A deepening sense of tribalism has been making holes in the canvas of national politics; and neither Sheikh Hasina nor Khaleda Zia appears to have been able to convince the country that partisanship is an activity they can soon subsume to the national interest. The two major political parties, once again on the look-out for superannuated civil servants and retired soldiers to buttress their ranks, are obviously not driven by the thought that those they pull into their camps could well be men and women whose sense of self-aggrandizement is a whole shade more important than a preservation of party policy, or an upholding of the national interest.

Speaking of self-aggrandizement, try not to overlook the strange tale of the once-upon-a-time bureaucrat Abu Hena. His vociferous condemnation of his party's, the BNP's that is, patronization of Islamic fundamentalists swiftly led to his being thrown out by Begum Zia last year. He spent time abroad or, when he was back in the country, in the safe confines of a hotel in the nation's capital. When the brand new Liberal Democratic Party, with of course the old faces the country has seen in circulation for decades, came along, Hena thought he saw light at the end of the dark road ahead. He jumped on to the bandwagon -- and then, for reasons we know not but can only think we can put our fingers on, went back to the BNP.

That, you might be tempted to suggest, is the quixotic side of politics. And of course you could be right. In 2001, failing to come by a parliamentary nomination of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, retired Major General Subid Ali Bhuiyan simply walked over to the Awami League, signed a primary membership form, and eventually rose to importance in the party. This time around he has been rewarded: the Awami League has given him the nomination the BNP did not (back when the AL was contesting the election).

The stories could go on and on. And even as you thought that there was nothing more left to be said, you suddenly came up with newer, grosser revelations about the doings of men and women around you. Some weeks ago, bureaucrat Haider Ali, having been pushed to the sidelines through being made an officer on special duty, turned up at the home of the former prime minister's former parliamentary affairs advisor. Obviously he was peeved at the action against him. That is again understandable. But that does not quite explain why he had to find his way to the doorstep of a politician.

If he was seriously interested in politics, he could have thrown away that bureaucratic garb and donned some new clothes. Much the same could be said about ASM Abdul Halim who, as cabinet secretary, went merrily soliciting support for his eventual participation in the elections. It is all right for men and women across the social frontiers to entertain bigger dreams of self-satisfying ambition, but why must such goals tear through the fences of decency and the law?

But note the bizarre quality of everything that happens. The BNP is not worried about welcoming its old enemies into its fold. The Awami League strikes a deal with the peddlers of the "fatwa" and yet would like the country to take comfort in its secular underpinnings. And the Jatiyo Party remains in constant search of a foothold on life. You could be forgiven for thinking that all these parties have lost their way. And you would not be too far wrong to think so.

But let all that be. And let the gaze turn to Bangabhaban where the element of drama that characterized its activities in this election season has never before been surpassed by earlier occupants of the presidential palace. Images of a head of state who, in a thickening shadow of questions, took charge as chief of the caretaker administration; of his palpable intentions of keeping his advisors on the fringes and in the dark about his moves; of the bubbling frustration that compelled four of those advisors into quitting their jobs; of the shadowy operations of certain men around the president -- all of these have pushed our political sensitivities several notches higher than they should have.

Add to these tales those very disturbing reports of a chief election commissioner refusing to get the message and so moving on. When he did move on, it was too late and pretty inconsequential. And then, just as the country waited for one of the election commissioners to take the same path to temporary oblivion, President Iajuddin Ahmed nearly made the nation choke on its emotions through appointing a new commissioner, this one in the person of a former inspector general of police who once made clear his vision of being a BNP nominee at the elections. And then, of course, there have been all those 1971-related allegations against him.

You could put it to me, to yourself, that such is the way things happen in Bangladesh. Things happen. Of course. But note the bizarre quality of everything that happens. The BNP is not worried about welcoming its old enemies into its fold. The Awami League strikes a deal with the peddlers of the "fatwa" and yet would like the country to take comfort in its secular underpinnings. And the Jatiyo Party remains in constant search of a foothold on life. You could be forgiven for thinking that all these parties have lost their way. And you would not be too far wrong to think so.

Politics, at this sharpened point in time, batters and bruises itself as it pushes its way through the thicket. That is certainly not a pretty sight for a nation which, quite inexplicably, keeps believing in the ability of its political classes to create new rainbow dreams for it. Sometimes hope can work wonders. Lingering too long, hope gains a toxicity that can only destroy a world.

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