

Awami League at sixty Party must fulfill people's expectations

THE Awami League observed the 60th anniversary of its founding on June 23 with enthusiasm as people's expectations of its maturity and experience to deliver grow. It has traversed a tortuous path through the decades and played a significant role in shaping the destiny of the country. Indeed, the Awami League, as a truly mass-based political organization, can legitimately lay claim to glory, given that it has itself been instrumental in the making of history.

Any deliberation on the Awami League necessarily brings to mind the pioneering role played in its formation and initial growth by such stalwarts as Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq became part of the Jukta Front that won the historic election of 1954. And with them came the younger crop of leaders, such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, et al, who would in subsequent years leave a historically lasting imprint on not only the party but also the people of Bangladesh. But such a recapitulation of the Awami League's past cannot be complete without recalling the repression it was subjected to in the days of Pakistan right up to the genocide of 1971.

The best years for the party were surely the period between 1966 and 1971, when its seminal Six Point plan for regional autonomy in Pakistan gradually but surely broadened out into a wider struggle for Bengali freedom once its triumph at the general elections of 1970 was subverted by Pakistan's ruling military junta. The party, made the target of a vicious assault by the army, proved itself equal to the task of forging mass resistance through forming the Mujibnagar government in April 1971 in conjunction with its allies and initiating war of liberation against Pakistan.

Yet there have been the moments when it veered away from its democratic ideals. Such a tragic turn in its political course occurred in January 1975, when the party, being in government, swiftly moved to replace multi-party democracy with one-party Baksal rule, in the process banning all but four newspapers and placing those in the control of the government

That said, however, in the years since 1975, when its entire top leadership was eliminated through assassination, the Awami League has come a long way, enough to have gained public support (in 1996 and 2008) in order to become once more the party of government. The credit for the achievement goes to its leaders and its workers across the country.

In the times ahead, popular expectations of the Awami League will expand and diversify. The party can satisfy those expectations through ensuring a continued growth and expansion of internal party democracy. Happily, at the last elections, such a trend was noticeable when it was the party grassroots which played a leading role in selecting candidates for parliament. Such transparency must be reflected at all tiers of the party. At the same time, the party must remember that its overwhelming victory at the December 2008 elections has devolved upon it a huge responsibility in that it will be expected to implement its promises and policies. It must carefully guard against even any hint of arrogance of power that political parties with overwhelming electoral majorities have often been susceptible to. Again, the Awami League can bring about a wholesale transformation within itself through utilizing the abilities of its senior politicians and at the same time going for an infusion of new, young blood in the organisation.

Finally, now that it is in government, its leaders must be able to distinguish between the party and the government -- in the interest of democratic politics.

Swine flu is here

Put in place measures to contain it

AMONG about a hundred countries which have been afflicted by Swine flu, we are the last-named one. But the worrying thing is, it's spreading like wildfire as was apprehended by the WHO. We can not pass off with any lower risk rating for, the truth is, since the detection of the first flu case at the Dhaka airport on June 18 the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research has confirmed seven more cases in a matter of week. And those who came in contact with such affected in-bound passengers from the US, numbering around 30, have been placed under surveillance as part of the 'contact case tracing' initiative which is the right way to go about it. But we are on the world affliction chart.

Going by the reports of passengers, the screening at the airport is rather lax as some passengers are bypassing form-filling formalities and thereby the preliminary check-point. Greater supervision coupled with capacity-building is clearly needed in order that potential cases do not slip through the cracks of the system.

The Zia International Airport is under the spotlight so that its inadequacies get pointed out, but what of the 15 other screening points set up in the country to ward off entry of the virus? How prepared are they in terms of screening, now that arrivals of people in our territory with traces of Swine flu virus have actually been recorded. Perhaps, we should have more screening points.

Even so, for all intents and purposes, it is difficult in today's fast-track multi-modal communication context to mount surveillance on all entry points through land, air, sea and water routes. Thus, we have to settle for the fact and work on the assumption that there will be more Swine flu cases on our hands to deal with. And how we do it is what matters. While we go on stepping up screening and tracing efforts, the main focus from here on should be on management and mitigation of afflicted cases within a broader policy framework for containment. The fact that we have sufficient stocks of H1N1 anti-viral vaccine rather than making us complacent should drive us into a greater invigoration of efforts.

Until people have raised their voice

Ideally, the parties should have disowned these politicians. Since that isn't the case, people need to come forward and clean up the mess created by them. Whether the parliament or the Election Commission takes the initiatives, nothing will happen until people have raised their voice.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TWO of our politicians have committed the same mischief in two different ways. Both concealed information about their academic backgrounds when they filed nomination papers to contest in the last parliamentary election. One of them wrote he had no education despite being a university graduate. Another shifted like a moving target, revealing varying academic level for each election contested. They must have thought it like many others do in this country. How a practicing Brahmin likes to wear his circle of twine is nobody's business.

But what I see here is politics taken for granted. Both politicians have been in politics for a long time and they have contested several elections. They have been elected and re-elected, their return to office being as given as night after day.

Which reminds us of Roman Emperor Caligula Caesar, who was afflicted by a bizarre madness. Absolute power had made him so conceited that one day he declared himself God. And then, too much power brought him boredom. Caligula turned into a monster because whatever he did was not challenged.

The same thing is also true for the Caligulas of our times. No matter what they have done or said, they have never been challenged. So they went one notch up to test our patience and thumbed their noses at us.

May be long years in politics have con-

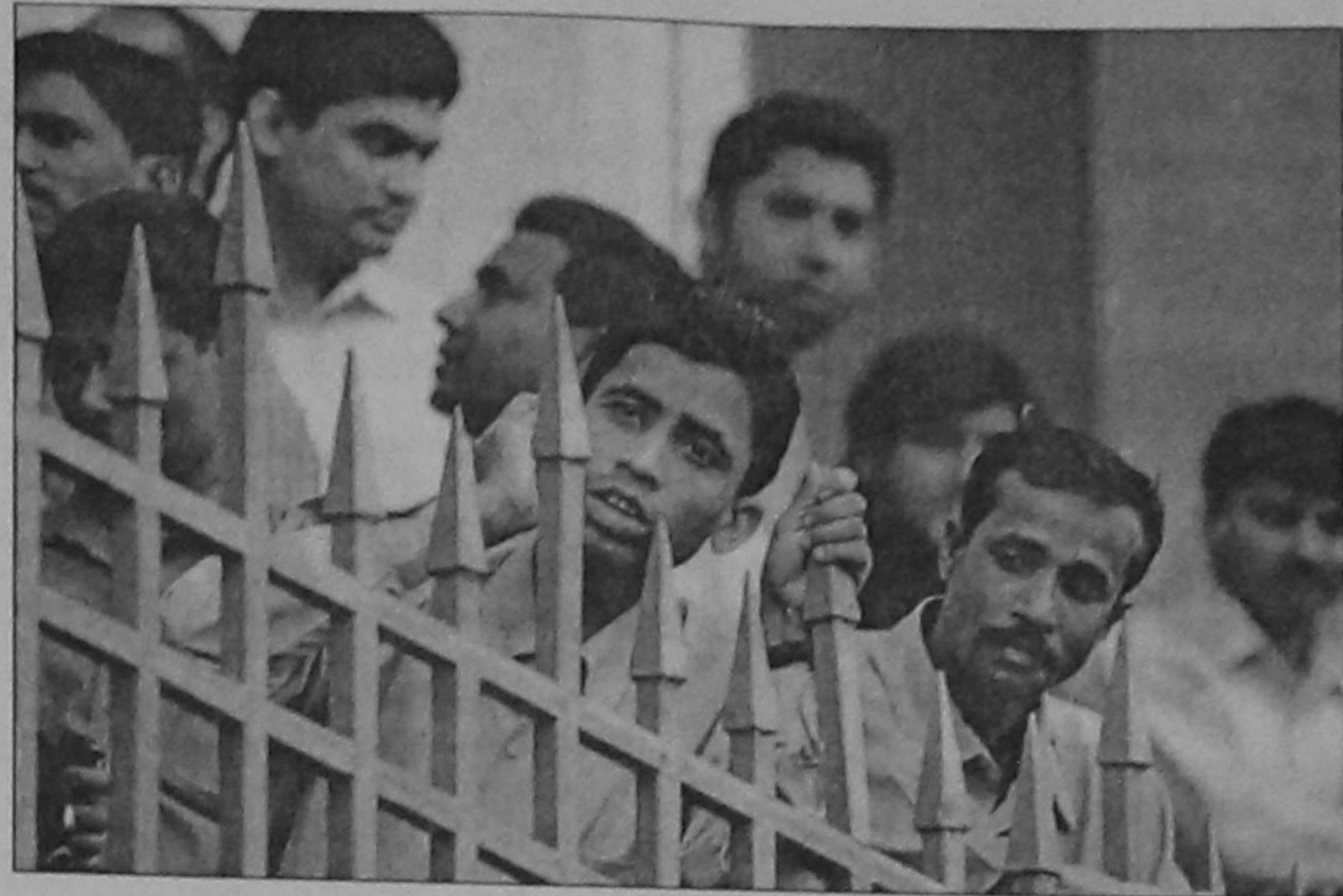
vinced these incredible two that education wasn't important. I agree, may be so does the rest of the country. The voters don't look for suitable boys in their candidates, but suitable candidates in their boys.

Needless to say, leadership isn't guaranteed by academic degrees. At least ten US presidents never graduated from college. South African President Jacob Zuma has only primary school education. British prime ministers Winston Churchill and John Major never went to college.

Then, I bet, it couldn't be the shame part of it why those politicians must have fiddled with that particular entry. One of them actually has a bachelor's degree but he decided to hide it. Why did the other one keep writing different things at different times? To give him benefit of doubt, he may have got bad memory or isn't quite organised with his records.

Yet, it's obvious that neither of them was serious when submitting nomination papers for a national election. That is something to worry about, because when politicians trifle with their own profession and make fun of its rite of passage, it could be manifestation of a deeper crisis. By all means this is only a symptom, but not the disease.

The disease, however, has its many other symptoms. We hear of doctors with false diplomas. We hear of judges with fake credentials. We have got counterfeit currencies, adulterated food and pretenders with false identities. Everybody criticises and everybody is criticised. We have lost sight of the forest of facts for the trees of tales.



With all of these happening in this country, why should we be upset because two politicians have pulled the fast one on us? Yes, they have been wrong and disrespectful to us. But what they did amounts to spitting in the air, that falls back on one's own face. They have undermined the same system of which they should be the proud products. They have ridiculed us by being ridiculous.

Though we should be upset for a different reason. It's not so much about how they have treated us. It's more about how we have treated them. If they have taken us for granted, it's because we granted them the right to make free with us.

With that kind of freedom, power often goes to the head. Caligula had built a floating bordello where the wives of Roman senators were forced into prostitution to fill his treasury. He even made claims to imaginary military expedition to England, while all that time his soldiers gathered shells on seashores as trophies. When he returned to Rome, a terrified senate granted him all kinds of honours for that fictitious cam-

paign. Historians believe that Caligula through his eccentric behaviour was affronting his people. He was provoking them to react against him. Tired of being worshipped by his people, he challenged them in the subconscious hope to be challenged by them.

Could it be that our politician duo was also prodded by that subliminal conscience? Could it be that they also wanted us to react against them, and challenge them against their challenges? They might have made those false entries in their nomination forms to see how far we could suffer them.

Ideally, the parties should have disowned these politicians. Since that isn't the case, people need to come forward and clean up the mess created by them. Whether the parliament or the Election Commission takes the initiatives, nothing will happen until people have raised their voice.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. E-mail: badrul151@yahoo.com.

Life is precious

As the value of human life is supreme and takes precedence over all other considerations, we are profoundly shocked at Anima's death, and can't accept this premature death as accidents do not happen accidentally. They are most of the time invited either by our own carelessness or by the carelessness of someone else.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

THOUGH I had driving experience in several countries, it took five attempts to get my driving license in New York City. In my second attempt, I failed because of a pedestrian. He was attempting to cross the road on a red signal. Seeing the green light, I moved slightly forward. The examiner pressed the safety brake and returned my learner permit card along with the result slip, with the remark: "Always life first, always pedestrian first."

Yes, it's always life first. We can't accept any death in road mishaps caused by reckless driving of a learner, as he is not allowed to drive or even learn in public places until he gets a proper driving license.

Anima Saha, wife of Dhaka University professor Parimal Kumar Saha, lost her life when she was hit by a speeding private car at Dhaka University campus on June 22. Reports say that the killer car was moving at a very high speed at the time of accident,

and was driven by a learner.

Almost every day in every news media, it is not very hard to find news related to road accidents both in Bangladesh and outside Bangladesh. Road crashes, causing deaths, injuries and damages, are always happening and seem usual. Deaths in road mishaps are at epidemic levels in many countries, and there seems to be a widespread acceptance that they are an inevitable consequence of ever-increasing mobility.

Like many other times and for many subjects, this time also we have statistics, not precautions. The WHO predicted that between 2000 and 2015 road accidents would cause 20 million deaths, 200 million serious injuries, and would leave more than one billion people killed, injured, bereaved, or left to care for a victim.

It also predicted that by 2020 road deaths would become the number three killer, behind heart disease and suicide, although Aids is now a much bigger threat than when that forecast was made. Many accident

victims were wrongly carried when being helped, which led to permanent disability and, in some cases, death.

Road accidents in Bangladesh today have gotten to the stage where it seems that there is an epidemic. With official death toll of nearly 10,000 a year, road accidents cause the largest casualties in Bangladesh as neither existing laws nor law enforcement agencies are stringent enough to punish culprit drivers or transport owners.

The number of people seriously injured in road crashes is estimated to be more than 100,000 each year. Bangladesh has one of the highest fatality rates in road accidents, over 100 deaths per 10,000 registered motor vehicles.

Road traffic deaths and injuries place an enormous strain on a country's health care systems and on the national economy in general. In financial terms, accidents inflict a severe damage -- no less than Tk 5,000 crore annually, or about 2% of the total GDP. The accidents are blamed mostly on badly maintained roads, faulty vehicles, inexperienced drivers, and disregard for traffic rules. In Bangladesh, pedestrians are involved in almost 75% of road accidents.

While the picture is horrific, some people may not be able to give importance to any individual case such as Anima's. But her death shows that so much is lacking. The absence of proper monitoring of traffic control, absence of sufficient speed break-

ers, unavailability of designated places for learners only, and lack of social responsibility -- as the learner's father let his son practicing a very important place.

In addition, a learner must not drive without a designated instructor. The learning vehicle is also different compared to the general vehicles. It is generally equipped with safety measures such as an emergency brake, which is accessible to the instructor.

The Dhaka University campus is subjected to get highest traffic control and frequent traffic vigilance, including strict actions against law-breakers. Considering the residential character of the university campus and its surrounding areas, stringent measures are needed to prevent road accidents -- but a number of serious accidents have occurred in this region in recent times.

On the other hand, beginners or learners should be strongly discouraged, and restricted by law, from practicing in residential places. Meanwhile, it's very necessary to have area-wise designated stretches for the learners.

As the value of human life is supreme and takes precedence over all other considerations, we are profoundly shocked at Anima's death, and can't accept this premature death as accidents do not happen accidentally. They are most of the time invited either by our own carelessness or by the carelessness of someone else.

Ripan Kumar Biswas writes from New York. E-mail: Ripan.Biswas@yahoo.com.

Theocracies are doomed

However strong they may be for a time, theocracies cannot finally survive modernity, because one of the key features of modernity is the shift of emphasis from the privileges and power of institutions (a monarch, a clerical establishment, the state itself) to the rights and relative autonomy of the individual.

JON MEACHAM

FOR years American conversation about Iraq has included a refrain about how we cannot expect to create a Jeffersonian democracy on the Euphrates. The admonition is true: if you think about it, America itself is not really a Jeffersonian democracy either (we are more of a Jacksonian one, which means there is a powerful central government with a cultural tilt toward states' rights).

And yet Jefferson keeps coming to mind as the drama in Iran unfolds. The events there seem to be a chapter in the very Jeffersonian story of the death of theocracy, or rule by clerics, and the gradual separation of church and state.

In one of the last letters of his life, in 1826, Jefferson said this of the Declaration of Independence: "May it be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind

themselves."

However strong they may be for a time, theocracies cannot finally survive modernity, because one of the key features of modernity is the shift of emphasis from the privileges and power of institutions (a monarch, a clerical establishment, the state itself) to the rights and relative autonomy of the individual.

In many ways, the modern virtues are the ones we associate with democracy: a free (or free-ish) flow of ideas, capital and people in an ethos in which men and women are free (or, again, free-ish) to form their own opinions and follow the dictates of their own consciences. By their very nature, theocracies are at risk in the face of such a world, for they are founded on an un-modern and undemocratic idea -- that temporal power should be invested in those who claim that their decisions about the life of this world carry divine authority from a deity who dwells in the world to come.

To say that theocracies are doomed is not to argue that religion is any less impor-

tant in our age. Quite the opposite: religious faith is an intrinsic element of human experience ("All men," said Homer, "have need of the gods"), and religion can be the undoing of a religious establishment, for an individual's interpretation of the applications of faith to politics may well differ from the institutional interpretation.

There is a deep irony at work here. Theocracies usually mandate the teaching of religion, but the teaching of religion -- the spread of texts and commentaries, the opening of theological debates among the people as well as the clerics -- can lead not to uniform public belief but to a questioning of orthodoxy.

Which is always a favourite activity of a new generation. The products of one world often react against the world of their parents: the descendants of the established church in Colonial America, for example, grew up to favour religious freedom.

In Iran, many of those protesting the regime have come of age after the 1979 revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his velayat-e faqih, or rule by the Supreme Jurist, to power. "The world of the successors is almost always different from the world of the founders," says Walter Russell Mead, a scholar of religion and foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Revolutionaries become what they behold; yesterday's outsiders are today's insiders. The promise of theocracy has to go unfulfilled, for no one can bring sacred

order to profane chaos.

The work of politics is not the same as the work of religion. Religious values can inform politics and civil society, but heaven and earth are ultimately separate provinces. The corruptions of the world always make their way into religious establishments, and once they do, religious authorities lose their credibility.

"Shortcomings and hypocrisies that would be bad enough in secular politicians are seen as even worse in clerics," says Mead.

Totalitarianism based on theology is destined to fail for the same reason other totalitarianisms fail: because, as Jefferson said, "the general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

In an imperfect world, there will never be a complete end of theocracy any more than there will ever be a complete end to tyranny. Power will ebb and flow, regimes come and go. But in the main, history's path leads to more liberty, not less -- to what Jefferson thought of as the bursting of chains, a sound you could almost hear in the crisis of Tehran.