

## Full steam ahead

*With major points agreed, no reason for pulling at threads*

AT this stage in the proceedings, there is broad agreement between the major political parties and alliances and the EC on all major issues, and, as such, there should be no bar to the holding of parliamentary elections participated in by all parties on December 29 as scheduled.

With respect to the outstanding issue of emergency being lifted prior to the polls, it seems to us that this is a consensus demand, not only of the two main parties but also of the people in general. Indeed, we have seen no great objection on the part of either the CG or the EC to the lifting of emergency prior to the polls, either.

All that is left, it appears, is the exact timing of withdrawal to be announced, and seeing as most parties have no objection to emergency being lifted after the last date for withdrawal of nominations, which we are given to understand is what the CG has in mind, then this should be a simple matter to resolve.

However, with respect to the demand of the BNP regarding Section 91(e) of the amended RPO, we feel that the weight of logic lies on the side of the EC. It has explained in painstaking detail how the clause cannot be invoked in an arbitrary or capricious manner, but requires a hearing before a magistrate, thorough investigation, and can be appealed in the HC. Thus, it seems to us, that sufficient safeguards are in place to allay BNP misgivings about its potential for abuse.

We should add that the situation pertaining in the past was wholly inadequate, since the election tribunals got enmeshed in long drawn-out proceedings and delivered verdicts well into the tenure of the person elected, sometimes even after it was completed, rendering them ineffectual as deterrence. Surely the necessity to ensure that candidates abide by elections laws and the code of conduct must be the paramount consideration.

Similarly, with respect to the AL's position on upazila elections, we again fail to see why this should be such a contentious issue. We can understand the point about shifting the upazila election nomination schedule in order to pay undivided attention to national polls, but the current schedule may be advantageous to the parties in that it might provide space for frustrated nomination aspirants for parliament to seek a seat at the local level. In any event, the EC has declared that there is no scope for any change.

In short, we feel that the time has come for the parties to put this matter to rest and affirm that they will go to the polls as scheduled. We feel that all reasonable demands of the parties have been met and all fundamentals are in place for fully participatory elections. When we are so close let us not be derailed by last minute tinkering on any issue. The people have waited too long already.

## Violence and the young

*Idea of discipline must be promoted*

ONE could call it a storm in a teacup. And yet what happened in the Dhaka University area on Monday turned out to be something worse. An argument at a tea stall between students and the stall owner over change for a hundred taka note took an unexpected turn when policemen tried to calm everyone who happened to be getting agitated. And so what followed was predictable. Students of the university tried to resist the police, who in turn went into action to discipline the young men. What happened to the tea stall owner is not known. That is natural, for all too often the causes of a bad situation often get lost when bigger elements are thrown into the chaos.

And what was the end result of the fracas? Again, it was a predictable affair. Altogether eight persons were hurt in the melee and in the process a police van was torched. It was plain violence, or call it vandalism, that was at work. Witnesses have spoken of unruly students pouncing on the policemen trying to contain the situation and many of them turned out with rods and sticks in their hands, obviously as a show of force. It all boils down to a matter of how a trivial matter can balloon into a crisis no one foresees. Much a similar condition erupted a few days ago when traders in the New Market area and students of Dhaka College found themselves locked in clashes over the purchase of a shoe rack! Of course, this was not for the first time that Dhaka College boys were involved in such situations. Indeed, the frequency of incidents involving traders and these students appears to be increasing, much to citizens' discomfort. As on earlier occasions of brawling by the students and traders, traffic on Mirpur Road came to a halt, with hundreds of people -- pedestrians and motorists and commuters alike -- finding themselves hostage to the situation.

What remedy is there for us to bank on? The first point to be made here is that the law and order forces must be constantly alert to the probability of normal conditions suddenly turning toward the nasty. The second and more important point is for academic institutions -- schools, colleges and universities -- to inculcate the idea in their pupils that discipline is part of the journey to the future. Not all students indulge in violence, it is true. But the handful who do quite successfully tar the others with the same brush.

# A rush of smiles on a sprawling lawn

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

EVERYONE is talking about the moment Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia met the other day, about the way they greeted each other and smiled at each other. Knowing the way things go in Bangladesh, you can be sure that it is a subject over which a lot of people will spend a lot of time talking. The process is already under way, and not even the adviser for home affairs could resist the temptation of telling us what actually transpired at the armed forces day reception. It was he who let us in on the revelation that the Awami League chief had sometimes cooked her own food while in incarceration and had sent some of it to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party chairperson. We have not been told, though, if Begum Zia had done some cooking on her own and whether she had reciprocated Sheikh Hasina's gesture.

Even so, that bit on Sheikh Hasina's culinary skills was rather enlightening.

Be that as it may, it was quite a cheering sight watching the two pre-eminent women in our politics speaking to each other on that lawn, in full view of the country. You could see the gleam in the eyes of all the men before them. Advisers tried to come as close as they possibly could to the two leaders. A slightly irritating moment was there with security seemingly refusing to budge, but then everything turned out fine and every face had a smile from ear to ear.

Somehow you had the feeling that before you was a collective advertisement for toothpaste. Or a feeling that everyone would now live happily ever after. On the television channels, nearly every intellectual as also pseudo-intellectual went into overdrive dissecting the meeting, drawing from it conclusions that simply were not there.

But then, that is the nature of things in a country where politicians refuse to speak to one another, indeed do not even have time to steal glances at each other. Consider this: when politicians all over the world are interacting regularly over a host of issues, when no one raises any question of whether or not they will meet and sit down to tea and talks, in Bangladesh the very fact that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have spoken -- Allah be praised! -- gets to be headline news for days on end.

So what happens now? Not much, really, unless of course you are an incorrigible optimist. In that case, you might suggest that politics will soon be undergoing the kind of transformation we have always imagined it would in the depths of the night; and you might

## GROUND REALITIES

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Beginning of a new era?

tell yourselves that our politicians will now reinvent themselves through focusing on the priorities of the future.

You have a right to hold such views. But think again, think deeper. In a country where political culture has by and large been one of paramount political leaders looking away from one another, it will be naive to think that a single meeting between the leaders of the nation's major political parties will lead to things on a grand scale. Look back at history.

In the early 1980s, when General Ershad decided that he needed to communicate with the politicians, Sheikh Hasina reciprocated his wish and went to see him with her team. Begum Zia ended up doing something pretty dramatic. Accompanied by Kazi Zafar Ahmed (who ironically was in the BNP but was about to jump ship and join Ershad), she went to Bangabhaban but refused to sit down and talk to the military ruler. Ershad repeatedly requested her to take a seat. She did not. She demanded the withdrawal of martial law and then stalked out of the room.

It is for you to judge whether or not that attitude was proper or politically correct. But what you cannot miss is the sheer peculiarity of it all. In this day

and age, you do not expect politicians not to speak to one another, not to banter and debate the issues.

In the 1990s, the Indian government decided that opposition leader Atal Behari Vajpayee needed to be sent to a conference abroad to speak for the country. And he did. In 1961, President Kennedy developed the notion that the man he had defeated for the senate in 1952, Henry Cabot Lodge (who in 1960 was Richard Nixon's running mate against the Kennedy-Johnson ticket), would make an effective envoy to South Vietnam.

In the event, Lodge was to serve in Saigon for a number of years, beyond Kennedy's assassination. That is how politics works, in the broad interest of society. It does not always have to be a matter of sending political rivals on significant missions abroad. Political accommodation and tolerance can also be symbolised through powerful individuals actually sitting down to conversations at home, even if those conversations do not lead to anything substantive.

In the days before the partition of India, Congress and Muslim League leaders were not averse to meeting the leading figures of the colonial administration as part of the efforts toward

gaining freedom for the country.

More crucially, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah did not refuse to meet and did not shy away from hammering on the issues they felt needed to be debated across the table. Nehru clearly did not like Jinnah, who was only too happy to return the compliment. But that did not come in the way of their negotiations over the future of the country. Subhas Chandra Bose and Mahatma Gandhi were not kindly disposed toward each other, but they nevertheless communicated regularly on the priorities before Indians.

Closer to our times, despite the huge chasm that kept them from finding common ground, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto never entertained thoughts of placing a wall of silence between themselves. And in February 1969, Bangabandhu could have told us that he would not speak to Ayub Khan and could have demanded his resignation from the presidency. He did not. He went all the way to Rawalpindi to be part of the round table conference called to debate Pakistan's constitutional future.

Mujib and Ayub talked, without acrimony and with full knowledge of the country's future being dependent on their political positions. In free Bangladesh, Bangabandhu and Moulana Bhashani had little in terms of shared politics. But they met in a regular pattern. They never lost the old sense of camaraderie.

But, yes, politics can be strange business at times. Joseph Stalin easily disposed of his rivals and felt not bad about it at all. Mao Zedong loved Lin Biao and named him his successor. Then came a day when Lin died and Mao and his loyalists went excitedly into the business of badmouthing him.

Morarji Desai thought Indira Gandhi was a chhokri, a mere slip of a girl. Maumoon Gayoom had Mohammad Nasheed tortured in prison, until Nasheed beat him at the presidential election in the Maldives. Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto persecuted each other in Pakistan for years.

Are't we fortunate, in light of these disquieting images, to have our two former prime ministers smile and laugh and talk on that sprawling lawn? It is, of course, another matter of what they do in the run-up to the general elections next month. One of them will be prime minister again. Will the other keep smiling?

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## On the edge

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

A flicker of hope appeared amid the lingering gloom of uncertainty over the ensuing national election when its latest rescheduling, with the shifting of vote-casting day to December 29, and the BNP welcoming the move conditionally. Although no unequivocal declaration of the BNP's participation in the election was made, it was taken to be a positive stance of the BNP in favour of its participation in the election.

The party's belated electoral alacrity was an indication in this regard, although the detractors say that the BNP was feigning election activities to bargain and extract further concessions from the authority by putting the latter in a catch-22 situation. The party's last three pre-conditions are pointers.

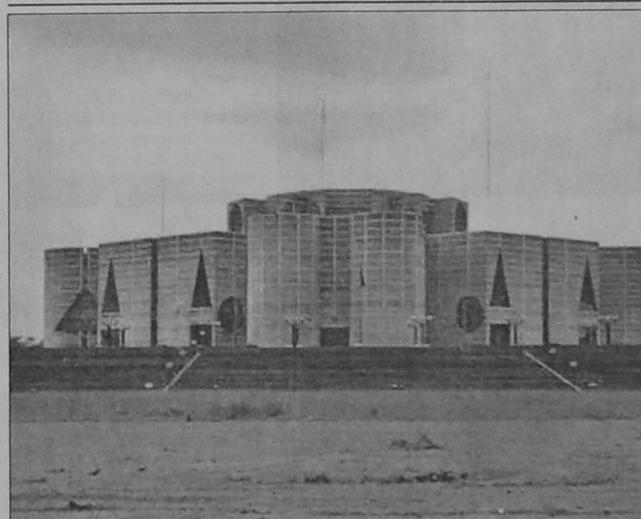
So far as an ever-reconciliatory Awami League is concerned, the authority reckoned that the party would grudgingly accept the change. True to the government's expectation, the AL -- in its official reaction -- did so rather gracefully. The AL, till recently the mascot for this year's election, readily accepted the changed schedule without a fuss for it was already prepared for the election and had almost finalised its list of nominated candidate.

The ground reality at the moment and the broad picture of the authority's achievement with regard to a credible election with the participation of all political outfits -- notwithstanding the fact that the nation has been made to stand on a slippery slope risking a descent into the abyss of a constitutional crisis and political chaos -- is indeed admirable.

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## PERSPECTIVES

Yet, the nagging uncertainty persists, and a scepticism as to whether there will at all be an election refuses to go -- thanks to the utterances of the two political leaders who exchanged pleasantries with each other only days earlier at Sena Kunja in full view of those present and amid spontaneous applause. Now their parties are exchanging blistering insinuations, vitiating the pre-election atmosphere.



Soon to be back in business?

earlier at Sena Kunja in full view of those present and amid spontaneous applause. Now their parties are exchanging blistering insinuations, vitiating the pre-election atmosphere.

Sheikh Hasina has been suddenly expressing a fear of "election engineering," while Madam Zia has stiffened her posture -- demanding the fulfill-

ment of three conditions already put forward to facilitate the BNP's poll participation. Or else, according to her demented secretary general, the party will reconsider its election participation. The Election Commission, in the meantime, clarified its position on the BNP's conditions. As it now transpires, those clarifications couldn't satisfy an

apparently prepared BNP.

Intransigence, coupled with histrionics, is Madam Zia's forte in gaining whatever is required for the return of the gravy train of perks, privilege and power. By all reckonings, time is the most vital element the madam is in need of. The election is, for the moment, a secondary thing for her. Through sheer obstinacy she has gained some time, but she needs more to emerge "clean" from the sleaze smeared on her face. She knows that the people, in their habitual amnesia, do forget the bitterest of things -- more so when they are overcome by the oddities of contemporary times. That's the point of anxiety.

Both Madam Zia and Sheikh Hasina, along with their parties, suffered jolts during the last two years. Both were indicted and incarcerated, and harsh treatment was meted out to them. Such misfortune can at times induce sobriety in human beings, for whom the adverse experiences become cathartic. Madam Zia's chemistry defies such noble changes. A narcissist to the extent she cannot look much beyond herself, her family, the party and, at the best, the cronies of her halcyon days. Hence are her layers of preconditions for achieving her self-serving ends. I

It is not without reason that she is averse to RPO 93(e), although the BNP's stratagems cast a long shadow on the fate of the election, at this stage it can sabotage the election only at the cost of its own existence. Even if it may be playing a fake electioneering game, the party men are already in the field with or without the nomination. The BNP leadership will find itself helpless in stopping this inexorable tide of pollmania.

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