LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY NOVEMBER 17, 2008

### Say 'no' to hartal

High time primacy is accorded to economy

IKE many occasions in the past, business leaders have once again urged the political parties to refrain from d calling country-wide hartal in the future as a way to bargain with the power that be. With the people expecting a qualitative change in politics following elections the call has a special ring of relevance to it. Such call has come from a sense of urgency for keeping economy at the centre of national priority objectives. The ongoing global economic meltdown further reinforces the need for constructive politics as opposed to hartal-centric confrontational politics.

Hartal by all considerations is extremely detrimental to the normal economic activity of the country, as large industries, factories, sea ports, railways, banks, wholesale markets, educational institutes, offices and transports are forcibly shuttered down by the hartal supporters. More often than not, in the past such occasions turned violent, with supporters vandalising on the streets in a despicable manner, damaging cars and buses, setting fire to overturned vehicles and pelting stones at business houses. The cost of a day-long shutdown proved to be colossal for a developing country like Bangladesh.

The nation has been a witness to many such anarchic situations created in the name of exercising political rights. But, unfortunately the thought had never dawned on the politicians that by forcing one to stay home on a working day they had impinged on the rights of others. We, therefore, believe the business leaders have spoken not only for themselves but for the masses as a whole. The common masses, especially the daily wage-earners and those seeking medical help, suffer

most acutely because of the forced deadlock.

Actually, the political culture that breeds hartal should be eschewed by the politicians. In view of the intense global competition, they should come out of the hartal mindset and collectively evolve other means to press forward their demands. There is no denying that parliament is the right place where they should exercise their rights and settle issues. Therefore, the upcoming political governments should be tolerant of dissent and give space to the opposition in parliament so that they can voice their demands on national issues without interruption. At the same time, the way government uses its machinery to block opposition meetings and rallies and stifles other forms of democratic expressions will have to be discarded so that the opposition is not pushed into an agitational mode. In a world where the breeze of change is blowing across, politicians in Bangladesh should also bring a breath of fresh air into their political culture.

#### Deaths due to negligence

Somebody must be held to account

few more of those who suffered from serious acid burn as a result of a collision between an acid laden truck and a passenger bus last week near Comilla have lost their battle, and succumbed to injuries. More than twenty were injured in the accident; regrettably, many of the injured, reportedly, have little chance of pulling through. These deaths are nothing but willful killing.

What makes the matter more poignant is the fact that most of the 15 that have died were middle class folks, some the only bread earner of the family, and one was a final year student of BUET. Their untimely deaths have dashed the dreams for a bright future of those who were dependent on the unfortunate victims.

What is most agonizing is the fact that all those who died in the accident lost their lives due to gross negligence and callous disregard for public safety on the part of those that were supposed to ensure that hazardous substance are transported in a way that does not cause harm to the people in and

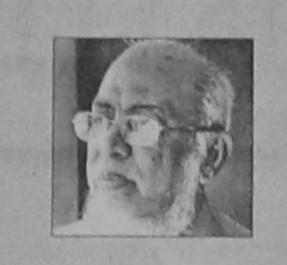
around the vicinity of the accident, should an accident occur. We would like to ask, how can anyone, in any position of responsibility, allow a vehicle laden with dangerous chemicals to pass the gates of the factory, or from wherever they commenced their journey? It appears that this was the normal mode of transporting such materials, which has only come to light because of the accident. Why no proper measure was taken to indicate to others that the vehicle was transporting dangerous materials, and why no precaution was taken to ensure prevention of leakage of the deadly substance in case of accident?

It may be mentioned that we see very often trucks carrying iron rods that jut out of the tailboards posing serious danger to other vehicles, or overloaded vehicles weaving through the traffic right in the heart of the capital, looking as if they will collapse any time. And they do so under the very nose of the law enforcing agencies.

We are not aware whether those responsible for the deaths have been taken into custody as yet. Reportedly, the probe team has submitted its report which has confirmed the fact that hazardous chemical was being carried improperly.

We suggest that the police move quickly to ensure that such accidents do not recur, and that the guilty are hauled up immediately. The guilty must be made to pay adequate compensation to the families of those killed and also for the treatment of the injured. No amount of penance can atone for this grisly crime.

### An exercise in surrealism



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

N a troubled time, when the regular political process is in suspended animation, the best bet for the politicians is to lie low and let the storm blow over. While it's prudent not to make insinuative remarks in political discourse, it's equally wise not to react to innuendoes thrown by others. After all, it's an unusual time!

So, those indulgences only vitiate the charged atmosphere and encourage non-political power grabbers to fish in waters already muddied. Yet a section of politicians, specifically those belonging to the BNP and Jamaat, are behaving exactly so by holding the nation hostage to their quixotic demands on the eve of ninth parliamentary election due on December 18, presumably to extract undue concessions from the government.

preferred choice in dealing with the opponents, although they ain't in any way relevant to election arrangements. The discerning observers have likened the situation to playing with the tail of a sleeping tiger. They think it's PERSPECTIVES

Informed circles are unanimous in their view that Madam Zia will have to come to terms with hard reality instead of exercising herself in inconsequential surrealism. All that is at stake with the madam is that an unprepared and tainted BNP may, at the worst, lose the election. But what she has put at stake for the nation is much more grave, fatal and lethal. In its own right, the BNP alone, or in alliance with others, is a force to reckon with and an enduring factor in our politics.

as dangerous as that.

We, as a nation, had a rollercoaster journey to our democratic destination, which has so long eluded us repeatedly. After due deliberations with the political stakeholders, the caretaker government made a public commitment for a democratic transition by the end of the year and, accordingly, a equally treated by the authority, well-meaning Election which alone can address BNP's Commission gave out an election schedule acceptable to the people and all political outfits except the BNP-Jamaat alliance, which has schedule it's doubtful that all of adopted a negative stance and BNP's grudges and grumbling can targeted its bete-noir, the AL, with all kinds of insinuations and accusations although it's not an inter-

Instead of settling the problems, Mud-slinging is still their if any, either with the EC or the government, the alliance is flexing its muscles to take matters to the street and is, in a frenzy, making accusations against the AL as well as blaming the government for as public patience is concerned, being partial in its treatment to its archrival, the AL.

party alliance, the government has been colluding with AL to catapult the latter to power through a stagemanaged election that the alliance wants to shun.

Yet, nothing can be further from the truth because, in the present equation, all political outfits are ambivalent complaints and placate its apprehension, if any.

However, in a tight timebelookedinto -- let alone resolved -- before the year is out. In the meantime, the people, buoyant with an election mood and with their eyes fixed on December 18, are indeed non-plussed as to what the BNP-Jamaat men are up to.

the schedule will be the proverbial last straw on the camel's back as far and will plunge the country into a dangerous uncertainty fraught

In the perception of the four- with the possibility of a chain of ominous developments. Is the cynical lot of BNP-Jamaat stalwarts consciously taking the responsibility of inadvertently catching the tiger by its tail?

> Neither the government nor any other quarter is in any way responsible for the BNP's predicaments -perhaps, which is why it is shying away from public mandate at this juncture. If required, the BNP will have to take its share of comeuppance without making the nation suffer for its own sins.

To obfuscate the party's terrible ignominy and parry the rationale of an immediate election, Madam Zia may draw comfort from parroting her old rhetoric of "sovereignty in danger" or "country in deep crisis" with a tinge of secularbashing (the India bashing is Understandably, any shifting of spared for now) in her Islamistnationalist context, but few are any more impressed by her gauzy feelgood commercial.

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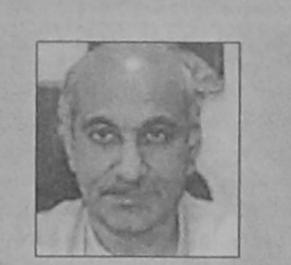
Will she or won't she take part?

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force to reckon with and an enduring factor in our politics. But we cannot let her sabotage the national election, an indispensable pillar of our democracy and already painstakingly arranged, on which the millions from home and abroad But what she has put at stake for have pinned their hopes for a much awaited democratic transition.

# In the semi-final analysis...



M.J. AKBAR

HE current assembly elections are not quite the semi-finals that they are being billed to be, for the nationwide electorate will determine the fate of the UPA six states. But it is beyond debate that these results will set the mood for general elections, now expected at the very last legal minute, which means April-May. These are arguably the most important of the mini-general elections that have dotted the political calendar over the last two years.

So where is the prime minister of India during this virtual referendum on his rule? During the first part of the campaign season he was doing bilateral visits in the Gulf. On the day that Chhattisgarh went to the polls he was on his plane to Washington. It could be argued that the G20 Summit on international financial crisis summoned by President George W. Bush was a must-visit. But that is not the real

point. The fact is that the Congress could not really care anymore whether Dr. Manmohan Singh is in Qatar or Chhattisgarh. He does not add to the vote. The Indo-US

BYLINE

The real semi-final, in my view, is actually the coming general election. The results of 2009 will set the stage for the revival of one national party as the electorate tires of regional parties, particularly in the North. Three critical factors will determine the winner: who controls how much space on the electoral map; who is the better magnet for women and the young; and who has shown the ability to deliver on good governance. It sounds simpler than it is.

nuclear deal, on which he staked even before the votes were cast? his government, over which he was hyped up endlessly by has simply disappeared from public consciousness.

The Congress had put two curious-looking lights at its Delhi success of the nuclear deal. The message was that it would bring electricity. The lights have been quietly taken down. Even Delhi's voters, who, as urbanites, might have been expected to care a hoot the city will influence more votes in same Cabinet room as Pawar. Delhi than the nuclear deal.

There is a perceptible demoralibroke the alliance with the Left and sation in the Congress, for both ishing corruption in what has brought in new allies who pur- administrative and political reagovernment, and not just voters in chased MPs on his behalf, which sons. The government has failed on scandal." inflation and terrorism, the two favoured television channels as the issues of highest concern to the glorious answer to India's prayers, voter. Partly as a consequence, the coalition is coming apart as the various partners begin to reposition themselves for elections.

Lalu Prasad Yadav and Sharad governance has some demands. headquarters to symbolise the Pawar are on opposite sides of the ready to say so. Praful Patel, Sharad Pawar's alter ego when Pawar needs to fire from a second shoulparochialism, while Yadav walks a or two, do not care a jot. A mis- tightrope between defending

From his perch in Tamil Nadu, take their toll on India's nerves. As for remoter parts of India, it is Karunanidhi, his party in desperate quite remarkable that neither the straits, threatens to withdraw his after the Amarnath agitation this prime minister nor Ms. Sonia ministers if Delhi does not inter-Gandhi campaigned in the 39 vene to protect the Tamil Tigers, Chhattisgarh constituencies that who are under extreme pressure went to polls on November 14; from the Sri Lanka army. The prime although Rahul Gandhi did make a minister can do little in effect token appearance. Did the except ignore these contradictions Congress give up on Chhattisgarh and carry on as if nothing is hap-

pening. A new ally, Amar Singh, accuses a DMK minister of astonbecome familiar as the "spectrum

Once again, the prime minister has to pretend ignorance or indifference as unprecedented loot takes place under his watch. There is absolutely no sense of accountability, or a suggestion that good

The only remaining strategy for "bhaiyya" war in Mumbai, and the Congress is to hang on to office, whatever the daily rate of attrition, and hope for some miracle that might revive its fortunes. Reversals der, has backed Raj Thackeray's of public mood do take place. We have seen one occur over the last year. The Congress peaked in the placed bus corridor in the heart of fellow-Biharis and sitting in the summer and monsoon of 2007, until inflation and fear began to

This decline went into fast gear year. But reversals need substantive reasons, and there is nothing visible on the horizon that can suddenly turn this tottering cabal in office into a viable instrument of promise. Divine intervention is

have no evidence to suggest that in also energising two key vote the Almighty is partisan. In an election season, confi-

dence does not evaporate into ether. By some mysterious process, it travels by osmosis into the savour. opposite side. There is an almost direct correlation. As one party turns skeletal, you can see the flesh gathering on the other. A year ago, the BJP was in deep depression, and its governments seemed utterly vulnerable. Suddenly, they seem to have steadied and even Decome sure-footed.

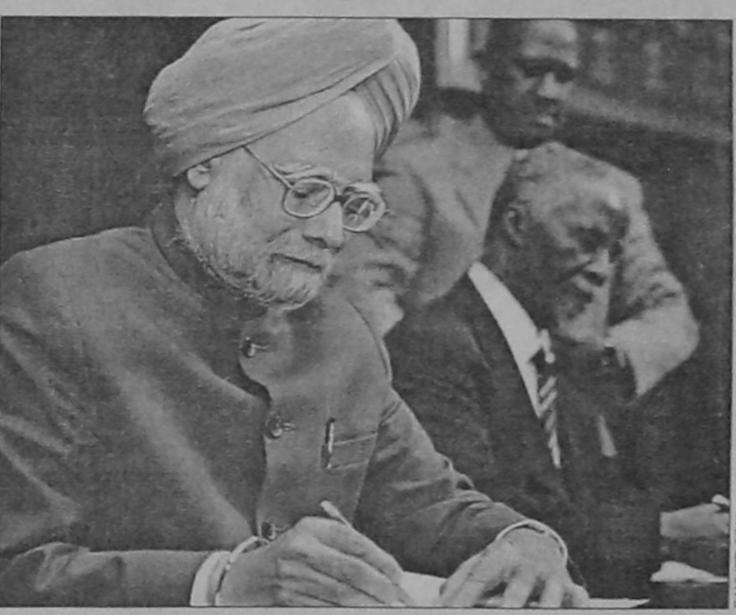
The most remarkable turnaround has been in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The first was nearly lost; the second was utterly lost. In both the party is in play, and could register moraleboosting victories.

Vasundhara Raje has shown exceptional skills, not only in

segments, the young and women. Add to this the panache of economic growth, and you have a recipe that an electorate can

The real semi-final, in my view, is actually the coming general election. The results of 2009 will set the stage for the revival of one national party as the electorate tires of regional parties, particularly in the North. Three critical factors will determine the winner: who controls how much space on the electoral map (the Congress is being suicidal by surrendering large swathes to allies); who is the better magnet for women and the young; and who has shown the ability to deliver on good governance. It sounds simpler than it is.

calming political turbulence, but M.J. Akbaris Director of Publications, Covert.



always possible of course, but we He writes while Congress flounders.

## What now in the Middle-East?

With upcoming new administrations both in Israel and the United States and the Palestinian Authority in disarray, the near-term prospects for a comprehensive peace settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians appear remote. Despite the daunting challenges posed by the many contentious issues and dispiriting paralysis in the current negotiations, demographics could decide the outcome for the region.

JOSEPH CHAMIE

S US citizens prepare to usher in a new president and Israel likewise welcomes a new administration, the long-lasting Israeli-Palestine conflict will again be put. on the agenda and get a fresh look. In the political and strategic calculations inevitably to be made about one of the world's toughest problems, decision-makers would do well to ponder the silent but inexorable fact of demography that defies any

short-term calculation. For more than six decades Israelis and Palestinians have struggled within a small tract of land that in total is about the size of Haiti. The numbers of people directly involved in the conflict are also relatively small, representing one-fifth of 1% of

population size of metropolitan Los Angeles. In addition, the economies of these populations are comparatively small, amounting to less than a third of 1% of world economic out-

Irrespective of these statistical facts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an issue of global significance, spilling out well beyond its borders and region into virtually every continent. The conflict continues to be a dominant concern of international diplomacy, regional and national politics, and public and academic political debate as well as a recurrent subject capturing the attention and

headlines of global media. With upcoming new administrations both in Israel and the United States and the Palestinian Authority

the world's population, or about the in disarray, the near-term prospects for a comprehensive peace settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians appear remote.

Despite the daunting challenges posed by the many contentious issues and dispiriting paralysis in the current negotiations, demographics could decide the outcome for the

Here are four general scenarios on demographic trends that could unfold, with implications for the period. future of this troubled region:

The first scenario is simply a continuation of the status quo. Over the entire 40-year projection period, which begins in 2010, Israelits population slightly more than 7 millionremains more numerous than the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

However, Palestinians have higher fertility rates than Israelis, currently 5.4 and 4.2 children per woman in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, respectively, versus 2.9 children per more rapid rates of population growth among the Palestinians --3.2% versus 1.8% annually, respec-

Consequently, the difference in population size between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory becomes progressively smaller with the result being that by 2050 the two populations would be roughly equivalent in size, or about 10.5 million

The second scenario, the "threestate" option, envisions three independent states: Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In this instance, Israel remains substantially larger than either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip over the entire projection

However, if the Palestinian refugees from the neighbouring countries are incorporated into the population of the West Bank in the year 2010, then this new Palestinian state would outnumber Israel in 20 years.

The third scenario, the "twostate" option, involves two separate states co-existing peacefully side by

side. Without the return of the Palestinian refugees, Israel remains larger in size than the population of the new Palestinian state up through mid-century when both are about woman in Israel, and this leads to the same size. However, if the Palestinian refugees were to be included into the new Palestinian state in 2010, it would be slightly larger than Israel at the outset.

The fourth scenario is the "onestate" option, often referred to as the binational option. Under such a scenario, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would combine into a than today. single democratic state with Arab and Jewish residents holding citizenship and equal rights.

At the time of the new unified state's establishment in 2010, its total population would be nearly 12 million, with the numbers of Arabs and Jews being roughly the same size, each slightly below 6 million. However, due to their substantially higher rates of population growth, the Arabs in this new state would soon outnumber the Jews, and by 2050 Arabs would account for nearly two-thirds of the one-state population.

A slight variant of this scenario is for the one-state to be composed of Israel and the West Bank, with the Gaza Strip becoming an independent nation. In such a case, the Jews in this new state would represent

approximately 55% of the population in 2010 and remain the majority up until around 2030; thereafter they

would be a decreasing minority. Perhaps the most obvious observation from this exercise is that whatever scenario, outcome or solution one envisions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it's abundantly clear that demography plays a decisive role. Over the coming decades, barring a large-scale disaster, the Israeli and Palestinian populations will be substantially more numerous

Consequently, this contested region of the world will become more densely populated than it already is. The densities for Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip -- today around 350, 450 and 4,300 persons per square kilometre, respectively -are expected to increase to approximately 500, 1,000 and 12,500 persons

per square kilometer by 2050. The projected demographic trends also suggest that it will be increasingly difficult for Jewish Israelis to maintain their current dominant majority of 76% within Israel. As fertility rates are higher among Arab-Israelis than Jewish-Israelis -- around 3.7 versus 2.8 children per woman -- the Arab-Israeli population is expected to grow more

rapidly than the Jewish-Israeli population over the coming decades. For example, whereas Arab-Israelis now account for one-fifth of the total population of Israel, they're expected to increase to one-quarter by 2025 and may reach 30% by 2050.

A central question concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains, and that is which scenario is likely to happen. Considering the current state of political affairs both inside and outside the region, the status quo seems to be the most probable

outcome, at least in the short term. The continuation of the status quo, however, undermines the credibility and diminishes the chances of a two-state solution. With more than 100 Jewish settlements, approximately a half a million settlers and an extensive Israeli presence throughout the West Bank, Israel has become for all practical purposes solidly integrated into the

West Bank. Consequently, and in contrast to is destiny. Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, withdrwal from the West Bank would likely be a logistical and emotive nightmare for the Israeli

government. Given these facts on the ground, Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in particular

those in the West Bank, may eventually decide to push for the right to citizenship and to vote in Israel. Indeed, the lack of tangible progress is swaying increasing numbers of Palestinians toward the conclusion that a two-state solution is not viable and may never be realised, and therefore they should press in favour of citizenship and equal rights in an

expanded democratic state of Israel. Finally, differential rates of population growth not only redefine the relative standing of Arab-Israelis, Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, but also impact political calculations, negotiating positions and public

In the short term, these relatively slow moving changes in human numbers may not be the primary forces behind resolving the conflict. However, in the long term, as it has been throughout the history of humanity, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no exception, demography

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