

PM's meeting with qaulmi madrasa leaders

Build up on the positive understanding

WE have noted with due concern that in recent weeks much discussion has gone on about the alleged links of qaulmi madrasas to religious militancy in the country. Against this backdrop, a team of religious leaders met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday and apprised her of their grievances vis-à-vis some comments on qaulmi madrasas allegedly made by some senior government figures. The prime minister, we are happy to note, reassured them that the comments had been taken out of context and that her government sought the cooperation of the ulema in combating religious militancy. Clearly, the meeting has proved to be a useful exercise in establishing rapport between the government and the ulema community, a move that bodes well for the country. For their part, the qaulmi madrasa representatives assured the PM of their cooperation in stamping out religious militancy wherever it might surface.

It was surely a commendable and wise move on the part of the prime minister to have met the qaulmi madrasa leaders; and on the part of the madrasa representatives, it was a good gesture to have reciprocated the government move. At a time when religious extremism appears to threaten social and political order, it is hugely important that the cooperation of the ulema be made use of in the greater social interest.

By far the most important job in allaying all fears about the alleged role of some madrasas in militancy lies with the madrasa people themselves. They will be rendering creditable service to the country by using their considerable influence on the community through ensuring that religion is not used as a cover for irrational and other anti-social activities by any quarters.

And then there is more that these madrasas can do. They must ensure that this stream of education does not any more stay confined to a one-directional approach, that of rearing up the young merely as future preachers. In a world of increasing economic complexities, these madrasa students must face up to the realities around them -- that they must also acquire education and skills training which give them the opportunity to find jobs and earn a decent living. In this context, the law minister's assurance that the government is contemplating recognising qaulmi madrasa education by bringing it into mainstream education is to be considered a step in the right direction.

The dialogue between the prime minister and the qaulmi madrasa leaders is certainly a good augury. Let it be the beginning of many more to come. Madrasas can surely fill society's needs, through reinventing themselves in the greater public interest.

Lingering power crisis

Take public into confidence on action plan

FROM all the discourses that we are getting to hear on the power situation prevailing in the country the impression we get is that the government is not moving fast or diligently enough to reduce the suffering of the people caused by constant power outages. And one does not even have the correct figure of actual shortage of electricity since there is an 'official' and an 'unofficial' figure. Taking the government statistic as a datum, the current shortfall remains high in spite of the 700 megawatt of additional capacity provided in the last three months; and the peak season has not yet come.

We do not know what the exact government short term plans are to address the problem. And not knowing what is in store for the people in terms of the likely suffering they would have to endure, makes the problem that much harder to face.

It is a case of the power sector being caught in a trap of rising demand for electricity, according to some statistics around eight percent per year, and the Petrobangla's inability to provide the prime source of energy to fire the power plants -- gas.

One couldn't emphasise more the need for the authorities to deal with the problem head on. The long and short of the issue is that there is no alternative in the short term, apart from regulating system loss and gearing up the distribution system, than to provide the power plants with adequate gas. And the authorities should ensure that the government power plants are treated at par in terms of gas supply vis a vis the private sector.

It is time too, we feel, the government takes the public into confidence and lets them in on what are its immediate plans to ameliorate the situation. We can see that the problem is enormous and needs not months but years to be solved. But in terms of load shedding which is becoming extremely unpredictable, the consumers would be better served if they are informed in advance of the area wise plans with duration of power cut indicated, as far as practicable. The people should also be informed about various ways to save electricity.

In this regard a private interest information service could be set up wherein the services of the TV channels, cable TV operators, FM radio stations and newspapers could be employed for disseminating information.

Pied pipers of our politics

And sooner than before we will start hearing the familiar tune played by our political pied pipers amid the din of distant drums, with the streets heated up by both sides over the issues and counterissues.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

HUMBLED in the last general election the once arrogant BNP still licks the wounds of its defeat. The party is in total disarray, with no visible initiative to reunite or reconsolidate the party split during Begum Khaleda Zia's incarceration. Amid post-electoral Awami bashing, party activists are closely watching the denouement of the catastrophe that has befallen them. In the meantime, the ruling Awami League also isn't faring any better. Mired neck-deep in the mess left by the preceding governments, it will take them far longer than many anticipated to put the polity back on the rails and devote itself seriously to the business of governance.

Common sense is not at all common -- so said Bernard Shaw. Quite in keeping with the dictum, the AL has created problems that defy commonsense and could have been avoided. When the country is still reeling under the shock of the Pilkhana tragedy and the public has been waiting with bated breath to see the mystery of it unearthed, an issue such as Khaleda Zia's house doesn't enthrust the common people embroiled in the hard issues of life -- the lack of water, power and essentials at affordable price.

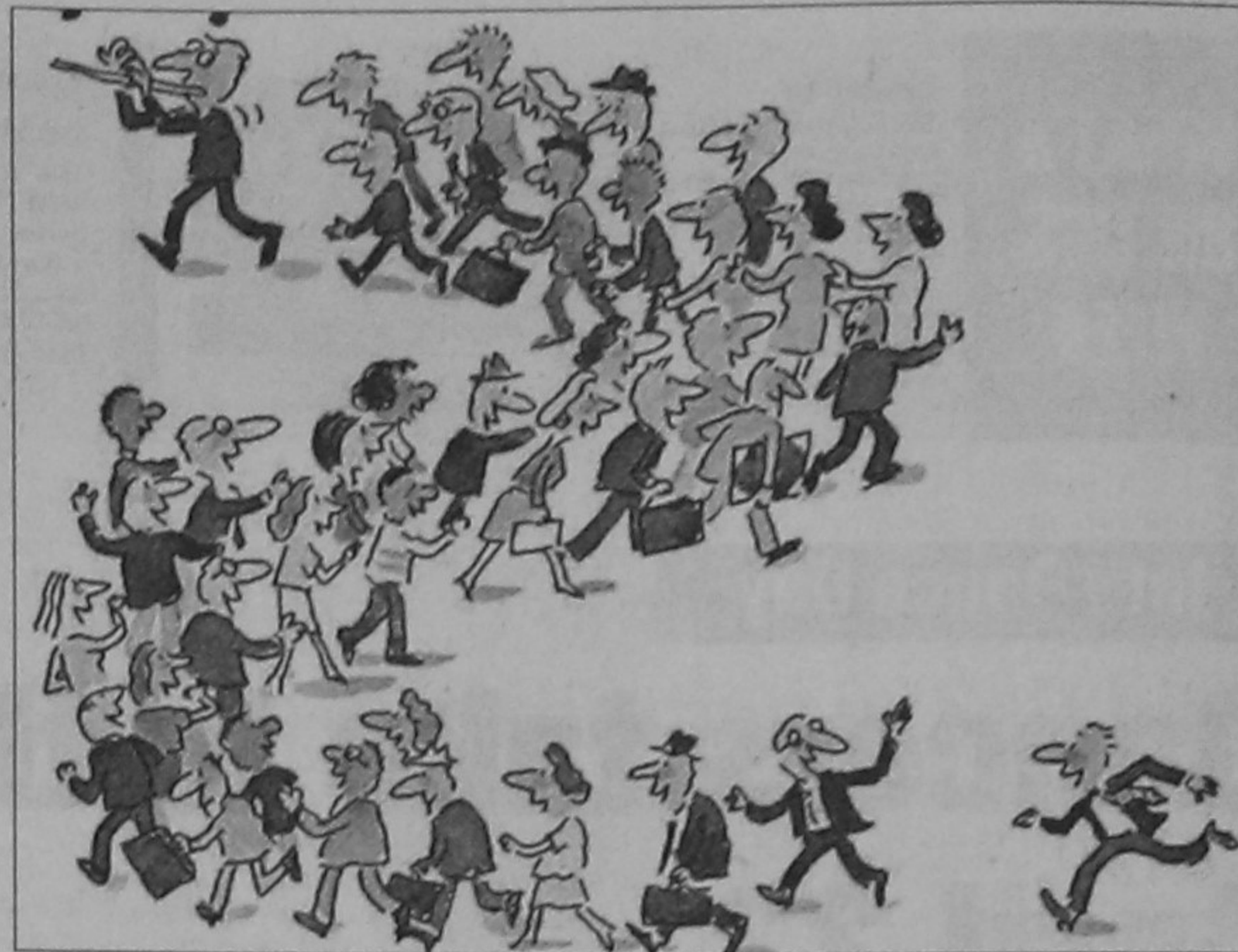
Although the BNP's potential has not totally petered out and the party has, in effect, got a shot in the arms with two of its

heavyweights getting elected in recently held by-election, its comeuppance is far from over and the party is yet to be fully exorcised of its stigma. After the revelation of BNP-Jamaat plunder of the country, corruption charges are still pouring in involving BNP men holding high offices -- like speaker Zamiruddin Sircar who, it is alleged, squandered public money illegally while in office.

However, the AL's continuing mistakes and failures on several fronts are the BNP's biggest assets for building an agitation and redeeming itself from the ignominy it is besmirched with. In the words of the prime minister herself, power is not a permanent settlement. Yet the powerful are digging deep to stay on, only to be disillusioned by the validity of Sheikh Hasina's golden words of truth. The incumbent's folly, in most cases, paves the way for the opponent's triumphant return.

Napoleon needed Caesar and the Gaelic Wars, and Churchill the Nazis, to rise to the greatness each achieved. Sheikh Hasina, with the attempt on her life in the tragic episode of August 21, 2004 and assorted other misfortunes, garnered disproportionate political mileage and a sympathy wave leading to her electoral landslide.

It cannot be predicted whether Begum Zia's ouster from her 6, Mainul Road residence in Dhaka cantonment will provide her similar political advantage or not, but her



Where are they leading us?

voluntary abandonment of its "ownership" will. She has enough, including a posh house in Gulshan, to sustain herself for the rest of her life. If the BNP plans to use this issue to fire its first salvo for taking to the street it will surely misfire.

The Awami League has just completed its first one hundred days in office, and produced a mixed bag. The prognosis for the days ahead is fraught with a bewildering variety of imponderables, given the dismissive style of its governance. Unless, through serendipity of sorts, or through things turning positive fortuitously, the AL's journey through its mandated period is likely to be a

roller-coaster ride. The Awami solidarity in power has always proved to be a myth, and its implosion over issues like the much derided upazila bill cannot be ruled out. Neither can the forces behind the war criminals, whose trials are on card, be underestimated. They are lurking in every nook and corner of the administration to scuttle the process and upset the apple cart.

And sooner than before we will start hearing the familiar tune played by our political pied pipers amid the din of distant drums, with the streets heated up by both sides over the issues and counterissues.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

What future for the Third Front?

There exist two other forces in Indian politics, the Left, and low-caste-based formations like the Bahujan Samaj Party. This has led some analysts to theorise the rationale of a Third Front. The Third Front (TF), born last July when the Left withdrew support to the UPA, has gathered momentum and is still evolving.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHATEVER its outcome, India's general election will be remembered for many peculiarities. First, there are no major issues at stake, no ideological contentions, and no political fault-lines.

The election's outcome will affect the economy and the prospect of secularism and coalition politics. But these issues haven't entered the electoral arena.

By contrast, the 2004 election was a referendum against the Bharatiya Janata Party's communal sectarianism and its celebration of an India it wrongly claimed was "shining." The BJP lost in 23 of 28 states.

Even in the 1991, 1996 and 1998 elections, there were major issues; the decline of the Congress, the future of the rising regional parties and the viability of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

Second, this is India's first election where a prime minister who has completed his full term is not leading his party's campaign. Dr. Manmohan Singh isn't even a candidate in these elections.

If the Congress forms the next government, he'll be the first prime minister to be re-elected as a Rajya Sabha MP, which will be worse than H.D. Deve Gowda's brief prime ministerial tenure in 1996-97.

Third, the number of crorepati candidates has risen astoundingly. Candidates with

assets over Rs 1 crore make up 14 percent of the total, compared to 9 percent in 2004, according to National Election Watch.

Of Mumbai's 36 contestants, 34 are crorepaties. In Andhra Pradesh, every fifth candidate is a crorepati!

Tragically, crorepaties are especially numerous in the poorest regions and tribal Orissa. This speaks of a big gap between procedural and substantive democracy, which involves social and economic equality.

This, like the growing criminalisation of politics -- 16 percent of candidates have criminal records -- doesn't bode well for participatory democracy.

Fourthly, there's a breakdown of established party alliances and unprecedented promiscuity. Parties are wooing one another irrespective of ideology and political affiliation.

The NDA stands reduced to one-third its original strength. The BJP is wooing Jayalalithaa, who's in the Third Front. She has rebuffed the BJP, but kept her post-poll options open.

Some UPA parties are seeking outside allies. There's an embryonic Fourth Front -- between the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Lok Janashakti Party which continue to support the UPA.

Besides opportunism and immorality, this reflects growing de-crystallisation of the party system. Clear party lines indicate different social bases, political identities and

programmes -- and a mature democracy. The party system must re-crystallise itself. It's futile to bemoan the rise of state-level parties. Their vote-share has risen from 11 percent in 1984 to 36 in 2004. Political differentiation can be empowering if it reflects grassroots-level self-assertion of underprivileged strata.

Inter-state differences in culture, economic development and political traditions are so great that a system of "national" parties cannot work.

Such parties typically either have an "umbrella" character (Congress), or are deeply conservative like the BJP which combines Hindu nationalism and elitist social-political agendas.

Smaller parties can counterweigh to an extent the centralised and unified conception of nationalism of the Congress and the BJP. There exist two other forces in Indian politics, the Left, and low-caste-based formations like the Bahujan Samaj Party.

This has led some analysts to theorise the rationale of a Third Front. The Third Front (TF), born last July when the Left withdrew support to the UPA, has gathered momentum and is still evolving.

But it may be wrong to see the present combination -- four Left parties and a clutch of regional parties, with the BSP hovering around them -- as a cohesive force which can make a convincing bid for power.

Even if the Congress and BJP win under half of Lok Sabha seats, and the TF wins 120-130 seats with the BSP joining it, the Front may not come to power or hold it for a length of time.

No ideological cement binds the Front's parties. Their twin planks of "secularism" and opposition to the Congress, aren't strong or convincing.

The Left alone has demonstrated a consistent commitment to secularism by identifying Hindutva as the principal danger. All other Front constituents have bestowed

respectability on the BJP, or helped it overcome political isolation.

The NDA couldn't have retained power beyond a few weeks in 1998 had the Telugu Desam not extended support to it in exchange for the speaker's position.

Jayalalithaa is probably the most communal politician outside the sangh parivar. She justified the Babri demolition and endorsed the Gujarat pogrom. She even sanctified Narendra Modi with a 48-course meal last year.

The Left parties derive their policy positions from a well-defined, consistent worldview. Most TF constituents lack any worldview.

On economic policy, they aren't progressive enough or sharply demarcated from free-market neoliberalism. They often go along with bigger parties in foreign or security policy matters.

True, the Left can give them some direction, but the primary motivation for change must come from them. This isn't happening.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, many non-Congress non-BJP parties represented rising Dalit and OBC forces. That momentum may have run out. Unless they renew their political capital by building links with grassroots movements and civil society organisations, their identities will remain fuzzy.

Many of them cannot ally with one another despite being unaffiliated to the Congress or BJP. There are strong antagonisms between the SP and BSP, the DMK and AIADMK, Trinamool Congress and the Left, the RJD and the JD(U).

This raises a question-mark over the Front's longevity even if it forms a government with external support. Perhaps these elections are India's semi-finals, not the finals.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in.

Challenges from within

While the BDR incident had been a real acid test for the Awami League led grand Alliance government in its first 100 days, some challenges from within the party rank and file have emerged sharply, and put it in a rather disadvantageous situation.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

WHILE the BDR incident had been a real acid test for the Awami League led grand Alliance government in its first 100 days, some challenges from within the party rank and file have emerged sharply, and put it in a rather disadvantageous situation.

Most of the upazila chairpersons, who have vowed to wage a strong movement even against the government to get their demands fulfilled, belong to Bangladesh Awami League. Some constitutional and positional changes that have taken place during the tenure of this government have, reportedly, also been propelled by the ambitious party people.

Yes, the upazila issue seems to have heated up recently. While the upazila chairmen have also the option of taking recourse to legal procedure on the strength of Articles 58 and 59 of our Constitution, the LGD minister has given a strong warning against the chairmen's threat of waging a movement.

Although the upazila system was intro-

duced by a military ruler, its representative and developmental role is well appreciated. Admittedly, civil society organisations and academicians have been always crying out for decentralisation and strengthening of local governments.

It is unfortunate that the upazila level of local government, which has the makings of being a strong local government body, had not been put into operation only because of resistance from the elected lawmakers afraid of losing their supremacy in their respective constituencies.

It was expected that the Awami League led grand alliance would not scrap the changed upazila ordinance set in place by the Fakhruddin led caretaker government, providing the chairmen with some freedom to work; this has not been the case. In addition, the local government commission (LGC), too, became extinct as the government did not feel it necessary to ratify the related ordinance.

Although the number of upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen is not a matter for Awami League (AL) to be concerned about, the internal discord centering round this

MP-upazila chairmen row might hit the harmony among local Awami League leaders and workers, badly affecting the solid party support required for smooth functioning of state affairs.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) continues to vex Bangladesh Awami League. Reportedly, the leaders belonging to this front organisation of Awami League have not been subdued despite party leader Sheikh Hasina's relinquishing the responsibility of BCL. Other front organisations have also been adding to the woes of the Awami League.

Newspapers reports of extortions and internal feuds relating to BCL must have been a real pain in the neck for the Awami League led government. A newspaper report, published in the Daily Star recently, concerning people calling themselves BCL leaders and workers collecting tolls from food shops to tea stalls, is indicative of how things are being muddled by the miscreants.

Though the amount they are receiving is not handsome in comparison to the frauds that are committed by some leaders and bureaucrats, the fact that they are damaging the party's image is inexcusable. In fact, extortion has reportedly come back in full swing.

Meanwhile, the civil society people have expressed disappointment over the resignation of the Anti-corruption Commission Chairman Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, which, I think, did not do anything good for

the party's image. Some have expressed the optimism that Hashan Mashud's absence would not affect the viability of ACC. However, our sordid past does not permit us to fall for this.

Moreover, the Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir led parliamentary committee's summoning of ACC officials, including the outgoing chairman, seems to be have been instigated by party insiders. Though the validity of the summons can be judged by the court if required, it has been a matter of argument because of the committee chairman's alleged personal grudge.

Controlling of the price-spiral and handling of the BDR issue are regarded as success stories of the Awami League led grand alliance government during its first hundred days. I believe, had some internal matters not disturbed Awami League, the start of the government could have been a flying one. The issues of discords have, however, not been resolved yet.

Statecraft is hardly a one-man show. Teamwork is crucial. I think the current government has found a superb captain in Sheikh Hasina, who needs to be supplemented and complemented by other members of the team. The sooner other team members find it easy to keep pace with her, the better will it be for the AL, the grand alliance and the government.

Kazi S.M. Khasrul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. E-mail: khasru74@yahoo.com.