

Don McKinnon's remarks

His thoughts merit attention

ON McKinnon's remarks on Bangladesh's political situation ought to be observed against the background of the position the Commonwealth has traditionally taken regarding democracy in its member-states. It is our view that the secretary general of the Commonwealth, while calling for an early lifting of emergency regulations and a restoration of political activities, was in broad measure reflecting the expectations of the larger international community. Though some may have perceived Mr. McKinnon's remarks as bordering on 'interference' in the country's internal affairs, we would like to think that, on a deeper basis, his concerns run in conjunction with those of the caretaker government itself. From such a perspective, one notes hardly any difference between what McKinnon wishes to see happen and what the government would like to set in motion here.

An unfortunate part of our recent political history remains the mess we as a nation have been pushed to through an inability or reluctance or both on the part of the major political parties to come to terms with each other, indeed to deal with issues on a bipartisan, cooperative basis. Add to that the mind-boggling plunder resorted to by the ruling classes, to a point where it became necessary for the caretaker administration to undertake corrective measures to restore our social and political order. We will have little difficulty understanding these compulsions. That said, we note that the government has taken certain steps which rather encourage us in thinking that we are on the right track. Indoor politics, we have been informed, could well be restored in the next three months. Moreover, plans for voters' identity cards appear to be on the anvil. These are steps which we think are good pointers to what we can further look forward to, matters over which the Commonwealth is ready to offer technical assistance. Apart from that, the seriousness with which the government has been pursuing reforms in such areas as the Anti-Corruption Commission and going for a restructuring of the Election Commission has been widely acclaimed by the public. Furthermore, the government is on record as having stated its intention to hold elections as early as possible.

We at this newspaper have regularly emphasized the idea that the existing situation needs delicate, careful handling. So far there has been prudent handling of conditions on the part of the caretaker government. It can, however, do a bit more -- through providing the country with a fairly good idea of when the scheduled general elections might be held. Some pointers in this regard will clear the air of any possible misgivings.

DS correspondent's arrest

We condemn

WHAT appears to be a blatant show of power the district administration of Nilphamari arrested the local correspondent of The Daily Star EAM Asaduzzaman Tipu on Wednesday following the publication of a photo of the local fertilizer dealer Biswajit Bhoumik Bapi in this daily. The photo showed Bapi talking with some agitating farmers who had surrounded him demanding fertilizer. But, the fertilizer dealer tearfully claimed to the local journalists that he was not aware of filing any case against Tipu for the report.

We are shocked to learn that even though Bapi asserts that he never filed any case against Tipu, the Nilphamari police picked up the journalist on the allegation of an 'unethical demand' made to the dealer. It is, however, alleged that an enraged administration had pressed Bapi to file a petition against Tipu.

What angers us most is why the district authorities took such an action against the journalist before even fully investigating the so-called allegation against him. The usual practice is to file a rejoinder against a news item found to be devoid of substance or smells of fabrication. The plaintiff can even lodge a complaint with the press council if the newspaper concerned failed to take any action against any allegedly errant journalist. But the Nilphamari civil and police administration chose neither of the ways and opted for the extreme.

There is no denying that fertilizer crisis in Nilphamari has taken a serious turn and the photo published was simply a part of reporting facts. We therefore condemn treatment of a journalist in the line of duty like an ordinary criminal.

It remains to be said that if journalists in the professional discharge of their duty are subjected to harassment then how the people and the authorities would come to know what magnitude a particular crisis has taken calling for urgent remedy. Authorities always tend to gain from factual reporting on local issues of importance.

On the ropes



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

The arrests of the night of March 7 were thus more significant even than people realise. Since then, the fortunes of both parties have been in eclipse. They are now riven by fratricide and in-fighting as the ambitious and the opportunistic circle the waters, sensing that at long last their time has come. It does not seem as though the senior leadership of either party has much left in the tank, and there are many in either party already more than willing to throw them overboard.

could go without incurring any kind of backlash.

That the biggest fish on the BNP side was Tarique Rahman cannot be doubted. As long as he remained at large, the BNP remained in the game. The authorities' continued hesitation to move against Tarique indicated clearly that they were not yet confident that they had the power and the support to take him down.

When they came for him shortly after midnight, it sent a clear a signal that the game was up for the BNP. At least for a BNP ruled by Tarique and his coterie: there remain elements in the party around whom a resurgent BNP could re-coalesce, though whether such an entity will be a formidable force in the future politics of Bangladesh remains to be seen.

Indeed, there was a certain measure of truth to both suggestions. On the one hand, there were (and still are) all sorts of desperate back-room deals being brokered about who could or would be arrested and who could or would be spared. And, of course, there was considerable anxiety among the authorities as to how far and how fast they

party apparatus into question. Even those who have remained outside the dragnet and can claim that they have received a relatively clean bill of health are implicated by association.

They are the silent accomplices who helped created the environment for these people to do what they did. Their thieving might have been less pronounced, and, in many cases, maybe they were not guilty of thieving at all, but nevertheless they can rightly be, and will be, tarred by the same brush for turning a blind eye to or actively colluding in the crime and corruption.

But, to return to my initial point, the little noticed thing about the night of March 7 was that the authorities managed to nab the Awami League leader they were most worried about, as well. The one they had the most doubts about being able to bring in quietly.

The raid at Sudha Sadhan, ostensibly to find Sheikh Helal and Bahauddin Nasim, was transparently bogus (why would they be there?) -- and was done to create an image of tit-for-tat

even-handedness in the public eye. Balance must be maintained, after all.

But, while the raid on Sudha Sadhan was for the benefit of the rubes, very quietly, the authorities did maintain balance by successfully bringing in that night the biggest fish on the AL side. I am referring to the mayor of Chittagong, A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury.

Mohiuddin wielded power like no other Awami Leaguer (with the obvious exception of the party president). Compare him to the other senior party leaders. In 2001, most of the party's senior leadership were swept out of office. They claim by fraud, but either way, whether as a result of their unpopularity or their impotence, they were powerless to do anything about it.

Contrast this to the fortunes of Mohiuddin. He was first elected mayor in 1994 during the tenure of the first Khaleda Zia administration, and in 2005 he was re-elected for the second time. Mohiuddin was thus able to get himself first elected and then re-elected (for the second time) while the BNP was in power at

the national level.

Indeed, the BNP tried strenuously to steal the 2005 mayoral election, but his control over the city was so dominant that they were unable to. At the first sign of shenanigans in the vote counting, Mohiuddin was able to put tens of thousands of supporters on the street and ensure a fair result.

Mohiuddin controlled Chittagong with an authority that Sadeque Hossain Khoka (or any mayor before him) could only dream of with respect to Dhaka. He could shut down the port at his command, and, indeed, emerged as by far the most effective AL leader during the three months in which they used oborodh to put pressure on the first caretaker government.

I think the AL would be in much better shape to survive than the BNP. The corruption is there, but not nearly so bad. They have not been tainted by the last five years. Their time in office, in retrospect, looks better by the day. And it is pretty much accepted that they would have come to power had there been free and fair elections.

All this puts them in an altogether different category from the BNP. But, nevertheless, they still look to be in serious trouble. There is no guarantee that the sharks who are circling the water waiting for their chance will be either able to hold the party together or will be worthy of its leadership. What happens then to the more honest and capable leaders, one can only speculate.

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Life cycle of revolution



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

That sacred word embodies the birth pain of change, and it should not be confused with the birth of change. A successful revolution means that the change has been initiated, but not necessarily implemented. A failed one is when the change is stillborn. What is, then, the life cycle of revolution? Let us say, it begins when the constant starts to change. And it ends as soon as the end becomes constant. Revolution is a violent way to remind us of the obvious. The only thing constant in life is change.

EVOLUTIONS are a lot like guests in the house. They come as assuredly as they go, although some arrive early and some leave soon. But those who are close to the host stay longer, while others take care not to overstay the welcome. Guess that it may be, how long should a revolution stay? If it comes early, people may not be ready. If it leaves early, people may not be happy. In an ideal situation, a revolution should last until it has completed what it begins.

Who invites a revolution? Well, it is the algorithm of history, which sends out the invitation on behalf of the people. The invitation goes out when time and destiny combine together and people are ready for change. If revolution comes at the behest of people, it must also leave at their behest. But sooner or later, every revolution comes to the crossroads. It must make a choice of whether to go or to stay.

This was dramatically exemplified by the French Revolution, when its ill-fated Justice Minister

George Danton said during his own trial that every revolution devoured its own children. This was one way to end a revolution. Then his colleague-turned-enemy Robespierre rejoined that the social revolution was not yet over, and he who made only half a revolution dug his own grave. That was another way to end it as well.

Either way, time is of the essence in any revolution. A delayed revolution is like an expired drug, it loses its power to cure. Again, a hurried one is like half-cooked food, which fails to satisfy the appetite of people. Therefore, a revolution must come on time and leave on time if it must be a potent force. Some revolutions are like surgical interventions. Others are like poultice applied to the body. A revolution should last as long as it takes to heal the wound.

By that time a revolution runs the risk of going through a rift.

The moderates like to be pragmatic, maximizing the goal of the revolution through minimum casualties. The radicals push to

be pedagogic. They want to take the revolution to its logical conclusion. Exactly 1376 people were guillotined within 47 days in the French Revolution. The Girondists fell apart with the Jacobins over the level of cruelty.

The French Revolution failed as a result of that conflict and Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins, would fail even in his attempt to commit suicide, ending up under the guillotine on the following day without a trial. The Bourbons would be restored to the throne of France 26 years after the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" was written. Compared to it, the American Revolution was more moderate and less bloody, yet much more influential and successful.

This is one of the reasons why revolutions never get a chance to be completed. It was Albert Camus, the Nobel laureate French existentialist, who explained that the world had many rebellions but not a single revolution. And he drew the

line between the two.

Rebellion kills men, while revolution destroys both men and principles. Unfortunately, when a revolution starts, men destroy each other before they can get to the principles. It is like the relapse of an infection when the antibiotics are withdrawn before the full course has been administered.

The strains of the virus remain in the body and attack again soon. That is why, after much bloodshed and violence, human society does not fully recover from the ever-repeating cycle of despair and distress.

During a revolution, the opportunists tend to hide amongst the moderates. They take shelter in the humane auspices of considerate men. This is where the revolution itself comes to a turning point. It meets with resistance from an opposite force that wants to push back. This is where those who fear to be overthrown by the revolution conspire to overthrow it. The revolution begins

to slow down before it is finally defeated.

Unless a revolution attains its objectives during acceleration, it cannot be done after the deceleration sets in. This is when the reactionaries overpower the revolutionaries, when the status quo is revived in quid pro quo, and the revolution gets mired in a stasis.

There is nothing more pathetic than a failed revolution, and there is no prosthetics for broken spirits when shot down to roll in the same banalities they had vowed to overcome through revolution.

The revolution devours its own children in the course of deceleration and then, once again, when the revolution is finally defeated. The first time the cannibalizing happens amongst the revolutionaries, and then the reactionaries take on the revolutionaries to finish up the revolution.

The first sign of that crisis is when the revolutionaries falter in their minds, showing compromise and doubts leading to internecine conflicts. In fact, the children start devouring the revolution before the revolution starts devouring them.

In 1929, Shri Ramanand Chatterji, the editor of Modern Review, ridiculed the slogan of "Long Live Revolution" in an editorial note. It stirred the emotions of Bhagat Singh who wrote a reply and asked the trying magistrate to send it to Modern Review. He explained

that revolution was a longing for change, because it was through change that the old order could yield place to the new.

Bhagat Singh also explained that, while bombs and pistols were mere means for its achievement, actual revolution was essential for saving mankind from paralysis and stagnation. Then he added that for the established agencies of exploitation the word "revolution" conjured up a feeling of blood-stained horror. But it was a sacred word to the revolutionaries.

That sacred word embodies the birth pain of change, and it should not be confused with the birth of change. A successful revolution means that the change has been initiated, but not necessarily implemented. A failed one is when the change is stillborn.

What is, then, the life cycle of revolution? Let us say, it begins when the constant starts to change. And it ends as soon as the end becomes constant. Revolution is a violent way to remind us of the obvious. The only thing constant in life is change.

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Why a bumper boro production is the need of the hour

BARE FACTS

In order to bring down the price of food grain (rice and wheat) the government has recently decided to withdraw import duty on rice and wheat. Besides, the government has started this week open market sale (OMS) of rice at subsidized price. It is yet to be seen how these measures help bring down the price of rice in the market.

hundreds of farmers queuing for hours in front of the urea dealers' shops in different places of the country, particularly in the northern districts.

Farmers call it mockery when one farmer gets one sack of urea against his requirement for ten sacks. In some cases, two farmers share one sack of urea. Farmers are erecting barricades on the highways and confining the upazila nirkabi officers in their offices, demanding adequate supply of fertilizers. Law enforcing agencies have been deployed to prevent any untoward incident.

Fertilizer shortage has been coupled with power crisis in running

deep tubewells in the command areas. Electricity crisis is equally affecting the running of power pumps. All this suggests that boro cultivation in the country, particularly in the northern districts, may be hampered due to short supply of fertilizers and the power crisis.

Now the question that arises is -- why is a bumper production of boro?

First, among the three major rice crops, (aus, aman and boro), aman continued to top the list until 1997-98. Food ministry sources reveal that, in 1997-98, aman production stood at 8.85 million metric ton (mmmt) while boro production was 8.14 mmmt. In 1998-99, aman was

replaced by boro as the highest producing rice.

In the year 1998-99, aman production was 7.74 mmmt while boro production stood at 10.55 mmmt. Since then, boro has continued to top the list. In 2005-06, boro production was 13.98 mmmt while aman production stood at 10.81 mmmt. Aus production is on the decline. In 2006-07, aus production stood at 1.51 mmmt against 1.75 mmmt in 2005-06 and nearly 2 mmmt in 1997-98.

Second, according to agricultural scientists, irrigated agriculture is much more productive than rain-fed agriculture, and it is an input to agricultural production where natural conditions are not favourable.

able. Since boro is an irrigated crop its yield is higher than that of aman, which is typically sown during the monsoon.

Availability of adequate fertilizers to the farmers, and uninterrupted supply of electricity for running deep tubewells and power pumps, will lead to higher boro yields and, thereby, total availability of food grain from domestic production will significantly increase.

Third, although production of aman this year (2006-07) was slightly better than that of last year (2005-06), it failed to reach the target for this year. Against the target of 13.18 million mmmt, output of aman, according to preliminary estimates, is expected to stand at 12.8 mmmt. Failure of aus and aman production to reach the target necessitates higher production of boro to fill up the gap this year.

Fourth, of all the food items, the importance of rice is supreme. Boro, as stated above, is the highest yielding rice crop. Rice provides about 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake and more than 70

percent of calorie intake. Cooked rice mixed with green chili and salt is the diet for many of the ultra-poor who constitute 20 percent or so of the 60 million people living below poverty line. Higher price due to short supply in the market forces the poorest to reduce their consumption of rice, which is practically their only food item. This endangers their very lives.

Fifth, wheat is the second most important cereal, and provides about 7 percent of the country's cereal intake. The demand for wheat is growing day by day, particularly in the urban areas. Our annual requirement of wheat is more than 3 mmmt. In 1999-2000, wheat production stood at 1,840,000 tons, which came down to only 730,000 tons in 2005-06. Higher yield of boro may compensate the loss in wheat production.

Last but not the least, while boro cultivation is being affected due to fertilizer and electricity crisis, the prices of essentials, including rice, are spiraling. Of particular importance is the price of rice, which is the

staple food in Bangladesh. In the first half of March, the price of coarse rice in the retail market was between Tk 20 and Tk 22 per kg. Fine variety rice was selling at Tk 28 to Tk 30 a kg. Available information suggests that the price of rice is higher than that of any previous year at this time.

In order to bring down the price of food grain (rice and wheat) the government has recently decided to withdraw import duty on rice and wheat. Besides, the government has started this week open market sale (OMS) of rice at subsidized price. It is yet to be seen how these measures help bring down the price of rice in the market.

What is more important is the failure in increasing production of rice commensurate with annual growth rate of population. While incentives like withdrawal of import duty, and reduction and/or exemption of L/C margin for importing rice, may be allowed for a short period, all attempts have to be made for increasing the domestic production of rice.

More specifically, emphasis has to be laid on further increasing the areas under boro crop, which gives higher yields, its season is not in conflict with any other major crop's, and is resistant to diseases.

It is the responsibility of the government to extend all support for timely