

Khulna workers' agitation

High level intervention needed

It does not obviously speak well of the management of the four state-owned jute mills in Khalishpur industrial belt, nor of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) at the top, who have allowed Taka 45 crore in arrear salaries to accumulate with their 22,000 workers. The employees have been agitating since Tuesday last for payment of the dues but the situation took a serious turn with the BJMC authorities laying off the workers on Thursday.

On Saturday, the workers flared up breaking into fresh agitation over their twin demands for payment of arrears and withdrawal of the lay-off orders. Violence erupted as sporadic clashes occurred between the police and the workers that led to at least a hundred people being injured, the casualty least including 20 policemen. Seventy people were rounded up by the police. Tension prevails in the industrial belt.

Under the emergency rules, taking out procession or assemblage of people is forbidden. While from the law enforcers' point of view, they were required to prevent the employees from gathering, the latter's pressing grievances over not getting paid for months and being laid off pushed them into a state of desperation. Trade union activities are prohibited in the present context so that CBAs do not operate, something that is underscored by the fact that CBA representatives 'did not attend' the meeting held at the Khulna Metropolitan Police office to discuss the situation. However at the meet attended by high officials of the four jute mills, the regional coordinator of the jute mills corporation and the police commissioner, a decision was taken to pay Tk 6 crore of the workers' dues by the current week.

It is both a matter of workers' right as well as a humanitarian concern. We would therefore hope and urge that there is an early intervention from a high level to thrash out the problems with the Khalishpur workers. A payment time-table needs to be worked out.

Primary school teachers

A question of eligibility

THE council of advisers of the caretaker government has given a breathing space to 24,000 primary school teachers by allowing them one more year to qualify for inclusion in the Monthly Payment Order. MPO is the government contribution to the teachers' salaries.

These teachers will have to appear in an objective test to qualify. The lenient view, we believe, was taken in consideration of their having endured years of uncertainty. These primary school teachers were employed before 1st July 1996 and were required to prove their eligibility by 1st November 2006. That hurdle was crossed by 20,000 teachers while 24,000 failed to do so.

Properly manning the primary schools has never been the top priority with the successive governments though teachers at the primary level interact with and impart lessons to the children at the very formative stage of their life and thereby leave long-lasting impression on their minds. It is, therefore, essential that the primary school teachers have the required qualification and training and they are well paid.

On the question of recruitment, we oppose the idea of giving employment to teachers on the basis of their political identity rather than their merit and qualification. There are numerous examples of partisan teachers breaking disciplinary codes of the school committee and bringing down the quality of education. There are also reports about primary school teachers not taking classes regularly but, on the other hand, coming to collect salaries at the end of the month.

Whilst we hope the 24,000 teachers will make the best use of the new deadline to earn the eligibility to come under MPO, we would like to stress that eligibility has to be tested in substance and not in mere form. The relevant authorities will have to ensure that.

Raising the alarm on the greatest threat to global security

Tuesday was a landmark day. It marked the recognition of climate change as a core security issue. It demonstrated that the vast majority of the international community now see an unstable climate as an unprecedented threat that we must meet with much greater urgency and ambition. If we succeed in that shared endeavour, we will all enjoy a better prospect of security. Climate change is a threat that can bring us together if we are wise enough to stop it from driving us apart.

MARGARET BECKETT

THE Congolese representative spoke about half-way into the Security Council debate. "This will not be the first time people have fought over land, water and resources," he said "but this time it will be on a scale that dwarfs the conflicts of the past." The French called it the "Number one threat to mankind." The Belgian said that in response to that threat we had to do nothing less than rethink from top to bottom how we thought about our security: we could not afford to fall into the trap that has cost the world so dear

throughout history and assume that the future will look like the past. The UN secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, said the scenarios facing us were alarming.

What was the focus of all this concern? Climate change. Our increasingly unstable climate is no longer seen as primarily an environmental or economic issue. As the threat we face has grown larger in scale and sharper in outline over the past two years, as recent scientific evidence has reinforced, and in some cases exceeded, our worst fears as to the physical impacts facing us, so it has become increasingly clear that climate change has conse-

quences that reach to the very heart of the security agenda.

Flooding, disease and famine and from that migration on an unprecedented scale and in areas of already high tension. Drought and crop-failure and from that intensified competition for food, water and energy in regions where resources are already stretched to the limit. Economic disruption on the scale predicted in last year's Stern Report and not seen since the end of World War II.

This is not about narrow national security -- it is about our collective security in a fragile and increasingly interdependent

world. And tragically, once again, it will be those who are most vulnerable and least able to cope that will be hit first. There is certainly no choice between a stable climate and the fight against poverty. Without the first, the second will certainly fail.

Anyone wanting to trace the links between what science is telling us about physical impacts and the broader ramifications for our security would do well to read a startling report that appeared on Monday. The Military Advisory Board are a group of the most respected retired admirals and generals in the United States. During their careers they have stood face to face with everything from containment and deterrence of the Soviet nuclear threat during the Cold War to the more recent struggle against terrorism and extremism. They are about as far as you can get from the old stee- reo-type of a tree-hugging environmentalist. And yet in that report they state, categorically,

that projected climate change poses a serious threat to America's national security. It is, they say: "A threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world." In other words an unstable climate will make the very kinds of tensions and conflicts that the Security Council deals with, day in day out, yet more frequent and even more severe.

It is those concerns, then, that lay behind the UK's decision to use our presidency of the Security Council to instigate this unprecedented debate on Tuesday. And it is those concerns that prompted 53 countries -- an almost unheard of number for a meeting of this kind -- to sign up to speak and take part.

Taking it to the Security Council is not an alternative to action elsewhere within the United Nations or across the international community. As the UK's lead negotiator at the UN Framework Convention on

Climate Change for over five years, I am the last person who would wish to undermine those other and vital multilateral efforts. But, charged as it is with the maintenance of international peace and security, the Security Council can make a unique contribution in the building of a shared understanding of a what an unstable climate will mean for our individual and collective security. And the decisions we come to and the action we take -- in whatever forum -- as we begin to build a low carbon, global economy will be better, stronger and more effective because it is informed by the fullest possible understanding of all the implications of climate change -- including the security imperative.

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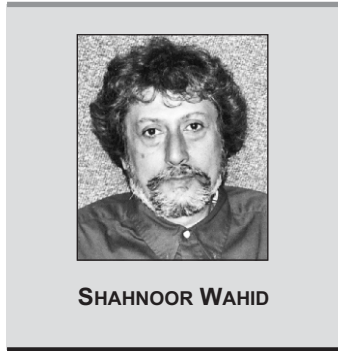


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Margaret Beckett MP is British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

Think of a scenario ...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

YES, let us think of a scenario where the following acts are played sequentially according to the political tradition of this country.

Act-1

Hundreds of thousands of people blocking the roads in some residential areas of the metropolis. Local residents cannot go into, or come out of, their houses. They cannot even sleep at night, as those hundreds of people shout and scream and give slogans in favour of their candidates. Senior police officers are sweating to prevent traffic jams occurring on the adjacent streets.

Thousands of posters have covered the boundary walls of all the houses in that entire block, and hundreds of banners are hanging overhead. Nomination-

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Can we reverse the situation? Difficult, but we can. Only if we have the unwavering determination, courage and resolve to develop a mechanism that will help us change the age-old, malice-laden, corruption-infested political system. The kind of politics we have witnessed in last fifteen years have shamed us again and again before the world, and destroyed all the good achievements of this nation. Therefore, we must not lose faith in ourselves so fast. We must not trivialize our resolve.

seeking men and women are going inside the party offices one after another, each carrying Tk. 5 crore in cash for the party chairperson. Three hundred (300) lucky candidates deposit a total sum of Tk. 1500 crore to the chairperson (could earning money be any easier than this!).

Act-2

The general election is held on January 22, as per the blueprint. Bloody battles are fought in most of the polling centres. About three dozen people die in the election related violence, and two thousand others go to hospitals with grievous injuries.

Five hundred vehicles are damaged beyond repair. Almost all the candidates of the 4-party alliance come out victorious in the "freest and fairest" election ever

held in the country.

Act-3

The opposition alliance rejects the election results accusing massive rigging and calls for hartal or general strike.

Act-4

Hartal day. Policemen in full battle gear take up position on the road intersections. Tokais are seen gathering at certain points in the city. Processions try to come out onto the main roads. Policemen try to stop them. Tokais start to throw bricks and stones at the policemen.

Policemen lob teargas shells at the crowd. Then begins the lathi charge -- baton charge and arrests of the opposition party workers. Some heads are cracked open. Some female activists are seen being dragged by the hair

and loaded into police vans.

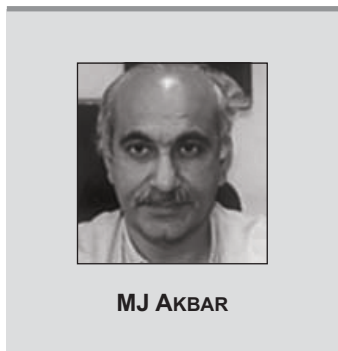
Leaders of the opposition alliance call for three-day hartal, and threaten to gather about two million people to lay siege to the city. In the evening, we all see the day-long drama on the numerous TV channels.

Act-5

The winning party leaders threaten to crush the backbone of anyone disrupting normal life. They accuse the opposition alliance leaders of destroying the country's image abroad with fabricated accusations, and call them traitors. To counter the threat of the gathering of two million people by the opposition, they threaten to gather four million people.

Fights brake out in the localities among the supporters of the major

If Rahul is the future, who is the past?



MJ AKBAR

IF Rahul Gandhi is the future of the Congress, then Dr Manmohan Singh must surely be its past. The prime minister's definitive statement linking the future of the Congress to Rahul Gandhi, made in the midst of a faltering UP election campaign, suggests many things. But the most important surely is that the dynamics of Congress politics has shifted from preserving Dr Singh in office to making Rahul Gandhi the next prime minister.

Was Dr Singh mature, or premature, in being so specific? It was not a casual remark. Nor was it meant merely to please. If the second were the reason then Dr Singh would have been parroting it ever since he was sworn in as prime minister three years ago. The point of the message lies not in the content of the remark but in the timing.

The content is not news. Rahul Gandhi did not win an election from his father's constituency, Amethi, to become minister of information and broadcasting. The tealeaves could be read in the list of Congress ministers sworn in along with Dr Singh. No one from Rahul Gandhi's age group was given a place in government, although you could virtually hear the crash of broken

BYLINE

Politics is an examination in which the voter awards marks, and the voter is one tough invigilator. Rahul Gandhi can become leader of the Congress, but he cannot become leader of India without winning an election. Rajiv Gandhi emerged from his election at the crest of an unprecedented tide. Rahul Gandhi is swimming against an ebb current, for which he has no one to blame but his own government. So, was Dr Manmohan Singh's remark mature or premature? His realism may have eliminated ambiguity in the Congress, but injected uncertainty into the coalition that he heads.

young hearts as the queue formed before the President of India.

The young were told to wait their turn. It was implicit that their turn would come along with Rahul Gandhi's. But in those early days, an "if" was attached to the "when," as Rahul Gandhi's "will" often seemed to veer towards "won't." Dr Singh's statement is evidence that the "if" has been deleted; the "when" has been notified.

The statement is clear indication to two generations of Congressmen that they have no hope of taking Dr Singh's place; that if the Congress returns to power, it will go unambiguously to the Gandhi family.

There has been much back-ground jostling in the past few months, as the government's failure to protect the party vote takes its toll at the state level. The prime minister is head of government, and must take the blame.

One politician's failure is always another politician's hope. There is a common view that if the Congress comes a poor fourth in UP, there will be turbulence in Delhi. There is also uncertainty about whether a government candidate can win

the coming election for president of the country.

It is merely human if such circumstances encourage hope in the minds of stalwarts like Pranab Mukherjee, or old hands like Sushil Shinde. The prime minister has informed his generation of hopefuls that they can stop hoping.

Manmohan Singh belongs to Generation Was. Rahul Gandhi represents Generation Next.

What happens to Generation In-between?

Dr Singh is over 70. Rahul Gandhi will soon be 40. Quite a few Congressmen, some of them with substance, are trapped in between, in that last decade of hope called the Sixties.

They don't seem to be in their sixties, for two reasons. First, because the men dye their hair. Second, because most of them came to prominence after Rajiv Gandhi's victory at the end of 1984, when they were in their early forties.

More than 22 years have passed, but we still subconsciously think of them as young. They will be squeezed, but they will adjust with the future as best as they can, keeping any regret intensely personal.

The problem will be with ambi-

tions within the same age group outside the Congress. If the Congress could win a majority on its own, this would not be a problem. But that is not possible in the foreseeable future.

Will non-Congress parties within the UPA coalition accept Rahul Gandhi as easily as Congress MPs? Lalu Prasad Yadav, for instance, has not been shy of claiming the prime ministership for himself at some future date; and it is difficult to see Sharad Pawar in a Rahul Gandhi cabinet. But all options will be subject to a single consideration: how many seats Congress wins in the next general election, under Rahul Gandhi's leadership.

In 2004, Dr Manmohan Singh became prime minister because Mrs Sonia Gandhi stepped aside and Rahul Gandhi did not have sufficient experience. You could argue, of course, that he still does not have sufficient experience, or he would not have made the gaffes he did on the UP campaign trail.

But you don't get experience by staring at the computer screen. Experience comes when you have stumbled on the wrong phrase, or made some exorbitant claim that induces friends to

search for worry beads and opponents to check out their potential for sarcasm.

Politics at the highest level in a democracy is, above all, the art of communication. Some masters -- Atal Behari Vajpayee, Narasimha Rao, or Kamaraj. Lal Bahadur Shastri, Govind Ballabh Pant and Sardar Patel from an older lot -- know that to talk less is to say more.

To rise beyond this, you need the confidence of a post-1969 Indira Gandhi, or a Jyoti Basu at any time in his career. A genius like Jawaharlal Nehru is exceptional. But neither confidence nor genius is achieved without effort. Indira Gandhi's composure was not an overnight phenomenon.

It did not descend upon her the moment Shastri made her minister of information and broadcasting in his first cabinet in 1964. For years, the Socialist leader Dr Ram Manohar Lohia described her derisively as "Gungi Guriya," or the silent doll. But her silence had the last word over his eloquence. Indira Gandhi understood that silence is preferable to a mistaken assertion.

Rahul Gandhi needs to appreciate the virtues of minimalism until moderation is within his reach. The past is a trap if you do not appreciate its nuances. It helps to have a speechwriter who remembers Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Mukti Bahini, and the innumerable Bengali refugees who fled army repression in East Bengal in 1971.

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So, was Dr Manmohan Singh's remark mature or premature? His realism may have eliminated ambiguity in the Congress, but injected uncertainty into the coalition that he heads. If the other parties are uncomfortable with the transition in the Congress, and they know that the change is scheduled to take place before the next elections, then they could look for other alliance options.

The prime minister might have been wiser to remain vague about the future. Could it be that there was a decision that the ground had to be prepared, just in case unpredictable events catapulted the government towards an early election? We do not know.

Power is not stagnant energy; it is high voltage electricity that switches from one point to another without compunction. But you cannot indulge in too much voltage fluctuation without hurting the machinery.

If the past has beckoned the future then it cannot allow the future to hang around idly outside the door, because those with an interest in the future (which means everyone except the prime minister of India) will spend their time outside the room rather than inside it. A government works only when there is a sense of fusion. Confusion is its death certificate.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

excitement that politics in this country entail. They believe in the powers and inviolability of democracy and, no matter what the politicians do to this country, they must get the opportunity to rule and plunder, again and again, all in the name of "upholding democracy."

So, are we a nation that suffers from the affliction called amnesia? We tend to forget too quickly about what happened in the immediate past, and lament the situation we are in at present, never realising that the events of the past were responsible for the present malady.

Can we reverse the situation? Difficult, but we can. Only if we have the unwavering determination, courage and resolve to develop a mechanism that will help us change the age-old, malice-laden, corruption-infested political system.

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