

Abdul Jalil's letter to the government

We must return to the politics of integrity

IT was a sad day for Bangladesh's politics when Abdul Jalil, the jailed general secretary of the Awami League, made it known through an abject letter to the President and the Chief Adviser that he wished to renounce politics and that he craved their mercy in his desire to be freed from incarceration. Jalil's move, made known at a news conference called by his wife, defies unabashedly the glorious tradition that politicians in an earlier era set in Bangladesh, one that involved untold sufferings and sacrifices on their part in the interest of the nation. This nation has over the decades passed through graver crises and yet there is no single instance of an imprisoned politician of his stature reducing himself into a state of genuflection in order to have himself released from jail. Jalil's letter is, in whatever way one looks at it, deeply denigrating to the high calling of politics and is therefore mortifying for the country as a whole.

There is, however, the important question of whether or not the AL general secretary's letter was a result of pressure exercised on him by the powers that be. Such an inference may be drawn in that the move seems to fall rather conveniently within the expediency-laden scheme of things at work today. Assuming, however, that the imprisoned politician wrote the letter of his own volition, one can then easily conclude that it shows the weakness in his personality that has brought him to such a pass. In plain terms, the language Jalil employs in the letter is one of unmitigated supplication. If it was his health that worried him, he had hardly any need to drag in the extraneous matter of the quality of leadership provided to the Awami League by Sheikh Hasina. If today Jalil holds Hasina, to whom his loyalty was always unswerving, responsible for what is wrong with her party, he cannot absolve himself of his share of the blame for the mess.

The letter from the Awami League general secretary is, to our intense regret, a reflection of the depths to which politics and its practitioners have sunk in Bangladesh. It is an unfortunate break with tradition, for never before has such degeneracy afflicted politics. The mettle and moral qualities which characterised earlier generations of political leaders have gone missing, fundamentally because of an erosion of moral standards among the political classes. The bankruptcy of those who have been in the centre of politics in the last two decades or so is now beyond question. Jalil's letter to the government is all the more reason why we need to return to the politics of decency, of integrity and of patriotism. A new, committed generation of politicians, reformed political parties, indeed a whole new ethos is the demand of these troubled times.

Hill plunderers

None of them should escape justice

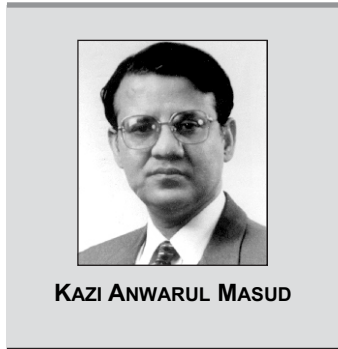
THE names of many individuals and organisations responsible for hill-razing in Chittagong are reported to have been left out of the list prepared by the Department of Environment as part of its plan to bring the culprits to justice. The landslide last month -- which claimed more than 120 lives and is attributed to indiscriminate flattening of the hilly terrains in the port city -- has brought the issue of senseless onslaughts on the hills to the fore. The instant response from the environmentalists and experts was that this suicidal course of action had to be stopped and the plunderers punished in an exemplary fashion. The environment department has already served notices on some of those involved in the illegal business, but it has to make sure that none of the offenders go unpunished. A complete list of the lawbreakers is the first step towards achieving the goal.

It has been reported that only the hill demolition sites close to the roads have been identified, while those located away from them have been overlooked. One would, however, expect, that the law enforcers take the trouble of visiting all the 134 sites where hills have been razed and put the names of the culprits on their list.

It is imperative that the people who caused such colossal damage to the environment and were responsible for the deaths in landslides do not get any opportunity to evade the law. Nor should there be any scope for them to slacken the law enforcers' grip through exerting any kind of influence from any quarter. The law enforcers have to maintain absolute neutrality while dealing with an offence as grave as endangering the lives of people. The government must also see to it that the agencies concerned work in a well-coordinated manner.

Finally, the lesson to be learned from Chittagong is that the environment is still a highly neglected area. So, a strategy for dealing with environmental issues ranging from water-logging in the cities through encroachment upon wetlands to demolition of hills has to be formulated on a priority basis and implemented in a no-nonsense manner.

Bangladesh's quest for democracy



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THAT democracy in its pristine form would be the most ideal expression of popular will is not even debatable. The question is, however, about the fiscal excesses that elected representatives are likely to indulge in, in order to satisfy their constituents, irrespective of whether such decisions will add to the common good.

Those advocating democracy, taking the literal meaning of "demos" -- the people -- as constituting majoritarian rule, often forget that the will of the majority may not necessarily lead to the most distilled judgment for the good of the society as a whole, because of the ignorance of the electorate of the appropriateness and/or timeliness of the decisions being taken on their behalf.

Additionally, the people's representatives themselves may not be au courant with the multitude of issues they are required to take decisions on. Congruent to this school of thought is the animosity expressed by legislators towards their opponents on

the other side of the aisle, regardless of the value of the arguments proffered by the opposition.

The discussion such as the above may give the impression that one is advocating a form of "aristocracy of the intellect" to run the government. A warning against this form of governance has been sounded from the time of Plato, who found real difference between democracy and oligarchy in terms of the wealth possessed by the people. Wherever people rule by virtue of the reason of wealth it was oligarchy, Plato wrote, and wherever the poor rule it was democracy.

Taken separately, this vein of thought is similar to socialist thinking that pervaded Europe from the age of the Renaissance, or the emergence of modernism, delineated as the time when tradition gave way to reason and, in Marxian terminology, the secularisation and humanisation of the world.

As the descriptive features of

modernity include the emergence of complex money economy and, thereby, the continuation of vertical and hierarchical social systems (the analogy of the television series Upstairs and Downstairs can be cited), the question that had to be answered was how best to safeguard the rights of the vast majority of the people who according to Scottish philosophers Robert Owen were doomed to live in poverty so that a small minority of the people could live in the splendour that they were used to.

The quest for democracy as an answer to this question continued, and the French and the Bolshevik Revolutions created milestones in the history of mankind. It would be imprudent to forget the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, and the American Declaration of Independence, all of which were attempts to establish the rights of the common people in the then existing feudal environment.

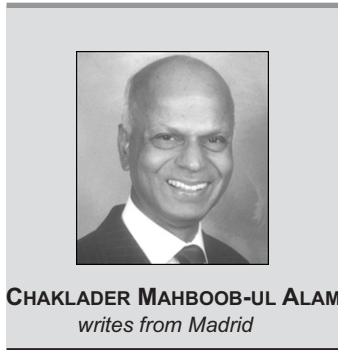
If the end of the first World War

saw the first wave of democracy, and decolonisation the second, Samuel Huntington saw the third wave following the collapse of communism. Whether the fourth wave would be ushered in the Middle East, particularly in the Muslim world, as desired by the Bush administration remains to be seen. But then, it is debatable whether the seed of democratisation is to be given more value than its quality.

Insertion of deliberative democracy in the governance of a country may not be accompanied by more productive input in the decision making process. Here again the skepticism expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville after his visit to the United States, and that of Edmund Burke of the French Revolution, about the pre-eminence of quantity over quality, and the cruelty that a majority can inflict on the minority, become relevant.

Very recently, the advisor for finance was reported to have

Sir Salman Rushdie



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

SO, we have a new knight in England, a Knight Bachelor. No one knows what it really means today. But one thing is clear, unlike his medieval counterparts, the new knight, Sir Salman Rushdie, will not be required to participate in cavalry charges. Last month, he was appointed a Knight Bachelor by the Queen for his "services to literature" for which he felt "thrilled and humbled."

Knighthood is now an honour bestowed by the British monarch on persons distinguished in government service, professions and arts. Although this is the only title conferred by a ceremony in which the sovereign and the subject take part in person, the sovereign usually confers the title on the recommendation of the British government.

As a result, it is not immune to scandals and controversies. But the furore caused by the recent knighting of Salman Rushdie has

been rather unusual. Why?

Ahmed Salman Rushdie comes from a privileged background. He was born in India sixty years ago in a wealthy Muslim family. His father sent him to England to pursue his studies there. He read History and got an M.A. from the University of Cambridge. While working as a professional advertising copywriter in London, he started writing newspaper and magazine articles on a variety of subjects as a hobby. His prose was so provocative that it soon attracted the attention of the critics. But he did not become well known as a writer until the publication of his novel Midnight's Children in 1981 which won the prestigious Booker Prize.

The book that made him really famous and at the same time an internationally controversial figure, was his third novel The

Satanic Verses, which was published in 1988. While The Satanic Verses was acclaimed by critics in the West as a first rate magical realist novel, it was denounced in most of the Muslim world as blasphemous because of the magical realist representation of the origins of Islam. In his novel, Rushdie challenged the fundamentalist believers' inclination to accept literally the beliefs of a revealed religion.

What is magical realism? According to Professors Parkinson Zamora and Faris: "In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation ... Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resis-

tance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in post-colonial cultures and increasingly, to women."

No doubt, Rushdie's fiction has a subversive streak. It is innovative as well as provocative. "If no single reality exists, then no world view or belief system is definitively correct, no society can be deemed permanent or stable and fantasy disturbs what has been taken to be real, tracing a space within society's cognitive frame."

Viewed from a fundamentalist perspective, no matter whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish, it is inevitably judged as irreverent and subversive. This was the reason why Iran's ayatollahs issued a fatwa condemning him to death in 1989 and Rushdie had to go into hiding.

The fatwa was lifted in 1998. If

compared the pre-budget debates held in our Parliament with the pre-budget consultations held with various stake holders, and concluded that the 2007-08 budget was far more responsive to popular demands than the ones held in our Parliaments.

Since the legitimacy of the current budget is beyond challenge, one cannot but wonder about the need for an elected government before the corrupt and the abusers of power have been rooted out of the political arena, after which the country can begin its journey anew towards truly fulfilling the aspirations of the people.

Professor Benjamin Barber of the University of Maryland (The Conquest of Politics) wrote about the conflict between the progressive liberals' emphasis on civil rights of minorities and the neo-conservatives' stress on economic rights of individuals and corporations, while Professor Michael Walzer (Harvard University) is least bothered that the claim to rule should rest upon the knowledge of the people, because the people are "subjects of the law, and if law is to bind them as free men and women, they must also be its makers."

One hopes that the Walzerian concept of the supremacy of the people has taken into consideration that the assertion of peoples' supremacy rests upon certain institutions that have to be created and nurtured for

sustainable democracy. The history (pre-January 11 declaration of emergency) of Bangladesh chronicles mostly the destruction of the institutions, and the institution of corruption, nepotism and other aberrations distorting the governance of the country, which could be best described as a "House of Horror."

It is indeed amazing that Bangladeshis, amidst the obstructions put in the path of progress, have shown considerable resilience in achieving promising macro-economic indicators, good export performance, increased remittance, lesser infant mortality and death at child birth, slightly better education (though not good enough to compete with even neighbouring countries), increased consciousness about socio-political rights, vibrant civil society, and, no less importantly, a force ready to rescue the country from an abyss without trying to lay claim to direct governance of the country.

One hopes that good sense will dawn upon our political leaders in order to correct the mistakes committed in the past and lead the country to the path of prosperity. Words alone will not suffice. They have to produce quantifiable results so that words do not get lost in translation.

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Rushdie was rebellious and irreverent before the fatwa, he became a die-hard reactionary after that. Before the fatwa he questioned everything and everybody. At a certain point of his young career, he had abandoned "a closed world of certainties" to live "in an infinite world of questions."

In the early part of his career he used his brilliant prose and stinging satire to criticise many of the British institutions. He wrote intensely against British immigration policy, hypocrisy, colonialism, racism, false multiculturalism, and Thatcherism. If there was any South Asian writer who aroused the ire of the British conservative media in the seventies and the eighties, it was Salman Rushdie.

Unfortunately, now he has become his master's voice. He has become a modern-day Torquemada. Worst of all, he has lost all objectivity by singling out Islam as the target of his venomous attacks. Although he is not yet considered a neo-con, he seems to subscribe to the American fundamentalist ideology.

He has given his wholehearted support to Bush's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. His views on modernity, violence, Islam and the West are completely one-sided. He has come to accept universal human val-

ues like freedom and tolerance as wholly Western ones and identify Islam alone with violence and tyranny. If Rushdie's objective is to start a reform movement in Islam, this is definitely not the way to go about it.

Muslims have every right to express their disagreements about Rushdie's writings, but violent reactions like book burnings and death threats by some over-zealous Muslims are, in my opinion, counter-productive because they provide opportunities to the renegades and a certain section of the Western media (who are already too eager to criticise Islam and the Muslims) to tarnish the image of Islam itself as being violent and intolerant.

True, these same Islam-bashers would never think of passing similar sweeping judgments on Christianity or Judaism because of Bush or Sharon's brutal policies in the Middle East. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is a great religion. It is strong enough to withstand criticisms and recriminations. No one should forget that Islam has a long history of accommodation of other beliefs and tolerance of differences.

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Medical scandal



ANM NURUL HAQUE

EVER increasing incidents of doctor's strike in the public and specialised hospitals in the recent days have made the conscious citizens deeply annoyed and aggrieved. A huge number of patients coming from within the capital or outside, seeking treatment at Birdem, had to either go back home or to some other hospitals, as the doctors launched strike for an indefinite period.

Around 500 indoor patients were compelled to remain almost uncared and unattended during the strike period continuing for five days. Even surgeries were stopped, leaving patients in grave situation as the doctors were abstaining from carrying out their

BY THE NUMBERS

Sima was admitted to RMCH with pneumonia complication and the doctors on duty had been neglectful in treating her. When Sima's condition was deteriorating with profuse bleeding through her nose, her husband Shahabul demanded urgent medical attention for Sima. At one stage of heated arguments with Sima's attendants, a mob of interns started to beat up Shahabul and his aged mother and mother-in-law. Police later rescued them from the fury of the interns. Meanwhile, Sima had died without treatment.

duties.

Nearly 300 in-patient department doctors including medical officers and consultants at Birdem enforced the strike on June 25, demanding regularisation of their service following issuance of a letter that said services of the doctors recruited on contract basis would not be renewed any further.

The doctors, however, put off the strike until July 31, following an assurance of meeting their demands by the national council of Bangladesh Diabetic Association.

The Birdem authorities have been recruiting doctors on contract in the indoor section since

1992 and had been renewing their services in three-year cycle. The irked doctors have all the right to wage movements to press for their demand. But they have no right to hold hundreds of patient hostage for meeting their demand.

The Birdem authorities cannot also avoid their responsibility for creating untold suffering to huge number of patients taking a foolhardy decision to terminate services of 300 doctors without any valid reason. It should not happen in an organisation like Birdem, which was founded by Dr. Ibrahim having a vision to provide world class facilities for treatment to the diabetes patients of this poor country.

By all means, the responsibility lies upon the national council of Bangladesh Diabetic Association to find a durable settlement of Birdem. We cannot but say that such an untoward incident is absolutely unacceptable in a specialised hospital that attracts huge number of patients from all across the country.

Nine patients died without treatment at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) on May 17 and 18, as interns enforced indefinite strike after they had clashed with attendants of patients and beat them up severely over accusation of neglect.

According to the media reports,

the patient Sima was admitted to RMCH with pneumonia complication and the doctors on duty had been neglectful in treating her. When Sima's condition was deteriorating with profuse bleeding through her nose, her husband Shahabul demanded urgent medical attention for Sima.

At one stage of heated arguments with Sima's attendants, a mob of interns started to beat up Shahabul and his aged mother and mother-in-law. Police later rescued them from the fury of the interns. Meanwhile, Sima had died without treatment and so did at least eight others. We do not know who was made responsible for turning the hospital into a hell-hole that took a toll of nine lives.

The doctors of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) enforced an indefinite strike in the first week of May, placing the treatment ground to a complete halt and compelling the indoor patients to leave the hospital. It was triggered by a clash between the doctors and class four employees of DMCH.

The clash ensued when a gatekeeper stopped some visitors willing to meet a doctor. Hearing

that his guests were not allowed to enter, the doctor rushed to the gate and abused the gate-keeper. At one stage of heated arguments, the doctor slapped the gatekeeper. After that the class four employees confined the doctor and beat him up badly. As a result the doctors were abstained from carrying out their duties.

The doctors at Dinajpur Medical College and Hospital also went on an indefinite strike from June 28, following an attack on an intern. According to newspaper reports, a few relatives of a female patient engaged in a scuffle with intern Dipankar, at the time of her admission. A few unidentified persons again attacked Dipankar the next night and beat him up.

A huge number of patients coming from different districts and upazillas had to go back or move to hospitals in Rangpur and Borga as the doctors refused to treat them.

Medical and legal experts in a roundtable on doctors' and patients' rights held on June 23 suggested formulating a comprehensive law to ensure patients' rights and protect doctors from harassment. Stressing the moral

responsibility of medical professionals, the speakers said that the doctors should change their attitude towards patients.

The healthcare in Bangladesh is deficient in many ways. Corruption and indiscipline have plagued the public healthcare system on one hand and pathetic health facilities and inefficiency on the other hand have put the health services in a terrible mess. Therefore, there are ample reasons to be concerned over the state of healthcare in the public hospitals.

It is alleged frequently that the doctors in the public hospitals are becoming devoid of values and professional ethics. They are also giving wrong treatment to their patients, sometimes causing deaths. This is why the country has seen alarming growth of private clinics and diagnostic centers over the past several years.

Work abstention by the doctors of the public hospitals has become so frequent that it needs to be forbidden. Leaving the serious patients to die without treatment or holding them hostage for meeting demands by the doctors, tanta-

mount to criminal dereliction.

The Hippocratic Oath that the doctors take traditionally while passing out, has made them bound to serve the ailing humanity regardless of the circumstances. The doctors in our country should remember that their education is also funded by the people whom they are denying treatment.

The doctors also need to be given proper training to strengthen their moral backbone and commitment to patients. The British curricula that are still followed in the country's medical colleges, has been changed several times by the Britain itself to make it need based. But these remain unchanged in Bangladesh.

Ironically indeed, there are as many as 45 laws related to health issues, but not a single one to protect patients' right when doctors deny treatment. Therefore, proper laws should be formulated to ensure patients' rights as well as doctors' protection.

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