

AL chief's unquestioned power re-established

Public expectations about open elections ought to have been fully met

THE Awami League has just emerged from its council session through re-electing Sheikh Hasina as party president and entrusting Syed Ashraf Islam with the responsibility of being general secretary. Public attention, it would be quite correct to say, was focused on the council and especially on what steps the party took about its passage to the future. Sheikh Hasina's re-election as party leader is once more a reaffirmation of the confidence the Awami League has placed in her since 1981. As for Syed Ashraf Islam, it was clearly his proactive role in keeping the party together in the difficult days following the imposition of the emergency in January 2007 that seems to have smoothed his way formally to the top. Both Hasina and Islam will now be expected to provide the party with the kind of inspiring leadership which can deepen the AL's roots countrywide.

Sheikh Hasina's call to her party workers and leaders to eschew any tendency toward arrogance and greed sends out the right message. Indeed, it should be regarded as a warning to those who have in these past few months not been averse to a crude demonstration of political clout in such places as educational institutions. At the same time, her remarks regarding those who attempted reforms in the Awami League during the period of her incarceration should mark a new beginning for the party considering the conciliatory tone of her message. The party chief was clearly intent on projecting an image of unity in the AL, a task made easier for her by the unalloyed support she appeared to get from the councillors gathered on Friday. Though there may be a few reservations about her emphasis on forgiving those who, in her view, stepped out of line in the caretaker days, there is little doubt that it is a unified party Sheikh Hasina now means to project before the country. She is eminently placed to do that.

For all the hoopla associated with the Awami League council, however, there are some realities about it that cannot be pushed aside. Granted that Sheikh Hasina's position as party chief was unassailable and there would be no challenge to her leadership, there was the hope that a full, open election would be held to elect the general secretary. In the event, it was by a simple voice vote or show of hands that Syed Ashraf Islam was elected to replace Abdul Jalil. To what extent such a method reflected the wishes or involvement of grassroots AL workers remains a question. More important than the election of the party president and general secretary is the manner in which the councillors have empowered the two to choose the other leaders for the party central committee and the presidium. For a party which has throughout its history stressed openness and a commitment to democratic ideals, it was only expected that a fully transparent process of electing members to the central committee and the presidium would be followed. That has not been done. Obviously, such inner workings place a huge question mark on the future of internal democracy in the Awami League or for that matter any significant national political organization.

All said and done, however, we wish the Awami League well as it moves into the future. It is on how it deals with the future that the future of the country, in very large measure, will depend.

Nabbing Rab delinquents

Gaining public confidence should be the force's goal

IT is very disconcerting to come across a recent report of extortion through threat of death by some members of the elite force. We are happy to see that the three Rab men involved in the incident have been handed over to the police for legal action following complaints of extortion of more than Taka ten lakh from a businessman.

While we appreciate the prompt working of Rab's internal mechanism in taking note of the complaint and in initiating action against the offenders without delay, the question is how come such delinquents find place in the ranks of an elite force like the Rab in the first place?

Some incidences of similar nature cannot but raise a degree of apprehension in public mind, not to speak of the great damage they can do to public confidence in the elite force. It is a travesty that those whom people look up to for protection against such criminals are themselves the perpetrators of these felonies.

Given that the force is composed of members of the armed forces and other elite agencies, and a very strict process of selection is gone through before secondment, can the public be expected to repose their trust on it after the very bad example in front of them? One wonders whether public dealings are making the members of the special force susceptible to corruption. If that be so then a foolproof mechanism should be put in place as a safeguard against such proclivity.

We are concerned too at the fact that the victim allegedly was threatened with death by crossfire if he did not pay up. Rab must be alive to the fact that their credibility has taken a great knock due to the many incidents of crossfire and encounter killings. And this allegation, if true, corroborates the accusation of unlawful killings that have been leveled by the media and the human rights organisations from time to time against the elite force.

While curative action is welcome it is more important to ensure that such malaise does not enter the system in the first place. All efforts must be made so that the members of the elite force do not act in a manner that replicates those of the criminals and murderers. Not only should exemplary punishment be meted out to the delinquent members of the force, strict supervision must be also enforced on the ground level operatives at all times.

Is public health a forgotten subject?

Matters of public and social interest are hardly capable of creating that kind of impact on the public mind. The media, too, is not quite prepared to allot as much space for such soft(!) issues as it would for those involving party politics.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

MEDICINE is not just another article of consumption to meet some kind of consumerist demand. It is meant to cure people of their ailments and not to kill them. Sad to say, an analgesic drug called paracetamol, instead of relieving children of their pain, has killed them.

Reports have it that out of some 34 children from different parts of the country suffering from acute renal failure after they were administered paracetamol syrup of a particular brand, 25 have died at the Dhaka Shishu Hospital and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU).

Paracetamol syrup manufactured by Rid Pharmaceutical Company of Brahmanbaria was behind the death of so many children. Though the offending drug company has meanwhile been closed down by the drug regulatory authorities, it is yet to be known how many more children might have fallen victim to this particular brand of paracetamol syrup.

To all appearances the government has

taken the issue seriously. The health minister mentioning that the findings of a primary probe body in his ministry have even identified the poisonous ingredient responsible for the tragedy: diethylene glycol. There is also the four-member probe body constituted by the parliamentary standing committee on health.

What can we expect from such committees? If past experience is any guide, there is no reason to be enthused by another one or two such probe committees on the death of the children from spurious paracetamol syrup.

In the present case, however, we already know the identity of the culprit. It is also known that the drug manufacturer unscrupulously used a poisonous chemical in a medicine meant to relieve pain and bring down temperature, because it was cheaper than the appropriate ingredient called propylene glycol.

How could such an outrage take place in a sector of the industry that is supposed to be engaged in a noble pursuit of serving humanity? Far from demonstrating any semblance of humanity, the company has committed the grave crime of killing children while masquerading as a medi-

cine company!

Granted, the company had no noble intention at all. But how could it get the licence to produce drugs from the government in the first place? What are the criteria for issuing licence to a company that would be producing such a sensitive and vital commodity like medicine?

The lapse of the licencing authorities needs also to be brought under closer scrutiny. How many companies among the 600-odd pharmaceutical firms in the country need also to be brought under fresh scrutiny and their products tested to meet international standards?

The drug administration agency that monitors the activities of the drug companies, the sales of their products, and the stores that deal in them is under-staffed and lacks equipment and other facilities. The existing drug control law in this connection also needs to be updated.

But the inadequacy of manpower, facilities, and law are not the only loopholes through which such dishonest drug companies are able to produce and market such fake medicines.

Efficiency of the drug administration staff as well as their incorruptibility is the most vital condition that has to be ensured so that the population is no more exposed to the dangers of unethical practice by any unscrupulous drug manufacturer.

The government, appropriate law, and an efficient and adequately equipped monitoring mechanism is also not the last word. The public in general should also be

aware in an active manner about the issues that have to do with their health, hygiene, and well-being.

The death of so many children after the use of the analgesic drug in question should have sent a shockwave across the length and breadth of the country. The citizens' groups, the media, the child protection and various rights bodies, and those concerned about the health and hygiene of the citizenry should have by now staged protest demonstrations on the city streets. But nothing like that has happened so far.

It is hardly surprising that we have not come across any such activities by the concerned bodies. For street demonstrations and protests in Bangladesh are generally accepted as the stuff of power and politics and the issues they involve.

Matters of public and social interest are hardly capable of creating that kind of impact on the public mind. The media, too, is not quite prepared to allot as much space for such soft(!) issues as it would for those involving party politics.

It is therefore about time we brought about a change in the prevailing culture of over-enthusiasm regarding party political matters and passivity about issues of public interest. The tragedy of so many children falling victim to a spurious drug made locally is undoubtedly a very serious issue that should stir the public conscience in a very active fashion.

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Finding unity in diversity

Minority groups have a duty to embrace what is good about the dominant culture. However, they should also exercise the right to be critical of any inconsistencies between values and policies. The hallmark of a pluralistic society is to entertain a diversity of views without doubting the loyalty of its citizens.

MUNYEMA HASAN

THE melting pot of cultures no longer applies to just America. Countries like the UK and Malaysia have been veteran hosts to ethnic minorities and immigrants. Dubai is a colourful pie chart which entertains more than 150 nationalities and 83 percent of the population is foreign born. Recent entries to the club are Australia and Canada, with 25 and 20 percent of the population born outside the country respectively. As of today, Canada has the highest per capita immigration rate in the world.

The ethnic and demographic make-up of societies is rapidly changing thanks to globalisation and migration, both internal and external. We have been congratulating ourselves over visions of pluralism and multiculturalism for a while now.

But the youth riots in France, attacks on Indian students in Australia, and conflict between Muslim Uighurs and Han Chinese can pose disconcerting questions for champions of these values. Can we dismiss these events as pockets of xenophobia or are they undercurrents of a brewing discontent?

Multiculturalism has been at work for over a decade trying to bridge gaps in understanding between people. On the surface, we seem to have largely conquered our fear or ignorance of "the other."

Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Whites freely interact with one another. Yet it takes but one event of conflict between dominant and minority groups to catapult sensitive issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and religion into the limelight. In those situations, differences between people, real or imagined, suddenly come to be acknowledged with more zeal.

Difference is good, considering we take British-style multiculturalism. Its multicultural policies have celebrated diversity with much success, but not without pitfalls. Under the cloak of "respecting difference," for example, we may have taken cultural relativism too far. Dreadful practices such as cases of female genital mutilation or domestic violence have gone unreported by social workers to avoid being seen as interfering in other cultures and thereby being labeled racist.

This live and let live attitude has also been blamed for disguising the existence

of unequal opportunities in society. The lack of proper housing, quality education, and employment are frequently problems faced by minority groups. Their frustrations are often manifested through violence, reflecting the absence of appropriate channels to voice grievances. These events only embolden bitterness towards "foreigners." Multiculturalism can hardly be called a success if tolerance stops when these groups become vocal with their criticisms.

The practice of multiculturalism implies defining difference in order to transcend it, but in reality it has stopped at defining difference. And transcending difference can only be done by promoting unity through shared values and equal opportunities.

It is what French-style integration has attempted to achieve, with the exception that unity has been imposed upon immigrants. Being different in this case is valueless. The space and freedom for self-expression and cultural creativity is invisible. But think, dress, talk, and imitate everything about the dominant culture and it will buy you integration. Unquestionable assimilation is the order of the day.

Creating harmony amongst people is an ambitious project, but these laissez-faire and iron-handed approaches have disappointed in multiple ways. Celebrating diversity and promoting unity need not be mutually exclusive. A mature pluralistic society will know how to handle the visibility of differences among people who give allegiance to multiple identities.

It will also, however, form a common

identity that unites people across colour, race and culture when time requires it. This unity must come through shared values of citizenship, which go beyond legal rights and passports, and extend to beliefs in democracy, fairness, equality, diversity, and rule of law.

This is easier said than done. The values and benefits of citizenship should ultimately be attractive enough for people to embrace them by choice, rather than by imposition. It will entail the right to debate and define the values of the nation. And it will entail legal, political, and economic arrangements for the equal participation of all cultures in wealth and social opportunity.

Minority groups have a duty to embrace what is good about the dominant culture. However, they should also exercise the right to be critical of any inconsistencies between values and policies. The hallmark of a pluralistic society is to entertain a diversity of views without doubting the loyalty of its citizens.

Lastly and most importantly, we cannot wish for harmony among people without knowledge about the other. This naturally means a concerted effort to educate ourselves in order to truly appreciate difference. Cultures are not static but are dynamic and ever-changing. To consciously incorporate different ways of being, knowing, and doing is to encourage a cross fertilisation of cultures that will only bring about enlightenment.

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An untidy history

So what is the bottom line? Who established the first permanent European settlement in the US? Were they the Anglicans of Jamestown or the Pilgrims of Plymouth or the Roman Catholics of Puerto Rico and Florida or the French Calvinists of Fort Caroline?

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

WHO established the first permanent European settlement in what is known today as the United States of America? The answer, I am afraid, will depend on who you speak to or whose history book you read.

According to many Anglican historians, Jamestown was the first permanent European settlement on North American soil. This was the reason why in 2007, Queen Elizabeth II visited the United States to attend the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown.

In the history of European colonisation of North America, Jamestown occupies an important place, not only because it was the first English colony that survived the onslaught of hunger, disease, and weather, but also because it is widely acclaimed as a bastion of Christian (Anglican version) civilisation in North America where the first European-style democratic system was introduced.

On the flip side of Jamestown's history are the facts that it started a process which led to the virtual extermination of the

original inhabitants of America and that it also introduced African slavery into North America.

All this is true but in the US, where Puritanism and the Presbyterian Church are strong, many American historians tend to undermine the existence of the history of Jamestown as the first English settlement by creating the foundational myth around the Mayflower Pilgrims and Plymouth.

Plymouth was founded by Pilgrims (separatists from the Church of England) in 1620. These "separatists" who were much influenced by French Calvinism, repudiated the state church and formed voluntary congregations. The Pilgrims, who were being persecuted in England for their religious beliefs, sailed on the "Mayflower" from Plymouth, England and arrived at the New Plymouth area of the US on December 21, 1620.

December 21 is still celebrated as the Forefathers' Day in the United States. The 81-foot National Monument to the Forefathers, which was built on a hill just outside the town, commemorates that distant event. The so-called puritan way of life and the famous American work ethics

symbolise the importance of Plymouth and the Pilgrims in the national history of the United States. Thanksgiving Day, which is celebrated as one of the most important national holidays in the US, was instituted by the Pilgrims of Plymouth in 1621.

This year, King Juan Carlos of Spain visited Florida to attend the 450th anniversary of the founding of St. Augustine, the first permanent Spanish settlement in Florida. Actually, if Puerto Rico is considered as part of the United States of America, the oldest European settlement in the US was founded in Puerto Rico in 1513 by a Spanish explorer called Ponce de Leon. In the same year, Ponce de Leon arrived at a place very near modern St. Augustine and named the entire region as Florida because it was Easter time (Pascua Florida in Spanish) and because of the lush vegetation of the area.

He did not have an opportunity to establish a permanent settlement at St. Augustine because in 1521 he was mortally wounded by the Seminole Indian warriors. That honour went to Admiral Pedro Menendez, who was dispatched by King Philip II of Spain to Florida in 1565, with express orders to "hang and burn the Lutherans" and consolidate the power of Roman Catholicism in the New World.

Who were these Lutherans? What crimes had they committed to provoke so much royal wrath? Actually, they were not Lutherans but French Calvinists (also known as Huguenots). At that time, it was

convenient for the Roman Catholics to lump different groups of Protestants together and describe them as the hated Lutherans.

Fleeing from religious persecution in their native country, these French Calvinists had crossed the Atlantic and established a settlement (Fort Caroline) in Florida in 1564. By most accounts, the settlers did well.

Realising that they needed help from the Indians for their survival, they established friendly relationship with the Indians. They built wooden houses, a mill, and even a bakery. But in 1565, following the Spanish king's orders, Fort Caroline was razed to the ground and most of its inhabitants were massacred by men under the command of Admiral Menendez.

So what is the bottom line? Who established the first permanent European settlement in the US? Were they the Anglicans of Jamestown or the Pilgrims of Plymouth or the Roman Catholics of Puerto Rico and Florida or the French Calvinists of Fort Caroline?

As Professor David Kennedy of Stanford University writes, there are "myriad ways in which history as a way of understanding the world is too often distorted, politicised and badly mishandled." This untidy history about the oldest European settlement in the US is just one more example of how history is manipulated to suit the writer's political and/or religious inclinations.

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