

Time for embracing confrontation free-politics

First and foremost, all the parties in the dialogue and outside must recognise this reality and give birth to a new nation, with hopes and opportunities to survive in an era of conflict and uncertainty. The politicians will, hopefully, propose options for devising a confrontation-free politics, and the CA should give them a patient hearing in order to achieve the major goals of the dialogue.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

REGARDLESS of what happened to the pro-liberation forces between 1975 and 2001, the nation was at least in some sort of comfort that the universally known war criminals had been kept at bay from grabbing power. But this was not going to last long.

In 2001, BNP struck a deal with Jamaat-e-Islami to form a coalition to win the 2001 election. Indeed, the BNP-Jamaat coalition worked very well and, finally, the war criminals elbowed in on the seat of

power, piggy-backing on the BNP. We, the liberation generation, had no clue in 1971 that this nation would see anti-liberation forces and war criminals climbing to the seat of power in our life-time.

In recent weeks and days, it appears that the BNP-Jamaat marriage has tasted the inevitable. At the time of BNP's unprecedented trouble, the partner has been busy with either saving its own skin or knowingly remaining silent to avoid trouble. This is understandable since the marriage was not based on ideology, but was certainly a marriage of convenience for grabbing

power. During the last one year, it has become clear through the actions of the CTG that the Khaleda-Nizami regime was not only after power, it was also party to an undeclared war against the people.

This nation was awarded the top place on the world's corruption list during the terminal years of the AL government (1996-2001) and all of BNP-Jamaat term (2001-2006). We even remember that the BNP-Jamaat coalition had campaigned in 2001 election on a single agenda. The major thrust was that the AL government had brought the nation disrepute by dragging it to

the top of the world's corruption ladder (Dr. B. Chowdhury's Shabash Bangladesh immediately comes to mind). Indeed, the voters, by and large, swallowed this pill prescribed by one of the eminent doctors of this land, and voted the BNP-Jamaat coalition to power with two-thirds majority in 2001.

I am sure the readers would also remember that the Jamaat, getting the smell of power, committed unprecedented atrocities within days of winning the election. A minority community and the opposition AL were attacked, which was reminiscent of 1971. Some BNP MPs also took part in these atrocities. After watching all this, everyone in the pro-liberation camp, including the media, was puzzled. Some instantly realised that a major mistake had been made by endorsing the BNP-Jamaat coalition for the general election of 2001. The rest of the

story is well known.

The BNP-Jamaat rule of five years pushed the nation towards not only a state of calamity (parallel government run by Hawa Bhaban), but also to the camp of the failed states of the world. Even the august office of the president could not escape politicisation. On January 11, 2007, the nation was re-born. The timely intervention by the military, like in 1971, rescued us, once again. Of course, no nation democratic or otherwise, takes emergency rule in any shape or form lightly. The rest of this piece is concerned with the concern of a prolonged rule under an emergency.

Gradual relaxation of emergency rule towards conducting a free, fair, and credible election in December gives rise to some hopes about the election, and all the rumours against CTG's intention have been quashed. It appears from the media that all the parties,

including AL and BNP, want immediate withdrawal of emergency. It is, however, abundantly clear that the CTG is not in a mood to heed this call. They want to adopt a go-slow rather than a big-bang approach in allowing nationwide free politics.

There are many reasons for going slow. The most important is that the nation has not yet got a clean bill of health from the threat of the so-called Islamists against politicians and ordinary people. Since our politicians are very proficient in playing the blame-game, as has been seen in the past (August 21, 2004 attack in mind), any disturbed person could try to create anarchy by taking advantage of that. This fear has increased after the recent developments surrounding the Gatco case.

Having said all this, at the end of the day, it is impossible to conduct a free and fair election without freeing

politics fully. Sooner or later, the concession has to be made for the 9th parliamentary election, promised for the third week of December. It is better if this can be done sooner, after the EC formulates a strict election code of conduct, for example, prohibiting huge outdoor public meetings. Let the politicians go door-to-door, which will pave the way for empowering the voters. If, God forbid, the election could be made controversial by any mob with legitimate documents, there will be no reason to believe that this nation will not turn into another Kenya.

Now, things surrounding the dialogue have certainly become too complicated for the CTG, and the nation is approaching the climax when anti-climax forces are out there to create chaos and anarchy. The nation hopes that all these complications will disappear after the successful conclusion of the

dialogue. The past experience of dialogue was not good. This time, the nation genuinely wants to come out of the dark days of the pre-1/11 period through dialogue.

First and foremost, all the parties in the dialogue and outside must recognise this reality and give birth to a new nation, with hopes and opportunities to survive in an era of conflict and uncertainty. It is unlikely that all the politicians will agree with this goal, since they were, in the past, a part of the conflict-making machine and creators of uncertainty.

The politicians will, hopefully, propose options for devising a confrontation-free politics, and the CA should give them a patient hearing in order to achieve the major goals of the dialogue. Certainly, the ball is back in the CA's court.

Dr. Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

When good turns to bad

For a long time under political governments, student politics had thrived largely on patronage. Activists had engaged in extortions, in and around the campus, and they had been critical in distributing favours. Many students got admitted because of party affiliations and if they managed to skip this, which many still did, then getting a seat in one of the hall dormitories became a privilege of the predominant party.

MAHBUB KAMAL

IN Bangladesh, student activism dates back to the 1950s when some students died when police fired upon them. They were demanding the recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Subsequently, with the pro-autonomy Jukta Front (United Front) sweeping the polls in 1954, student activism subsided.

After the imposition of martial law by General Ayub Khan in 1958 and subsequent incarceration of political leaders, students once again emerged to fill the political vacuum. In 1964 they came out in huge numbers to protest the education commission report prepared by Justice Hamoodur

Rahman. Universities and colleges had to be closed down and the report withdrawn to quell the protests.

In 1966, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced his radical six-point program for full autonomy it was the industrial workers of Naryanganj and Tejgaon who came out in support. Student activism was, initially, sparse.

In January 1969 the students in what was then East Pakistan erupted again. This was a sequel to anti-Ayub agitation in Pakistan. The movement ultimately forced the abdication of Ayub Khan. A couple of years later when the Pakistan army went for a military crackdown accompanied with genocide to curb political dissent,

students in large numbers fled across the border and swelled the ranks of the Mukti Bahini. When the Pakistan army was defeated, the students, as a community, felt vindicated.

One would have thought with the liberation of the country that there was little reason for student activism. However, that was not to be. Student politics continued, this time, in the garb of a radical socialist revolution and later in the 1980s when General Ershad took over, for democracy.

Even after Ershad was ousted, the campus remained turbulent. But there were changes. In the 18 years since Ershad was ousted not a single election to the student unions could be held, largely due to opposition from an unexpected

quarter -- student organisations who were linked to the ruling parties. Evidently, the mood had changed. The activist student community had become pro-establishment, for the most part.

In some of the mofussil universities, the situation was much more disturbing as Islamist cadres dominated -- killing and maiming many adversaries and innocents who refused to toe the line. There were voices of concern but nothing concrete emerged. In the early 1990s, then leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina proposed delinking student politics from the national political parties, but the prime minister, Khaleda Zia, turned it down. However, following the proposal, a series of meetings, albeit without Hasina and Khaleda, were held between the two big parties, BNP and Awami League, to bring some sanity to student politics -- but nothing could be agreed upon.

While there is widespread concern about student politics, the "chattering classes" are divided on the issue. Some want an end to the violence on campus, while others feel that without a complete ban on student politics this cannot be achieved. Then, there are others, particularly of the left, who have some following among the students and teachers, who believe that politics is part of the educative process and any blanket ban will adversely affect the level of "consciousness" in society.

Student activists, quite regularly, point to the glorious role their predecessors played in the history of the country, specially for liberation and democracy and therefore by extension claim that the country's polity would be worse off without the redeeming role of the young men and women who have been its "conscience-keepers" for long.

On the other hand, those who want a complete ban cite the huge numbers of boys and girls who have been killed because of the campus violence that has erupted because of the frequent internecine conflicts there between the student activists. They also cite the innumerable students whose careers have

been destroyed or stunted because of student politics.

It has become a difficult situation now with a large number of teachers joining the fray. For a long time under political governments, student politics had thrived largely on patronage. Activists had engaged in extortions, in and around the campus, and they had been critical in distributing favours. Many students got admitted because of party affiliations and if they managed to skip this, which many still did, then getting a seat in one of the hall dormitories became a privilege of the predominant party.

It did not end there. Getting a first class, the ultimate in a student's life, also increasingly depended on which party the student was affiliated to. The recent scandal of 50 plus first classes in political science had raised many eyebrows and although there have been many promises of investigation, nothing has actually followed.

Political science is not the only department that has this problem. Dozens of first classes in sociology

and anthropology and some other departments have also been there for some time. These raise questions of equivalence and probity. Are the students of other departments, like economics or public administration, any less meritorious? How come they get fewer first classes? They will have to compete with the first class students wherever they apply to. Evidently, the same standards are not followed in all departments. Then is anybody bothered about it? Possibly not, as they know nothing can be done about it -- so powerful is the syndicate that rules the roost. It is a trend that has come to stay and will gradually consume other departments, too. The lowest common denominator will prevail.

By this time teacher recruitment has also fallen victim to the over-politicised politics of the universities. This has resulted in full institutionalisation of politics in the universities. In the absence of union elections, the raison d'être for student politics is no more there, but apparently the teachers' association has taken over where

student activism ended. Any end to the unruly campus atmosphere would also need an end to teachers' politics, as well.

A number of proposed reforms such as evening classes or raising fees and charges had to be cancelled in the face of strong opposition from left-wing students and teachers. As for productivity, as a former vice-chancellor so typically once said: "We are not a government department. We do not have to be kept track of every penny."

The academic community, however, is silent about irregularities at the universities including moonlighting in the private universities by their colleagues. This they can ill-afford for long. Eventually, they will have to be self-righteous to retain their current position. Besides, they will also have to prove their excellence in human resource development to prove their case. Otherwise, the voices for depoliticisation of academia will get stronger by the day.

Mahbub Kamal is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

August 15, November 7, and post-January 11

I congratulate the caretaker government for their noble and seemingly impossible tasks to right the wrongs of the 15 years of BNP and AL misrule. There is no magic bullet to make years of orchestrated division disappear, even though we are such a homogenous people in terms of race, language, culture, and religion. I hope, for all our sakes, we can reach a national consensus to institute the reforms undertaken by this government.

OMAR CHOWDHURY

THE future does not seem to bode well for Bangladesh. In a rapidly changing global economic scenario of soaring food and energy prices, and the uncertainty with climate change, our survival as a functioning sovereign state depends on unity. Without unity, it will be impossible to manage our resources in respect to food and energy security amidst a political environment that is totally corrupt, divisive and dysfunctional.

If a political government had been in power with rice retailing at 40 Taka per kg, the opposition would have started street agitation to destabilise the government in a bid to grab power, irrespective of the consequences to the nation. Our political culture is about divi-

sion and confrontation, rather than cooperation and consensus in the national interest.

Let's put dysfunctional politics into perspective. Khaleda Zia / Hawa Bhaban / 4 Party Alliance in the guise of democracy unleashed five years of mismanagement and unbridled corruption that ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt nation in the world. Sensing defeat in the polls, the 4 Party Alliance attempted and failed to engineer the elections thanks to intervention on January 11, 2007, and Bangladesh was spared from total anarchy and possible civil war.

Khaleda, her family members, Hawa Bhaban, half the cabinet and scores of MPs have been arrested and charged with corruption, murder, patronisation of terrorism, etc. Khaleda's post-1/11 actions, like the

unilateral expulsion of Mannan Bhuiyan and appointment of Delwar Hossain as Secretary General of BNP has further plunged the party into a crisis that may destroy the party completely.

Yet, after all her failures of colossal magnitude, no one in the party, from grassroots to the top leadership, has the intestinal fortitude (guts) to hold her responsible for the present state of the party, whereas men of good conscience and character should be challenging her leadership and demanding that she be expelled from the party. Rather, grassroots BNP, the reformists, and the Khaleda-loyalists all claim to be united under her leadership, and no one within the party dare question her supreme authority. Odd, is it not?

Our politics have become dys-

functional as a result of the deadly rivalry between AL and BNP. Bangladesh achieved independence under the leadership and inspiration of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971, but after forming the AL government of a new Bangladesh, Bangabandhu switched from a multi-party democratic system to socialist one-party rule (Baksal).

Bangabandhu and most of his family members were murdered by a group of disgruntled army officers on August 15, 1975. In the following months, a power struggle ensued between pro and anti-AL forces. After a series of bloody coups and counter-coups, there was a mutiny within the ranks of the army on November 7, 1975 in which the deposed chief of the armed forces, General Ziaur Rahman, was reinstated.

In a period of total anarchy, General Zia emerged as the hero for restoring stability to a relieved nation. Zia presented the nation with an election roadmap to restore multi-party democracy and transfer power to civilian rule. Zia went on to form an anti-AL political force called

BNP. BNP won the elections of 1979 by a landslide and formed the government with Zia as president.

Thus, Bangladesh began her journey of bi-polar partisan democracy with political forces split into two distinct camps: anti-AL and pro-AL. The rivalry and bitterness from the events of 1975 is still prevalent between these two camps to this day.

Following President Zia's assassination in 1981, General Ershad usurped power from Zia's successor in a bloodless coup in 1982, assuming the role of president and chief martial law administrator. In the years that followed, Ershad formed his own political party named Jatiya Party in an effort to become an elected civilian president through several staged elections.

During this period, Zia's widow Khaleda and Bangabandhu's daughter Hasina both emerged as the undisputed leaders of BNP and AL respectively. In an environment of power struggles within their respective parties and defections to JB Khaleda and Hasina were, in essence, the glue that held their respective parties together. They

were able to put aside their differences briefly to topple Ershad in a mass uprising in 1990.

Elections were held under a neutral caretaker government in 1991; BNP was elected to power and formed a civilian government with Khaleda as PM. Bangladesh entered a new phase of democracy, but the rivalry between BNP and AL only intensified.

In the years of "democracy" that followed, BNP and AL made parliament totally dysfunctional, with the opposition resorting to hartals and street agitation on any excuse. Money and muscle power became the modus operandi to win elections, and both parties resorted to corruption, patronisation of criminals, and created armed student cadres to control the universities (which have always been in the forefront of struggles for democratic rights).

In the process, both parties politicised the civil administration and public institutions (EC, PSC, UGC, etc) and would not allow an independent judiciary or Anti-Corruption Commission. With no transparency or accountability, the

quality of individuals entering politics and the bureaucracy dramatically deteriorated, politics took on a purely business outlook, and politicians made unimaginable fortunes.

I hope I have been able to shed some light on the alarming state of our politics. Most politicians are opportunists, out to line their own pockets. Frankly, neither party has been able to display the courage, integrity, vision, and patriotism of the current dispensation. Without Hasina and Khaleda, both parties face the risk of disintegration. They don't want reform because their livelihoods depend on division, dysfunction, and corruption, and other than these narrow self-interests there is no incentive to do politics.

This division has been shoved down our throats with the political holidays of August 15 and November 7, which have been observed and not observed by alternating AL and BNP governments. On August 15, BNP celebrates Khaleda's apparently fabricated birthday with great pomp and circumstance while AL mourns with Hasina for her family.

Most people have no clue as to why November 7 is a holiday. These "natoks" are just ploys to divert our attention and keep us divided while they loot and pillage.

I congratulate the caretaker government for their noble and seemingly impossible tasks to right the wrongs of the 15 years of BNP and AL misrule. There is no magic bullet to make years of orchestrated division disappear, even though we are such a homogenous people in terms of race, language, culture, and religion. I hope, for all our sakes, we can reach a national consensus to institute the reforms undertaken by this government.

I urge the CTG to honour the memory of Bangabandhu by flying the flag at half-mast on August 15, but for the sake of national unity I also urge you to rethink the political holidays of August 15 and November 7, because public holidays are supposed to unite the nation and not divide us or be imposed on us. United we stand, divided we all fall.

Omar Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Huckleberry Finn of the 21st century

Jack Reacher -- this 21st century Huckleberry Finn stands as the new hero that every American male aspires to become, a throw back to a time before paper work, ID cards, tax returns, mortgage payments, degrees from university, etc; a man who take matters into his own hands and uses violence to overcome evil.

FORREST COOKSON

I want to introduce readers to the Huckleberry Finn of the 21st century. Most readers of this column will have read all or parts of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the story of a remarkable young man in revolt against his society. Huck is a truly free person managing to escape such matters as going to bed when parents dictate, smoking if he wants, going anywhere at any time that crosses his mind, and avoiding school.

He is free to explore as he wishes, he makes friends without consideration of social status, race or wealth.

To wander the wilderness was the dream of most American boys. Huck Finn is a symbol of how we would like to live: Not dependent on following a lot of rules, refusing to fill in a lot of forms, pretending to value things that are absurd, unwilling to honour fools posing as our leaders, and not conforming to the whims of society.

Middle class America and Bangladesh are full of people for whom pride and status are the most important values that determine their behaviour. Grasping for status and admiration, jewels and cars, houses too large to live in, servants to take care of their every

whim. Huck saw through such pretensions and simply laughed at such folly.

But at the same time he is the essential representative of a sarcastic interpretation of freedom: Do not cooperate, do not follow the rules, and a modern society cannot work. The path of Huck's freedom may be open to a few but it cannot be a general rule or no human organisation would function. Nevertheless, this is a kind of freedom that we all crave but few can achieve.

I introduce a fictional hero Jack Reacher, hero of a series of books by Lee Child. The latest of these,

Nothing to Lose, Bantam Press (2008), is particularly relevant at managing to poke the pretensions of modern conservative political thinkers in unexpected places. I suggest Jack Reacher is the new Huckleberry Finn, although Lee

Child is neither as good nor as humorous a writer as Mark Twain. Although these books are detective type novels meant to entertain and amuse, there is something more serious here. Reacher is the ideal American patriot: A soldier who graduated from West Point but who after years of service became disgusted with the self-serving behaviour of senior military officers and set out to live a different life.

He effectively resigned from society. He had a modest pension sufficient to meet his needs. He has no home, just wanders about; he owns only the cloths that he has on his back and when they are dirty

he throws them away and buys new ones. He owns nothing -- no property, no car, no computers, no furniture, no stocks, no bonds, no anything!

He has no family: a brother who was a perfect member of a modern orderly society is killed in one of the earlier books; his mother dies in another but she has been living in France and he has had little contact with her. At once he is cut off and free of all of the paper work of modern life. An ATM card and a passport are all that he has to define himself on paper.

In *Nothing to Lose* Lee Child takes up three unusual themes related to the Iraq war and to the Christian religious conservatives. The first theme deals with the handling of depleted uranium. This is a heavy metal left over from extracting plutonium from rods in a nuclear reactor; it is used for anti-

tank shells and a great deal of this ammunition was used in Iraq. It is very weakly radioactive. What happened to all of this depleted uranium?

The second theme deals with deserters. In any war where citizens go to war there are some who wish to run away. In Vietnam this arose from the compulsory participation in the war; those who did not want to fight deserted. In Iraq it arises from soldiers who volunteered to join the army but were not prepared to go through repeated tours of fighting in Iraq. No one knows how much of such desertion there is; I am sure this is a deep secret.

The third deals with those Christian religious fanatics who believe the world is headed for the "end times." This will feature a major war followed by the reappearance of Jesus Christ who will then sort out the good from the bad. The

triggering of such a war may well bring judgment day closer!

The combination of the evil consequences of the Iraq war along with Christian fundamentalists trying to accelerate God's program for man provide plenty of excitement and mystery as Jack Reacher struggles to do the right thing while fending off all who wish him harm.

Huck Finn was a fugitive from the American social system. But he was also innocent of the crimes of slavery and met the test of seeing everyone for what they were: male or female, black or white. Huck solved problems by clever manipulation of those around him. He was a master of the indirect. Reacher is modern America.

In the earlier books Reacher uses rather clever methods of deduction to reach conclusions. Exaggerated versions of Sherlock Holmes these are amusing enough. But this

deductive ability is downplayed in this latest book. Now Reacher has come to terms with modern America as, he turns to violence; although a man who sees things as they are, he does not turn to the subtle to deal with his problems but rather he favors violence.

He personifies the America of the past eight years; his approach is to batter his way through problems. Lee Child is an Englishman who sees America very clearly. Jack Reacher -- this 21st century Huckleberry Finn stands as the new hero that every American male aspires to become, a throw back to a time before paper work, ID cards, tax returns, mortgage payments, degrees from university, etc; a man who take matters into his own hands and uses violence to overcome evil.

Forrest Cookson is an economist.