

PM's distancing act

It should be followed up by tangible action

THE decision taken by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to step down as the organisational chief of Awami League's student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), following the latter's notorious activities across the campuses, has been received with mixed reaction by people in general. We would like to believe that it is not merely an expression of disgust but one of determination to cry a halt to BCL tyranny that has been wreaking havoc as much on higher education as people's confidence in the credibility of the ruling party and the government.

It is no secret now that the internecine brawls that have been taking place at regular intervals among the various factions of BCL had no noteworthy cause. Groups of unruly, even knife-wielding students, fought over taking control of the organisational hierarchy, including business tenders, hostel seats, admission of new students and so on. The continued anarchy created stumbling blocks for the new government to ensure law and order on educational campuses. The recent premeditated killing of a BCL activist in a Dhaka Medical College hostel was the last straw on the camel's back, which left the nation aghast at the level of animosity prevailing between various factions in BCL.

The PM's directive to law enforcement agencies to take stern action against so-called student leaders and activists involved in criminal activities, extortion and tender manipulation should be carried out to the hilt, we suggest, under the watch of the PMO. The role of a bystander that the police played so far should transform now into energetic action against the hoodlums.

What the BCL wayward did ought to be treated as criminal offence and be tried under the law of the land. The PM's distancing herself from the AL student wing, unless followed up by strict and deterrent action, might turn out to be merely cosmetic. Hence, we would like to suggest that she should be firm in her pursuit of a long-lasting cure of the malady so that it does not reincarnate in any form or shape. Importantly, we believe, the PM and AL should keep the people informed about the actions taken against the rowdy elements of BCL.

MPs on school and college committees

Ramifications of move will be unhealthy

THE reported move by the government to have local Members of Parliament play a major role in the management of non-government schools and colleges is rather disquieting. It is so because of the negative consequences such a move may have on these institutions where a proper and efficient administration is concerned. In this respect, it is the past record of non-government educational institutions under political management that we are reminded of. And we cannot but say that the record has never been a good one given the propensity of political figures on the management committees to give a partisan colour to the running of schools and colleges and thereby inject controversy into the entire process.

Indeed, the action taken by the newly departed caretaker government to take political elements off school and college committees and replace them with government officials was an outcome of the charges of gross corruption and other wrongdoing that political party figures had allegedly indulged in during periods of political government. A misuse of the funds of the educational institutions, encouraging admissions through a violation of rules and appointment of teachers and other employees through a flouting of regulations were cited, and not without cause, as the reason behind the change in the rules. Certainly one of the worst ramifications of the political management of schools and colleges has been the harassment of teachers at a number of these institutions on grounds of political loyalty. It is these attitudes that we feel will come to undermine the non-government schools and colleges if indeed the government seriously plans to foist political figures on their management committees.

We think the authorities should seriously reconsider the move in the larger interest of education in the country. There is the perfectly justifiable fear that such a move will be taken advantage of by future political governments with the result that it will be the schools and colleges that will suffer with every change of government. We do not, however, suggest that the management committees be run on the lines proposed by the last caretaker government, for that might lead to problems of a bureaucratic nature. It is our belief that all management committees of non-government schools and colleges should be apolitical in nature. That can be ensured through ensuring the autonomy of the institutions to choose their management committees from among their teaching staff and respectable members of the local committee known for their dedication to the cause of education.

At a time when the government is busy disseminating the message of change, let us remind it that the message should not be marred by patently wrong steps. Education is an investment. Let it not become a tool in the hands of MPs and other local political elements.

A losing battle from slippery slope

It appears that the AL has compromised merit and experience for loyalty, which will seldom surpass the ingenuity of the one to whom the loyalty is due. As a result, the government limps forward, often slipping off the slope it is functioning from.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE month of March commemorating the first days of the struggle for liberation in a series of elitist formal gatherings in the capital gave the beleaguered Awami League government a feel good commercial behind which it could conveniently take refuge from the ugly realities that have befallen the dispensation ever since it took charge. Though commoners like us enjoyed no access to the elites' celebrations, we did commemorate by reminiscing about those glorious days. However, the reprieve was soon over.

Now, while the public is deviously diverted by the images of a digital future and by amorphous conspiracies for anything going wrong, the sinister scenarios continue to stealthily emerge, with a clueless government reacting to them like schizophrenics. A familiar sense of dread returns with the bestial killing of a Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activist in an intra-organisational feud over sharing of extorted money.

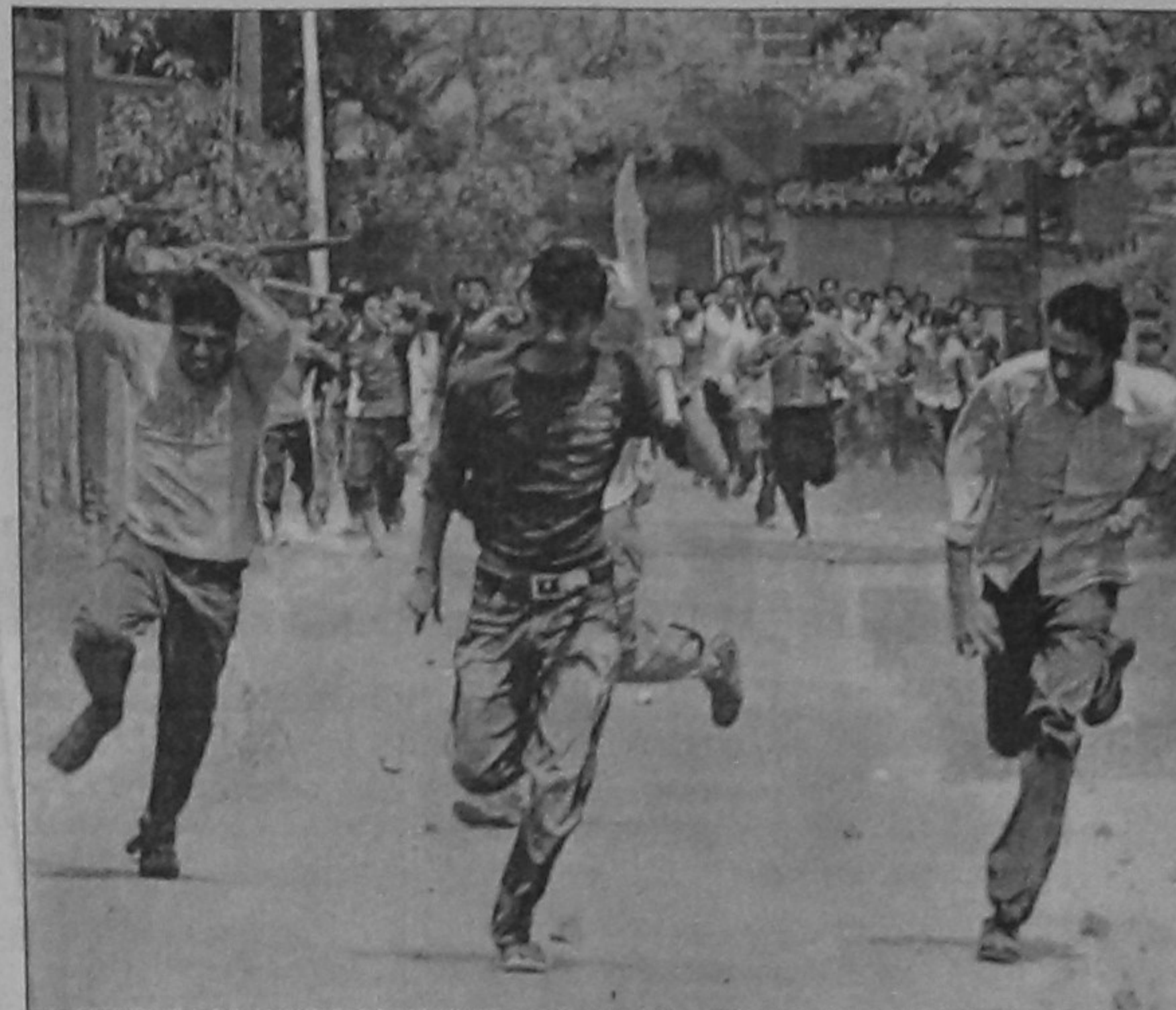
After a month of pious pronouncements of democracy, values of the Liberation War, the legacy of Bangabandhu, and so on, fascism was brought back into action by the feuding hoodlums of the BCL -- the ruling AL's student wing. Due to the unruly conduct, vandalism and high handedness of the BCL, the educational campuses in Dhaka are tense and restive and the imposed silence in them is eerie. Several universities, colleges and assorted institutions across the coun-

try are already closed to avoid further clashes.

In the meantime, the government's pretence of being aggrieved at these dismal developments lacks credibility because it did not take any effective measures to stop them. There is no visible concern in the government quarter, neither has any head rolled in this connection. Rather, there are reports of police protection for the BCL while they are in action. When the entire education system is on the verge of collapse, where does the BCL gather courage from to hold the nation hostage to their mischief? Who are their patrons in sabotaging the national education system? Even after the banning of BCL's organisational activities in Jahangir Nagar University, inter-group violence broke out in the university's Musharaf Husain Hall by the weekend!

An analysis of the problem reveals that, notwithstanding the AL's mealy mouthed profession of conduct different from that of BNP, it has in fact neatly taken over the BNP's unfinished agenda of plunder, hooliganism and rowdiness. Ever since the BNP's fall from grace, the AL and its front organisations chose to ride roughshod over the fallen opponents. It's a pity that the AL has learnt no lesson about the consequences of such conduct.

With the BCL openly extorting and the AL incapable of stopping them, it seems that an apocalypse is fast approaching in our socio-political scene. The AL government is too embroiled in a multiplicity of problems to take notice of it. Meanwhile, the rulers sprawl in their shiny suits, grin-



Back to business as usual?

ning at each other and sponging on the state. A weak opposition is composed of a few fighter cocks. There is no law and order, no electricity, no public service amenities, no justice. The public fends for itself. It is not known if we really deserved a tragedy of such Shakespearian dimension!

Those of us who voted in the election last year expected that the political leaders and the country's political elites, chastened by the reformatory measures of the interim government, would have learnt some lessons to be able to deliver. We also expected that the churning that the dispensation received would make them behave. But, to our disappointment, not a grain of catharsis has taken place in our archaic political culture and its medieval mould. Belying all our expectations, the point in

our politics lies in unquestioned loyalty to the boss, with whom there is no room even for constructive dissent. It has unavoidably caused a stupor in our political thinking, allowing no scope for innovation.

A meritocracy lacking political sense ruled us during the last two years. It failed to break any fresh ground in spite of bright ideas. The AL government that has succeeded it is political to the hilt, but seems to be suffering from mediocrity. It appears that the AL has compromised merit and experience for loyalty, which will seldom surpass the ingenuity of the one to whom the loyalty is due. As a result, the government limps forward, often slipping off the slope it is functioning from.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Sanjay Gandhi is reborn in the BJP

Varun depicts himself as his father's reincarnation. The slogan is: "Varun nahin yeh andhi hain, doosra Sanjay Gandhi hai." (This isn't Varun, but a hurricane; it's Sanjay reborn.)

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THERE are two ways of seeing Varun Gandhi's anti-Muslim speeches in Pilibhit, where he's contesting as a BJP candidate. The first views him as an insecure, pathologically disturbed person, obsessed with getting attention, and prone to anti-social behaviour. Given his psychological makeup, he was bound to make trouble.

Varun grew up in fraught circumstances, aware that this father Sanjay was despised for human rights violations and forced sterilisation of Muslims during the Emergency. His mother was estranged from Indira Gandhi.

Young Varun was obnoxiously rude. He managed what very few children who attend the prestigious Rishi Valley School succeed in doing: getting expelled. A teacher from another school he attended recalls Varun as a difficult boy "with a huge chip on his shoulder about his cousins Rahul and Priyanka" prone to getting into trouble and "convinced he's superior" for being Sanjay and Maneka's son.

Varun is also given to lying. He swore before a court that he studied at the London School of Economics and holds a Masters from the School of Oriental and

African Studies in London (SOAS). He was never admitted to LSE, only enrolled in its distance-learning program. And he quit SOAS without a degree.

Varun behaves shockingly to gain fame. He stunned everyone by his "chop them... sterilise them" war-cry and became a hero for the Sangh Parivar's Muslim-haters.

The second view is that Varun is a shrewd, calculating politician, whose ideology is shaped by his intense dislike of the Congress, shared with his mother. His discovery that his great-grandfather defined the Congress's vision impelled him to reject the Nehruvian paradigm, comprising democracy, secularism, socialism, and non-alignment. He probably embraced Hindutva as a foil against Rahul and Priyanka, too.

He calculated that vile anti-Muslim rhetoric would communally polarise Pilibhit, which has a large Muslim and Sikh population. Varun knew the shortcut to prominence within the BJP passes through the terrain of extremism, not moderation. It's far easier to fit into the BJP's Far-Right niche than compete hard within the crowded Centre-Right space where most party leaders operate.

A hep Westernised, English-speaking youth can capture the quasi-lunatic niche

-- especially if he stoops to the gutter level, pleasing those who admire uncouth behaviour and macho Hindu-chauvinism.

Varun's hate-speech script wasn't written by the BJP-RSS. He himself drafted it knowing the BJP wouldn't be able to fully disown it. After all, what he said about Muslims is exactly what many in the Sangh Parivar think, but don't say.

So which angle is right, Varun the psychopath, or the shrewd strategist? The answer is: both. Going by his Supreme Court petition, he's also a deceitful and cowardly person.

L.K. Advani has invited ridicule by comparing Varun to Jayaprakash Narayan. Varun depicts himself as his father's reincarnation. The slogan is: "Varun nahin yeh andhi hain, doosra Sanjay Gandhi hai." (This isn't Varun, but a hurricane; it's Sanjay reborn.) Like Sanjay, he has brazenly defied the law, torn civility and political decency to shreds, and used goon power.

When Sanjay was legally charged for his excesses, he defied court summons, declared the presiding judges prejudiced, and asked his supporters to unleash violence. After he was held guilty of destroying a film that criticised the Emergency, they unleashed merry hell in Delhi.

Varun has violated the Representation of the People Act (RPA) and the Indian Penal Code, including Section 153A, which concerns inciting enmity against particular communities/classes. He would have instigated even more violence

if not detained under the National Security Act, 1980.

Regrettably, he couldn't have been debarred from the election. According to most legal interpretations, the Election Commission cannot disqualify a candidate until a court holds him guilty. Because of this legal loophole, it must watch helplessly while he wreaks communal havoc.

Varun Gandhi stands booked under the draconian NSA, which allows detention for up to a year without bail, subject to approval by an advisory board. The case must be referred to the board within three weeks and decided within another seven weeks. If the detention is approved, Gandhi cannot campaign although he can contest the election.

The NSA has been used by many governments, including BJP-led ones, for acts that don't remotely threaten public order. The BJP used it in Rajasthan in 2007 against pro-reservation agitators, and in UP in the 1990s against uncooperative traders. Yet, it hypocritically calls Gandhi's detention "political vendetta."

The BJP has stooped to a new low. Many people had some sympathy for it because it opposed the Emergency. By celebrating the Sanjay cult, it has forfeited that sympathy.

Varun has only made explicit the virulent anti-Muslim bias of Sanjay's authoritarianism. The revulsion this has caused could impact the election.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

We need a G20 reality check

The key challenge is to give the markets and the public a sense of hope that some important actions will be taken balanced by a sense of reality that the summit can accomplish only a very limited number of objectives.

JEFFREY E. GARTEN

WHEN I was a trade official in the Clinton administration, I discovered that the British government was unusually talented at writing summaries after difficult negotiations.

Their communiqués were not just eloquent, but managed to brilliantly paper over major differences among the participants. It was a vital skill at the G20 meeting in London to coordinate policies for the worldwide economic crisis.

French President Nicholas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have talked about "remaking capitalism." IBM CEO Sam Palmisano has called for the summit to unleash a new wave of long-term investments, and Fred Bergsten, a prominent economic commentator, calls the meeting the best and last hope for significant policy coordination.

Yet in today's highly fragile global economy, any disparity between the hype and

the reality is bound to upset financial markets, investors and consumers. It could exacerbate the already dangerous rise of economic nationalism.

It could also damage essential collaboration among key governments that will be necessary long after the one-day summit. That is why officials in London, New York and Brussels in particular should work this week to lower expectations of what the G20 can accomplish.

In ordinary times, deep cross-border collaboration is problematic. Today it is even more so, with political leaders facing excruciating domestic pressures of plummeting growth, shrinking credit, contracting trade, soaring unemployment and rising political demonstrations.

Conducting international diplomacy was difficult enough when the G7 was the central institution, but it is far more complex with the addition of China, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Turkey, South Africa, etc., all with their divergent interests and political processes.

Beyond that, decision-making is made tougher by massive economic and political uncertainties. No one knows how long and deep the downturn will be. No one knows the true state of the banking system. No one knows whether the stimulus measures that have been implemented are adequate.

Most important are the deep-seated differences among the major G20 participants. The US doesn't want its gigantic stimulus package to become a free ride for Europeans, so it is pushing for the EU to further gun its fiscal engines.

The EU wants Washington to take a tougher and more comprehensive line on global financial regulation. Both the US and EU are concerned that Beijing will expand its export subsidies. Brazil is focused on reopening global trade negotiations, something President Obama has all but ruled out. And so it goes.

The best the G20 should do is announce a few feasible and concrete goals that fall far short of any claim of revamping the global financial system à la Bretton Woods.

Working group of ministers must make proposals within three months for a stronger regulatory regime, indicating guiding principles such as the need to subject every category of financial institution, including hedge funds and sovereign wealth funds, to greater supervision.

And they should agree to meet in July and every quarter thereafter to show that coordination isn't an occasional photo op.

The key challenge is to give the markets and the public a sense of hope that some important actions will be taken balanced by a sense of reality that the summit can accomplish only a very limited number of objectives.

This time around, no government is unaware of the dangers and futility of go-it-alone policies. But the fact is also that governments are a long way from the kind of collaboration necessary to remake the global financial system.

In terms of new institutions, they are, for example, simply unprepared to accept the need for a global monetary authority with regulatory powers. In terms of mindset, the major nations are still not ready to make fundamental changes in their domestic policies to accommodate international needs.

The truth is that our public officials are doing the best they can amid massive domestic constraints imposed by the crisis, but they are not capable of the major breakthroughs in global coordination that the times really demand.

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