

Pilot project on primary schools

Brac's role is focused on improving quality

THE government approved pilot project under which Brac is assigned to improve the functioning of primary schools in 20 upazilas is facing resistance from four primary school teachers' association.

Brac is to play a well-defined role in supervising and improving the quality of education at the crucial level through teacher training, strengthening of school management committees and introduction of consultative processes among the teachers and the guardians with the headmaster presiding over.

It is an incontrovertible fact that most primary schools, both in government and private sectors, are in dire straits. In rural areas particularly, they are in a deplorable state, beginning with the bare look through lack of classrooms, educational aids and minimally qualified teachers to poorly constituted management committees, you name it and they have it. Barring notable exceptions, the school staff were politically appointed rather than selected on the basis of merit and qualifications. The school hours were dismally low as teachers attended schools at will. The composition of the school committees would change with the power alternating between major political parties. There was no accountability and no transparency in the running of the schools and the quality of classroom environment and instructions declined over time.

In this context, Brac has been brought into the scene by the caretaker government in acknowledgement of the fact that the organisation is globally reputed for its efficiency and cost effectiveness in running primary schools. Under an elected government, Brac had successfully completed a pilot project involving four schools in Sherpur. Its expertise is worth utilising in enhancing the quality of primary education in the country.

In response to misgivings expressed by the teachers community, Brac chairperson Fazle Hasan Abed has asserted that his organisation has no intention to commercialise or privatise primary schools in the country. We understand that control of the primary education remains very much with the government and that there is no relinquishment of the authority by it in this sphere. But these words need to be stated in clear terms by the government itself. We would therefore suggest that the education ministry make a public statement focusing on the objectives it seeks to achieve through the pilot project. This should be repeated through radio and television to make a positive impression on the public mind.

Ensuring rights of indigenous communities

Idea of a national commission makes sense

THE demand for the formation of a national commission to ensure the rights of Bangladesh's indigenous people makes sense. And it does that because of the large scale deprivation they have been subjected to over the decades stretching back to British colonial times. The irony is that even in an independent Bangladesh, where attitudes ought to have changed positively regarding the rights citizens across the board are entitled to, discrimination toward the many ethnic minorities has persisted. It is a matter of deep embarrassment for us and will remain so until concrete steps are taken toward redressing their grievances. That is a strong message coming out of a workshop organised by the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights in the city on Tuesday.

The perspectives on the issue are rather clear to us. While we remain aware that the rights of indigenous peoples all over the world are now acknowledged, though not implemented, in Bangladesh those rights are yet to be internalised and made an integral part of the social structure. There are statistics which demonstrate the dilemma in which the ethnic minorities find themselves. A high percentage of indigenous people are still victims of discrimination in one form or the other ranging from limited educational opportunities to chances of employment. Many of them are dispossessed of their ancestral land, some putting it at 20 percent. More importantly, their legitimate grievances must not only be seen to be addressed but also be met in reality in order for our indigenous communities to feel that they are part of the national mainstream instead of being a footnote in our social history.

The test of a mature democracy is in the way it treats its ethnic and other minorities. That being the necessary yardstick of any assessment of how we have performed all these years, we as a nation now need to focus our energies on a correction of the situation. That means the opportunities that are available to all citizens under the constitution have to be ensured to all our indigenous communities. Rather than romanticise their ways of life as part of the culture we regularly project to the outside world, we must now go forward in meeting their basic needs and making them feel cared for. The government in particular and society in general must make sure that the ethnic minorities are accorded the dignity they so fully and richly deserve.

11 o'clock tick tock



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

There remain issues of the disposal of the cases against Hasina and her ability and inclination to run as a candidate in the upcoming elections and her role on the national stage thereafter. These issues will be difficult to resolve to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, but it seems to me that at the very least the door to such a discussion has been opened, and this can only be a good thing.

IT was almost a year ago that the current government faced its first existential crisis. Back in August 2007 it seemed as though the fate of the government might well end up hanging on an umbrella that was opened at an inopportune moment at a football game at Dhaka University. That incident led, eventually, to street riots that at one point looked like they might spiral out of control before the government was able to restore order and authority.

Today, it is not an open umbrella but something even smaller, a hearing aid, upon which the immediate future of the country seems to rest. But on such little things do governments rise and fall.

I do not mean to suggest that there is no genuine need for AL chief and ex-prime minister Sheikh Hasina to have her hearing aid replaced and indeed to have extensive check-ups to ensure that everything is alright. In fact, there is no doubt in my mind that the ex-prime minister has a legiti-

mate need to see a specialist outside the country.

But, be that as it may, no one is fooled. Her medical need is no greater today than it was one, two, or ten months ago. The political nature of the deal that has been made to permit her eight weeks of medical parole is so transparent that even in the lead news article on the matter in this paper, the phrase "for better treatment" is put inside inverted commas.

But that's fine. Apart from the chronic malcontents who can never be pleased and smugly point to the granting of medical parole as further damning evidence of the judiciary's continued subservience to the executive (there's a news-flash!) -- most people see this as an encouraging and pragmatic sign of compromise.

In fact, the compromise that led to the release of the ex-prime minister on medical parole for eight weeks is the most encouraging sign of progress towards a democratic and participatory

election since the arrival of the caretaker government some 16 months ago.

In an apparent quid pro quo, the AL has agreed to sit for dialogue with the caretaker government and looks set to participate in the upcoming elections. The charges against Hasina remain in place and exactly what will happen once the designated eight weeks are up remains, for all practical purposes, open for discussion. Thus is honour equally satisfied on both sides.

With the country not so long ago heading towards what looked like an impasse, with worrisome implications for the future, the current compromise is a good thing. Now we need to build on that compromise.

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me that at the very least the door to such a discussion has been opened, and this can only be a good thing.

Two weeks ago I wrote that compromise was very possible and that remains the case. Fortunately, we are not locked in a situation where there is no possible win-win resolution. All that is required is for cool and calm heads to prevail at this sensitive time. There is no reason to push things unnecessarily towards confrontation. The agreement to release Hasina on medical parole is an encouraging step down the path of resolution.

It seems as though, as senior AL leader Saber Hossain Chowdhury was quoted as suggesting last month in the Financial Times, that the government has perhaps begun to stop "[seeing] Hasina as the problem but rather as a part of the solution."

Sheikh Hasina now has the chance to be part of the solution, and not just on the issue of elections, but also on the issue of the kind of polity the nation will

inherit in the future. One hopes that she will stand firm on the need for the AL to participate in the upcoming elections and for the necessity for the reforms of the past 16 months to be preserved under a political dispensation.

Of course, many maintain that the government's initial instincts on this matter are correct, and that Hasina remains part of the problem. Either way, however, what has happened with her medical parole is that we now seem to be moving inexorably in the direction of elections, and, ultimately, what we all want: a democratic resolution -- whether that resolution eventually encompasses Hasina or not -- and that is a good thing.

Now comes the issue of how to deal with the BNP. Again, it seems to me that some kind of compassionate release, perhaps also on "medical" grounds of Begum Zia might well be possible, though she herself has quereed the pitch for that somewhat by stating that neither is she unwell nor does she have any desire to leave the country.

Begum Zia's preferred price for co-operation is the freedom of her sons, but this could prove more problematic. If there are genuine medical grounds for their release, then it could happen. But it is unclear that such grounds exist, and, in any event, there is considerable danger of flight, which is not the case with either Hasina or Khaleda. Sexagenarian ex-prime ministers are not flight risks;

ne'er-do-well sons of an ex-prime minister, facing a slate of serious and credible charges, are.

No one can accurately predict the next chapter. Some suggest that Hasina's departure is the beginning of the end for any efforts to remake the political landscape of the country and that we are on the fast track back to the pre-1/11 status quo ante. Some suggest that her departure is the first step towards her permanent exile from the political arena if not the country. Some suggest that the most likely eventuality will be something in between these two extremes. No one knows for sure. But what we do know for sure is that we are far closer to a fully democratic and participatory election than we were before.

In truth, there is no great reason to be overly optimistic for the future. Both the AL and the BNP as well as the current government and its backers in the cantonment have shown a distressing propensity for making serious strategic blunders when the situation calls for sensitivity.

Nevertheless, the parties to the current imbroglio may yet surprise us and navigate the country skillfully through the present crisis and towards good elections and functional democracy. The recent compromise suggests to me that there is still enough reason to remain hopeful. Let us see what comes next.

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Will repair do more damage?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

But where does it leave us as a nation? One of the two leaders has gone to sojourn, and another is still left in prison. And it's somehow comparable to a half-full, half-empty glass situation. Whether the government is still trying to minus the two leaders or create an enabling environment for the dialogue, one can argue both ways. Either the problem has been half-solved or the solution is half-problematic.

formed for their health check-up and also for the two sons of one of the two leaders. For most of the early part of the week, the country floated on rumours that all four could be going abroad for advanced treatment.

Both leaders were quick to respond. One made it clear that she had no intention of leaving the country but wished that her sons did. The other said nothing but must have quickly conceded since preparation for her departure started immediately after the medical board submitted its report.

Then, open sesame and all doors opened. Her passport was returned, she was exempted from physical appearance at court hearings, released on Wednesday and yesterday boarded a British Airways flight, which took her out of the country. Needless to say, when the government is happy, wishes are granted with the speed of a fairy.

But where does it leave us as a nation? One of the two leaders has gone to sojourn, and another is still left in prison. And it's somehow comparable to a half-full, half-empty glass situation. Whether the government is still trying to minus the two leaders or create an enabling environment for the dialogue, one can argue both ways. Either the problem has been half-solved or the solution is half-problematic.

So, what will happen now? Will it help the dialogue to set sails? Will it now clear the coast to bring the two political parties to the discussion table? The leader who has been released met with the government advisors within hours after she reached home. She talked to the chief advisor on the phone and expectedly announced that her party was ready to sit for the dialogue.

What about the other party, whose leader remains in custody? It's interesting that she appears

less bothered about her own health than the government, which wants to send her out of the country. She is understandably more concerned over the failing health of her two sons, which could become her Achilles' Heel. She may be on a dare to refuse now, but how long will it take before the declining health of her children forces her to change her mind?

Here is a famous scene from the movie *Amistad*, where Cinque, the leader of slaves who were transported to the American shores from Africa, meets the former US president John Quincy Adams. He tells the president, who agrees to act as their legal counsel, that whenever they have a crisis in the tribe, they invoke their ancestors.

In our case we don't rely on our ancestors, heroes and martyrs who laid down their lives to protect our freedom. Instead, we invoke the strength and wisdom of foreigners for guidance in matters

ranging from medical treatment to national interest.

No matter who goes abroad and who stays home, that dearth of dignity persists in our hearts. Perhaps long after the leaders recover, dialogue is completed, elections are held and we go back to popular government, democracy will still stumble, because, we are long way from finding our feet on the bedrock of democratic aspirations. Leaders must believe in their people and treat them with respect. In democracy, people aren't cannon fodder. They are the cannon itself, which fires the shots.

One of the political parties has recently announced that its leader would guide it wherever she was located. In fact, leaders can lead from anywhere in the world as long as they are close to people. That is how the links work in the daisy's chain of power struggle. People listen to leaders who in their turn listen to their leaders. That is how supremacy builds up, the powerful dominate weaker ones.

Last week's development somehow had the element of writing history with a blowtorch. It was the concentrated expression of our struggle to find a solution, a crash course in political brinkmanship that will go down in history as a desperate moment. One leader free

and another in prison, people of this country might feel they have been left out again. They know what has happened, but may not be sure how this is going to make any difference.

Since we are a nation of xenophiles, I would like to invoke the example of one man from a foreign land and faraway times. Three modern cities in Italy (Cincinnati) and the United States (Cincinnati and Cincinnati) are named after him. In the 5th century BC, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was nominated dictator for six months by the senate to save Rome from the Aequians.

Cincinnatus defeated the enemies, resigned his dictatorship, and returned to his farm on the far side of Tiber. Everything was done within sixteen days after he took the job. In his second term as dictator, he put down a revolt by the plebeians, once again left the job, packed up, and went back to his life as a farmer.

For us it's important to ask why our struggle for democracy has been disrupted from time to time. The answer is that there is fat in the fire, damage in the repair. Time will tell that when we restore democracy, we also plant the seed of disruption.

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Why did Nepalese people abolish monarchy?



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

Pressure from prevailing political systems in China to the north and in India to the south, coupled with the disappearance of feudalism and absolute rule in Sikkim and in Tibet, influenced the Nepalese people who gradually became impatient with the monarchy and wanted democracy with a Republic.

earlier in the week.

The constitution of Nepal describes the country as a "Hindu Kingdom," although it does not establish Hinduism as the state religion. Nepal's constitution continues long-standing legal provisions prohibiting proselytisation and discrimination against other religions. Nevertheless, Nepal remained the only officially Hindu country in the world.

The 2001 census identified 80.6% of the population as Hindu and 10.7% as Buddhist (although many people labelled Hindu or Buddhist often practice a syncretic blend of Hinduism, Buddhism or animist traditions). 4.2% of the population is Muslim and 3.6% of the population follows the indigenous Kirant Mundhum religion. Christianity is practiced by less than 0.5% of the population.

The new 601-member constitu-

ent Assembly was summoned in the Birendra Convention Hall on May 29, and 560 members voted to declare the country as a secular Republic.

For more than two hundred years the monarch enjoyed absolute power, revered by the subjects as incarnation of god or Buddha.

In June 2001, the monarchy received the severest blow when the Crown Prince Dipendra killed 56-year old King Birendra, the Queen, and sisters and aunts in the palace (total eight persons) after what was said to have been a dispute at a family dinner party over the son's choice of an Indian bride. In 1991, King Birendra had steered his country to constitutional monarchy with commendable vision and skill.

The tragic incident dissolved the mystique around the monarchy. The Nepalese people, who used to regard the royals as differ-

ent from them, came to realise that the royals were actually no different from them. Human foibles exist in them and they are able to kill each other.

Why did the Nepalese people abolish monarchy?

There are many reasons, and some of them may be described as follows:

First, almost all monarchs, except a few in the Arab World, are constitutional monarchs. They reign, but do not rule the country. It is believed that King Gyanendra opposed constitutional monarchy when it was introduced by his brother in 1991. When he became king in June 2001, he said that he would not be a silent king like his brother. In February 2004, he famously said: "The days of the monarchy being seen but not heard... are over."

The greatest political blunder he made was that he implemented his

words when he took power in February 2005, declared emergency and sent troops to fight the Maoist rebels when peace talks collapsed. Some say he could not fathom the sentiments of his subjects when he took control of the state, and it was a move which precipitated the end of the country's 240-year-old Shah dynasty. Weeks of demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of people secured the end of direct palace rule in April 2006.

Second, some people in Nepal suspected that Gyanendra was responsible for the royal palace massacre on June 1, 2001 (although he was away from Kathmandu), and blamed Dipendra so that he could assume the throne himself. Gyanendra, not as popular in the country as his brother Birendra, had been third in line to the throne before the massacre. He was a businessman, and invested money in hotels, a cigarette factory and a tea estate.

Third, in November 1950, during a political plot, both his father Mahendra and his grandfather King Tribhuvan along with other royals fled to India, leaving the young Gyanendra (3 year old) as the only male member of the Royal Family in Nepal.

He was brought back to the

capital Kathmandu by the then prime minister Mohan Shamsheer Jang Bahadur Rana, who had him declared King on 7 November, 1950. After opposition to the hereditary rule of the Rana prime ministers from India, a deal was reached in January 1951, and his grandfather King Tribhuvan returned to Nepal and resumed the throne.

Some say that Gyanendra secretly cherished his ambition from his childhood to become the king again one day, and the conspiracy theory involving him in the killing of his elder brother, late King Birendra, gained ground easily among people.

Fourth, a wind of change began in 1975 when Nepal's neighbour Sikkim's Buddhist monarchs, the Chogyals, retreated in history when India annexed the territory in 1975, ostensibly to support a mainly Hindu Nepali democracy movement. Furthermore, Tibet's "Priest-King" the Dalai Lama fled in 1950 to India when China ended feudalism in Tibet.

Pressure from prevailing political systems in China to the north and in India to the south, coupled with the disappearance of feudalism and absolute rule in Sikkim and in Tibet, influenced the Nepalese people who gradually

became impatient with the monarchy and wanted democracy with a Republic.

In the Himalayas only Bhutan has a monarch, but he surrendered his power this year to a democratically elected parliament.

Challenges for the new government

Both the nation and elected political leaders are now in euphoria. This may not last long when they confront the challenges before them.

The Maoists, who won 220 seats in the elections in April, are expected to have a major role in the government. All leaders will require tolerance and respect for each other's views. They will have to compromise and accommodate each other's views to reach a national consensus on burning issues.

The Maoist leader reportedly wants to review all the treaties concluded between India and Nepal. This will not be an easy task because the country is a landlocked nation sandwiched between India and China. Furthermore, the US has not yet reconciled with the Maoists' past conduct. The international community will watch how the relationship develops with India,

China and the US.

Nepal is a least-developed country, and poverty is widespread. Economic growth in Nepal was just 2.3% in the year ending in July 2007, compared with 3.1% the year before. Business and trade suffered because of political turmoil.

The people have great expectations from the Maoists because they promised jobs to the unemployed and land to landless farmers. Whether they can deliver or not is a big question.

Another issue is related to the integration into the military of Maoists former fighters. The army has so far refused to allow them into their ranks.

The political establishment faces an immense task to satisfy people's high expectations. In the meantime, the mood has been jubilant on the streets in Kathmandu. The sentiment is reflected by a Nepali, Rupesh Ranjitkar, 25, who reportedly said: "There will be peace now. I don't think anyone will miss the king or shed any tears."

We wish the Nepalese people well in their new journey under the Republic.

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