

President's statement

What is there to end the impasse?

AFTER remaining conspicuously cloistered of his own volition for quite a while, President-cum-Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed came up with a statement that helped little to pave the way for a political settlement leading to participation of all the parties in the election. The tone and tenor of what he said did not reflect any change of heart, or direction on his part while the situation is manifestly worsening with the passing of each day. He prefers to stick to his inflexible posture even though the nation is veritably on the edge of a precipice. It is only an elementary perception now that one wrong move by any quarter could send it plummeting down to an abyss.

We wonder why the president had to refer to the already elected candidates (Unopposed) to seek the shelter of the Supreme Court in case of need when their names have not been gazetted by the Election Commission. It smacked of taking a side and talking on behalf of them, which no doubt has surprised many discerning citizens. By doing so, he has virtually sent the signals that the door to further negotiations for the election has been shut down.

His quoting of the Awami League chairperson Sheikh Hasina on the 90-day dictate of the country's constitution on holding election when she was in power is curious because it is not analogous to the present situation, and it has been taken out of context.

We fail to comprehend why the president talks with a tone of finality while the voter list remains unpublished and the Election Commission not fully prepared to undertake such an important task of holding national election. We understand that no election can be hundred percent foolproof but it cannot be held either with an overwhelmingly flawed voter list, and keeping too many loose ends trailing behind.

We believe in being optimistic, therefore, we would urge the president to reconsider his position. We understand that he has given his consent to his advisors to take some initiative. We hope he gives them his sincere backing and works towards an election participated by all. Only that would ensure his fair place in our national history.

The accident was just waiting to happen

We condole their tragic deaths

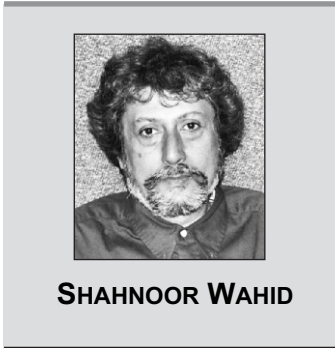
THE festive Eid mood might not have all died down as the passengers on board a local bus on the Dhaka-Chittagong high way were reflecting on how to get back to rhythm at their work places in the port city. The commuters travelled with their families so that there were many women and children in the group. On the way the bus with a capacity for 52 passengers took on board as many as 30 more out of mindless greed for the fast buck thereby making the aging transport unstable under huge pressure of total body weight of passengers along with their personal effects.

Then the inevitable happened as the vehicle tried to speed past a CNG auto-rickshaw. It turned upside down trundling before nose diving into the eight feet ditch where its diesel tank ruptured and caught fire. In the instant inferno, 41 people were snuffed out; with the firefighters having to come from a long distance, the victims simply roasted alive screaming helplessly.

Road safety at all times is at a low key because of lack of highway patrol and poor surveillance at the terminals or major stopovers. Money seems to overrule law enforcement. But in times of festival vacations when the pressure on the road increases a holiday mood seems to prevail among those who must enforce rules on the highways.

Three factors usually conspire to make an accident happen and all these are within the capacity of men to eliminate. First, the overwhelming number of transports are simply unfit to ply, especially the local buses. Why not phase them out re-enforcing the rule on time bar. Secondly, install speed governors in the buses where possible with wayside watch mounted at appropriate road bends or free stretches to check speeding. Last but not least, make sure that qualified personnel with tested eye-sight, antecedents, driving skill and knowledge of traffic rules get to drive the transports. We cannot put the lives of millions in the hands of amateurs on the wheel.

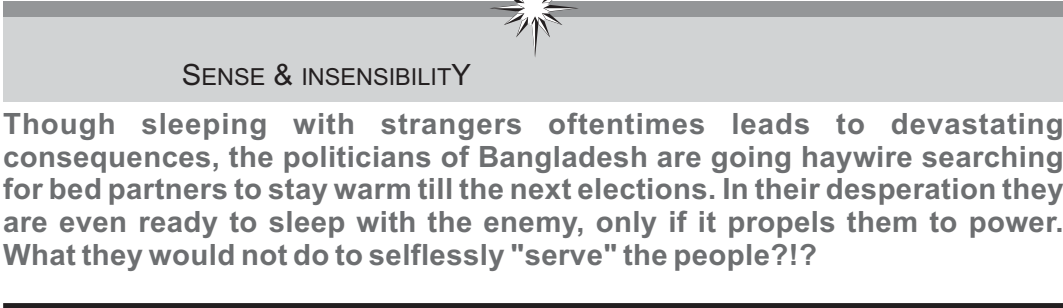
Cold winter, cold hearts and more...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

BITING cold and cold hearts are conniving together at the moment in Bangladesh to make living for the common people nothing better than mere survival on a daily basis. And both the calamities are potent enough to kill them if they are not careful. While the cold spell is likely to go away in a couple of days, there is no sign that the cold hearts blinded by the lust for power would thaw on seeing the misery of the people -- the faceless priyo janagan of the politicians.

At the moment, the cold hearted politicians are engrossed in scheming and steaming, wheeling and dealing, all with the intent of grabbing power, because they know that if they can grab state power they will get the power to grab land, water, air, industry, factories, railways, property, graveyards and so on. Hence, in their rush towards the corridors of power they are trampling on the mutilated and bleeding bodies of their priyo janagan. But do they feel anything? Do they hear the screams of the janagan? No, because their hearts have tuned cold. Therefore, even if the cold winter ends, it is no good news for



the people.

Sleeping with the enemy?

Though sleeping with strangers oftentimes leads to devastating consequences, the politicians of Bangladesh are going haywire searching for bed partners to stay warm till the next elections. In their desperation they are even ready to sleep with the enemy, only if it propels them to power. What they would not do to selflessly "serve" the people?!?

To be candid, self-respecting citizens were forced to witness all sorts of unsavoury things, like the cajoling, coaxing and cooing that have been going on in the dark alleys of politics in Bangladesh in the past months. For example, there was open bickering over the possession of a "hot" partner, who was a sworn enemy only yesterday. While one alliance pulled this hot stuff by the hand, the other alliance pulled him by the leg. And from the sideline, cynics asked one another: "Besides giving some seats to the political party that he joins, what has he got to give to the nation?" Then, with other potential partners, some quite obscure, various tricks are still being used, such as emotional exploitation, financial exploitation, religious

exploitation and familial exploitation. One strategy will hit the jackpot, won't it?

Then there are the group shows to entertain the crowd. Jogais and Madhais, Morod Alis and Surat Alis are joining one party today, and another tomorrow, with a large group of people trailing behind them. They are ready to oblige the media with fixed smiles on their faces, and large bouquets of flowers in their hands, as they meet the party chairperson. The party chairperson welcomes them and then gives a look at the camera that says: "See, you could not get this ugly lot, I did. Just wait and see how I dump them after I go to power. Right now I allow them to enter my office because I need their votes." So much for the love of the people!

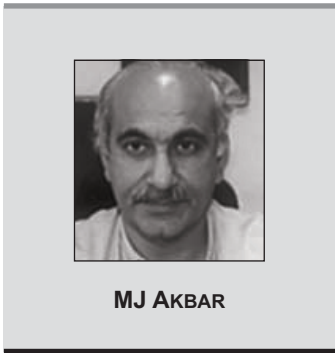
In the month of December, the month when brave Bengalis had snatched victory and created the country called Bangladesh, Awami League offered something rotten to its supporters and sympathizers. Failing to consolidate its power and position in the last five years for launching a decisive movement to make the 4-party alliance unpopular, the largest party of the country (up until now) is now frequenting the dark alleys

for partners. Abdul Jalil, who is deft at talking without thinking, came up with another of his legendary trump cards (he has an un-ending supply of such cards). But this time it was not an invisible card. This time it manifested itself in the shape and garb of Shaikhul Hadis, or whatever, and scared the hell out of the progressive people. Abdul Jalil appears to be ecstatic because he has this old, controversial man as his bed partner, and justifies his decision by giving all sorts of ridiculous arguments.

Readers were aware of the consequences of sleeping with the enemy during the rule of the 4-party alliance, when militants belonging to JMB, and other factions, proliferated under a sympathetic administration and began to kill people in the name of establishing their brand of Islamic rule. These people have a long history of turning on their own mentors one day to grab absolute power, and that's exactly what they did. But leaders in power remain blinded by the glare of the cameras, and as such cannot distinguish between friends and fiends.

Now, the Awami League, in its quixotic trance, believes that such a tiny obscurantist entity as Khelafat would strategically

Blood clot



MJ AKBAR

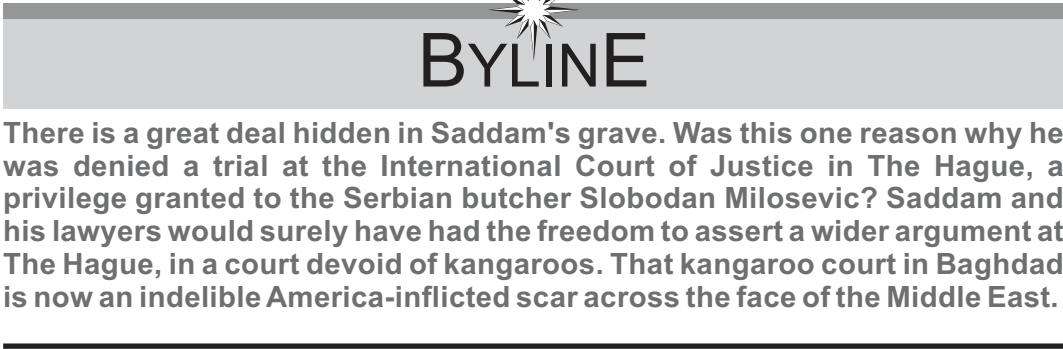
SADDAM Hussein is more powerful in his grave than he ever was in his palace. Alive, he was a dictator. Dead, he is a martyr. The evil inherent in arbitrary power is in the process of being interred with his bones.

Strong men like to associate with iron. Hence, an Iron Duke, or Iron Chancellor, or Iron Fist, an Iron Will. It is ironic that all it needs is an extra letter to turn iron into irony. If Saddam was full of iron when he ruled Iraq, his legacy is replete with irony.

To take the most obvious instance, in death he has become a symbol of justice denied. The inexplicable haste, and the brutal shoddiness with which he was hanged has become, thanks to a grainy video and millions of television screens, the final testimony in the first example of victor's prejudice masquerading as law in this century.

This is not an arbitrary interpretation. Louise Arbour, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, urged Iraq's President Jalal Talabani, to stop Saddam's execution because of doubts about the fairness of the trial.

Alive, Saddam Hussein was helpless against George Bush.



Dead, Saddam could leave Bush helpless. His memory will pour fresh fuel on a hundred existing fires. The defeat and death of Saddam is a narrative with one author: George Bush.

Saddam was the quarry, Bush was the hunter. The hunter changed the rules of this jungle when every reason was exposed as an excuse. When the quarry was trapped, all rules were abandoned in the pursuit of death.

Spin, passed on to the world's most famous "embedded" reporters, the White House press corps, now seeks to distance Bush from the crude trial, premeditated judgment and barbaric execution.

It is unconvincing. Bush's formal statement welcomed the death of Saddam as an "important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy that can govern, sustain and defend itself."

There is an implicit admission in that sentence, that a "democratic" Iraq needs a dead Saddam. Why was Saddam, in prison and unlikely to get out, considered so dangerous for Iraqi democracy? Is there a semi-hidden fear that the consuming anarchy in Iraq is breeding nostalgia for the stability and order of Saddam's regime?

Nostalgia can so easily turn into votes.

It is inconceivable that the White House was not informed about every step on the way to the noose. State-owned media like the Voice of America had begun preparing obituaries and reactions a day before the execution.

Baghdad and Washington did not do themselves any favours by hanging Saddam during the great Abrahamic festival of Eid-ud-Adha, while millions were bowing their heads before the mosque of Kaaba during Haj, an event redolent with the spirit of sacrifice for a higher cause.

Bush and his one-eyed coterie do not understand either Islam or Muslims, and will not fathom the anger that injustice generates on the street. The bars of Saddam's cramped jail would not have melted in thirty days.

In death, Saddam has become a symbol of resistance to American hegemony. This is perhaps the height of irony, since, for most of his time in power, his enemies accused Saddam of being an American cat's paw in the region.

Facts tell a story. Saddam Hussein was trained by the CIA during his years in exile in Cairo, after the failed coup of 1959. It has been mentioned, in more than one account, that his mentors were

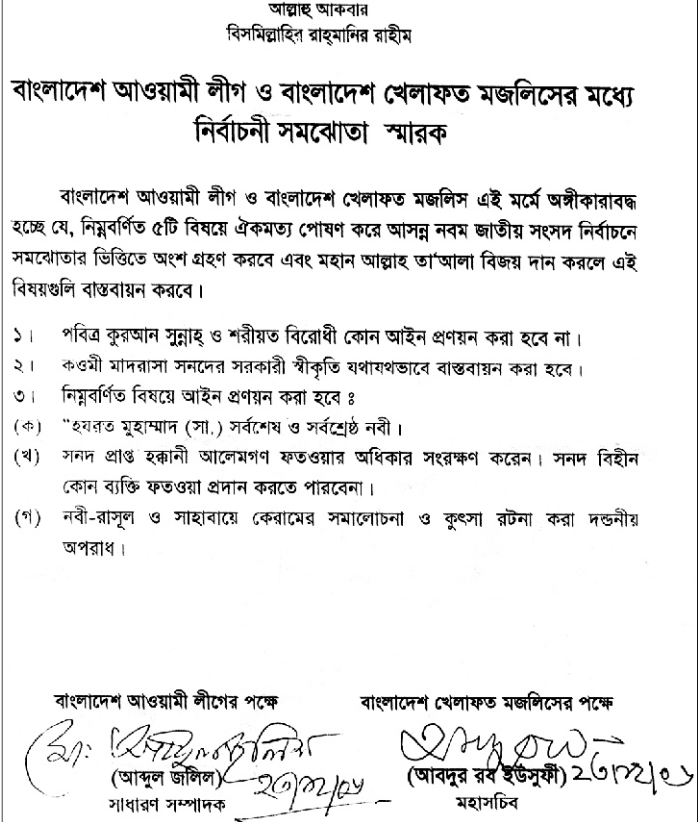
privately pleased when he seized power from an ailing Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr in July 1979.

They were certainly delighted when Saddam purged communists from the loose coalition in Iraq that was drifting towards the Soviet bloc at a time of heightening Cold War confrontation (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would take place in December that year).

Saddam Hussein did America an incalculable favour when on September 22, 1980 he escalated border skirmishes into a full-scale war by bombing ten Iranian air bases. The planes in his air force were not MiGs from the Soviet Union. They were brand new Mirages from France.

America maintained an official distance from that war, but there was much unofficial help as well as massive funding from American allies in the region. In December 1983 President Ronald Reagan sent a special envoy to Saddam, Donald Rumsfeld, the same man who launched the current Iraq war with the thunder of shock and awe and resigned last November.

American arms to fight Iran came through third party routes, and American credit more visibly. Britain's Margaret Thatcher took



become useful to counter the aggression of the larger Islamic parties in the country. But it is too late Mr. Jalil. Maybe you and other Awami League leaders should have been up and awake, and been more attentive to the media outcry for the last twenty years about the rise of the militants across the country. If Awami League had played its due role when it was needed the necessity for such an ignominious alliance would not have become so pressing today. This apparently friendly

person may turn into a monster one day. Abdul Jalil should read Mary Shelly's "Victor Frankenstein" for some useful tips.

It bewilders commoners like us to the extent of making us grapple in the dark in our quest for answers to the disturbing question: When will politics in Bangladesh become people-centric rather than power-centric?

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

the lead in re-supplying military hardware to Saddam under the cover of lies, which were exposed in the 1996 Arms to Iraq report.

Paradoxically, Saddam occupied Kuwait because of war debts, and his conviction that the Arab regimes whose interests he had served by going to war against Iran had become stingy with their cheque books once the conflict had ceased.

He had overplayed a very weak hand. But his faith in Washington was surely restored when the senior George Bush refused to remove him from power after an international coalition had defeated his armies on the battlefield in 1991.

There is a great deal hidden in Saddam's grave. Was this one reason why he was denied a trial at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, a privilege granted to the Serbian butcher Slobodan Milosevic?

Saddam and his lawyers would surely have had the freedom to assert a wider argument at The Hague, in a court devoid of kangaroos.

That kangaroo court in Baghdad is now an indelible America-inflicted scar across the face of the Middle East. A few lines from an editorial in the New York Times are appropriate: "Saddam Hussein deserves no one's pity. But as anyone who has seen the graphic cell phone video of his hanging can testify, his execution bore little resemblance to dispassionate, state-administered justice... For the Bush administration, which insists it went to war in Iraq to implant democracy and justice, those globally viewed images were a shaming embarrassment. Unfortunately, all

Americans will be blamed."

It is not the defeat of Saddam, or his death, that has driven Iraq into chaos. It is a myth that Iraq needs despotism to keep it united. The Hashemite family of King Faisal ruled Iraq with a mild hand from 1921, when the state was formalized, to 1958.

There was no talk of disintegration during the soft, albeit compromised, monarchy. Nor was there chaos during the two Baathist decades till 1979. The present havoc is a direct consequence of occupation, an inevitable insurrection against foreign troops on Iraqi soil, and a polity fractured by ethnic interests.

The full account of this malfeasance will be written, but only after the occupation is over in a few years. "The enemies forced strangers into our sea/And he who serves them will be made to weep. Here we unveil our chests to the wolves/And will not tremble before the beast."

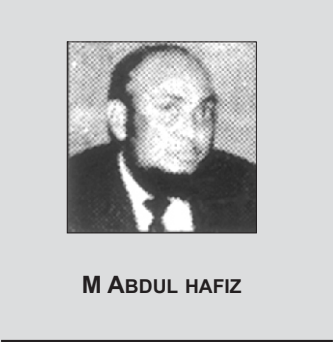
As poetry that might not be the most memorable lines in Arabic, but these lines from Saddam Hussein's last poem, written in jail, will resonate. Saddam's grave in Tikrit has already become a memorial, where Iraq's Sunnis are offering a prayer from wounded hearts.

"I sacrifice my soul for you and for our nation," he wrote. "Blood is cheap in hard times." Blood flows, and each drop becomes a seed of future war.

Perhaps such poetry will be forgotten. But a line of prose he uttered at the end will certainly live longer. Palestine, he said on his way to the gallows, is Arab.

M J Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The looming danger of the political brinkmanship



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE nation is back to the brink again with the AL-led grand alliance rejecting the election for the ninth parliament due on January 22. It has vowed to resist that election altogether. In quick riposte the caretaker government has taken a hard line by making it known that the armed forces will be in control before the activists take to the streets during their siege program on January 7 and 8. As a result a clash that may turn lethal seems inevitable. The situation couldn't have been



different.

The country's major political forces, sans the BNP-Jamaat alliance, had always been sceptical that a caretaker government headed by a partisan president could conduct a free and fair election. Yet they were roped in for participation in the election by the dangling carrots in front of them.

The baffled lot of political parties, befuddled at the dramatic developments following the previous government's end of term, willy-nilly accepted an arrangement in which President Iazuddin unabashedly and arbitrarily

grabbed the post of the chief executive of the interim government, in violation of constitutional provisions. But the shady circumstances leading to the president's filling in the slot made him suspect with regard to a free and fair election right from the beginning.

However, the public wanted to trust the octogenarian teacher whose conscience, they thought, would be stirred as referee in the electoral game.

During the last ten weeks, to everybody's disappointment, there were few signs that it would. All this time he, like a deaf and

dumb demon on Sindbad's shoulder, dutifully complied with the dictates of his employer only. In fact, his has been an extended government of the four party alliance, whose purpose has been loyally serving. Whether it was regarding the election commission, the administration or even the judiciary, he apparently upheld the BNP-Jamaat view points and interests.

It seems that he has also been testing the elastic limit of the opponents' -- particularly the AL's -- endurance, which, however, kept stretching. So much so that at

one point it decided to join the electoral fray just on the caretaker government's rosy promises in a package of proposals to reform the election commission, rearrange the election-related administrative set-up as well as to update and correct a fraudulent electoral roll. The way the AL jumped at the package without prior scrutiny increased the guile of its authors.

Once the AL and its associates took the bait Professor Iajuddin relaxed, and his government went into slumber after some perfunctory changes here and there, the effects of which made the situation worse than it was before. They ostensibly resorted to subterfuge, thus taking away vital time from the opponents on the eve of the election.

In the meantime the BNP-Jamaat alliance, now free from the answerability of incumbency, had a field day and came in real earnest to rule the roost. Inevitably, a breaking point came for the AL,

which then stood in a cul-de-sac.

At long last it was convinced that no meaningful election reflecting the people's wishes could be held under the present set-up, with its strings being held by the previous government acting from behind the scene. Therefore, the AL, or grand alliance, wasn't left with any option other than withdrawing. It may be a long, tortuous path but the stakes are high.

It is still unclear as to how things will move onward now. Speculations abound about the future course of action by the caretaker government -- the proxy government of the BNP-Jamaat -- which is bent upon staying the course and carrying through its game plan without any vacillation. Or will it revive or restart the process of the realisation of the package proposals to placate the anxiety of the grand alliance and make it participate in the election? No such indication is there.

What is, however, visible on the

surface has indeed been ominous. There is a clear prospect of a farical election on the date, and the BNP-Jamaat alliance are proceeding towards that goal with the tacit acquiescence of Professor Iajuddin who has not as yet taken any political initiative to defuse the crisis.

The trio (Election Commission, the caretaker government and four party alliance) seems to be ruling out any fresh political understanding or the rescheduling of the election date, and is not yielding anymore, either on electoral reforms proposal or the package proposals.

Instead, the president, with his warped mindset, is contemplating a hard line vis-à-vis AL's resolve to thwart the election, and planning a military cover to hold an election of sorts, even without the participation of major political outfits, only to salvage his discredited party and catapult it to power.

It may, however, be a sad replay of the February 1996 election. But

Professor Iajuddin couldn't care less, although a fake election will lead to a protracted turmoil portending a period of fresh uncertainty. The BNP-Jamaat axis, living in its make-believe world, fondly hopes that, unlike 1996, it can sustain its illegitimate election this time round by crafting appropriate safeguards.

Yet, the whole issue is quintessentially political and is capable of being resolved through political process, and not by using force against the opponent. But Professor Iajuddin seems reluctant to undertake any project or political initiative that would have to dismantle the already created election mechanism. Consequently, he will continue to stoke the smouldering fire of public discontent. Unless some conscious effort is made by the authority to extinguish that fire it is bound to snowball into a prairie fire.

Bng (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.