POINT COUNTERPOINT

Between hope and despair



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

FFORTS to hold the general election on schedule along with the flurry of bails obtained by a substantial number of high profile politicians suspected of corrupt dealings have simultaneously raised hope and created fears in the minds of public. It would appear that the culpability of politicians warrant a different standard. Has this difference occurred because thinking and education. Bangladeshis have not given generously and unsparingly of themselves and their talents to the nation whenever the occasion demanded -- most

may remain undefiled? It is strongly likely that many of us have just watched things happen while the overwhelming majority had no idea of what happened. Such a mood of despair and despondency should not be surprising because most of our political parties are at best personalized institutions. Quite a few of them have been converted into family dynasties, where the mantle is passed from one generation to another. Even if the internal elections are held, they are nothing but farce as

the top leadership remains the same.

particularly in defence of the rights

and liberties of the common man -- so

that the well-springs of democracy

also suffer from above-mentioned ailments with no party members daring to challenge the word of the

leader, no internal debates, and no merit-based system of vertical movement from the junior rungs of the ladder to the top echelons. The parties do not have any active think-tanks that would try and find solutions to problems like sustainable growth, social development, housing, health The current events contain an

amazingly accurate description of our disenchantment with the present state of affairs, while they also provide hope for the distant future. Despair overtakes us when we see the servile behaviour of our senior political leaders towards the party bosses. Hope arises when we notice young people saying that they could run the country much better than the old politicians. For Bangladeshi politics to acquire a moral edge, the period of gestation will prove lengthy and painful.

The apparently bleak environment need not make us unduly despondent. Things have been difficult and disquieting at most times in human history. Even great men have been proved by history to have been unduly despondent about the future.

The remaining political parties In fact, quite often the years which followed gloomy predictions saw nations rise to the height of glory.

Politics cannot be restricted to politicians and their indiscretions and intermittent interventions from outside

because that will mean reducing it to a mere spectator sport. It is time to ensure people's role in selecting the

players and a part in the game so that the existing patron-client relationship can be done away with. This will

hopefully guarantee the asking of amenities as a matter of right and services in return for tax payment.

The salutary part of the present situation is that many of our politicians displaying clear pretensions to infallibility and being promise-bound never to become wiser, have awakened to the reality that at some point of time they may have to account for their reckless disregard for propriety. The process of accountability has acquired some teeth and it may be possible to do effective housecleaning by means of firm executive support and judicial activism. Above all, the political commitment to steer clear of wheeling-dealing in public affairs is of paramount importance.

There are, however, reasons for worry. While the movement for independence of judiciary and rule of law is lofty and noble, there is not much effort for the reform of the entire judicial system and addressing the ailments that are hampering the process of delivery of justice. There is not much talk about how judges are appointed, how cases are fixed, how much money is to be paid to the staff at every step, why abnormal delays take place and whether the poor can afford to seek justice under the pres-

The current situation pertaining to

the incapability of the civil judges to decide cases, the conditions in which they are forced to work, paucity of staff and progressive polity. and furniture, paints a dismal picture, but not much attention is paid to that.

There are additional reasons for despair. The fact that we have not been strong enough to effectively book the bigger suspects would mean that nothing adverse will happen to the hundred thousand petty tyrants that mushroomed all over the country. There was widespread admiration for the strong postures after 1/11. However, as the spell is gradually broken, the people are getting disillu-

Millions of dollars were spent on

access to justice programme but not

much has been achieved. The politi-

cal will and priority is definitely lack-

Bangladeshis have to admit that democratic and the political party reforms have not received the due attention because our political elite have not believed in the concepts of modern governance. They did not think that a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local selfgovernment and an independent judiciary and more modern universities and colleges for social sciences,

medicine and engineering were essential for building a democratic

The striking irony of recent times is that the suspension of democratic activities following the change of 11th January 2007 has actually resulted in the sharp awakening of the political conscience of the nation. A realization has perhaps dawned that the people are the only keepers of the constitution and that at poll time they need to exact a heavy price from those who have been manifestly notorious by indulging in the worst of corrupt and undemocratic activities.

Many politicians including the party heads did not sound credible when they pointed to the paramount necessity of the holding of party council session for carrying out the proposed reforms. This is so because at least one major political party did not hold any council session for the last 12 to 14 years. In fact, major party decisions have been mostly influenced by the sycophants and the time-servers, the cringing and the

It may be the time to strengthen the local government, now that we have an extended caretaker government that has supposedly no narrow and partisan interests. This is urgently necessary to control the ever-

increasing greed and lust of less than conscientious politicians. Greater concentration of power at one point is undoubtedly bad for the political

It is time to think if by means of legal and institutional measures we can make life difficult for the corrupt elements. We have to ensure that such elements do not get time to relax and are subjected to real inconveniences in displaying their ill-gotten worldly possessions. The politicians can be kept on track if statutory measures are taken to guard against their becoming unbridled promoters-distributors of favours. This is crucial to stop favourseeking satellites from hovering around the so-called power points. The opportunity cost of being corrupt in politics has to be very high.

It is time for our society to ensure that the political scene is not dominated by people whose real sources of income cannot be ascertained. For most people politics must not turn into a fulltime occupation, and prominence in public life should be accorded only after some positive record of public service. The villains cannot be upstaged in our political history. Sense of propriety in public life has to be retained. Administrative and financial accountability should be considered as solemn, serious and sacred in affairs of the State.

Running the affairs of State is a solemn and grim business where we need individuals of true grit. It was indeed pathetic to see occupiers of very high political office enjoying largely the perks and privileges of power without feeling the burden of responsibilities. Their conspicuous consumption was a rude shock for many. The single minded pursuit of money by the ruling elite have impoverished the mind of the nation and has also desiccated its heart. Wiping

the dirt from the art of politics brooks no further delay.

It is time to remind ourselves that politics is taking one's agenda in one's own hands. It is about the process of change; how society is organized; what is its power structure; who are the actors; how they interact with each other and with the outside world. It is also about social responsibility, about participation, and inclusion. Above all, it is about ideas and new concepts and their implementa-

We have to decide about the inclusion of social organizations and planning processes in the purview of politics. A good number of citizens groups should know how physical development takes place from designing to implementation. We have to know about the management of civic amenities and the emergence of 'mafias' in urban centers, the institutional weaknesses of the government, the quality of education and its relevance to our social and economic needs etc.

Politics cannot be restricted to politicians and their indiscretions and intermittent interventions from outside because that will mean reducing it to a mere spectator sport. It is time to ensure people's role in selecting the players and a part in the game so that the existing patron-client relationship can be done away with. This will hopefully guarantee the asking of amenities as a matter of right and services in return for tax pay-

It is time to effect transition from autocratic whims to representative governance, institutional development, revival of learning, scientific enquiry and thoughts about organized municipal services. The focal points of our politics in metropolitan Dhaka may be on law and order,

shortage of electricity and water, deficiencies of public transportation and unemployment. It should also cover all developmental activity of the government, small acts of social organizations and attempts to find solutions by NGOs and community based organizations. Let us remember that all issues which concern

people's lives are political issues. In mature democracies people are more concerned with their neighborhood, their borough and their city--in that order. The central government has hardly any direct significance in their lives. The local government boss, that is, the Mayor gives a programme and an action plan to convince the voters of his ability to implement it

and justify the expenditures. If we have a powerful, effective and financially supported local government, changes of government at the national level would not affect people's lives as they do now. The real test of politicians and their opponents should be a concrete agenda to start a process of reform and proof of their ability to implement it either at the city level or any social sector.

In the recent past our political scene did present an incredible army of pudding-headed mercenaries but it is time to replace them by men and women of honour and knowledge. Freedom cannot be inherited in the blood stream. Each generation will have to defend and fight for it and only then it will pass to the next. The crippling injustices and indiscretions of the previous decade is proof enough that a free democracy can turn into an authoritarian State when people fail in their duty as the keepers of the constitution. Our politics is in need of redefining.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The

Unguided youngsters slip into crime cauldron



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ANGLADESH'S young population (under 25) that mounts up to 50 percent of its total population is a vast untapped wealth that could be turned into the most effective and potential manpower of the country. Born mostly of poor parents, the male children supplement the poor parents' meager income, while many of the female children work as domestic helps and the unfortunate of them are either engaged inside the country in anti-social works or trafficked outside the country to work as sex workers. Even after the promulgation of child-labour ordinance, a good many of the male children labour in factories and fields until affected by diseases while working with toxic chemicals in some of these factories.

Bereft of food, education and shelter, many of them wander homeless in the streets of big cities and towns surviving by begging and thieving. They die by hundreds every

BITTERTRUTH

The great society we had dreamt of, meaning a social fabric free of the vile scourges of disease, poverty, corruption and illiteracy and cherished it to come into being, since the days of liberation war, has not come to pass. We are aware of our problems. But we are not keen to solve them with courage, conviction, patriotic feeling and proper planning.

malaria, measles, whooping cough, diarrhea and jaundice. They are the most disadvantaged group of the total population. The neglect of these youngsters by the society and last of all by the government is most depressing. Reports carried by the newspapers recently indicated that 11 children both male and female abducted from the Bihari colony at Mirpur were last indicated that BDR arrested two human traffickers from Rajshahi border and rescued 17 men and women aged between 2 and 55 while being trafficked to India. The grim story they narrated after they were rescued by the police made it clear that chill penury and lack of employment opportunities inside the country had driven them to look for a living outside the country.

As these children grow in absence of opportunities for education and work, their derailment and drift towards evil association and criminal-

day of easily preventable diseases like ity go unabated. Drug addiction, extortion, beating, rape and even murder are the images of violent crimes associated with the most depraved individuals. Sensible citizens are shocked to hear of the atrocities committed by these innocent looking boys and even some girls who have turned into mobsters, hijackers and drug pushers. Unhappily, some atrocious crimes in the country are rescued by the police on August 26 last now being committed by those who and returned to their parents. Report should be most innocent. Drug addiccarried by The Daily Star on August 12 tion and drug trafficking have increased to an extent that sensible citizenry could never conceive in earlier times. The number of addicts in the country, it is now known through a survey of UNDP and other NGOs, has swelled to 20 lakh from 10 lakhin 1996.

Over the years hundreds and thousands of poor people in the age group 15 to 30 have flocked to the capital city in search of work and a better life. Few found either and packed themselves into shanties and crowded localities. Shockingly true, many of the most desperate turned to

the protection of some very influential godfathers who operate this clandestine business but have always evaded arrest allegedly because of high connection and money dealings.

crime to make a living working under

Our failure to delve deep into this tenuous issue and grapple with it properly might explode into a catastrophic situation. This will mean turning the country into a snowcapped volcano -- pretty and calm on top but seething within. A silent revolution resulting from simmering discontent that is brewing up may, in no time, throw us all into a web of How do we fight shy of the prob-

lem that warrants our attention most? What a horrifying drudgery and waste of human energy at the prime of one's life due to lack of economic protection, guidance and motivation? Sleeping in railway stations and bus terminals and picking through garbage dumps and sifting for food in the municipal dump and hotel corners!

Juvenile crime in Bangladesh has exploded in recent years along with

organised crimes by local youth gangs Punishment is often meted out to the offenders but when they are released, they go back to the families which are not better than what they left. The situation has reached such a nadir that poor parents, sometime indulging in crimes themselves, encourage their children to work as couriers. With crime woven into the fabric of the society, the nation has every reason to be wary. Recent weeks have brought news of two particularly brutal acts: gang rape and murder of peace loving citizens protesting the drug trafficking business. In the last week of August a young pregnant house wife Lipi Begum (20) in the Pallabi area of the city was killed by the deviant youth gangs as she protested the drug dealing and drug taking near

While analysing the present pathetic situation, we are led to believe that it is the government's failure in the past days to create opportunities for education and work that has pushed them to take up such criminal activities, in most cases as a

herhouse.

way for living. On the other hand these crimes have awakened the country to the beast that has broken loose in its young people.

However, with resources gobbled up by some self-seeking politicians and opportunist business syndicates and the government machinery vacillating and adrift, the country can't get rid of the dreaded scourges like disease and poverty. This leads the grotesque problem and violent nature of the youngsters crippling the growth

With climate change causing heavy rainfall in unusual times and increasing frequency and intensity of flood that ultimately affects food security, the country now faces the worst of times. Experts in a media workshop held in the city on August 29 last suggested the formulation of a comprehensive action plan which will have to be friendly to both environment and infrastructure for sustainable development. This is the time to show that we live in a globalised world and share each other's suffering and pain. Developed countries in the West should allow their surplus fund to flow into the poverty-stricken countries like Bangladesh for the emancipation, education, food security and healthcare of the less fortunate and unfortunate people in this region. This would help people allowing their youngsters an access to better living and education.

Political leaders and people belonging to all shades of opinion in the country must wake up to the fact that the time for reckoning has arrived. If the country has to rise up

from the quagmire of past neglect, has to prosper and carve out a selfsustaining future, then it should not have a lacklustre education system or an infrastructure that is falling apart. It should not have its people being turned away by hospitals because they don't have money or dying in the street corner of drug overdoses or becoming victims of random crime because they were 'in the wrong place in the wrong time'.

The great society we had dreamt of, meaning a social fabric free of the vile scourges of disease, poverty, corruption and illiteracy and cherished it to come into being, since the entmoment. days of liberation war has not come to pass. We are aware of our problems. But we are not keen to solve them with courage, conviction, patriotic feeling

and proper planning. Drug addiction and drug trafficking among youths are eating into the vitals of the nation. Many of these disgruntled youngsters are resorting to unethical and illegal means of earning a living because of the lack of opportunities of doing anything else. We have a whole generation of human beings who could be so productive and helpful but are being lost. Reports published in the national dailies in the recent past indicated that hundreds and thousands of Bangladeshi youths after paying a big sum of money to manpower agents could not get the job they were promised and were languishing in jails of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Malaysia. If the country could have provided them a simple job, they would not have either slipped into crimes inside the country

or gone abroad by selling their last belongings likeland and jewelry.

Within the country the drug trade and 'contract killing' have in many cases become the last options for these disgruntled youths. These crimes, perhaps obviously, have shown them that in a little time they can make a lot of money and they have accepted it. Government effort in the past days to root out criminal activities of 'Oggan party and Malam party' as well as drug trafficking, vandalism and child trafficking" has been far from satisfactory other than what RAB has been doing at the pres-

The way the whole country is plunging into chaos, because of the apathy and neglect shown towards the vital section of the society signals a potential calamity for the nation. In fact, the country has inherited decades of benign neglect, misplaced priorities and outright incompetence at every level. Small wonder, alleged corruption of politicians and administrative cadres in the government circles and widening economic and social fissures in the body politic of the nation have soured the disadvantaged groups on the political class

who so long ruled the country. At this hour of crisis and need, sensible leaders irrespective of their affiliations have to come forward to heal the rifts developing between groups and lead them in building a new society based on equal rights and opportunity.

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You can't grow a 100-year old tree in 99 years

ENAM UL HAQUE

L University on Tuesday to join a human chain of teachers and students in a bid to stop its administration fell several hundred trees of the campus. Over the past 20 years, we visited the campus a hundred times and watched those trees grow into large green umbrellas we and the birds loved so much. The campus was the first place we proudly showed every bird lover visiting Bangladesh. More than 150 species of birds are seen here and at least 40 species nest here every year. Nowhere else in Bangladesh we have seen such great avian diversity in a square kilometer of

Some tens of years before, the trees were planted on the grassland of the campus by students and teachers including a few VCs who were great tree lovers and keen to have a shade over their heads in summer. Today we have this green oasis by the concrete jungle of Dhaka metropolis mostly because of their leisurely plantations. Ironically, the tree felling lobby has been citing that glorious past to justify its present slaughter! They claimed that they had a right to fell since their predecessors planted the trees that did not have the good sense to sprout on their own.

To us their plan of felling the trees, known to be the home of a great number of birds, was like the news of Emperor Nero about to burn Rome. The carnage would probably move the jaded Emperor to play his flute well but we would loose so much dear to us. We were shocked even more to learn that

other expediencies; but to make money. The three rationales the felling lobby used for promoting its cause were ludicrous and possibly threaded together clumsily to mask the money-motive.

Their first rationale grew out of the stumps of five Teak trees sawed and carted away from the fringe of the campus at night by the thieves. Believe it or not, the rationale is: we should cut the trees of the campus before the thieves do it; we have the power to do at daylight what the thieves do at night... Never before we met a dupe planning to sell all his carpets cheap since his doormats were stolen. Neither do we expect to see the Bangladesh Bank prepare foreclosure of hundreds of good banks because five far flung ones were robbed.

The second rationale, ridiculously, is: the trees of the campus are old, and the aging trees are a health hazard. This is first time we learnt that Bangladesh has old trees. The Americans are proud of the Red Wood forests that are 500 years old. The Nordics are proud of the trees that are 1,200 years old. Bangladesh hardly has any tree 100 years old. We grieve over the shortage of trees old enough to be the nursery of large birds like ducks, geese, storks and vultures. The older trees of this campus have lived less than 35 years and are mere adolescents of

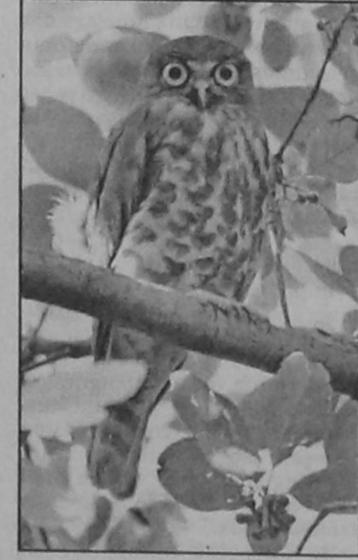
saw the University of Philippines making a huge effort to upright the half-uprooted giants of old trees at the low success predicted against ceive such a committee. the high budget to save the trees. Professor Jerry said: 'No money is

All over the world we met many people proud of old trees -- older the prouder. We also met a few people eager to see the old trees felled -- but they were loggers, not professors.

Never before we heard anyone claim that the aged trees were a health hazard. Our oldest known trees are in the Sundarbans. How many people were killed or maimed by the presence of a large number of old trees in Bagerhat, Khulna and Shatkhira? On the contrary, they seemed to have protected a lot of people against the fury of the Sidr. No wonder many of us were baffled by the invented health hazard theory. We asked a young botanist if an aging tree could be hazardous to people in any way. He replied: 'No more hazardous than perhaps an aging

The third rationale is: the trees are the 'resources' of the campus, and can be traded by a committee managing the internal resources. The trees are seen as 'resources' of the university exactly as its land, lakes, fish, fruit, etc. to be leased or sold to make money. The trees are not seen as part of the environment the students, teachers, staff and their families live in. Trees are certainly not viewed as a home of thousands of birds, beetles and as such waiting to be watched and studied by the students and the After a big cyclone in 2006, we faculty. The fate of the trees is to be decided by the 'Internal Resources Committee', not by an 'Environmental Management Committee' Diliman campus. When I hinted at since the university is yet to con-

Those were the depressing sides of the story. On the brighter side the felling was planned not to make too big for saving a 100 year old there was a very big turn over of from for new road, building, or tree. You can't grow it in 99 years'. teachers and students out in the EnamUl Haque is an ornithologist.



street in rain vowing to resist any large scale tree felling in the campus. The VC and most of the faculty seemed not to favour the felling plan. Many said that felling would benefit the loggers more than the university. The log-dealers and saw-mill owners are likely to earn ten fold more than the Internal Resources Committee would gain. 'Meanwhile, the loss to us would be immeasurable', said a zoology student working as an assistant to a teacher doing research leading to a Ph D on the birds nesting in the trees of the campus. Much brighter side of the story is that the tree felling lobby seemed a rather small part of the university, albeit powerful. 'They are not the growing part of the university and are likely to age and perish faster than our trees,' said a young teacher to cheer

Reminiscing '62 education movement

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

HE other day (September 17) was the 'Education Day'. 46 years ago, that day students of the then East Pakistan waged a huge movement against the 'Sharif Education Policy' announced by then Pakistan government. I too participated in that movement as the General Secretary of Dhaka College Students' Union, convening and presiding over the first formal meeting of students for scrapping the Education Policy and removal of discrimination in education.

In 1947-48 the number of primary

schools in East Pakistan was 29633, which

came down to 26000 within a span of 5 years. The Pakistan army chief Ayub Khan hatched a conspiracy with the Governor General Eskander Mirza to topple the coalition civilian government headed by Prime Minister Firoz Khan Noon. Marital law for the first time and first of its kind in qualityatthehighereducationlevel the sub-continen was promulgated on October 07 of 1958. But within less than three weeks Eskandar Mirza was removed serious agitation. and Ayub Khan himself became selfappointed President of Pakistan and Chief Martial Law Administrator. After two months, on 30th December the government announced formation of a commit tee headed by Education Secretary of West Pakistan and Ayub's former teacher at Aligarh University, S. M. Sharif. In the 11 member commission, four educationsts were from East Pakistan. Dr. Morntaj Uddin Ahmed, Vice Chancellor, Rajshahi University, Dhaka Secondary Education Board president Abdul Haque and two teachers, one from Dhaka University and another from Dhaka Engineering College, included hunger strike. Professor Atowar Rahman and Dr. Abdur Rashid, respectively. The commission

August, 1959. Features of Sharif Commission Report included: (1) 'Urdu should be made the language of the people of Pakistan'. (2) English should be made

submitted its interim report on 26th

duce a Lingua Franca for Pakistan, common script should be introduced and for that, Arabic should be given priority. (4) Education should not be available in minimum cost and at cheap rate. (5) There is reason to see at par investment in industry and education. (6) The concept of free primary compulsory education is Utopia. (7) We emphatically recommend that the 2-year degree course should be upgraded to 3-year for improvement of

Some of the features provoked

They clearly pointed out that the door of education was closed to the poor and low-income people. The very connotation of "investment in education" triggered sharp reaction. Committees and sub-committees were formed in many institutions spontaneously to protest against the commercialization of education. The agitation programme was started by Dhaka College students. Sporadic strikes by students continued. Students of national medical institutions also resorted to the movement, which

However, the students' movement took a new turn on 10th of August when Dhaka College students meeting announced general strike of students throughout the province on 15th August. All responded favourably to the programme. Series of meetings were held in between 15 August and 10 September at compulsory from class VI. (3) To intro- the historic Amtala in the Dhaka

University campus. On 10th September a representative character meeting was held at the Dhaka University Cafeteria where almost all the colleges of the city were represented. The meeting announced a fresh action programme of hartal or total strike on 17th September. Street corner meetings, processions, talks with different organizations and associations of government employees, rickshaw employees union, labour unions and different trade bodies held to make the programmeof17thSeptemberasuccess.

Opposition leader Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy came to Dhaka from Karachi

during the last leg of the movement. He met East Pakistan Governor Golam

Faruk and could persuade him to defer implementation of the Sharif Commission

Report. This resulted in the eventual end of the movement which was an eye

Students started picketing from early morning on the day. Agitating students set some vehicles ablaze as contingents of police chased demonstrators from Sadarghat to Nawabpur

opener to the vested interests in the ruling coterie of Pakistan.

railway crossing. By 9am Dhaka University campus was packedup with students coming from different institutions of Dhaka city. It was virtually unmanageable situation. A news this time was spread like wild fire that the police fired at Nawabpur and a number of demonstrators had been killed. Hearing the news, a huge procession was brought out with Sirajul Alam Khan, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Rashed Khan Menon, Haider Akbar Khan Rono, Ayub Reza Chowdhury and Reza Ali in the forefront. Immediately after Kazi Zafar Ahmed could make a short speech the procession entered Abdul Gani Road crossing High Court when police fired on the back of the procession. Babul a student of Nobo Kumar High School was killed instantaneously and bus conductor Golam Mostafa, domestic (BCTA), e-mail:principalqfahmed@yahoo.com.

workerWaziullah and many others were seriously injured. Waziullah later died in the hospital. The firing at Abdul Gani Road infuriated the processionists which not only included students but also workers and employees of different mills and factories, rickshawpullers and boatmen form Burigangariver.

Two chief characteristics of the 62 education movement which deserve special mention are: first, the movement was initiated by the students alone without any outside influence and secondly, the central student leaders could not foresee that such a huge movement was possible based on education and academic problems faced by the students alone. However, Opposition leader Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy came to Dhaka from Karachi during the last leg of the movement. He met East Pakistan Governor Golam Faruk and could persuade him to defer implementation of the Sharif Commission Report. This resulted in the eventual end of the movement which was an eye opener to the vested

interests in the ruling coterie of Pakistan. After 1952, the students again presented a camouflaged conspiracy against the mother tongue from being successful. So every year the day is observed and incidents recalled on 17th of September.

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