

Tackle price issue comprehensively

Ad hoc-ism simply will not do

THE caretaker government's move to go soft on hoarders of food items reveals two things: one, that they took a wrong decision, and, second, that they had the courage and wisdom to retract from it. What is now clear is that when the authorities first decided to tackle hoarding, they did not think things through. Only one area in the market was touched while all the other important factors were not brought under consideration. The result was only to be expected: when the authorities moved against hoarding, by ordering a shutdown of warehouses, they left the entire supply chain disrupted. The offshoot of such action is to be discerned in the reversal of policy the caretaker administration has now gone through.

It should have been for the administration to bear in mind that myriad forces define the market. In other words, any measure to correct the system, once it goes wrong, must take into account the effects such action may have on the system as a whole. At this point, we note that the government has reduced LC margins for traders and has gone for open market sales of food items. At the same time, cuts in duty have been brought in. All such measures ought to have been put in place before action was taken on the hoarding front. However, now that the administration has gone for a change, or a turn-around, in policy, we will expect matters to move back to normalcy. What is important here is that citizens must not continue to pay the prices they have so far in the market. Clearly there is a strong case for vigilance to be maintained here.

Such vigilance will come through ensuring that, despite the decision to go soft on hoarding, there will be no leniency shown to any trader inclined to deriving profits through banking on consumers' sufferings. The authorities must reassure the country that there will be no more disruption of market forces, that they will abjure ad hoc-ism as policy. The law adviser has suspected sabotage in the rise in prices. That is one more reason why the government must go for a fine balancing act as it prepares, hopefully, a raft of measures to bring back discipline in the market through not allowing any syndicate to coerce citizens into helplessness.

Biman's nose-dive

An overhaul imperative

ON Monday, a Dhaka-bound Bangladesh Biman flight had to abort take off due to wheel failure at Dubai airport. It rendered the international airport shut for eight hours. The accident which could have been fatal on the London-Dubai-Dhaka route with 236 passengers on board saw as many as 14 sustaining injuries. It is often said that an accident is an accident but in the case of Biman, there is perhaps more to it given its track record of mishaps on the ground. Irresponsible and unprofessional conduct of those who are responsible for carrying out checks on the aircraft cannot be ruled out.

One is likely to ask as to whatever happened to the loud claims of Biman that it has the capacity of carrying out a thorough check of its aircraft ensuring the all round flight worthiness of its planes.

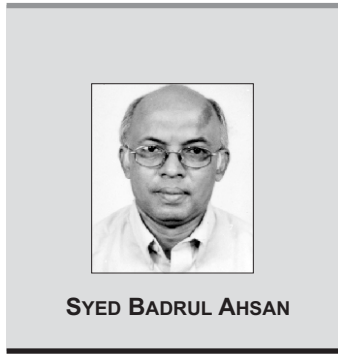
Media in the past had reported on the overall operational flaws that exist in running the affairs of Biman from time to time. All we have seen so far, in response, is some half-hearted explanatory remarks with no substantive action on the ground to follow.

The present incident is of special significance in that it not only put the lives of the passengers at great risk but that it happened at an international airport outside the country. It has caused a dent in the image of the country.

It is our belief that the problems of Biman are deep rooted and go far beyond this accident or any other that took place in the past.

The time has come and perhaps long overdue for us to take a hard look at the affairs of Biman in a comprehensive way. Time has come to ask such basic questions like whether or not it is at all feasible to turn Biman into an efficient and commercially viable organisation. Let a thorough study be made by a task force into how to rejuvenate Biman in a competitive aviation world in which other airlines are making such huge profits by plying on the routes Biman does.

Politicians and the art of writing



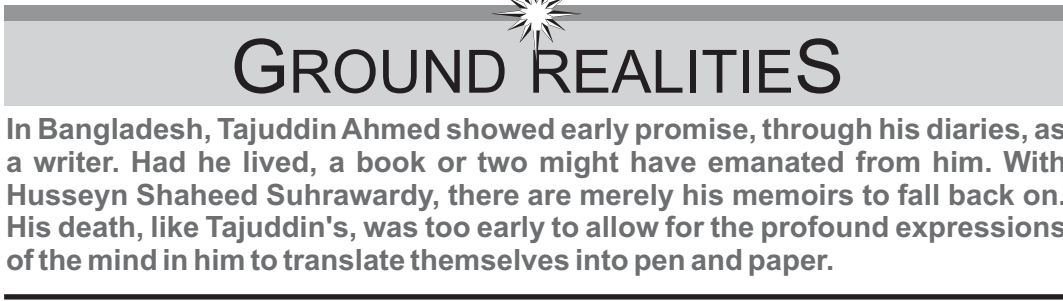
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE good news is that Sheikh Hasina plans to spend time writing, now that politics has moved into a state of animated suspension. She might come up with new thoughts and, at the same time, as she has said, put the finishing touches to the writing she began sometime ago but was not quite able to round off.

For a country, nothing can be more pleasing than knowing that it has politicians who can, and are willing to, write. In all these years since Sheikh Hasina came back home from self-exile and took charge of the Awami League, she has written books and has contributed write-ups to newspapers.

There are people who tend to agree with her analyses of events; and there are others who do not. But all of them agree that when a political leader of her stature writes, it augurs well, by and large, for the nation.

Intellectual activities by politicians assume importance owing specifically to their being at the centre of dramatic events constantly unfolding around them. Then again, there are some pretty drab times when hardly anything



of note happens, with nothing to write home about.

Even so, some politicians do write despite the impoverishment of drama around them. You might want to go back to the story of Richard Nixon. It took him quite a while to get over the shock of his Watergate-related resignation from the White House, but once he did that he simply plunged into writing.

Such works as RN, which are his memoirs, and Leadership, are admirable tomes on how the mind often works in statesmen. If you fork out the crooked side of the Nixon character, you will note the makings of a statesman in the thirty-seventh president of the United States.

He had his eye, constantly, on foreign policy. But, and this is significant, he was sometimes impressed by men greater than he, Charles de Gaulle for instance. Soon after taking office as president in 1969, Nixon met De Gaulle in Paris and launched into an exposition of Cold War politics.

At a point, De Gaulle stopped him, to tell him: "Mr. President, in the Second World War, all the nations of Europe lost. Two were defeated." The American leader

was impressed.

Nixon's writings remain an impressive evaluation of modern global history, and reveal a worldview that few politicians develop within themselves. But, of course, a worldview is what generally shapes up once a politician begins to take up writing as a serious enterprise.

There used to be Benjamin Disraeli, who shared some of history's more memorable moments with William Gladstone. He had an abundance of wit in him, wrote on politics, and was a fairly good novelist.

Perhaps that was one reason why he made such a charismatic politician, one who has turned into a powerful point of reference in history. Another Briton who engaged in good politics and indulged in better writing was Winston Churchill.

His History of the English Speaking Peoples remains a potent instance of good writing. When the Nobel came to him, it was conclusive proof of the command over the English language he possessed. And what was also his to command was humour.

There is a whole archive that has grown up around his witticisms, a sign that men and women

who mean to be good politicians might give a thought to demonstrating their human qualities through a recourse to the jocular.

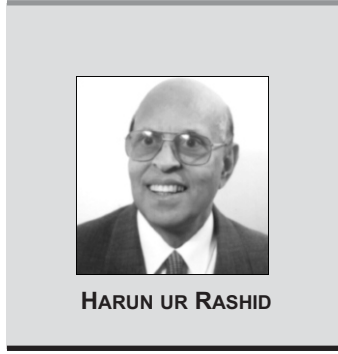
Churchill's abilities as a good writer were reflected in his inspirational speeches, especially those in relation to the Second World War. No one but he could have coined the phrase "Cold War." The gray matter in him was profuse to the point of being stupendous.

Some politicians are endowed with a natural ability to play with words. Jawaharalal Nehru's "tryst with destiny" speech in the early moments of Indian freedom has forever been symbolic of the evocative beauty of speech in English, indeed in any language.

He spoke well and wrote well, that last point being nowhere more distinctively illustrated than in The Discovery of India. Nehru was one of those few politicians who put his spells in jail to good use. Discovery was a work that he began and finished in prison.

It continues to be unparalleled in beauty. Maybe Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's When I Am Assassinated did not reach the heights it ought to have, but when you consider the circumstances in which he finished the work (he was under

And then there were three



HARUN UR RASHID

THE French presidential election will be held on April 22nd this year. Under the election law, a second round will be held in May and the outcome of the election will be published on the evening of May 6.

The election does provide a clear choice for voters because right, left and centrist candidates are contesting the election.

Three candidates

Ms. Segolene Royal, (53), is the Socialist candidate and Nicholas Sarkozy, (51), the son of a Hungarian immigrant, and present interior minister, is the candidate of the centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (UPM).

The two had dominated the scene in the past, but lately a third centrist candidate, Francois Bayrou (56), a former minister, has emerged. His rise appears to

be in inverse ratio of Sarkozy's and Royal's decline in popularity.

Issues

Zero growth economy is a concern, with 8.8% percent jobless rate. It has been reported that 6.9 million people (of a total of about 61 million people) live below the poverty line. The country is losing its competitive edge.

Generally the Socialists and centre-right UPM differ in economic philosophy. The Socialists want to stimulate economic growth by increasing purchasing power, while the UPM has been advocating free-market economy.

While the Socialists want to lift incomes to raise domestic demand, and to spend on research and development to raise competitiveness, UPM's prescription is to work more to produce more and earn more.

With regard to other issues, such as condition of workers, pensions, minimum wage and privatization, they have presented different policies.

Another important issue that may have an impact on the election concerns the ethnic groups. It is noted that only five years ago, immigration and integration or assimilation of ethnic groups were not campaign issues.

Some sociologists say that France is split in two. There is the France of the suburbs, and there is the rest. Most importantly, Arab and black African communities have no liking for Sarkozy because, at one stage, he had called them "thugs." It is reported that Sarkozy knows this, and he failed to show up for a dinner in Paris that brought together more than 300 French-African party members.

Standing of the candidates

Segolene Royal's aim is to unite the Left with the Socialist Party. The extreme Left, including communists, accounts for 15% percent of the popular vote. While Royal needs votes from the centre to win the presidency, the far Left matters a great deal to her. Analysts believe that, perhaps with this in mind, Royal appears to have moved steadily to the left.

Segolene Royal's supporters have carried out campaigns so that ethnic groups vote in the polls, and if they do not, as in the past, they would end up with Sarkozy as president. Many, however, say that her message to the ethnic groups was positive but somewhat vague. The initial surge in her popularity fell after the exit of her economic adviser, and her foreign trips.

sentence of death at the time), you realize how loaded it was in terms of revealing the final dark months in the life of a political leader noted for a fast rise to fame and an equally fast slip to a sorry end.

But there is another, earlier book by Bhutto (The Myth of Independence, 1967), which brings forth his clarity of vision where the future course of Pakistan's foreign policy is the issue. Myth is an image of the compulsions which often undercut third world diplomacy in the 1960s.

Mohandas Gandhi, of course, was as constant in his writing as he was in his politics. His experiments with truth, his reflections in a number of journals in the three decades or so before the partition of India pose some fundamental questions about life and the society in which it thrives, or loses itself.

And Moulana Abul Kalam Azad's India Wins Freedom has always been a collector's item for students of history, because of the simple reason that the writer observes the making of history (in which he was a key player) in a palpably dispassionate manner.

Years after losing power, Mikhail Gorbachev decided to write his memoirs. The outcome was certainly not very uplifting, for he missed the kind of flair that was in abundance in Richard Nixon.

Likewise, Bill Clinton's My Life and Hillary Clinton's Living History are both run of the mill affairs. Bill Clinton the captivating public speaker comes off a poor writer. That is the pity.

In Bangladesh, Tajuddin

Ahmed showed early promise, through his diaries, as a writer. Had he lived, a book or two might have emanated from him. With Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, there are merely his memoirs to fall back on. His death, like Tajuddin's, was too early to allow for the profound expressions of the mind in him to translate themselves into pen and paper.

Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, in the manner of Winston Churchill, was a vibrant and witty politician. Much of his time, though, that Abul Mansur Ahmed, a pre-eminent politician in the 1950s and a colleague of Suhrawardy's, has left behind rather remarkable elucidations of the era he and his friends so clearly dominated.

Sheikh Hasina ought to provide us with a glimpse into her take on her times. There are others who could do a similar act, Tofail Ahmed for instance. He has been part of our modern political history.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Bayrou is the president of the centrist Party for French Democracy (UDF). He had been a minister in two conservative governments in the 90s.

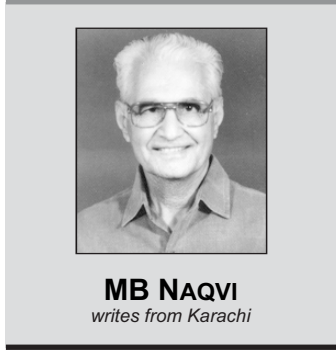
The French public reportedly indicated to pollsters that they find his platform more pragmatic than those offered by Royal and Sarkozy.

France's presidential race has, until now, been a contest between the right and the left parties but, with the appearance of a centrist candidate, the contest has now widened. The third candidate might pose a threat in a run-off election against Royal or Sarkozy.

The contest for presidency in France is shaping up to be most interesting. Recent polls indicate that 79% percent of the voters are undecided. If Ms. Royal wins the election, she would be the first female head of state in French political history.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Sacking of the chief judge



MB NAQVI

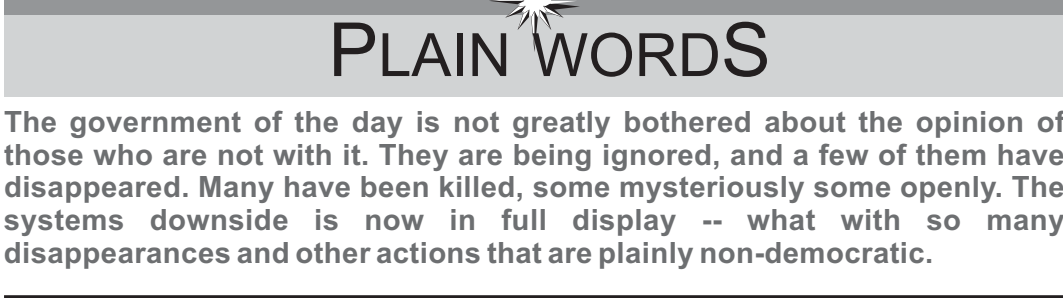
writes from Karachi

THE country's president called the country's chief justice to his palace for an explanation, and the latter returned under escort and was confined to his residence, incommunicado. What went on between the two is not known.

The president will make a reference to the Supreme Judicial Council to investigate the alleged CJP's misconduct. In what this misconduct lay has not been divulged, though planted stories tell the tale.

The president does not like disorderly or disobedient persons; he has not made the formal inaugural speech of a new parliament for three years running because he finds the deputies of the parliament disorderly.

They shout, hoot, and refuse to listen to the august person in silence. On the other side was



Ifitikhar Chaudhry whose record is one of judicial activism. He did tread on many sensitive toes. He was given to taking suo motto notice of various happenings.

Some of his judgments embarrassed the government. He was the person who ensured that the Mukhtaran Mai case was taken up, heard and, in some way, decided. Later she was enabled to travel abroad against the wishes of Gen. Musharraf who said that she would defame Pakistan abroad and sully the country's image.

The suspended CJP had caused serious embarrassments to the government. He frustrated the sale of Pakistan Steel Mills, the largest industrial undertaking. He found this privatization to be non-transparent, and that the public exchequer stood to suffer the loss of many billions of rupees. Then he became a pain in the neck for authorities in the

cases of hundreds of Pakistan's citizens who had disappeared, leaving no trail.

It is widely known that they were picked up by intelligence agencies, and have not been heard of since. Their families have been running from pillar to post without knowing whether their dear ones are alive, and where they might be.

The CJP upbraided the government several times because they could not find out where such people had disappeared. In one case, he even fined a federal secretary to the government.

On the downside, it is said that he loved protocol; he was abrasive; he treated lawyers not very politely sometimes; he liked to show-off his power; and he had tried to place his policeman son into a better posting. There is no charge of any bribe-taking, or any other conduct unbefitting of a judge.

The legal fraternity is, of

course, in a state of shock. This is a direct assault on what remains of the independence of judiciary. Justice Ifitikhar Chaudhry thought nothing of embarrassing the government many times for the sake of providing relief to unimportant people.

He was punished before the SJC had investigated and found him guilty. This is a disgrace to all, not merely to the legal fraternity but also to all aware citizens.

Now, most thinking Pakistanis can't raise their heads with pride. The image of the country is muddy. The sacking and arrest of a chief justice after a personal encounter is the most unexpected and ungracious thing that could have happened. Most other dictators round the world have not done anything so blatantly.

Pakistan is well provided for with evil geniuses to suggest some legal stratagem to get rid of this or that difficult person in a

graceful manner.

People ask what the hurry was. Naem Bokhari, a lawyer from Lahore and a TV personality, wrote an open letter detailing various misdeeds of Justice Ifitikhar Chaudhry.

Although he later denied having written this letter, it did go around the world under his name, and is said to contain many of the points that the charge-sheet the government sent to the SJC had. That the chief justice was not toeing the government line, and was careless about saying things and giving judgments that the government did not like, is the real reason why he was sacked. But even then, the people ask why now and why not a fortnight earlier or a month later? There is a tell-tale quasi-explanation.

A particular writ has been filed with the supreme court, challenging the constitutional basis of what the government is openly planning to do: it wants the president to be re-elected by the existing assemblies a second time just before they are to die (completion of their tenure).

The petition also mentions that the government is likely to postpone the election due this year. That too is undesirable. Also included in the impugned government intentions is that the president wishes to continue to remain

chief of the army staff indefinitely after being re-elected.

How would the CJP have reacted to this petition? What would have been his judgment? This is a matter of great political importance for Musharraf and the system he has devised. Could it be that Justice Ifitikhar Chaudhry was unlikely to take a line that would have satisfied the president's desire?

Every citizen today feels diminished. The two highest officers of state are behaving in a manner that puts all of us in a bad light. This government is extra-sensitive about the image of the regime. Now, this particular action, so spectacular, should have been foreseen as something that would bring disrepute not only to this government and its shabby political system but also to Pakistan.

This is, of course, not the first assault on the independence of higher judiciary. This has happened many times. Everyone knows of the major constitutional cases in Pakistan's top court.

It began with GG Ghulam Muhammad in 1953-54. In the latter year, he sacked a sovereign constituent assembly on a charge of failing to perform its primary duty of writing a constitution, although the man who did this was himself a creature of that assem-

bly. Sovereignty over Pakistan had been transferred to this assembly as the representative of the Pakistani people.

Ayub Khan tore up the first constitution, hurriedly written on the non-democratic principle of parity between the two unequal wings, barely two and a half years after it came into force.

Then the former military chief and self-appointed field marshal wrote a constitution for his own needs. Some people went to the top court and complained. The chief judge then, Justice Muhammad Muneeb, gave a judgment that still resounds in the great halls of justice as the most disgraceful judgment ever delivered in Pakistan.

A legal fiction was invented: state necessity required extra-constitutional measures in extraordinary situations. It has served all dictators.

That principle has provided a fig leaf behind which naked aggression against the people of Pakistan, by successive military chiefs, hides. CJP's have been either cowardly or in cahoots with dictators.

The top courts, to their shame, always upheld a military coup d'etat. It puts the higher judiciary to shame; in this area of darkness there shine a few exceptions who did not "obey" the tyrants.

Justice Chaudhry was the first CJP; earlier, some judges had said "no" to arbitrary oaths. Most senior judges have failed. Some legal experts disgraced themselves by justifying extra-constitutional actions of freebooters.

What view common citizens should take is a question that faces all thinking types. They cannot support it. What are the means available to oppose it? Very few.

The government of the day is not greatly bothered about the opinion of those who are not with it. They are being ignored, and a few of them have disappeared. Many have been killed, some mysteriously some openly.

The systems downside is now in full display -- what with so many disappearances and other actions that are plainly non-democratic. There is nothing that an ordinary citizen can do, because there are no strong political parties that would mobilize them and channelise the people's voice to some effect.

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