

EC's sticking to RPO restrictions welcome

Political parties should move forward

IN the sequel to the Election Commission rescheduling the national and upazila poll dates thereby meeting the political parties' principal demand, we are heartened by the EC's announcement that it would stick to the restrictions contained in the amended RPO. The EC's decision not to further relax the provisions of RPO is well in order; for, we think, it needs the power to conduct the election effectively and credibly.

The BNP and its alliance partners have not looked kindly upon some important elements of the amended RPO. This is in spite of the fact that they were engaged in the process of deliberation the EC had conducted with political parties before finalising the draft ordinance. Even though such features as have been adopted hold the key to a qualitative change in the substance of the forthcoming election and its outcome, the BNP alliance has asked the EC to waive the restrictions on former government officials and loan and utility bill defaulters seeking to participate in the election.

Their another demand touches on a fundamental question of empowering the EC with the authority to cancel candidature of somebody who has flouted the electoral code of conduct, a power that is vested in the EC of the neighbouring country.

A brief analysis of the BNP alliance's contentions pertaining to each of the new provisions of RPO on which it has taken issue with the EC will reveal the untenability of their position. First, as for eligibility of government officials to contest in the elections after three years of their retirement, termination of contracts, dismissal or resignation, this is quite a proper criterion to set. Given the experience of former government officials nurturing their constituencies at the fag end of their job career with all the power and influence to wield and then taking a plunge immediately on severing ties with the government, we have seen how long-serving genuine politicians were elbowed out.

On the question of relaxing restrictions on bank loan and utility bill defaulters, the BNP-led alliance is clearly asking for the unacceptable. Because, the EC has already relaxed the timing for rescheduling progressively: from the original six months through a fortnight to a week before the polls just to meet the demand of the political parties. Yet, now the BNP asks for the repayment facility on rescheduling a day before the polls! To our knowledge, some of the election aspirants have run into crores in default; is it morally justifiable to be any more lenient to them? Definitely, we think not.

As for the EC's power to disqualify candidates for breach of code of conduct, the political parties need not have any misgivings provided the EC uses it sparingly and extremely cautiously in a fully transparent and open manner, which we believe, the EC has promised to the political parties. Our understanding is, it's only after providing opportunity for defence and thorough investigation and hearing that a candidate will be disqualified or acquitted.

All things considered, we urge the major parties and their alliance partners to look forward and make a fresh beginning, unhitched from the past blemishes.

Clash between students and shopkeepers

Police's timely intervention missing

WE are appalled at the report of Dhaka College students and local shopkeepers getting involved in a brawl on petty matters that left fifteen people injured. The two-hour long brick-battling and vandalism that ensued caused damage to a number of shops in a local market place and a building of the college. It is not really clear why a minor altercation over the purchase of a shoe-rack ended up with the two sides going on a war path. Clearly both sides ran out of patience and sense of propriety taking recourse to violence. It is extremely regrettable that their mindless acts caused three-hour long traffic congestion on Mirpur Road that ultimately spilled all over Dhanmondi residential area.

The vicinity around Dhaka College and New Market tends to get heated up often for various reasons and we have seen some severe cases of violence and vandalism there in the past that left hundreds injured and scores of vehicles damaged. Though a good number of police personnel remain on duty in the area during business hours we wonder what role the police contingent in the area had played on Saturday to defuse the brewing trouble. The pertinent question is, why was it allowed to be blown out of proportion? Preventing small-scale problems from going out of hand is the foremost duty of any police contingent in public places but it has been often alleged that such forces remain a silent spectator and appear on the scene only after considerable damage has been done to human life and property.

At the same time, we wonder why the students did not report to the college authorities or the higher police officials of any misconduct on the part of the traders. When students take law in their own hands for trivial reasons it tarnishes their image as a sensible group of people who would lead the country in the future.

We are in the know of many committees and associations of traders existing in the area who can be approached to settle any dispute. Similarly if the shopkeepers had any grievance they could approach the college authorities. But under no circumstances should any group threaten peace by taking law into their own hands. We feel both teachers and traders' association should instil a sense of responsibility in those under their wings to avoid any unpleasant confrontation in future.

De-hartalisation of political culture

NO NONSENSE

It's precisely because of the enormous loss the country had to withstand that the business leaders, on November 16, urged political parties to abandon the culture of hartals and strikes in the greater interest of the economy. The same urgings are in the veins of all hardworking citizens of the nation.

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IF hartal were an English word, it could have been effortlessly adopted as a fitting abbreviation for "harmful (h) action (a) required (r) to (t) achieve (a) leverage (l)."

However, one wonders, if observing hartal is the appropriate course of action to gain some leverage over state affairs by the opposition parties -- one that inflicts economic loss to the detriment of the people.

The adverse consequences of hartal are now well known, and I also analysed those in my March 25, 2005 piece "The political economy of hartals."

It's precisely because of the enormous loss the country had to withstand that the business leaders, on November 16, urged political parties to abandon the culture of hartals and strikes in the greater interest of the economy. The same urgings are in the veins of all hardworking citizens of the nation.

Strikes (a labour driven boycott of work for better wages, benefits, and working conditions from employers) aren't rare in the US (auto workers, sports team and so on) and other developed countries, while lockouts (an employer driven shutdown of factories and business to realise a compromise on wage and benefits contract from labour unions) aren't very common.

Politicians aren't factory workers but they resort to strike anyway, such as boycotting the parliament. In many instances, politicians

are also known to instigate/support labour unions' strike as a prelude to creating a charged environment for countryside shutdown of nearly all activities -- an improvident act by any measure.

Although not factory workers, most elected politicians and leaders are factory (or business) owners. For example, in the last parliament an estimated 75% MPs were businessmen. As experiences would show, these politicians were always willing partners of hartal, while sacrificing their own business as well as country's interest.

All things considered, hartal doesn't benefit anybody, although I may be a lone exception -- it made me a columnist of The Daily Star (DS).

On my way to Comilla on March 11, 2005, I bought a copy of the DS when stopped by a traffic jam. An UNDP report of 3 - 4% annual GDP loss due to hartals had aroused my attention. During my stay in Comilla when hartal was underway, I wrote my first newspaper article, which I sent to the DS soon after my return to the US.

I argued: Even if the magnitude of GDP loss is an exaggeration as claimed by some quarters, the eventual loss doesn't reflect the true measure of the overall welfare loss caused by hartals (e.g. inconveniences, economic hardships, anxieties, discouragements of foreign investments, potential loss or delays of supplies of exports and imports due to holding back productions, distribution, and so on).

The article stressed that calling for a countrywide hartal was tantamount to a call for an "economic boycott" of our own goods and services during the period hartals were in effect. I went a step further to call hartal a blatant act of economic terrorism.

Political protests, open dialogue and debate are the fundamental rights of the citizens. Radical action such as hartal may be warranted when everything else has failed and the issues raised are compelling public concerns -- not the demand for realisation of the wish list of an egocentric party leadership. Historically, our politicians have shown that they're gratingly hypocritical -- promise to work for betterment of the people but end up ballooning their own bank accounts after getting elected.

Parliament provides the legal forum for reasoned and thoughtful political dialogue and public discourse. Resorting to hartal to turn the government dysfunctional cannot solve real problems. Such eccentric protest movements only push the country onto the pyre of lasting partisan flames.

The ruling party and the opposition bench must be equally conscientious to solve people's problems. Was there any incidence on record that observance of hartal brought a resolution to such problems as corruption, health care, public transportation, deteriorating law and order situation, lack of clean and safe drinking water, road side city garbage disposal, shortage of electricity, gas etc., which aggravate the life and living of every citizen on a daily and hourly basis.

All issues of national significance, and those concerning political reforms, law and parliamentary affairs, must be debated on the floor of the parliament, if possible with live TV broadcast. The ruling bench must allow open and timely forum for the opposition parties to voice their grievances and suggestion for remedies. If the country feels that the opposition's disquiet are reasonable and compelling then they win their cause. Failure of the ruling party to attend those issues will guarantee that the opposition bench is the next government in waiting, while there's no guarantee that hartal

will take them there.

To resolves all possible irreconcilable issues there could be a 5-member team of nonpartisan mediators who could be entrusted to find common ground to avoid hartals.

Our politicians in electoral defeat cannot accept that the voters have rejected them. To cover up their humiliation in defeat they look for scapegoats -- blaming the EC and whoever they can find to point fingers at. To our disgust, BNP's beyond the pale leader Delwar Hossain has already started that blame game in anticipation of its defeat in the upcoming national election.

Instead of conceding graciously and congratulating the winner, our politicians warm up to launch hartals and other forms of protests. Thus it's no coincidence that, weeks before the national election, the business community is openly pleading to the two leaders to abandon hartal as a weapon of protest and movement.

Within two weeks of the November 4 US presidential elections, Senator John McCain flew to Chicago to meet president-elect Barack Obama to extend his cooperation for the success of Obama's presidency. McCain's gesture showed that graciousness in defeat can, paradoxically, be turned into the most powerful leverage of all.

Expecting such a graceful demeanour from our present politicians is a far cry. Would such a gesture come by in the future? I don't see how -- given that the new political breeds out of our universities, the nouveau riches (politicians family breeds, and business associates and the retired officials joining politics follow the trails and teachings of their current leaders).

Some commentators believe that the last two years of relative relief from the perils of hartals may have set the stage for a new beginning for our politicians -- maybe an era of the politics of reconciliation and reaching out may have dawned as the two former prime ministers reciprocated pleasantries through hand shakes on the armed forces day -- for the first time since 1990.

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The lurking threat

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THE large-scale haul of grenade making materials and other lethal explosives along with deadly accessories by Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) from the possession of alleged religious extremists in the capital city once again brings to the fore the ominous threat to our democratic existence.

The dangers posed to our constitutionally ordained pluralist dispensation by such extremists are, by now, well known and, therefore, need no further elucidation. The silver lining in an otherwise precarious scenario is that the law enforcing agencies have not lessened their vigil in an environment of diminished overt activities of the terrorists during the last two years.

The above incident once again proves, if proof at all was necessary, that the discontinuance of violent acts by the so-called religious extremists for some length of time was no guarantee of a comfortable scenario.

The reason is simple. The unhealthy growth and harmful rise of such extremist groups in our body-politic is not known to the general public and, more disconcertingly, its damage potential is not adequately appreciated by the political establishment.

Beyond, and in addition to, the admirable piece of work done by Rab, there is an urgent need to embark upon a concrete course of action involving the practitioners of constitutional politics, principally to sensitise the body politic about the regressive effects of the so-called religious extremism.

No matter which political alliance comes to wield power in the not-too-distant future, the threat of so-called religious extremism cannot be wished away. Even an incorrigible optimist will agree that under circumstances as obtaining now, we need to be vigilant.

We have to admit that the reality of the threat of violence and subversion from some religious outfits and institutions was abundantly clear from the first quarter of 1999.

The attack on eminent poet Shamsur Rahman, the planting of extremely high-powered bombs at meeting the place and helipad in Kotlipara where the then prime minister had an official program, the discovery of huge explosives and bomb making materials at Sonar Bangla Soap Factory at Gopalganj owned by Mufti Hannan (now in custody), the attacks on a Communist Party meeting at Paltan Maidan and at the Bengali New Year cultural function at Ramna Park, to mention a few, were credible evidence to the steadily growing mischief making potential of the extremist groups.

There was credible information about some apparently charitable and voluntary bodies which were receiving funds from abroad for activities that were dubious and could not be satisfactorily explained.

The fact that some such bodies were asked to close their activities in Bangladesh, and that the expatriates from Middle Eastern and African countries working in those organisations have now left, is clear testimony to their association with Bangladeshi elements believing in unconstitutional ways of achieving their socio-political objectives.

Whether extremist elements have flourished due to the support and encouragement of ruling parties and the establishment may be a matter for a probe, but the threatening reality is that they have not been under effective surveillance at all times.

The determination and deadly attacks on the state apparatus, with attendant panic, were adequate proof of the unhindered growth and sustenance of persons and organisations who want to upset the constitutional way of life. Our failures were mani-

STRAIGHT LINE

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Who will use these against whom?

fest. We may have to ask ourselves if a perception had developed among the terrorist groups that the Bangladeshi state was inherently incapable of meeting their challenge, and that it had become soft and indolent.

We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government, and ineffective implementation of the laws. Are substantial foreign funds flowing to various organisations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned, or sympathetic, to some regional or international terror network?

Since terrorism of the so-called Islamic extremists has increased, thereby demanding changes in the strategy to counter it, are we ready to seriously study the problem? This is natural because we do not witness credible attempts being made to examine links between terrorist groups, the conditions in which they had spawned, the politician-militant nexus and other forms of patronage these groups receive, the proliferation of small arms leading to the growth of private armies etc.

The question is, are we trying to appreciate all the factors that contribute to the "quality and extent" of internal security threats?

Another specific question could be whether our failure to deal with the terrorist crime is largely attributable to the inefficiency and corruption of the law enforcing machinery.

What may or may not be done to counter-veil the malevolence of the extremists concerns every right-thinking Bangladeshi, but equally, if not more significant, is what kept the state apparatus in a deep slumber while the bigots carried on virtually undisturbed.

There is a creeping suspicion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. In other words, was there no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity and, by extension, to our independent national existence? These questions should bother us because

patriotic citizens of the People's Republic of Bangladesh must know the answers.

The pernicious culture of playing to the tune of unscrupulous political masters or pandering to their unholy wishes by the state investigating agencies has not occurred all on a sudden. Spells of unconstitutional rule, particularly during 1982-90, have substantially damaged the ethos of our public service, including the investigating agencies.

While leadership deficits account for some malfeasance, the real damage has been done by an insensitive and myopic dictatorial establishment that was hell-bent on messing-up all regulatory and corrective institutions. The unwholesome effect of such institution-bashing is now being felt by a concerned citizenry.

One is, however, not oblivious of the fact that the democratically elected but temperamentally dictatorial regimes since 1991 have not been any better in realising the damage done to the professionalism of the services. The halo and élan of public service has meant little to the political leadership, who spent more time and energy in fostering the growth of pliable and time-serving personnel for achieving their selfish goals.

While the public's right to be informed cannot be denied and the nation's concern for the safety and security of innocent lives cannot be brushed aside, we will perhaps do well to look at the factual dimension of the bomb blasts in a dispassionate manner.

Almost immediate apportioning of blame, mostly on rivals of the other camp, by responsible persons after each occurrence has become a pathetic recurrent reality. Indiscreet and uninformed comments in such sensitive matters further compound the environment in our society, where almost everybody from the humble to the mighty has some expertise on law and order.

Extremism of the so-called fundamentalist variety can be countered by a joint strategy of persuasion and tough action, with political direction being conspicuously pronounced. The acumen needed is political sagacity and patience to fight the pain-

fully long battle against extremist depredations. If it is a political battle with armed support and not the other way, we will definitely overcome the present predicament sooner than expected. Violence must not be allowed to be a way of our life along with a political consensus to abjure it.

One would not be far from reality in saying that the Bangladesh polity is now being challenged by extremist groups that profess a philosophy of life and of government inimical to the beliefs and life styles of the mainstream. In fact, we are now facing an adversary who is armed well enough to commit widespread violence.

One has to remember that, while in our free society our defences and deterrents are largely prepared in an open fashion, our new antagonists have succeeded in building a formidable wall of secrecy and security. There is, therefore, a need to break through the shield of secrecy of the bigots. There should be a firm resolve to be forewarned and forearmed. The forewarning by itself would be an effective deterrent to the bigot's appetite for attack. Intelligence gathering on the so-called religious extremists should not be a subject of authoritative ambivalence.

Concerned authorities must be able to avoid bending of facts obtained through intelligence to suit or defeat a particular political view-point. We may have to admit that we are not really at peace with the so-called religious extremists because they have declared war on our system of government and life.

The reality is that we are faced with a closed, obscurantist and scheming enemy. We should not hope to maintain our position securely if our opponents are confident that they can attack us on any subject, time and place of their choosing and without any forewarning.

We should be able to unequivocally condemn all acts, methods and practices of terrorism that are aimed at the destruction of human rights, freedom and democracy. Concern should be there when we witness efforts towards destabilising of lawfully constituted governments, the undermining of pluralistic civil society, and the adverse effects on social and economic development.

Our strategy should be to remove the aspect of "motive" from any act of terrorism and public destruction, thereby denying the possibility of describing some acts as political violence rather than simply terrorism. The aspect of endangering human lives or jeopardising individual freedom should be highlighted.

We should be able to draw a dividing line between mindless violence and violence aimed at a larger purpose.

Democracy has to allow the interaction of different shades of opinion or divergent views to ensure the vibrancy of a pluralist society. However, that does not mean that there will be freedom to convert the entire country into a theocratic dispensation by application of force and intimidation, and the litigant public has to approach the clerics for resolution of disputes and judgment, as demanded.

There is a challenge to our way of life. This must be realised by the mainstream political parties who are pledge-bound to uphold, protect and preserve our constitution.

Therefore, the visible enemy must be caught by the forelock and dealt with under the law. A sovereign Republic born out of a historic struggle entailing epic human sacrifices demands that We must not fail.

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