

BNP's most serious crisis

Bhuiyan's expulsion makes split inevitable

BEGUM Khaleda Zia's arrest on Monday was clearly a major blow for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. What, however, came as a new blow was the peremptory manner in which the BNP chairperson announced the expulsion of party secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan from the party. If the first blow was precipitated by the Anti-Corruption Commission's case against Begum Zia, the second was brought about by the harsh move of the former prime minister herself. To what extent the BNP will handle this twin crisis is something that political observers will be watching keenly. And that is only natural, given that the occupants of the two most powerful positions in the party are now positioned against each other.

It will perhaps be restating the obvious when we suggest that BNP leaders and activists across the country are now in a dilemma regarding the future of their party. Of far bigger significance, though, is the fact that Mannan Bhuiyan's expulsion from the party by the chairperson has patently brought into focus the malaise that the BNP in particular and the major political parties in general have fundamentally suffered from. It will be noted that where Bhuiyan is concerned, there is nothing in the record to suggest that he has ever rebelled against his party chairperson or demonstrated any lack of confidence in her leadership. His only fault, it appears, is to have questioned the way the BNP conducted itself in the last five years as the party of government and to have suggested that perhaps some efforts toward self-analysis and self-correction were necessary within the party. Mannan Bhuiyan was certainly not alone in expressing such views. Indeed, a very large number of party activists, to say nothing of BNP sympathisers and supporters, shared his point of view. That being the reality, one might well raise the question of why Begum Zia found it hard to permit an open discussion on the reform proposals at the level of the party's central hierarchy as well as among its district and other tiers of leadership. Her reason behind expelling Bhuiyan was that she thought the suggestions for reforms were an affront to her and a questioning of her leadership. It is a regrettable attitude, made worse by her curious claim that all the anti-BNP criticism was actually a result of envy on the part of her detractors at what she claimed the huge successes of her government. Till the very end, she refused to accept even the slightest criticism of her having led a corrupt administration. Her refusal to accept even a modicum of open discussion in the party on reforms depicts the kind of leadership that has brought the BNP to its present sorry pass.

We believe that a split in the BNP will have grave repercussions for democratic politics. We therefore urge those veteran leaders of the party not embroiled in the Zia-Bhuiyan spat to work behind the scenes in order to bring about a rapprochement between the chairperson and the secretary general and also initiate a process toward internal party reforms. The goal should be one of transforming the BNP into a vibrant, modern and democratic party, of the kind Bangladesh is in sore need of.

Unregistered universities

Why sit on their aberrant status?

FOLLOWING publication of the HSC exam results there has been a noticeable rush of students seeking admission to various unregistered private universities, including a number of branches of foreign universities, located outside the capital city. The University Grants Commission (UGC) had earlier identified these institutions as operating without due registration, and therefore illegally.

Obviously, the UGC did not act on the so-called blacklisted universities by way of either phasing them out or allowing them to regularise themselves by meeting certain criteria. Instead, they have reportedly sent a list of such institutions to law enforcing agencies and are now pleading with the parents, guardians and students not to approach such institutions for admission.

The UGC is giving mixed signals. On the one hand, it is apparently acting against such institutions, but on the other, it has distributed forms to their owners to fill these in furnishing details of their eligibility or otherwise. In other words, if the goals and programmes of the institutions are deemed satisfactory they could be allowed to operate. Only that this is a belated step. Furthermore, it is stated that some such setups could function as study or resource centres, but the question is whether they should be allowed to confer degrees. Branches of a few foreign universities are functioning "effectively to a degree", according to the UGC.

The government must have a clear-cut policy with regard to operation of private universities. Subject to fulfilment of the criteria consisting of staffing pattern and its quality, equipment and infrastructural base and suitability or otherwise of academic atmosphere, educational enterprises like private universities, of both local or foreign signboards, must be either approved or disapproved by a competent authority. Let's not forget that in view of the limited intake capacity of the public universities, the private ones are increasingly playing a vital role offering opportunities for higher education to a large number of students. While the bad apples must be jettisoned from the basket, the good ones must be recognised for what they are worth.

Words, phrases and our political lexicon



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

GROUND REALITIES

Move on, and keep moving, until you stumble on something we have been told is the "nomination business" indulged in by the major political parties. It is really something quite simple: you give a party a hefty amount of money and in return the party will give you a nomination for a parliamentary constituency of your choice. And once you are elected to parliament, you can recoup all that money and march on to add loads more to it, through contracts and tenders and the like.

THERE is a lot you hear about something called indoor politics these days. And you begin to wonder what it all means. Politics, after all, is just that -- politics. It is either there or it isn't. Again, if you speak of indoor politics, it naturally follows that there is another phenomenon known as outdoor politics.

But that, as you will discover to your intense amazement, is not what you will chance upon in the real world. Wherever there is democracy, there is politics, at once transparent and unfettered. It is just that in our own context we have lately been overwhelmed by this idea of indoor politics.

Before you get down to the business of observing how our political lexicon has been getting transformed over time, only remember that indoor politics is a term, if not a concept, we first ran into during the days of General Yahya Khan in 1969. Close to four decades later, we still seem to be unable to get free of it.

But that is not too unnatural a happenstance, is it now? Bengalis being historically fond of delving deep into politics and often getting bruised and brutalised in the process, it is quite understandable that they will invent new political terms and then turn them into household words.

Law Adviser Mainul Hosein

(which was called Basic Democracy and which really was antithetical to democracy).

We thought martial law was gone from our lives. But, lo and behold! It came roaring back in March 1969. In the years after that, it reared its head at fairly regular intervals in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Today, as we turn the pages of the lexicon, we spot the term scattered all over them.

Perhaps there will come a time when the phrase "martial law" will be history, in the way that "revolutionary command councils" (in places like Iraq and Syria) have become history. And then comes the matter of an extreme measure called the state of emergency. Indira Gandhi used it to extend her rule by a couple of years in India. When she lifted it, in 1977, and called fresh elections, the electorate threw her out.

General Pervez Musharraf, raring to go for an emergency, saw his hand stayed by a simple call from Condoleezza Rice. He certainly does not relish his present discomfiture, what with the humiliation the Supreme Court is heaping on him and the plain disrespect that Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif are throwing his way. A state of emergency could have helped him avoid all that bother. Now he simply does not know what his future will be.

Politics, as many of us will have noted, has taken a regular battering in Bangladesh. You can readily count on your fingers the meagre number of years when politicians have governed this nation. And then you recapitulate all the old stories of coups and counter-coups that have often come in the way of democracy.

More importantly, it is the sheer hold that such a word as "coup" has on the popular psyche that you cannot ignore. There are individuals who may not understand English or French (and they inhabit the villages of this country), but they know full well what a coup signifies. And that is how "coup d'état" has carved a particular niche for itself in our political dictionary.

It is something that people in the world's democracies are not really aware of. They have, after all, not lived through the kind of exciting times we have. Back in the old Ayub era (the man keeps coming back despite all our efforts to keep him at arm's length), there was a curious law called the Elective Bodies Disqualification Ordinance, or EBDO.

It was a bad law, as it was aimed at keeping politicians out of politics while allowing Ayub Khan and his fellow soldiers to run wild all over the place. EBDO was one sure way of curbing dissent.

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Basically aimed at Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, there are good reasons to think that minus two, unless it is neutralised as an idea soon, could one day lead to minus three or minus four or even higher.

Move on, and keep moving, until you stumble on something we have been told is the "nomination business" indulged in by the major political parties. It is really something quite simple: you give a party a hefty amount of money and in return the party will give you a nomination for a parliamentary constituency of your choice. And once you are elected to parliament, you can recoup all that money and march on to add loads more to it, through contracts and tenders and the like.

Exercise your mind a little more. If you do, it is likely that you will recall a measure that was once used with abandon to intimidate anyone who challenged the government of the day. We speak here of the Defence of Pakistan Rules. In its time, the DPR was a ubiquity because of the random way in which it was applied to bring politicians to heel.

In Bangladesh, there is the bitter legacy of the Special Powers Act. Every government post-1975 condemned the earlier Awami League administration for enacting this bad law, and yet all of them made convenient use of it, especially when it came to harassing political opponents. Be that as it may, the SPA was for years a term we were repeatedly made familiar with. Today, every time someone talks about it, we know that it has eventually made its way into our political vocabulary.

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Whither political party reform?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Democratic practice is totally absent there. Everywhere it is the same picture -- chairperson or president is surrounded by many tiers of sycophants who are always busy elbowing out one another. They laugh out when the leader laughs out, and they weep when the leader weeps. In the mazaar of the dead father or husband of the leader they jostle openly and shamelessly to be photographed with the leader.

Khaleda Zia through thick and thin for decades. And yet they were served the death sentence without being given any opportunity to protest or argue their case before her. What else but "prashad shorajantro" (palace conspiracy) can you call this?

This single act of the BNP chairperson tells aplenty how this party or, for that matter, all other parties in Bangladesh are being run. To the media, to the donors, to the foreign mission heads and to the people, these leaders have been speaking unremittingly about democracy and how they have been sacrificing everything they possessed to uphold democracy! And they cried and they wept...they fretted and they fumed...while describing how the opposition, the 'ekti mohol,' have

been conniving to destroy democracy in the country. They also animatedly described the role of various foreign powers working from behind the scene to destabilise the "popular" government.

Going back to the beheading of the two BNP stalwarts, frankly we fail to understand what faults BNP chairperson had found in Abdul Mannan and Asraf Hossain? To us they were a perfect example of blind loyalty...to be blunt...sycophancy. During the last five years, and even the previous tenure of five years, they had endorsed without even batting an eyelid any and everything that the chairperson and her small coterie did and undid.

Today, one feels a bit concerned thinking about the kind of people who are going to replace them, or have replaced them already. Today, one begins to worry a little thinking about the fate of BNP, the large party that came to power for two terms. One, in fact, wonders whether

many year at a stretch, if he had a second opinion on certain matters of national importance, Abdul Mannan never demonstrated that he had the guts to go up to her and say, madam, I feel this instruction coming from your office/Hawa Bhaban will not bring good fortune for the country, so I think you may kindly rethink your decision. If he had done it quite frequently, today his head wouldn't have been rolling on the carpet.

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