

Pandemonium at BNP meeting disquieting

It throws up some pertinent lessons for political leadership

THE foiling of the council session of the Chittagong city unit of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party amid bedlam in full public glare on Monday is extremely disquieting. No one who believes in democracy wishes to see such pandemonium get the better of an established political party. In the interest of healthy politics in Bangladesh, we expect the BNP to tide over its difficulties and truly emerge as a vibrant and cohesive organization. Its troubles, let us note, should not be a cause for satisfaction on the part of other parties because the pains the BNP is passing through have to do with the bad tradition of nurturing unruly elements and feuds within a party. Such a tendency is to be discerned in varying degrees among other political parties as well. All other parties may, therefore, desist from the temptation of feeling happy at the BNP's discomfiture and indeed hope that such disturbances are defused within the party before long.

The realities today are not hard to notice. While it is customary for the ruling party (whichever party it is at a given time) to hold itself together despite some incipient dissent in the ranks, it is by and large the opposition which finds itself in disarray. Loss of power has generally been a spur to chaos among the rank-and-file. And that is what became obvious once more at the BNP's abortive council meeting in Chittagong.

It all brings us to thoughts of the sane, transparent culture of debate and dissent which once defined political behaviour in the country. Where, we might as well ask, has the old politics of values, of winning hearts through the art of enlightened compromise, gone? In earlier times, dissent within a party was a given and yet this spirit of argument and counter-argument kept parties united and strong. The fact that such is not the case today is a very sad manifestation of the way in which a negative political culture of intolerance has been nurtured over the years.

But none of this would have happened in Chittagong had intra-party democracy been the norm in the party. Had the BNP (or for that matter any other political party) eschewed the opaque and gone for a natural growth of leadership through regular party councils and elections, it would today be an organization able to withstand all sorts of pressure, internal as well as external. An inherent balance and sense of cohesiveness would have underpinned the party, especially in its worst phases. But let this also be a note of caution for other parties --- that internal democracy, the creation of space to allow for dissent and debate, the ability to strike a harmony between different schools of thought are the foundations on which parties thrive and so help democracy to gain in strength.

The sooner our political parties comprehend these truths, the better served will we and our future generations be. In democratic politics, there is no alternative to transparency and a free expression of opinion. A synergy between differing points of view in political parties greatly aids the process of democracy.

Commitment to eradicate hunger still fragile

Rome conference yields inadequate outcome

THE world summit on food security held in Rome in the prelude to the high-profile Copenhagen global climate conference has proved to be long on expression of concerns but short on commitments. That is how generally the outcome has been described by the rather discerning western media.

The commitments to eradication of hunger with which at least one billion people in the world currently go to bed, apart from many more agonising through undernourishment and malnutrition, have fallen short of not only expectations but also requirements.

The one-world vision of food security for the coming decades that the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon spoke of, is still sadly missing. This seems to have been predisposed by the fact that none of the leaders of the developed world, G-8, to be precise, managed to participate in this vitally important food summit.

Although the countries pledged to substantially increased aid to agriculture in developing countries, the commitment lacks in specifics. It falls short of the US dollar 44 billion a year as agricultural aid that the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) reckons will be necessary in the coming decades to match projected population growth. It is estimated that by 2050 world population will reach such a figure that it would entail massive investments to increase global food production by 70 percent from the current level.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a strong plea for a fair and equitable food governance system, so as to reach food to the marginalised and vulnerable across the world. The declaration adopted at the summit emphasised on coordination at national, regional and global levels to provide improved food security.

Bangladesh prime minister quite naturally brought in the climate change dimension saying that Bangladesh stands out as an example of how agricultural production has become hostage to frequent and erratic natural disasters adversely affecting food output in the country. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon also pointed out that climate change and food security issues are intertwined. The message is clear and it needs to be heeded.

Darkness at dawn

These days you get up, or are compelled to, at the very witching hour of the night. Of course, the watch beside your pillow tells you it is six in the morning. But, wait! Why put the blame on the watch? It is the government which tells you it is six in the morning, that the enveloping darkness you see all around you is really dawn in its new colours.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE as a people are going through a most exciting phase in our collective life. Never have so many been hostage to the whims of so few ensconced in such grand pavilions of power. The powers that be decreed months ago that this country and everything in it would move ahead by an hour, the better to conserve some electricity in the evening.

Now, that was a fine idea, though it did take millions of us a pretty long time to get used to getting up earlier than usual, giving ourselves a shake and be off to doing whatever it is we have been doing for years. Come to think of it, we almost persuaded ourselves in believing that finally, at least where daylight saving time was concerned, we had caught up with the more mature West, where people see quite a difference in the way their watches work in summer and winter.

Not many of us complained, of course, in the belief that come winter the wise men and women in the government would, again in happy imitation of foreign lands, take us back to the clock time we had had for generations on end. We waited. Our little babies, tiring themselves out with homework till late in the evening and then sleeping for a few hours before being called back to a new day, waited.

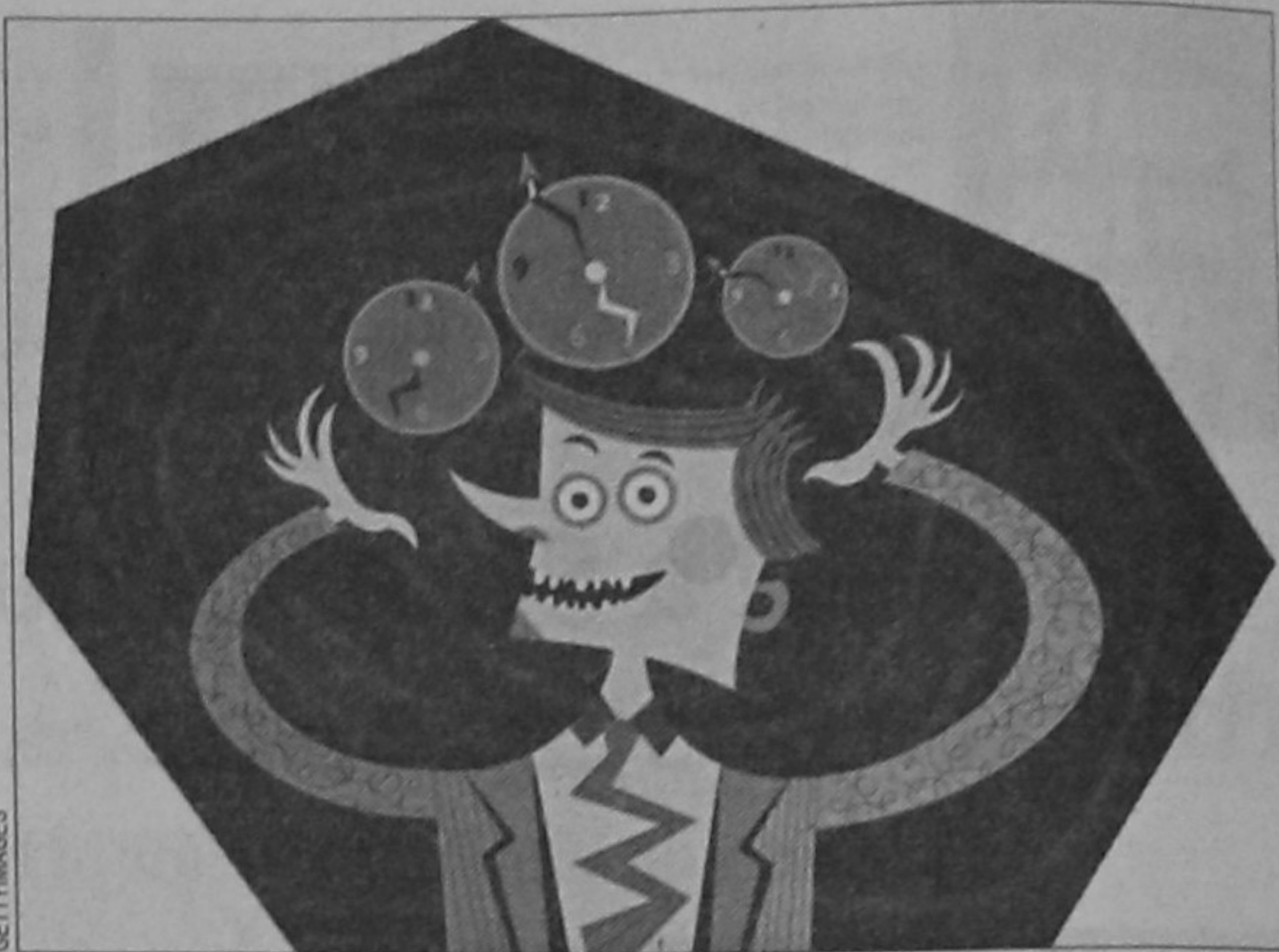
Meanwhile, autumn came along. Outside your window you could feel on your ageing cheeks the early tremors of oncoming winter. In the deepening hours of the night, even as you lay in slumber, your hands moved fur-

tively in search of that essential quilt to keep that invasive cold from seeping into your skin. And then came that hour when the faithful recalled the Almighty through the muezzin's call to prayer. You looked out the window and made a bizarre discovery: night was all over the place. So why was the muezzin remembering God so early? Ah, you remembered. It all had to do with daylight saving time.

These days you get up, or are compelled to, at the very witching hour of the night. Of course, the watch beside your pillow tells you it is six in the morning. But, wait! Why put the blame on the watch? It is the government which tells you it is six in the morning, that the enveloping darkness you see all around you is really dawn in its new colours. Deep inside your heart, though, a little voice whispers that it is five in the morning, that five is different from what some naughty people have begun to describe as digital time.

Time flies and yet there is something adamant about the sky and the sun. The sky refuses to discard its dark raiment; and the sun is in little mood to wake up before its time. Do you see the dilemma here? The government forces you, because you have a job to do, because you have children who must go to school, to rise at an ungodly hour. Its writ does not run on the way the sun conducts its life. Your little son grumbles, for he does not wish to go to school in the night (and it is yet night). That sun ninety three million miles away does not grumble, does not complain. It is beyond the pale of the laws devised by mere mortals.

And so we slog through life in newer pain.



What time is it?

As a nation, we have consistently walked through pain, of various sorts and hues. Life has never been fair to us; and our politicians have had little time to understand, even vicariously, the agony we endure every day and all the nights of our lives.

An advisor to the prime minister (only the Almighty knows why they are there around the head of government and what it is they are expected to do in a political system that has no room for them) tries to enlighten us on the endless benefits accruing from pushing the clock an hour forward. He tries to be dismissive about the time idea in the West. And he and people of his philosophical persuasion truly believe that this relocation of time has been a boon to the country. And well they might say that! The advisor does not have to teach a class at school or college or university early in the morning. And since he outgrew school decades ago, he does not comprehend the thousand and one perils and problems

schoolchildren must endure as they set out for classes in the dark of winter.

Here is the picture, one where you spot the dichotomy between the real world we commoners inhabit and the unreal universe that ministers and bureaucrats in all their majesty live and thrive in. The head of government does not have to leave home at seven in the darkness of dawn. Her ministers will take their own time leaving their beds and making their way to their workplaces. Government employees know they have no worries till nine in the morning.

But in our lives, ladies and gentlemen, it is perpetual night. In that daylight saving time, it is daylight we look for. It is darkness at dawn we battle our way through, even as the wise, powerful ones weave embroidered dreams in their sleep.

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South Korea and ASEAN

South Korea's desire for influence in the region may help ease the rivalry between China and Japan in the region. Asean welcomes more outside players in the region, particularly at a time when China has become too dominant.

HARUN UR RASHID

SOUTH Korea has led a regional rebound with China and Singapore as companies, including Hyundai Motor Co. and Samsung Electronics Co., reported a surge in profits driven by overseas sales.

Gross domestic product expanded 2.6% in the second quarter and 1.9% in the third quarter ending in September.

Furthermore, South Korea's profile has risen in many directions: First, South Korea is the host of next year's G-20 meeting, G-20 take centre stage in global politics and represent two-thirds of the world population, comprise 85% of global gross national product and 80% of world trade (including EU intra-trade).

Second, South Korea has signed a Free Trade Agreement with European Union and its economy is being gradually integrated with EU's economy. Third, the current UN secretary general is a South Korean national.

Until recently, South Korean official presence has been quite muted. Now with the restoration of its economy after the

global recession, it has both confidence and money to make its own mark. Aid has been stepped up and South Koreans have been prominent in disaster relief efforts in Indonesia and the Philippines.

Asean has been a fertile ground of South Korea's influence. Economically, there is nothing new about the South Korean presence in Asean. South Korean companies were the first to set up export factories in Vietnam more than a decade ago.

South Korean investment is found almost anywhere in Asean. South Koreans have bought up golf courses and have dominated the tourist districts in the Philippines. South Korean TV dramas have a huge following in Asean.

Against this background, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak embarked on a visit to Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand from October 20th to 24th.

During the three-day visit to Vietnam, President Lee Myung-bak held talks with President Nguyen Minh Triet, paid a courtesy visit to Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh and met with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

During the talks, the two presidents agreed to elevate the two countries' "comprehensive partnership in the 21st century" to a "strategic cooperative partnership."

The two state leaders reached agreement to further increase visits by and meetings of high-ranking leaders and to establish a strategic dialogue mechanism at the level of deputy foreign minister to help deepen bilateral cooperation.

They have set out to raise two-way trade to \$20 billion by 2015 along with further improving the balance of trade, and to consider the elevation of the project to develop areas along the Hong (Red) riverbanks into a national-scale project.

During his visit to Cambodia, on October 22-23, the South Korean president promised to provide \$200 million in concession loans for 2009 to 2012 to develop the Cambodian economy and society. Together with the above concession loan, it is reported that the governments of both countries also signed nine agreements and memorandums of understanding to strengthen cooperation between Cambodia and Korea.

The South Korean president also said that he saw some positive points for future cooperation between both countries in agriculture and bio-energy. The president focused on cooperation in forestry. The forestry project will become a mechanism for increasing "green" cooperation bilaterally, which can create proper carbon dioxide emission credits and help to control global climate change.

Another field is cooperation in industry, to provide training and education services to the more than 500 enterprises in Cambodia contributing to develop the Cambodian economy. There will be cooperation in building infrastructure where, since the 1970s, Korea has a lot of techniques, capital, and experience, and has constructed infrastructure in Korea and in other countries in electricity, roads, and railroads.

On October 23, President Lee arrived in Thailand to attend to a regional forum hosted by Asean. The Korea-Asean summit was held on October 24th, followed by the Asean Plus Three Summit that involves the leaders of Korea, Japan and China. The bilateral summits largely sought to improve Seoul's ties with Asean members.

The president cemented ties with Asian neighbours at the summit by earmarking half of the \$200 million South Korean East Asia Climate Partnership Fund for cooperative programs in Asean countries.

South Korea's desire for influence in the region may help ease the rivalry between China and Japan in the region. Asean welcomes more outside players in the region, particularly at a time when China has become too dominant. Adding friends in Asean is welcome and the member-countries can fine-tune their balancing act with China -- Asean's largest trading partner.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Developments in leather industry

What is important for Bangladesh is adopting measures to remove post-mortem defects due to inadequate healthcare and improper handling of materials during and after flaying.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

LEATHER is one of the most prospective industries in Bangladesh. It has enough scope for both vertical and horizontal expansion in terms of economic return and social benefits. Leather making is capital-intensive, with labour costs in the region of 10 percent to 15 percent. A tanner has limited opportunities to isolate any high labour cost and shift it to a low-cost area. European and North American tanners and manufacturers have introduced computerisation and robotics to reduce the labour input, rationalise selection and production control, and improve effluent quality and discharge volumes.

In Bangladesh, the manufacturing of wet blue, the chrome tanned semi-processed leather, was featured in 1965. Out of 35 medium to large tanneries, 30 partly mechanised units were owned by non-Bangalees.

With the emergence of Bangladesh, the experienced non-Bangalee tanners abandoned their plants, and a vacuum was cre-

ated in the leather industry. Despite such a situation, the resilient Bangalees have been able to advance fairly well in the sector during the last three decades.

The major problems affecting the Bangladesh leather industry are:

- Inadequate grading of raw hides and skin, collection and curing facilities, and raw stock supply;
- Difficulties in obtaining quick advice on chemical formulas, applications and techniques;
- Lack of R & D facilities, inadequate supply of trained technologists and laboratories for physical and chemical testing; and
- Uncertainties in government strategies, bureaucratic delays and disposal of effluent.

High-grade goatskin and bovine hides provide an excellent base for developing the leather industry.

In addition to existing governmental aid, new measures that need to be adopted for the sector are:

- Providing special training for the high-profile technologists;

- Declaring a long-term policy (covering at least 10 years) for the industry to allow its development without uncertainty;
- Facilitating rapid delivery and providing special facilities to the export of high-value leather and its products.

There are some extreme opinions about the future utilisation of natural leather. Some scientists and economists think that raw hides and skins, which have plenty of protein and, thus, are badly needed in the world for food, are too luxurious to use for footwear. Their share in leather products will, therefore, be minor. For opposing experts, hides and skins will remain relatively cheap by-products. They see the tannery industry as the only economic user that has developed very tolerant processing methods at a fairly sophisticated technical level. They forecast a slight increase in leather utilisation for footwear uppers and leather governments.

As indicated earlier, the leather industry has a very bright future in Bangladesh. What is important for Bangladesh is adopting measures to remove post-mortem defects due to inadequate healthcare and improper handling of materials during and after flaying. Furthermore, the Bangladesh government may consider encouraging tanners to computerise and use robotics in their factories to reduce labour input, and even amortise their micro-electronic equipment to significantly reduce processing costs.

Computerisation helps in rationalising selection and production control. It also improves effluent quality and discharge volumes to obtain control over quality and performance specifications, to monitor inputs and machine performance, to reduce wastage, to stabilise production and above all, to give the basic properties that the manufacturer regards as essential, uniformity within and across the piece, from piece to piece, from batch to batch, and even from tanner to tanner, as well as conformity with specifications and standards.

Leather and its products are major export items for Bangladesh. Due to the global recession, our exports earnings have fallen during the last quarter. However, indications are seen that we shall recover from this slump within a short time.

We should bear in mind that our people are unhappy about the concentration of the leather industry in Hazaribag, and the poor disposal of effluent from the industry, which creates serious environmental hazards. The government must be up and doing to shift the leather factories from Dhaka residential areas at the earliest. Along with the leather industry, the government may try for a rapid improvement in a leather substitute industry because of the high price of natural leather and rapid urbanisation.

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