

Media bashing in vogue again

"Price rise was a media creation"

THE RE is a saying that those who deliberately keep their eyes closed are worse off than those who are blind. That's what came to our mind when the former prime minister Khaleda Zia commented that there was no price rise during her tenure and that it was solely the creation of the media. Then she went on to say (as a mark of success of her regime) that public income had gone up and people had more money to spend, implying that increased purchasing power could have pushed up prices. If prices had gone up because of the "flood of development" generated by the success of her administration then why blame the media for reporting it.

There was a "festival" of media bashing on Saturday at a meeting of pro-BNP Association of Engineers of Bangladesh (AEB) where newspapers and the electronic media were accused of all sorts of things, including the old charges of maligning the country and serving foreign masters. These monopolists of patriotism further accused us of ignoring the developments in the country brought about by Khaleda Zia's government. Numerous speakers had only one issue to focus on, the evil that media was, and literally issued threats of consequences unless we mended our ways. All the while the former prime minister was continuously clapping on.

Media bashing was not a BNP habit when it was in the opposition. In fact this paper was praised publicly, and quite often, for its courageous role for criticising the government and upholding the rights of the opposition. What changed in 2001 was that BNP became the ruling party and that's when the problem started, first marginally and later in a big way, as the government started losing its initial popularity.

Free media of Bangladesh is one of its biggest success stories and one for which it is most respected internationally. We have contributed significantly to convincing the world that we have a vibrant democracy. It is the free media that has contributed fundamentally in ensuring some semblance of accountability in a situation where the instruments of governance have been mainly been used to rob the public exchequer and the people of their prosperity. Those who blame the media either forget these facts or are deliberately feigning ignorance of them.

Bashing the media has never led either to democracy or to better governance. Only strengthening it has. This is the biggest lesson of our time. Please remember it.

Sporadic violence

Anything but democratic

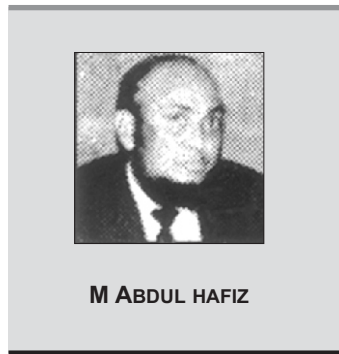
AS the political crisis persists, reports of sporadic clashes between the supporters of the two major parties are coming from some places. By all indications, political tension, running high for almost a month, is likely to mount further in the absence of any worthwhile attempt being made to defuse it.

What we find totally unacceptable is violence that the supporters of the two alliances are resorting to in the name of political agitation. It is really very unfortunate that the two alliances, now facing each other on the streets, are showing all the signs of intolerance and belligerence that can only further aggravate the situation.

The onus of finding a solution to the political impasse certainly rests with the caretaker government which is in place now. It is also true that the CG must demonstrate absolute neutrality while discharging its duties and enforce the law strictly. But then the political parties which are locked in a fight for supremacy cannot remain unresponsive to the issue of violence if only because it is their activists who are by and large responsible for the street skirmishes and attacks and counter-attacks. The local leaders of the parties have to behave sensibly and refrain from doing anything provocative or unduly aggressive. Again, the role of the central leadership is very important here, since it is they who formulate the game plan of a party. Sadly, what we have noticed in the past one month is not what the people expected from the top leaders. They have not succeeded in preventing violence undoubtedly a major failure. The leaders of the political parties appear to be more interested in publicising the 'casualties' on their side, than making sure that such casualties are avoided altogether.

There is one more point of concern that we cannot overlook. The extremely antagonistic relations between the BNP and the AL, the two major stakeholders in politics today, may further worsen in the days ahead, especially after the elections when either of them will be out of power and thus become vulnerable. So, corrective measures have to be adopted before things degenerate further.

Awaiting a moment of truth



M ABDUL HAFIZ

"The bullies bully not only because they want to, but also because they can." -- Noam Chomsky

IN the context of confrontational politics now raging across our country, this statement aptly applies to BNP-Jamaat combine that has till recently been the alliance in power. Governments, like human beings and organic matter, have a natural life-span of their own. Our constitution limits it to a time-frame of five years.

But the alliance, with its grip still firm on the levers of power, continues to function as de facto government even beyond that time-frame, through its proxies -- a subservient head of the caretaker government, a compliant Election Commission (even with the exclusion of MA Aziz), and an administration heavily politicized in its favour.

Governments, on expiry of their terms, quit lock, stock, and

PERSPECTIVES

So, when the BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia threatens the 14-party alliance in her usual tantrum not to meddle with the Election Commission or insists upon immediate declaration of election schedule, saying that it is not the caretaker government's business to see who respond to it and who do not -- few are surprised, because this is the familiar hubris with which she ruled the country during last five years.

barrel, but the BNP-Jamaat alliance left party tentacles all along the way of their departure from the office. It has thus been endowed with the power to call the shots and bully with impunity.

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She cannot be faulted when she claims her regime completed its term with total success or blames the media for the price hikes, calling it the latter's creation, when in fact the people's purchasing power has increased according to her. She was used to such hyperbole when in the government. These are therefore in order as she is leading another version of her government. She cannot even be questioned about her innocent ignorance because, despite the regalia in which she is ensconced, these mundane affairs are indeed beyond her comprehension.

The BNP secretary-general rests assured that his party is going to clinch yet another electoral victory with flying colours because nothing has been left to chance. The party's election strategy had been meticulously worked out during last five years and its mechanism doctored with layers of contingency plans. If one fails, another will take over. If Aziz goes, another equally insensitive one will replace him. It will be virtually impossible to break through that entanglement of chicanery, intrigue, and subterfuge. The BNP-Jamaat will deny any viable choice to the opponents.

It is axiomatic that, without caring a damn for public opinion hostile to election under the present commission, BNP-

the constitutional process.

When the countryside agitation for electoral reform is at its peak, BNP-Jamaat deliberately throws a spanner in any possible effort to resolve the political impasse to ensure a credible election. The constitutional debate is merely distraction because BNP-Jamaat's priority is immediate election. Even if the president for a while pretended to neutral at least outwardly, the fast changing events suggest that the presidency is solidly behind BNP-Jamaat game plan of going to poll without reforms.

But the presidency is not necessarily the alliance's last line of defence when it is apparently fighting a rearguard action. It has its band of ferocious cadres specializing in political show-down while sending its lethal storm troopers to intimidate and annihilate the opponents. They, along with hired musclemen, will be the alliance's asset for managing the polling stations. The alliance will surely unleash them as the last resort for their survival which it thinks lies only in recapturing power.

Last but not least, the alliance's coffers are stuffed with money accumulated during the alliance's reign of terror and plunder. Just how much money it can offer to buy, bribe, or intimidate the dissident politicians of the party is anyone's imagination. That it will buy loyalty with money, of which there is no death in the

alliance, is clear from episode surrounding Barrister Zia. But in our criminalized politics, money is going to play a vital role which no other party can match.

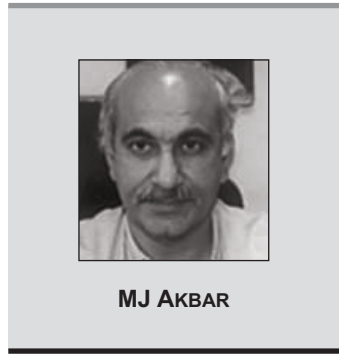
But can only the bully fill in gaping holes in public perception. Notwithstanding BNP-Jamaat's masterly scheming, it is near coupled with public alienation. It cannot be oblivious of this, which is why it has resorted to delusion and treachery. With hardly anything to go to people with, it has resorted to the same old refrain of "unnayan" and "utpadon."

BNP-Jamaat men are now chanting this cacophony in unison, but with little imprint on public consciousness. This is not without reason. The people know the meaning when BNP-Jamaat promise the continuity of development and production if they are voted back to power. They know that it will be unmistakably the continuity of plunder and terror.

When we in this country are looking for a moment of truth after so much of guile enacted by our rulers, the president of the country on whom we should pinning our hopes is playing foul with the electoral reforms. His address to the nation was very disappointing. So, what is the course open now to the nation? Should we court defeat from the forces of reaction and retrogression or resist it whole hog?

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Eyeless in India



IF I was, God forbid, chief censor of world media there is one four-letter word that I would ban completely: doom. Doomsday is as dull a concept as one can imagine, for it represents the end of all action. Doomsday is the ultimate reaction. Whether therefore the end is nigh or far out, why worry about it, particularly since you can do nothing about it? It is far more sensible to explore options in the sunshine instead of sniffing through gloom, making a virtue out of misery.

But there are limits to optimism, and it has been crossed by those who have concluded that India is a superpower. A curious and crazy mania of self-congratulation has overtaken us in India.

Perhaps every word in the previous sentence needs some elaboration. First: who is "us"? I suppose every reader of an English newspaper would belong to "us." Broadly, "we" or the "us" are those who have crept, slithered, slimed, or worked our way legitimately to that huge space above the misery index of India.

Poverty is only one of the lines dividing Indians. The poverty line is in fact the weakest line; it is the

BYLINE

But what is it with the successful Indian that makes him so criminally indifferent to the truth of our poverty? We have certainly moved away from a hopeless past. India might become a superpower; India should become a superpower. But we are not there yet. We cannot call ourselves any kind of power as long as half of India still goes to sleep on a stomach that is only half-full.

line of non-resistance. The truly impoverished do not have the strength to resist, or they would wreak havoc of a kind you might not deem suitable for a mere doomsday. Above that comes the anger line. These are the Indians who have escaped from destitution, and discovered the courage to exercise their democratic right to anger. For them democracy is not a matter of a vote every five years; they test its flexibility as often as they can, and with a gun if they can find one. Call them Naxalites, Maoists, terrorists, whatever: they don't care. They have no interest in categories. They know that Indian democracy's methods of healing are to offer a Band-Aid when the disease is cancer. They have been told that the honey of economic growth will trickle down to them eventually. Try offering the mirage of a trickle to a man dying of thirst. Then there is a hatred line. It is a thin but potent line, and consists of those who are the leaders of anger. They channel anger towards violence. It is not a moral line, for those who hate also know how to negotiate. The establishment exploits this weakness quite liberally, offering rewards which

buy leaders out of their group. Parliament is full of those who have been purchased by the establishment.

Above hatred is the envy line, that huge mass of Indians who are almost there, seething through small towns and villages, anxious to join the long queues of upward mobility. Envy is a good spur for aspiration, as anyone in mass marketing, or indeed banking, will confirm. This is the target group of future consumers which will keep the growth rate at 10 per cent and possibly send it higher. Envy is good for the economy. May it always flourish. And on top of it all sit the exalted "us": a mix of the smug, the complacent, the rich, and the wealthy which now believes that it has arrived, and is totally convinced that because it has arrived India has also reached her historic destination. This is the hyper India class, the doctrinaires of Superpower India. This is the fairy-tale "middle class," the subject of international attention, which hates looking below, except of course to find servants. This class has reinvented the morality of caste. It believes that the less fortunate deserve their misfortune, just as untouchables once

were underweight, which, in a poor country like ours, means appalling malnutrition.

Parliament interrupted its regular interruptions in order to debate defeat in cricket and demand immediate action from Sharad Pawar, head of the Board of Control for Cricket, so that the hungry ticket-holders of the cricket amphitheatre could see their gladiators do what they were paid to do, kill the enemy. Parliament did not have time for the National Family and Health Survey which, frankly, is such a bore compared to cricket. Cricket is hyped by multinationals who produce lurid television spots screaming, in jungle rhythms: "Ha ha India!" -- the best one can say about the ad is that it is about as tasteless as the product. Any chorus for the Family Survey would have to keep its refrain to a more doleful "Hai Hai India!" The new middle class has created its own deities. The new Mother India carries, in her ten invulnerable arms, a nuclear weapon, a share market index printout, a mobile phone, a cricket ball, a ticket from a low-cost airline, a job offer from an outsourcing company, a colour television set, patched jeans, an iPod full of superbly arranged dancing music from Bollywood and an English dictionary.

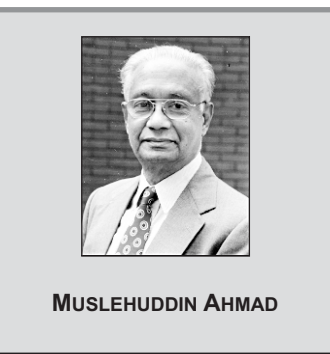
The high priests of this India are politicians and businessmen, two terms that encompass a wide variety of types. (Some of my best friends are politicians and businessmen.) Whenever high priests have taken charge of a nation's destiny, they begin to tend towards complacency and corruption, and the brightest minds are

tempted into sloth. You can see the victory of fantasy over fact in the constant homage to the mirror, and the easy dismissal of everything that does not comfort or reinforce this self-image. Back to our initial sentence: that this is crazy is obvious, but why should it be curious? The curious bit is the blindness that all of "us" wear each morning as we head to work, and retain till it is time to go to sleep. It is not as if impoverished India lives in another geography. You can see poverty in the slums of Delhi, the stench of Mumbai, the peeling decay of inner Kolkata, in the thousands of street orphans and beggars that are a constant reminder of failure. The urban poor are the elite poor. Think of the tribal enveloped by fear outside Ranchi, or the rural Muslims stretched across the eastern curve of the Ganga. But we, all of "us," are Eyeless in Delhi. Who has time for the hungry at our doorstep?

I am not a Utopian who believes that prosperity must march in step with equity; economic growth will come in stages, and there will be inexplicable disparity as we seek a better future. But what is it with the successful Indian that makes him so criminally indifferent to the truth of our poverty? We have certainly moved away from a hopeless past. India might become a superpower; India should become a superpower. But we are not there yet. We cannot call ourselves any kind of power as long as half of India still goes to sleep on a stomach that is only half-full.

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The West's problem with the veil



SOME days ago Dutch government issued a prescription that a Muslim woman should not wear in public places veil that covers her face. This is likely to be a law in the near future. The Muslims have generally protested such an embargo on the Muslim minority community in Holland.

One detects similar views from a person like Romana Prodi of Italy. Earlier, former British foreign secretary Jack Straw felt "uncomfortable" with Muslim women's veil as he probably thought appropriate communication is not possible if a woman speaks from under a veil. He said that the veil was a "visible demonstration of separateness" and forming "parallel communities" in

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

The western way of life that Bush-Blair often talk about will not suit the people of the Islamic world. Bush's war against Afghanistan did not change the burqa culture of the Afghan women. This difference in the way of life involving culture and traditions of certain society is as old as civilization and will remain entrenched within the religious divide. No amount of Bush-Blair war or persuasion can change this. And it should not change.

a country. He reportedly said the women should not wear veil with face covered when they visit his Blackburn constituency office.

It is not only his problem, most of the people of the western world have problem with Muslim veil. France officially banned headscarves and any other religious signs in schools. Even a Muslim country like Turkey, known to be a secular one, banned veils in schools and offices. Jack Straw apparently did not want this to be "prescriptive," as reported by the media. He thought covering of face stand in the way of good community relationship. Many in the Muslim community felt this was highly insulting.

Regardless of the behavioral

pattern of men on women, it is generally believed, in the context of social interactions, that the face is the mirror of one's relationship with his/her surroundings. If the face is covered, the results of one's community interaction remain obscure. However, a politician sitting in London and visiting constituency only in long intervals is not a social animal in the sense of day-to-day social interactions in the community and therefore should not be terribly concerned about women's facial reaction. The community reaction is more important. Hence Jack Straw's comment on covering of women face falls even outside his political jurisdiction and indeed appears unsocial to say the least.

He was probably guided more by the terror fear arising out of resistance fighters and suicide bombers' covered faces, though the Muslim veil has nothing to do with what the resistance fighters do.

It is not only Jack Straw, a person like Gordon Brown who is set to take over the premiership of the UK as soon as Tony Blair resigns as the prime minister, also has problems with veils and supported Jack Straw's view on it. He said: "I would emphasize the importance of what we do to integrate people into our country, including the language and including the history." One may agree with Brown on language, but history appears doubtful, as this brings in a community's

cultures and traditions, which are bound to be different. But there is no problem: each country has different communities including religious and tribal cultures and traditions and they live together in peace and harmony. Only thing is that you do not ask anyone to abandon them against their choice and wish. This is their religious and community freedom.

Even the UK race relations minister went to the extent of asking the school authority to terminate the services of a Muslim woman teacher who covers her face. She was reportedly suspended from her teaching job. In the TV interview she said she did not cover her face when teaching young boys and girls in the school; she only did it when some male colleague appeared before her. So said her students find no problem as her face remains uncovered while teaching. Some politicians, including one Muslim member of parliament, expressed the view that it would be better to keep the face uncovered, though wearing veil, while teaching.

This veil row has adversely affected race relations in the UK as some believe that veil with

face covered is one's religious choice and she should be allowed to exercise her religious freedom. Even the attorney of the Muslim teacher, who is British native, said earlier she did not have any problem in her social relationship as she has many non-Muslim friends and she communicates with them without any difficulty. Apparently, her face remains open when she works and talks to women, but she covers her face when male colleagues appear. This is her choice and her way of life.

Everybody cannot have the same way of life. One may walk practically half dressed in the eyes of some, as one may prefer to be consciously less careful about his or her dress. Others cannot say anything as it is their way of life and their choice to lead the life that way. It is terribly embarrassing for any parent, whether Muslim or of any other religion, to go to a newspaper stand with their children in many cities and towns of the West as some magazines and other advertisement papers carry pictures of practically naked women.

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not suit the people of the Islamic world. Bush's war against Afghanistan did not change the burqa culture of the Afghan women. This difference in the way of life involving culture and traditions of certain society is as old as civilization and will remain entrenched within the religious divide. No amount of Bush-Blair war or persuasion can change this. And it should not change.

The veil is often a part of culture and traditionally used by the women and particularly Muslim women all over the world. The religious Jewish women also wear veils almost like religious Muslim women. Veils are used by many Christian women while going to church. Veil is a must for a practically all women regardless of religion during wedding. In some parts of India, working women also use long headscarves which seem to a part of their tradition and culture.

However, those used by the Muslim women are of different kinds, ranging from full burqa, as seen in Afghanistan, to veils with fully or partly covered face, as we see more in the Arab world, and hijab, where face and hands up to wrists are not covered. Indeed, hijab with face open is the most

widely used dress by the Muslim women now in the various parts of the world and particularly in the western world.

Whatever may be the general public reaction on the issue, the prescription as per Qur'an is:

"And they say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosom and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their family members ..." (Sura Nur: Ayat 31).

My interpretation is that hijab with faces open is possibly the right kind of veil that is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. But may be, some others would interpret it in a different way, and I would respect their views. It is a very sensitive issue. Allah probably never wanted to put people under duress with their dress. The most important thing that must be observed in dress is the issue of guarding modesty -- modesty of both men and women but more strictly applicable to women folk.

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