

Democracy must negate laissez-faire, breed stability

In one of the latest incidents, a teacher of the Rajshahi University was assaulted by some BCL student leaders of the university as he came to the rescue of an admission seeker and tried to foil the extortion bid by these hoodlums. Bizarre incidents are taking place in many parts of the country, but when it happens in the educational premises, a sacred place from where flowering of life starts, one has got to feel wary.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ECONOMIC reforms and infra-structural development launched by the government are moving at snail's pace. Leaving aside the power sector development that is yet to make any headway, the pledges made by the industries minister to revitalise the government-owned sick industries have not yet been fulfilled. For unknown reasons prices of essentials are shooting up and inflation is mounting.

The jute sector, which in the pre-liberation days had been the mainstay of the country's foreign exchange earning, has withered out. The promise of a bright future for all classes of people, which seemed so near after the massive election victory of the AL-led alliance has, in the past one year, been tampered with social polarisation and political bickering.

The BNP's continuous boycott of the parliament session, firstly on the front row seat issue and lately for a ten point demand, has neither brought any good to them nor increased their popularity with the masses. It is true that the ruling party, because of the global recession and fractured political culture inside the country and a lethargic

bureaucratic tradition and legacy, has not been able to translate their skills and their "vision of 20-21" into running a country and restoring the economy to order. But despite the fact that hardship and turmoil still continue to plague the masses, people are still hopeful of an economic rejuvenation.

As it appears, a social fabric free from the curse of poverty and exploitation is still a far cry. Despite the government's firm initiative, there has not been significant improvement in the law and order situation, mostly because of inept police investigation and weak judicial process. At the same time, the growing poverty is pushing marginal citizens into crime.

While the fighting in the political arena goes on unabated, a sizeable portion of the population is undergoing the most severe hardship resulting from homelessness and lack of job opportunities. During the last few years, especially during the BNP-led government, occurrence of crime rose manifold, with burglaries, extortion, trafficking and drug peddling topping the list.

Unhappily, that trend still continues because of the police administration's failure to handle it with a firm hand and without malice, fear or favour. It is ironic that fledgling democracy has released

creativity of all kinds that include criminality -- and added new desires and also frustrations. People now have more ambitions and bigger dreams, which sometimes lead to bigger acts of criminality.

Most factories in the country are facing closure, primarily because of the disruption in power supply and secondly because of the shrinking demand for the shoddy goods they produce and thirdly because of the deplorable condition entailed by lack of BMR facilities. But even as hard times sweep the country, the advent of capital market has created a new moneyed class.

In the absence of laws governing the emerging system, "business" in Bangladesh has become a free-for-all pursuit. By taking advantage of a not so transparent system, savvy entrepreneurs, mafia style business people and infamous syndicates bereft of ethical values, and of course some corrupt government bureaucrats have profited handsomely. This laissez-faire attitude has led to a situation that is totally cataclysmic and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening rapidly.

With agriculture receiving the highest priority in terms of providing uninterrupted power supply to irrigation, subsidy in fertiliser prices, and rice purchase from the producers after this government came to power, the result has been highly encouraging as evidenced by the savings in food import bills. The record production of boro and aman brought down the rice price in the beginning of 2008, but the present rice price hike is partly attributable to some mill owners 'syndicates' clandestine move to hoard rice by advance purchase with a motive to cash in on a crisis situation based on the news that India has banned export of rice.

Despite the government's avowed policy of maintaining a stock of 32 lakh tons of foodgrains as a buffer stock, the target could

not be achieved, possibly because of the lack of storage capacity. As revealed in the press, the government has been able to maintain a stock of 10 lakh tons against a storage capacity of 15 lakh tons. In the present volatile market situation, if a part of this stock is released to augment the present price hike, the government might face a crisis in the lean period.

The problem with the policy machinery is that there is thought and debate as long as the crisis lasts. But the fact is: Food security is not an issue that a cash-starked nation of 150 million people can take lightly. What is needed is a long-term view on the needs and engineering of solutions that survive the test of price cycles.

With success in the food front through boosting of agricultural production and in the education front through holding of primary school final examination and distribution of textbooks to the students in the beginning of the academic year in spite of the burning of the Textbook Board godown, there are some bad omens that still bedevil the good works done by the government during the last one year, mostly coming from a group of greedy BCL cadres, the student wing of the AL.

BCL extortionists and greedy party cadres continue to collect toll in all convenient places -- markets, business houses and bus corners. Tender manipulation and influence peddling indulged in by the BCL cadres have greatly thwarted the development works and tarnished the image of the party and the government. Even teachers in the educational institutions who have always commanded respect from all sections of the populace have not been spared from their nefarious attack.

In one of the latest incidents, Anupam Hira Mondol, a teacher of the Rajshahi University folklore department was assaulted by some BCL student leaders of the university as he came to the rescue of an

admission seeker and tried to foil the extortion bid by these hoodlums. Bizarre incidents are taking place in many parts of the country, but when it happens in the educational premises, a sacred place from where flowering of life starts, one has got to feel wary.

A report published in the Prothom Alo on January 5 indicated that Akkelpur upazila AL president in Joypurhat was vying for the post in Tilakpur United Degree college, and to prove his worth he managed to get the recommendation of an AL MP in the reserved women's seat in Bogra. With the principal's refusal to endorse this recommendation, he got the MP's recommendation approved by the National University, and this time he was accorded a rousing reception along with gifts that included a boat made of gold.

It was not clear from the report whether Upazila AL president Moksed Ali Mondal was ever a distinguished educationist of the area or if he had any contribution to the development of education in the area that earned him such a costly gift. Ironically, this "culture" still exists even after the prime minister, in a similar incident in Natore, detested such practice and asked her party men to shun such decorations.

Another report published in the Prothom Alo indicated that despite reports of irregularities in the recruitment process of cooks and sweepers in the DMCH, and while an investigation of such irregularities was under way, appointment letters to the "chosen" recruits were issued by one deputy director of the hospital (now on LPR) from his residence. People wonder if an appointment letter having no memo number could be issued by an officer enjoying LPR, and that also from his residence!

In the interest of protecting the image of the government and maintaining transparency, people hope that the prime minister

might ask some of her advisers to investigate all such reports of malpractices. It is worth noting here that Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill, during World War II, attached importance to reports coming from his adversaries more than his cabinet colleagues and intelligence agencies.

Against the backdrop of such dismaying incidents there are, however, some events to cheer about. A report published in the Prothom Alo on January 5 said that a teacher of Bagha Primary school in Rajshahi, who offered special coaching to backward and meritorious students to help them attain better grades in the just concluded primary final examination without charging any fees, only with the objective of raising the standard of the school, has been awarded a travelling fellowship for a week to the Indonesian capital Jakarta under "School Management and Participation Programme" of the government. The recognition or reward, however small, will offer incentives to the meritorious and committed workers in every sphere of the administration.

With democratic norms and spirit taking roots in the country, people have pinned great hopes on the present leadership. No wonder, the ruling party has taken great strides towards transforming the country into a free and open society. But the disastrous state of economy the country inherited has made that exceptionally difficult. But it should also be noted that the task the bureaucratic administration is doing falls far short of the expectation of the people. If the government falters, may fails, the consequences will reverberate throughout the length and breadth of the country.

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Alternative to Congress?

There is no opposition party which can provide an alternative to the Congress. Its arrogance and that of its governments at the Centre and in the states has violated the rule of law irreparably. The party has done very little to check the food prices, rising by 20 per cent in the last six months. The lower half is suffering the most. Power has corrupted the Congress.

KULDIP NAYAR

ON its 125th birth anniversary, the Congress put up a hoarding to focus attention on five leaders: Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. Party president Sonia Gandhi's love for her dynasty is understandable. But the limelight on them distorts history.

No doubt, Nehru was from the dynasty. But he loved all and did so much for the country that his imprint is still fresh on the institutions he built. A democratic, pluralistic constitution was his gift to the nation. He wielded all the power but never misused it.

The three others, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, have used the Congress as an instrument not of betterment and reform, but of power which has degenerated into the techniques of deceit and smear. All the three do not merit the distinction that Nehru commands.

Indira Gandhi has to her credit the suspension of fundamental rights and the detention of more than one hundred thousand people in jail without trial.

During Rajiv Gandhi's regime, the authorities and many Congress leaders connived at the killing of 3,000 Sikhs in Delhi. Sonia Gandhi presided over the meeting of top party leaders who exposed the country to the balkanization with the decision to create a new state of Telangana.

True, Rahul Gandhi, Sonia's son, is making waves. But putting him along with Nehru gives us peep into the thinking of the powers that be. It is unfair to him as much as to the party. He would like to earn his position and be judged by his performance, not because of his dynasty ties. The projection of Rahul Gandhi forecloses other options in the Congress. By showing Rahul at the head of five leaders in the hoarding presupposes his qualities of leadership which he has yet to prove.

Indeed, the Congress has come a long way from the days when it was founded by a Britisher, A.H. Hume, in 1884 to the present when Sonia Gandhi, an Indian of Italy origin, presides over it. Yet the person who converted the Congress into a people's party was Mahatma Gandhi. The organizers could not help him giving prominence.

But he was not in the hoarding which showed only the dynasty. Even otherwise, the Mahatma would have been out of place except with Nehru.

Nowhere on the Congress radar Maulana Abul Kalam Azad figures. A tall leader in the national struggle who sacrificed all has been practically forgotten by the party. His photo is seldom displayed at Congress sessions. He was called "a show boy of Hindus." Still this did not bother him because he felt that the division would affect Muslims in the long run.

Over the years, the values of the Congress have changed. It was austere in its approach. Today the five-star culture has taken over the party. On corruption especially, there was a zero tolerance. Nehru shunted out K.D. Malviya from the cabinet because he took money in the name of the party and did not inform about it.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, mentioned the least in the present Congress set-up, made Punjab chief minister Pratap Singh Kairon resign because the Justice Das Commission held him guilty on a trivial charge. But neither Rajiv Gandhi nor Sonia Gandhi found anyone guilty for the Bofors gun scandal. The case against middleman Ottavio Qattarachi, an Italian and the family friend, is sought to be closed. Jharkhand's Madhu Koda, who has made more than Rs 4,000 crore, in less than two years, was the Congress nominee to head the government.

The Congress has also converted public functionaries into instruments to carry out the party's orders. And they, bureaucrats, have played havoc with the country. But other political parties that have ruled at the

Centre and in the States are no better. They, too, have erased the thin line between right and the wrong, moral and immoral. The BJP is most to blame. Its Hindu Rashtra policy, dictated by the RSS, has tried to sink the minority communities in the sea of communalism in a country which is pluralistic.

The good news is that the BJP is going down the hill rapidly. Its strength came down from 138 to 116 in the Lok Sabha election held last May. In contrast, the Congress won 206 seats in the 543-member house. The BJP and its allies lost in eight states, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Haryana, Orissa, Rajasthan and Sikkim which went to the polls last year. The defeat is reportedly the reason why the RSS has taken direct charge of the party. Its leaders do not, however, want to face the fact that fundamentalism does not sell any more. One fears lest the party should try what it did in Gujarat, the state-sponsored killings, in Mahdy Pradesh and Chattisgarh where it rules.

The Left is still licking its wounds. Their tally of 64 in the Lok Sabha has come down to mere 16. There is a strong emergence of opposition in West Bengal and Kerala where they rule. The anti-incumbency factor may play a part in the defeat of leftist governments in both the states. Even otherwise, the youth which once provided cadre to the communists is more attracted by the corporate sector than Karl Marx. In fact, the Maoists have come to be considered leftists. The communists are seen at best as the radical Congressmen.

Regional outfits like Mulayam Singh's



Samajwadi Party and Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal, are in a shambles. The only regional party that has won the state election is the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa. The DMK in Tamil Nadu and Janata Dal (United) in Bihar are yet to pass the muster. Mayawati, the dalit leader who is UP chief minister, is losing her ground. The result of the by-elections in the state indicates this.

Therefore, there is no opposition party which can provide an alternative to the Congress. Its arrogance and that of its governments at the Centre and in the states has violated the rule of law irreparably. The party has done very little to check the food prices, rising by 20 per cent in the

last six months. The lower half is suffering the most. Power has corrupted the Congress. Absolute power may corrupt the party absolutely.

There has to be an alternative party committed to secularism and public welfare. A viable opposition is necessary in a democratic state so as to keep the government on its pins. India's graph of clean administration and basic human rights is dipping. The more the Congress occupies the space the lesser would be the attention paid to the values. The dynastic politics which is embracing the states as well is ominous.

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Continuing education is a necessary skill

Location, audiences, and occasion should be kept in mind while delivering any speech. The speech needs to be crafted in such a manner that is acceptable to its audience. Once Plato had this to say: "A wise man speaks because he has something to say, a fool because he has to say something."

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE right to an education is a fundamental human right which has been enunciated in Article 2 of the first Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights. Similarly, the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 ensures this right. Sincerely educated people are the key to the development of a civil society. In particular, for those who are trusted by the people to run the country, continuing education is a necessary skill.

As a part of education, there is an imperative need to train lawmakers, both in the governing coalition and the opposition, to communicate the message in an appropriate manner and an opportune moment to people at home and abroad. The message should be based precisely on issues. Speeches without substance and message fall on deaf ears. Speeches should reflect truth and fact to have the attention of their target audiences. In these

speeches, many different interests and issues can be addressed to bring under the broader canvas of a unifying political philosophy. If the leader cannot write his own speech, which has substance, he should take the help of experts. It is the sign of a thoughtful intelligent person.

Parliament lawmakers play an important role in society. They are not only making the laws of the country, but also representing the constituency and overseeing the well-being of the country at all times. The law-making procedure is really cumbersome. It needs analytical minds to examine any bill or review the enforcement of laws as well. A law should be made in the interest of the progress of the society in conformity with the constitution, not to harass the people. Bills should be debated before being placed for voting. Financial policies need thorough examination while the budget should be thoroughly scrutinised from the people's point of view. Here, the roles of government and opposition lawmakers are very important. Generally, lawmakers from the govern-

ment bench give credit to the finance minister without criticism. That is wrong indeed. The government's foreign policy should also be a matter of scrutiny in the parliament. It is really intriguing and worth noting that no debate has ever been held on the foreign policy of the country.

We need to invest in proper education and training at all levels of governance. Increasing the quality and availability of education is a very important tool for a country's national security and domestic well-being. Former US President John F. Kennedy once said, "A free nation can rise no higher than the standard of excellence set in its schools and colleges." The government should ensure quality education in schools, colleges and universities. Ignorance and illiteracy is the product of a failure of our education system, which is obsolete indeed. Along with our prescribed curriculum, we should also introduce literature and art competitions, science and technology fairs, games and athletic competition in our colleges and universities. Specifically, debates on national and international issues of importance in English should be held on a regular basis. Science education must concentrate on advanced math, physics and chemistry. We must invest in the modernisation of our science and technical institutions. In view of the deteriorating standard of education, the government may consider devising mechanisms to monitor quality improvement. If any educational institute does not come up to the government's expectations, it should be closed down.

The comments by a justice of the High Court, the Honourable Nozrul Islam Choudhury, that "clerks prepared the laws and the illiterate MPs pass them with applause by thumping tables in the house," caused uproar. A justice of the High Court has pointed out his lack of knowledge of lawmakers in the country. Knowingly or unknowingly, the justice himself makes sweeping derogatory remarks against lawmakers. His thinking process lacks knowledge. Some people might think he is saying the right thing in a sarcastic manner!

The use of words lies not in the word itself, but in its application. A word may be a fine-sounding one, and yet, the manner in which it is introduced may be pointless and redundant. It seems there is an absence of proper basic education and training in objective reading and writing in this country.

I wrote this article after attending an event celebrating the December 16th Victory Day organised by the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC. I had the opportunity to listen to a number of speeches, including that of the visiting minister for industries. The event's audience was mixed, with both Americans, including representatives from the state department, and expatriate Bangladeshi-Americans, including the first vice-chairman of the Bangladesh Planning Commission Professor Nurul Islam. Bangladeshi expatriates are mostly an educated class and belong to professional groups.

The minister for industries spoke for

about twenty minutes in Bangla. The main theme of his speech was showering praise on Sheikh Mujib for his contribution to making Bangladesh an independent country while his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, serves the country pragmatically. The minister touched on six points: the March 7th speech, the declaration of independence by unheard voices, the massacre of army officers at the BDR headquarters, the conspiracy theory to dislodge the elected government and claims of cabinet members being above corruption, etc. etc.

First of all, the Minister did not follow the chronology of events leading to victory day. He should have realised that he was speaking to sophisticated gatherings in a foreign land. Instead of delivering his speech in English, he spoke in Bangla. Had there been a provision for simultaneous translation, speaking in Bangla would have made sense. Second, he neither spoke about the ministry of industries programs, nor urged the people to uphold the spirit of Victory Day and call upon expatriate Bangladeshis to contribute to building Bangladesh as a happy and prosperous country. The manner in which he presented his speech sounded like a public speech at the Paltan maidan. The audience did not receive any message whatsoever.

Another lawmaker: Sarah Kabori, who joined the event halfway through, spoke of the country's independence day and recited a poem by Nirmalendu Goon. Unfortunately, she didn't notice the big sign showing that the embassy was observing Victory Day, not Independence Day.

An American Professor in Medicine William Greenough, who served in Bangladesh in ICDDRDB for about a decade, including during the war of liberation, gave a good and objective account of achievements in Bangladesh. William Greenough gave high marks to Senator Edward Kennedy for his positive role during the Bangladesh war of liberation. Ambassador Akramul Qader spoke briefly in English. On the other hand, Oli Mohammed, an expatriate Bangladeshi residing in Houston, Texas spoke clearly in English about the need for the present generation to uphold the ideal of the liberation movement and preserve unity, secularism and democracy. Oli Mohammed represents Friends of the Liberation War Museum and brought mobile exhibits relating to the liberation war.

As shown, location, audiences, and occasion should be kept in mind while delivering any speech. The speech needs to be crafted in such a manner that is acceptable to its audience. Once Plato had this to say: "A wise man speaks because he has something to say, a fool because he has to say something."

It is strongly felt that there is a need to open a training institute for lawmakers, as well as for other bureaucrats and the armed forces, where they would learn the process of speech-making and etiquette. Learning is a process and we all should embrace it with an open mind.

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