

Begum Zia's 'no' is welcome

Culture of sycophancy can only undermine cause of democracy

WE are heartened as well as relieved that Begum Khaleda Zia has declined the offer to be chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party for life. By doing so, she has made a creditable and wise move. As she has pointed out, the party constitution and her respect for democratic norms do not allow her to accept such an offer.

We might add here that at *The Daily Star*, we have over the past many days focused on politics involving the BNP. We have spoken of the signals for reforms within the party in wake of Begum Zia's release. We hope that the decline of the offer of life-long leadership of the party by Begum Zia will only carry the process of such reforms forward. The people's expectations are that the BNP will emerge out of its autocratically run image into a truly democratically governed party.

While on the subject, we note with concern the tendency on the part of a class of senior politicians not only in the BNP but also in other parties to be unabashedly sycophantic towards their party leaders. Such politicians have generally, and across the years, proffered bad advice to them which in turn has done grave damage to democracy and the future of the country as a whole. How incorrigible sycophancy can get is gauged from one member speaking of changing the party constitution if needed in order to ensure that Begum Zia continue leading the party as long as she is alive.

What is troubling about such an instance of political sycophancy is that the party leaders thus being indulged take few or no steps to discourage such grossly disturbing instances of ingratiating behaviour on the part of their followers. Political loyalty is surely important, but when it mutates into unashamed genuflection on the part of senior politicians it raises a number of questions about the future of democracy.

Let people remain aware of the evils of sycophancy. Unquestioning loyalty to powerful men and women is a sign of danger. The danger is that this sort of behaviour seeks to suppress dissent within parties and in the long term undermine democratic norms at the national level. At this critical juncture in our national life, we certainly do not need such inexplicable political behaviour. For their part, the top most leaders of the country must beware of flatterers surrounding them.

Terror strikes India again

We condemn the macabre act

WE condemn the dastardly act of violence perpetrated on innocent people in a series of bomb blast in Delhi on September 13. We condole the death of 25 and sympathise with 100 people who were injured. An indigenous terrorist group calling themselves 'Indian Mujahideen' has claimed responsibility for the attacks. This is the same group that had claimed to have carried out the recent attacks in Ahmedabad and Jaipur.

The group claimed that, "The Indian Mujahideen -- the jihadi militia of Islam -- have once again attacked to make you face the disastrous consequences of the injustice and oppression inflicted upon the Muslims all over the country," in their handout. It has almost dared the Indian government to take action against them. Their grievances, they say, stem from the events of Ayodhya, of Gujarat, and of the killings of Christians in Orissa.

It is a pity that such a grisly and senseless mayhem has been carried out by a group claiming to be followers of a religion that has emphasised nothing more vigorously than renunciation of violence in resolving differences. It is even more poignant that the bombings were carried out in the Holy month of Ramadan, a month of peace and prayer. True Muslims will not have any hesitation in disassociating themselves from groups like this that bring nothing but calumny to Islam.

It is good to see the absence of the usual knee-jerk reaction of the Indian intelligence and the media as in the past instances, putting the blame on the neighbour without any substantive evidence. We would hope that the Indian law enforcing agencies would be able to go to the bottom of the incident and apprehend the perpetrators.

Events in India ring a very familiar bell in Bangladesh. If not of the same intensity, we too had been the victim of serial bomb blasts carried out by religious extremists. There are disconcerting reports that these elements are regrouping -- that leaves no room for euphoria that we have seen the end of the fanatics who chose violence over reason, who kill innocent people without remorse -- all in the name of religion.

It needs little emphasis that terrorism is no longer a local phenomenon. Whatever be the hue of the terrorists and the reasons for their germination, they straddle international borders, if nothing else than for warped ideological regions. This must be stimulus enough for the regional countries to seriously contemplate sharing resources to address the scourge.

Without a common focus, the phenomenon may engulf the region inextricably.

All sound and fury? Signifying nothing?

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

What a shame! We rejoice at the release of some people from confinement, people who have committed crimes that would shame any sane person to death, but we do not think for a while of the millions who need to be given freedom from a life of drudgery. Do we find a minute to contemplate, sitting in our political party office, that each day of the common people is but an episode of cruel real life drama, where there is no such thing as bail or release or treatment in a foreign hospital.



SHAHNOOR WAHID

A line from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, from Act 5, Scene 5: "Macbeth's plans are falling apart around him."

Elsewhere he says: "And all our yesterdays have lighted fools. The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!"

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Here, what the playwright meant is that life is like a bad play, or a good play that has been spoiled by a bad third act. A bad drama is one that is full of sound and fury, special effects and battle scenes, all occurring without a context. Ah! How coincidental! How terribly, terribly close to truth!

Dear readers, we are all witnessing a bad drama, a chaotic stage performance, where the storyline is changing fast, thus causing nausea and vertigo among the audience. They are at a

loss, failing to comprehend the bizarre acts going on stage. They cannot decide whether to clap, or cry, or flee from the dark theatre.

In a manner that is manifestly macabre, our politics resembles a bad drama where it is more noise than a spectacle of significance. It is vociferous and raucous at the same time, like it used to be in the good old days. Whatever is happening in the name of politics has the foreboding of doom that crouches not too far away -- like a nasty cyclone hovering on the horizon.

It is a matter of time only. We are yet to learn that nothing that is based on deception can sustain and produce better results. Our politics at the moment, in general, is fraught with elements of deception, and all good attempts at sanitising the system have proved to be counterproductive. We are returning to ditch number one, to live with the slithering organism once again. No escape. Good Lord! Are we destined to live

in a ditch?

The successive developments in the recent weeks have been unusual to say the least. The very imprisoned people (VIPs) have managed to come out of jails and, as we had written earlier in this column, they went home with garlands around their neck. And true to their reputation, they have started to threaten the people who had filed cases against them. Now it is the turn of the accusers to flee.

Oh, we have heard so much about reforms in the style and manner of politics as done in this country. We hoped politicians and supporters and their student cadres have learned one or two things in the last 18 months.

We hoped they would understand that the days of politics of violence were over and days of tolerance and practicing democratic norms were about to be ushered in. But alas! It is not to be so. Nothing has changed.

For example, one activist of

BNP was beaten up mercilessly by other supporters of the same party accusing him of being a reformist. It happened in front of the BSMU hospital when he went there to see the BNP chairperson after her release. The young man died of grievous injury two days later. He is veritably the first victim of the kind of politics that we shall see in the near future. So, fasten your seatbelt.

The lucky VIPs have been released from jails. But what about 14.95 crore people out of the 15 crore? Will they be able to end the life sentence of rigorous existence with the help of law? Is there any such law? They were born to serve the sentence -- a bondage in perpetuity -- for having committed, unknowingly, the crime of being born in poverty. For them -- the faceless millions -- Samuel Beckett had written: "The major sin is the sin of being born."

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confinement, people who have committed crimes that would shame any sane person to death, but we do not think for a while of the millions who need to be given freedom from a life of drudgery.

Do we find a minute to contemplate, sitting in our political party office, that each day of the common people is but an episode of cruel real life drama, where there is no such thing as bail or release or treatment in a foreign hospital.

The question that haunts my mind is: Are the people who are being released and those who remain imprisoned within the bounds of their fate created by two different creators? If not, then who are responsible for the divergence, for the inequality?

Why must some people get bail for engaging in corruption themselves and making a large number of people around them corrupt, while common criminals will not

get such differential treatment? Does political identity ensure impunity from criminal proceedings?

The kind of politics we are advocating for is responsible for perpetuating poverty in this country. A sea change is needed to make politics accountable, transparent and productive through playing a supporting role to the economic and social progress.

Politics by itself is meaningless unless it creates the right environment for the blooming of the potential in all the sectors that would lead to production and progress. Therefore, stop the noisy politics, settle down, use your grey matter, and find out how you can contribute to nation building. Making it "signifying something."

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Body blow to nuclear disarmament

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

This showed the extent to which many of the NSG's 45 member-states "felt pressured" by the United States' and India's furious sledgehammer-level lobbying. Very few were satisfied with the waiver, and many entered caveats through "national statements." Said a dismayed diplomat: "NPT R.I.P. (rest in peace)!"



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

export-control and non-proliferation system.

For the first time, the world's major powers have agreed to resume nuclear trade with a country that possesses nuclear weapons, but has signed neither the NPT nor another agreement on nuclear restraint.

On a short-sighted, narrow, parochial view, the waiver -- itself part of the US-India nuclear deal -- is a historic victory signifying India's "arrival" as a Great Power. But on a broad-horizon, long-term view, it's bad news for nuclear disarmament and, eventually, for India too.

The deal's supporters have a gung-ho national-chauvinist perspective. A majority of the opponents, too, share it, and regard the deal as a litmus test of national sovereignty. Both views perversely vest sovereignty in mass-destruction weapons, not people. This column offers a different perspective, based on peace, nuclear disarmament, and equity in international relations. Seen thus, both the nuclear deal and the waiver are unmitigated disasters.

They won't enhance India's security, but will intensify an arms

race in South Asia, making its states and peoples insecure. They won't promote energy security.

First, consider three big claims. The waiver is a victory of "sweet reason." Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's September 5 statement convinced half the NSG's prime "like-minded" dissenters -- Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland -- to change their stand.

Second, the waiver rights a historic wrong by lifting sanctions imposed on India after 1974. And third, it'll bring India into the "non-proliferation mainstream."

Mr. Mukherjee's was a vague statement claiming India has always opposed proliferation and arms races. This doesn't square up with India's record in initiating and sustaining a South Asian nuclear arms race for three decades. India failed to provide the assurance the world wanted: a legally binding commitment not to test.

The waiver happened not for arms-control reasons, but because of intense US pressure, described as "brutal and unconscionable" by former United Nations disarmament undersec-

retary Jayantha Dhanapala. India too practised "with-us-or-against-us" threats.

Second, it's simply not true that "innocent India" was punished unfairly for conducting the 1974 test with "indigenously" developed materials/technologies. The critical materials were imported or illegitimately procured.

The plutonium came from the Cirrus reactor built with Canadian and US assistance, meant for "peaceful purposes." Hence, the hypocritical "peaceful nuclear explosion!" India cheated the world to become a proliferator.

Unfortunately, the NSG made a dangerous distinction between "good" and "bad" proliferators and rewarded India because it has become Washington's friend. Tomorrow, another country could exploit that distinction. This will undermine the global non-proliferation norm.

Third, the waiver won't bring India into the "non-proliferation mainstream." In fact, the deal will help India expand its nuclear arsenal. Under it, India will separate its military-nuclear facilities from civilian installations and subject some of the latter to

International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, to ensure non-diversion of material to military purposes.

However, India will only put 14 of its 22 operating/planned civilian reactors under safeguards. But it can use the remaining eight reactors to produce plutonium for as many as 40 Nagasaki-type bombs every year!

This makes nonsense of India's professed "minimum deterrent," usually understood as a few dozen weapons. (After all, how many bombs would it take to flatten five Chinese or Pakistani cities? 15, 20, 50?) India already has an estimated 100 to 150 bombs. The deal will, thus, accelerate India's nuclear arms race with Pakistan and China.

Is the NSG waiver "clean and unconditional," as India insisted it must be? Strictly speaking, no. India formally accepted only one of the three conditions proposed in the NSG: "periodic review" of compliance with non-proliferation commitments.

The other two conditions -- exclusion of enrichment and reprocessing from trade, and terminating it in the event of testing -- figure in the "national statements" by many countries, including Japan and Germany.

So, even limited nuclear trade with India will be terminated if India tests, withdraws from IAEA safeguards, or violates other non-proliferation commitments.

Many national statements interpret Mr. Mukherjee's speech as a solemn promise not to test, which will automatically terminate cooperation in the event of a

test. This isn't quite the unconditional waiver New Delhi wanted.

Seizing on this, India's political opposition accuses the government of having betrayed its deal-related commitments, and compromising India's "strategic sovereignty."

This off-the-mark criticism exaggerates the compromise involved. Worse, it altogether misses the crucial disarmament and peace implications of the deal/waiver.

Joining the Nuclear Club, which the Indian elite has long craved, won't remotely end "Atomic Apartheid." India will merely become another participant in its ruling regime.

India's nuclear weapons will be legitimised. And India will sanctify other countries' nuclear weapons. The last thing India will do is to demand the Club's dissolution, or a change in its rules! India will inevitably betray its promise to fight for a nuclear weapons-free world.

India's ruling United Progressive Alliance seems determined to ram the deal through, despite its divisive character. There's a good chance that with the Bush administration's hard push, the bilateral "123 agreement" will also soon clear the US Congress.

However, the deal won't win the hearts of the Indian public -- and certainly not its votes. The UPA shouldn't make it an election plank.

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The afflicted ACC

BY THE NUMBERS

The ACC, which had raised hope that it would cut corruption drastically from public life, is now afflicted in the wake of mass granting of bail and stay orders of the graft cases. The hope is still there, as its boss who traveled to every corner of the country to raise repulsion against corruption has not lost heart.



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE recent release of a large number of accused in corruption cases on bail, as well as stay orders on many other cases, has greatly affected the image of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which had started its vigorous drive against corruption after the 1/11 changeover. More than 150 high-profile individuals accused in corruption cases filed by the ACC got bail from the High Court (HC) in the last two months, and were released from jail.

The HC has also stayed proceedings of at least 120 corruption

cases during this period, following petitions filled by the accused. The ACC chairman, however, has admitted that the image of toughness of the commission is getting dented due to recent bail binge and stay order on the corruption cases filed against the bigwigs.

The caretaker government (CTG) laid down an ambitious agenda of combating corruption as the pervasive corruption and plundering of national wealth by a handful of dishonest people had pushed the economy, society and politics to a disastrous state.

Accordingly, the ACC started its cleansing drive from the top tiers, which was highly acclaimed by

the people.

The army-led joint forces arrested at least 112 high profile politicians and businessmen, including several former ministers and lawmakers of the major political parties.

These high profile politicians, who were so long in jail on charges of crime and corruption under the Emergency Power Act, are now slipping through legal loopholes. Only one bench of the HC granted bail to at least 76 graft suspects in a month, of whom 33 were listed by the ACC.

It was really a commendable move by the CTG for purging the polluted politics and bringing the

top-most corrupt politicians, who were hitherto believed to be immune from the normal law of the land, to justice. The CTG won 105 cases filed against 154 people, mostly politicians and their family members, but failed to cross the next hurdle as the top graft convicts challenged the verdicts in the HC.

The 10 special courts set up in the National Parliament Complex for trial of graft cases received nearly 1,147 cases. Of these, the ACC filed 434 cases, out of which the legality of 350 cases was challenged by the accused in the HC. The HC issued stay order in 185 cases.

Intriguingly, 68% of the convicts in the graft cases filed by ACC are absconding. At least 89 high profile individuals out of 130, who have been convicted in 105 graft cases, have gone into hiding. The absconding are four former ministers and one former lawmaker of BNP, one former minister and eight former lawmakers of AL and a former minister of Jatiya Party.

The ACC chief may be partially right when he says "It's a matter of perception," while commenting on the string of bail orders. But two perceptions are involved here. Other than the ACC's own perception of getting its job done, the public perception is that the crusade against corruption is lost, as to them mass granting of bail is synonymous with acquittal.

The ACC chairman, however, said that the cases were not going to end due to bail and stay order, but it would take time to get them on track after disposal of writs and stay orders. One would agree with him, as bail and stay order are indispensable parts of law. But

people feel quite shocked when they see the champions in corruption walking out of jail, and assume that the ACC does not have the proper net to catch these bigwigs.

The ACC, which had raised hope that it would cut corruption drastically from public life, is now afflicted in the wake of mass granting of bail and stay orders of the graft cases. The hope is still there, as its boss who traveled to every corner of the country to raise repulsion against corruption has not lost heart.

"There is no shift in the policy of the ACC. So the legal process against the graft suspects will continue as per rules," says its DG. But most people believe that trial of top graft suspects will meet the same fate as thousands of others writs pending for years in the HC.

Granting of bail to such a huge number of high profile graft suspects also carries a message for the nation that the country is going back to the same political

and social condition conducive to corruption that had prevailed before 1/11.

Detention of political bigwigs under the Emergency Power Act is the easy part. But the crucial part is to clamp down on the crime lords and the godfathers of graft with foolproof cases for prosecution. We have seen in the past that many detained political leaders with alleged links with high profile crime and corruption could not be punished, as the charges against them were not specific.

The CTG is now planning formulation of a National Integrity Strategy (NIS), with a view to creating an ethical society to back up its drives for combating corruption. The CTG aims to achieve this goal by rebuilding integrity in every segment of the society.

The parliament, judiciary, executive, civil service, local government, attorney general, ACC, PSC, EC and CAG are the public sector institutions where the government is going to set a standard of integrity through the

NIS. The NGOs, media, civil society and political parties are the private sector institutions where the NIS would be employed.

The fundamental problem that relates to corruption in Bangladesh is the dominance of the vested interests, irrespective of changes in the power matrix. The remedy was to start the cleaning drive from the top tier. But the ACC, despite making some desperate attempts for combating corruption, could not succeed for lack of legal support.

The long-felt need of a statutory body to address unabated corruption in the country could not be met. Corruption still continues to devastate the society and distort our national psyche. In such a situation, a utopian idea like NIS for combating corruption brings little hope for the nation. Moreover, the next elected government will decide the fate of the NIS as soon as it takes oath of office and settles down.

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