

BCL's continuing violence

Government must act before its credibility is stripped away

THE Bangladesh Chhatra League's internal feuds, which have led to several bloody clashes in the last 20 days, and its encounters with rival student organisations on university campuses, are a sad example of where students politics stands today.

The news is in itself cause for concern as a group of BCL activists are trying to establish their supremacy on the campuses by eliminating opposition from both within and outside. The greater worry, however, lies in the challenge that such activities might pose to the credibility of the newly elected grand alliance government led by the Awami League. The AL's promise of firmly dealing with all unruly elements is bound to sound hollow if its own student adherents are allowed to engage in vandalism and violence, that have already affected the academic life at the universities. The measures adopted by AL chief Sheikh Hasina in 2006 to give the BCL the real look of a student outfit cannot produce any results if professional goons and killers dominate the show. It is worth mentioning here that Hasina decided not to allow anybody above 29 years of age to remain involved with the BCL. This was done to ensure that only regular students remain associated with the BCL. But what we watch today appears to be something different.

The AL decision makers are reported to have been extremely annoyed with the BCL activities. They may soon dissolve the BCL central committee in their bid to rein in the activists who are apparently working on their own in the absence of any effective chain of command. Attempts are also being made to keep things under control at Jahangirnagar University through suspension of BCL activities for a month.

The expressions of concern by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet colleagues over what the BCL is now doing wouldn't themselves be enough. They have to realise that the situation calls for a pure law and order approach which requires that those committing culpable offences must be brought to justice. This is precisely where successive governments failed miserably in the past, as they could not maintain neutrality while dealing with their errant supporters. The AL-led government can set the right example now by taking an objective stance on and a surgical approach to the issue.

The AL is facing a crisis, but it is an opportunity as well for the party to prove that it is not only willing but also quite capable of clearing its folds of undesirable elements. It has to go for a reappraisal of the BCL issue and reconstitute the student units at all levels, leaving the troublemakers out.

After the ceasefire in Gaza...

Israel must withdraw and reopen crossing points

THE ceasefire in Gaza, declared unilaterally by Israel and followed by the announcement of a seven-day suspension of action by Hamas, should be an opportunity for positive developments in the region. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has already held a summit on the issue, which from a certain perspective may be described as a happening rather too late in the day. The conspicuous silence of most Arab states during the three weeks of Israeli bombardment and occupation of Gaza was disturbing. A more proactive attitude on the part of these states could have been a warning to Ehud Olmert and his government that their military assault was endangering the prospects for peace in the future. Even more worrying was the silence of Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, who of course has now decided that the ceasefire declared by the Israelis is insufficient. He is right there, but his earlier inability to speak up against Tel Aviv's relentless bombardment of the Palestinians in Gaza will rankle.

Israel's actions have left no fewer than 1,245 people dead in Gaza. Of these dead, more than 400 have been children. The number of those wounded runs into the thousands. The sheer scale of the Israeli assault, which left even the local United Nations compound on fire, has now quite rightly raised the question of whether Israel's actions amount to war crimes. That at least is the impression an assessment by Amnesty International gives out. The brutalities, consistently justified by Israeli government leaders and not protested by their friends in the West, have certainly left the region a whole lot more polarised than it was earlier. The ceasefire now in place, tenuous as it might be, is of course welcome. But for peace and a rolling back of damage certain concrete moves need to be taken by Israel. In the first place, all Israeli soldiers must move out of Gaza as evidence that Israel has not placed the territory under new occupation. In the second, crossing points to and from Gaza must be reopened to allow aid to reach the Palestinians, who have been under siege for 18 months by the Israeli military.

The world does not expect a roguish Israel to respond positively, or soon, to these needs. Which is why it will now be for the international community, especially the permanent members of the UN Security Council, to bring pressure to bear on it on these issues. A defiant Hamas and brutalised Palestinians will surely not settle for anything less.

Too little advice, too late

And all this happened right before the eyes of the BNP chairperson. She was the prime minister and she had all the secret service agencies and NBR to submit reports on the "income" of her ministers and MPs.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

BEGUM Khaleda Zia has said something that she should have said seven years ago on the eve of starting her second term as the prime minister. If she had done so, things would have been different today as far as image of her party is concerned. She has said something too little, too late.

Now, what did she say? After taking oath as members of parliament she spoke before the newly elected members from BNP and told them to "cooperate with the government, supporting its good works and criticising the bad ones."

But what caught everyone's attention was her advice to the party men to lead a simple life, shunning luxury. These words reminded us of the bizarre race by the 4-party alliance rulers for plundering the country's resources for personal gain so that they and their family members could maintain a lifestyle matching the millionaires in Europe and America.

The "sacrifices" of the people's representatives of this poor country included 100 crore taka apartments in the US and Dubai, 20 crore taka villa in Dhaka, 10 crore taka villa in village, 10 crore taka limousines (4 of them), mini zoo, foreign furniture, club membership, family trips to Bangkok for shopping, family trips to Singapore for health checkups, children sent to best boarding schools in Malaysia, Singapore, USA, and so on.

And all this happened right before the eyes of the BNP chairperson. She was the prime minister and she had all the secret

service agencies and NBR to submit reports on the "income" of her ministers and MPs. She has seen how a middle-income businessman from Bandarban or Jessore or Comilla became a billionaire within five years just by being an MP or minister in her government.

Didn't she realise that no one could earn that kind of money in five years by doing politics? Didn't she realise that there were laws in the country and someday when BNP would not be in power law would take its own course and try those people?

If one remembers, it was quite difficult to get near her to talk about the wrong-doings of her party men. Therefore, to expect her to take any steps to stop them in their plundering binge was something inconceivable. She is on record for calling an extremely rogue party MP from old Dhaka *dushu chheley* when someone complained about his atrocities in the locality.

We have never seen her reacting to the complaints that a senior member of her party regularly consumed sugar, rice, meat, milk etc., from the kitchen of the MP hostel and never paid for them.

Begum Khaleda Zia and her party people always looked for invisible enemies to blame for her party's image going down. Even now, they are blaming "foreign hands" in the debacle of the party in the national election.

But, surprisingly, they never looked within to find out the causes of the image failure or election failure. When senior members plunder government land or a few kilos of sugar, no one from outside has to spoil the image of



"Fringe benefit" for MPs?

the party. The other day, the sugar plundering senior BNP leader gave a sermon before some supporters. He told them to be imbued by the ideals of late President Ziaur Rahman. Now that, coming from him, was a bit too much really.

A man who cannot control petty greed and who cannot rein in his own sons, must not talk about the personal honesty of the late president. Such men in BNP are personifications of greed, lust and intrigue. They survive not by giving service but by doing disservice to the party and the nation.

An example of practicing what one preaches. A newly elected minister of the new government took part in a TV talk show last Sunday night. There, he expressed his surprise at how any MP or minister of this poor country could own a 2-crore taka limousine to show it off to the poor countrymen.

Now, we know that particular minister comes from a business family of repute who can afford to buy expensive cars. But we also know that he maintains a simple life, never caring to show off family wealth. He, thus, has

set examples before his voters in his constituency.

The grim task ahead for the *mohajote* (Grand Alliance). It has started impressively with a carefully selected cabinet. But before it can go any further to address various socio-economic challenges, it is faced with challenges from its very own student wing -- Chhatra League (CL).

We know the prime minister has issued warnings to the CL leaders but people feel more has to be done before CL turns into Frankenstein's monster -- destroying its creator.

The terms of reference (ToR) of the student wing therefore have to be specified so that they cannot do any or everything on campuses in the name of being a tail of the ruling alliance. Unless these issues are addressed right now, they will remain hanging around to pose as bigger threats to the *mohajote* in the future. They must not be oblivious to the disservice done by Chhatra Dal to BNP in the past.

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Taliban's and the other Islam

Consensus can only be reached on the basics, not on every single detail. Consultation with one another is the democratic means of reasoning, and agreeing to accept the majority view -- especially on details. Thus democracy is a basic ingredient of Islam.

M.B. NAQVI

PAKISTAN faces a threat of an eventual takeover by a new Islamic extremism. Among its progenitors are two prominent scholars: Maulanas Abul Ala Maududi of India and Hasan al Banna of Egypt -- who founded Muslim Brotherhood. This Islam assumes that it provides a complete system of politics, economic and culture for Muslim societies.

There have been many Taliban uprisings in NWFP's tribal areas. In these areas, the writ of the Pakistan government runs during the day. After nightfall, it is the Taliban who rule. The movement now threatens Peshawar itself, and several other cities and towns.

Islamic literature and lore is rich in the praise of Islam's completeness and beauty, but this collectivism, covering the entire spectrum of social life, is something new. It is borrowed from the collectivist political movements of Europe: the 1917 Russian Revolution, Mussolini's Fascism, and the 1930's Nazi regime.

The main features of Taliban's Islamic state, or Caliphate, in Kabul are known. Politically, it was a dictatorship of one person,

whose Word was law. That it was pure totalitarianism was confirmed by what it did.

It brutally oppressed minorities; especially women. Women were not allowed to work along with men. The rule of law was absent and what counted were whims of the top man, despite claims of enforcing Shariah. Shariah has mostly been conceived in terms of penalties for crimes and rules for transfer of property to recognised relatives. A formal constitution and courts that treated the ruler and the citizen as equals, with their verdict being binding on both, were absent. Mullah Umar's was a totalitarian dictatorship, and copy is going to be foisted on Pakistanis. The Caliph will be head of the faith and head ruler at the same time.

Traditional Islam is entirely different. It is an intensely personal and indeed secular religion. Its focus is on purifying the self through laid down duties, or *Arakan-e-deen* -- five times prayer, a month of fasting, *Hajj*, *zakat* and *jihad*. As for *jihad*, the *Ulema* of various *fiqh* have laid down so many conditions that it is practically not in force now. *Zakat* is not a collective action. *Namaz* (prayer), despite the desirability of organised prayers in a mosque, may be said alone.

Islam is wholly individualistic; it makes no collectivist demands other than living a pure, disciplined and orderly life. Islam asks only for good work from individuals. All punishments or rewards are for an individual's actions.

The Prophet's (PBUH) last sermon lays down that God has made all of mankind, not Muslims alone, His viceroys on earth. No one has any inherent superiority over another. A person claiming to be Caliph cannot take away the status of viceroyalty from all of mankind. This is a fundamental tenet of Humanism rather than of a narrow faith. *Meesaq-i-Madina* can be quoted as a first constitutional document that treated Muslims and non-Muslims (mainly Jews) as *Ummat-i-Wahida*.

Muslims are required to reach Paradise through good works. Who else can go to heaven? Logically, there is no reason why non-Muslims cannot enter Heaven if they have done good works on earth.

The Quran is the authentic word of God. It is eternal and will always be there. Who can read it? Any non-Muslim may read it because God addresses all of humanity. There are no laid down qualifications for interpreting the Quran or Islam's teachings.

There is no reason why non-Muslims should be precluded from issuing *fatwas* if they understand the word of God or Prophet (PBUH). There may be risks in the freedom to interpret religion in this fashion, but Islam countenances such risks in the hope that human reason will produce universal human amity, peace and progress.

There is growing anarchy in Pakistan over what Islam has to say. This is not created by non-Muslims because these are differences among Muslims. It is for all human beings to interpret God's words and act upon them.

The conclusion is clear: anyone can enter Heaven if they have lived decent lives. They are equally free to enter Hell. An interesting point is: non-Muslims are neither specifically included nor excluded.

God makes no clear-cut recommendation on issues of politics, economics or culture. He neither recommends anything in particular, nor bars people from any political, economic or cultural experimentation.

Relying only on the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) is risky because there are so many that they cannot all be possibly authentic, though selections are necessary and have been made by some scholars.

There is no escape from the need for Muslims and non-Muslims to consult one another to arrive at amicable conclusions in multi-faith societies. If agreements can be achieved after consultation, anything can be agreed upon in collective matters. Ideas have to be evolved through agreement or consensus.

Consensus can only be reached on the basics, not on every single detail. Consultation with one another is the democratic means of reasoning, and agreeing to accept the majority view -- especially on details. Thus democracy is a basic ingredient of Islam.

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Aggression, ceasefire by Israel in Gaza

Israel believes that if Shia Iran goes nuclear, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Egypt might make the case that they too needed to follow suit for Shia-Sunni balance of power in the region. This has to be stopped because the more Muslim nuclear powers there are the less secure Israel will be, according to Israeli calculations.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

SUPPORTERS of Israel in the US justify Israel's invasion of Gaza thus: if some Mexicans were lobbing homemade missiles into the US, what would the US do? Surely, the US would invade Mexico to put a stop to it.

Notice the choice of country: Mexico. The US's other neighbour, Canada, is never mentioned as a potential aggressor. One does not have to be too cynical to detect racism embedded even in this analogy. Canada is a lily-white country, therefore, the Canadians do not elicit America's ire.

On the other hand, many Americans consider the brown-skinned Mexicans the root of many of America's problems. Therefore, "missile coming from Mexico" has a negative connotation, and strengthens Israel's argument.

The few supporters of the Palestinians, on the other hand, are too weak to make the counter argument: if a foreign nation controlled the borders, the seas, skies, movement of people in and out, and restricted the entry and exit of essential goods to an American city like New York, in contravention of international law, as Israel does in Gaza, what would America do? Surely,

America would bomb the hell out of such an international outlaw!

Columbia University professor Rashid Khalili published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on January 8 pointing out facts about Gaza. Most of the 1.5 million residents of Gaza are refugees, driven from their homes by Israel in 1948.

Israel occupied Gaza in 1967. Although Israel withdrew Jewish settlers in 2005, it still controls access to Gaza, imports and exports, movement of people in and out, and the air space and sea coast, and Israeli forces enter Gaza at will. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel, the occupying power, is responsible for the welfare of the Gazans. Israel has never carried out that duty.

After Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative Council election, Israel blockaded the strip. The supply of fuel, electricity, imports, exports and the movement of people have been choked off, leading to life-threatening problems. For exercising their democratic rights, the Gazans are suffering collective punishment, a crime under international law.

Lifting of the Israeli blockade over Gaza was one of the key points of last June's ceasefire agreement between Hamas and

Israel. This led to a reduction of missiles thrown at Israel from Gaza from hundreds in May and June to only 20 in the next four months. The ceasefire broke down when Israel launched major attacks in November, as a prelude to its all-out invasion in December.

According to Tom Friedman of the *New York Times*, Hamas had to be "educated" into understanding that throwing missiles at Israel was going to cost Palestinian civilian population dearly. That "education," war crimes according to international law, has resulted in the death of over 1000 Palestinian civilians, including over 300 children!

The timing of the Israeli invasion is significant. George W. Bush may have been the worst president in US history and Condoleezza Rice the worst secretary of state, but they have backed Israel to the hilt. Israel wanted to complete the destruction of Gaza before the next president and secretary of state take office. Israel shot an arrow across Obama's bow to warn him to get used to its unilateral ways.

What do the Arabs do? They rush to the UN for relief. Wait a minute! Didn't the UN General Assembly mandate the creation of Israel in 1947, without consulting the wishes of the Palestinians who constituted a 2 to 1 majority over the Jews at that time? If there is logic in the Arab rush to the UN, it escapes me.

To a neutral observer it would appear that the UN Security Council exists solely for the purpose of punishing the world's Muslims. What the Arabs do not seem to understand is that Jews and Christians of the West have always backed, and will always back, Israel against the Arabs.

Many Arab nations remained silent; some even blamed the victims for the Gaza massacre. After Israel had enough fun, it asked Egypt to arrange a ceasefire. These days Egypt is always asked to bail out Israel. The reason Egypt obliges is the subtle hint that \$2.5 billion foreign aid that it receives from the US annually could be in jeopardy if it does not comply.

Israel concluded long ago that its safety lay not in the unjustifiable immorality of its creation, but in its brute military strength. That is why it insists that its military power has to exceed that of all the 22 Arab states combined. That is why Israel will not stand for a nuclear Iran capable of challenging its nuclear might.

Israel believes that if Shia Iran goes nuclear, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Egypt might make the case that they too needed to follow suit for Shia-Sunni balance of power in the region. This has to be stopped because the more Muslim nuclear powers there are the less secure Israel will be, according to Israeli calculations.

Several of the nations that did not sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 -- India, Pakistan and Israel, for example -- have gone on to become nuclear powers. The Shah of Iran, America's protégé, had to sign it; Iran now has to face the consequences. Originally, Egypt had not signed it either. Here is the beauty of dealing with a dictator -- the US persuaded Hosni Mubarak to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in the 1990s!

The Palestinians might as well agree to a ceasefire; they have no real friends!

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