

Rabid criminalisation of student politics

Onus on major political parties to act decisively

THE armed encounters on Monday of feuding Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) groups on the Dhaka University Campus with the BCL supporting one faction have had a telling fallout badly souring academic atmosphere in the process. As many as 24 were hurt and, amidst a brandishing of lethal weapons, a strike was promptly called in a ludicrous show of self-righteousness.

Outsiders trespassed on to the campus with a pile of weapons and what their identity was nobody knew or the reports didn't indicate either. But it's a well-known fact that non-students have a way of intruding on to the varsity premises whenever some trouble had been brewing. The intrusion of outsiders, open display of arms on the campus, factious clashes, trading of gun shots -- all of these unfolded in a rapid sequence right before the eye of law enforcers who preferred to look the other way just to save their skin.

It is the BNP-nominated committee that was physically resisted by those deposed from their previous positions. There was trading of blame that 'tested and dedicated' student leaders were dropped in favour of allegedly a reformist vintage of the aged type. Basically, it's a turf war within a student body. So, there are as much inter-party rivalries which took on violent forms as there are intra-party factional fights both between and within the JCD and the BCL. Actually far removed from its ideological and principled moorings, student politics has become more of a business than espousing the causes of the students. Criminalisation of student politics has thus grown over time through a combination of factors cited above.

The way the political parties, and, especially the police behave in such situations gives rise to a suspicion that perhaps they want the students to fight. Why? Because all said and done student politics is the mirror-image of national politics, a continuation of the same only in a different form in the face of which all seem to be helpless.

There is a strong suspicion in the public mind that the leaders of major political parties while cultivating their own student following are often indulgent to them to the detriment of party discipline and credibility. Who benefits from student violence but the trouble makers themselves?

After a two-year lull this eruption of student violence has taken place. Thus, this is a matter for serious analysis by the political parties who must own up the responsibility for such student excesses and work to reverse the trend to foster congenial atmosphere in the educational institutions. And it is the government party that must lead the way.

Honouring our foreign friends in 1971

Though belated, it is highly welcome

THE move by the government to officially honour individuals abroad who supported the cause of our freedom during the War of Liberation in 1971 has been a long time coming. Truth be told, it should have been for the authorities in independent Bangladesh to accord formal honour to these friends in the time of our greatest need soon after the war drew to a close and as we set about rebuilding the country. Even so, that such a move has now been taken by the government is commendable and is surely reflective of the fact that for all our travails in these nearly four decades since winning the war, we have not forgotten those whose support overseas gave our cause a huge moral and political boost.

History is replete with instances of individuals coming to the aid of people struggling to free themselves of foreign domination. During the American war of independence in 1776, brave Frenchmen identified themselves with the cause of a people who wished to be free of British rule. In the Second World War, it was a grateful France that honoured the Allied forces liberating it from Nazi occupation. In our particular instance, there were friends aplenty we found around the world loudly raising their voices against the genocide launched by the Pakistan occupation army. Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny denounced the atrocities in a message to General Yahya Khan. In the United States, Senator Edward Kennedy was vociferous in his support for Bangladesh and went visiting the refugee camps in India despite the tilt toward Pakistan the Nixon administration had taken. Peter Shore in Britain did for us a commendable job of arousing public support and bringing to light the plight of our nation. In India, beginning with Mrs. Indira Gandhi, whole sections of society came forward in defence of our cause. The ageing French intellectual Andre Malraux offered to take our side in the war in the interest of morality.

And we cannot, of course, forget the invaluable contributions made by artists and journalists, apart from others, to our cause in 1971. George Harrison, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, will forever be the recipient of national gratitude for popularising our struggle through a concert at New York's Madison Square Garden in August 1971. How much we remember Ravi Shankar. Newsmen like Simon Dring, Anthony Mascarhenas and Mark Tully lifted the lid on the truth of Pakistan's atrocities in occupied Bangladesh. Even Ahmed Salim, the young Pakistani poet, dared to raise his voice within his country against the genocide.

These are men and women we must honour. Their support and their encouragement injected dynamism and energy into our battle to free our land of foreign occupation. Let the government move swiftly into making a formal acknowledgement of their contributions and let it all be made part of the history curriculum in our schools.

Politics is a search for grandeur

Politics eschews the petty. It has no room for squabbles. It is not a place for thievery. It throws up men like Charles de Gaulle, who then proceed to rediscover their nations in order to remould them in the brilliance of historical greatness.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1961, only months into his presidency, John Fitzgerald Kennedy saw his plans over the Bay of Pigs crumble in a heap all around him. The mercenaries sent to oust Fidel Castro from power were swiftly cut down by Cuban forces. Kennedy was unnerved enough not to provide the Cuban exiles with air cover and simply folded up the operation. Depressed, he asked Richard Nixon, his rival at the November 1960 election, to come over to the White House for a conversation. The two men talked. Nixon gave Kennedy some sage advice on policy making and implementation. The president was grateful.

It was politics operating at the bipartisan level. And politics comes best when its practitioners realise that national

interests, sometimes global priorities, are served well when they rise above party, when they decide to talk between and among themselves in order to reach common ground on what needs to be done and how it can be done.

In the days before Bangladesh's liberation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spotted the opportunities offered by cooperation with those of his political peers who saw little reason to agree with him. He kept in touch with them and they with him. They met over tea, at dinner; they laughed, they bantered even as they held on to their positions and explained to one another why they needed to do that.

In the 1960s, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Nurul Amin, Mohan Mia, Hamidul Haq Chowdhury and Moulvi Farid Ahmed cultivated politics on the heights. They

did not allow it to dwindle to the petty and the personally antagonistic.

There are swathes of people in the Bangladesh political class who will today remind you that it took as many as three hundred years for political tolerance and accommodation to become the norm in the West. No one questions that fact, but to suggest that we in Bangladesh need the same quantum of time before we can build a proper democratic society for ourselves is absurd. We need no excuses for our shortcomings. But we do need to learn from the sophistication which politics in countries such as Britain has evolved into.

Britain is regular witness to its prime minister and its opposition leader engage in serious debate in the House of Commons on national issues. The two men stand side by side to listen to the Queen's address to Parliament. At Prime Minister's Question time (PMQs), seriousness of debate is often punctuated by refreshing doses of humour. And it all reminds citizens that these politicians and their parties do care about the country's future, that politics for them remains above individual enmity.

It was the petty and the personal that Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsangvirai needed to cast away in their search for political compromise in Zimbabwe. After years of confrontational, often violent, politics the two men went ahead into the business of reaching a deal, however tenuous, on how the country should be governed. Today, Mugabe is president (he has been since 1980) and Tsangvirai operates as prime minister.

Back in the early 1990s, it was a rainbow coalition Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk forged in South Africa. The goal was simple and noble; the past had to be left behind and the future needed to be seized. In the 1990s, India's Congress-led government despatched opposition leader Atal Behari Vajpayee to Geneva to speak for the country on issues that mattered to the whole nation. It was an

enlightening instance of purposeful politics at work.

Politics is never about politicians hurling terrible epithets at one another. It is not about ruling circles smelling things rotten about the opposition. It is never about the opposition being assailed by thoughts of the country being put up for auction by the powers that be. It is, indeed, always about a demonstration of the best and the beautiful about men and women who go to power or dream of going to power.

Politics assumes grandeur when Barack Obama, flanked by Bill Clinton and George Bush, announces a recovery program for Haiti. Politics makes men of divergent views come together, over tea or at funerals. In 1981, Ronald Reagan asked his predecessors to speak for America at the last rites for Egypt's Anwar Sadat. Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter turned up in Cairo.

Months before her assassination in Rawalpindi, Benazir Bhutto signed a Charter of Democracy with her implacable foe Nawaz Sharif in London. These days, for all their differences, Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari do not fail to keep in touch. In the national assembly, Yusuf Raza Gilani goes beyond his party and reaches out to all Pakistanis. Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak are men of dissimilar temperament and yet they are part of one and the same government in Israel today.

Politics eschews the petty. It has no room for squabbles. It is not a place for thievery. It throws up men like Charles de Gaulle, who then proceed to rediscover their nations in order to remould them in the brilliance of historical greatness. And they do that through searching for -- and finding -- living symbols of wisdom their countries are in need of. Think here of Andre Malraux.

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Code of conduct

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M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

ON January 14, ruling Awami League lawmaker Saber Hossain Chowdhury moved a private members' bill styled "The Members of Parliament Conduct Bill 2010" in the House to enact a code of conduct for lawmakers to ensure high moral standards.

Newspaper reports suggest that the bill proposes formation of a nine-member ethics committee headed by the speaker. The committee, having representatives from lawmakers of all political parties, will take cognisance of any reported incident, investigate it, recommend punishments for the lawmakers violating the law and oversee its implementation.

The bill proposes that lawmakers will not resort to any illegal way of securing their own or others' interests, and that they should maintain their lifestyles to avoid conflicts of interests. Lawmakers will not recommend any type of recruitment, promotion, transfer or seniority for anyone. They will not stand in the way of guaranteeing impartiality in the law enforcing agencies, judiciary and other bodies, and will refrain from influencing government decision on public procurement. If they receive gifts worth more than Tk. 5,000, they will deposit those to the government. They must not accept any gifts that can influence their decisions as lawmakers.

On the matter of "freedom of speech" in Parliament, the bill says that lawmakers' speeches must follow the norms of democracy and tolerance. They must not be involved in character assassination, personal attacks, or unwarranted criticism or praise. They should consciously avoid causing harm to any individual who does not enjoy the same privileges. They should not knowingly mislead the Parliament or the public through their statements, and will correct Parliamentary records as soon as possible when incorrect statements are made unintentionally.

The bill proposes that the ethics committee present a report on its activities every year, which will be made public.

In his statement supporting the bill, lawmaker Chowdhury said that he had

initiated the bill as often there were reports in the newspapers that lawmakers were involved in influencing government or private decisions to secure their personal or political interests. The bill, if passed into law, would make lawmakers accountable to their conscience and impose an obligation on them to avoid conflict of interests.

The bill was sent to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions for further scrutiny.

The parliaments of a number of countries, including the EU Parliament and the House of Commons in the United Kingdom, have codes of conduct that lay down obligations and behavioural standards for their members. Studies have shown that the effect of a code of conduct is generally felt in four different areas: (a) in a benefit to society in general, by enhancing the rule of law; (b) in the relationship between members and their electorate; (c) in the relationship of members with their peers; and (d) as a yardstick for members themselves.

In Bangladesh, civil society members, the media and the anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), have been pleading for more than a decade for a code of conduct for lawmakers, mainly to stop the culture of parliament boycott by the opposition, prevent misuse of their privileges by the lawmakers, and make them accountable to their conscience.

The placement of the aforesaid code of conduct bill in the House has been welcomed by the people, the media and the TIB. An online poll by *The Daily Star* shows that 93.7% have opined that enactment of a code of conduct for lawmakers is necessary to ensure their high moral standards.

While welcoming the placement of the bill, *The Daily Star's* editorial of January 16 said that even though there was hardly any precedent of enacting a private member's bill, this one merited special consideration in view of the pressing nature of the need for a code of conduct which would be designed to ensure high standards of morality and ethics within and outside the Parliament in the discharge of the lawmakers' duties.



Laying down the law.

While hailing the bill, the TIB in a statement on January 16 said that the transformation of the bill into a law would not only fulfill a key electoral pledge of the ruling AL, but also would go a long way in institutionalising democracy, promoting democratic practices and meeting public expectation. The TIB urged all concerned especially, the lawmakers, to take immediate steps to enact the bill as a law and meet public expectation.

According to the rules of procedure of the Parliament, "private member" means a member other than a minister, either from the treasury bench or the opposition bench. Saber Hossain Chowdhury is the first private member to place three bills in the current Parliament. He moved two other bills styled "Oppression and Custodial Deaths (Prevention) Bill 2009," and "Eviction of Slum Dwellers from Government Land (Prevention) Bill 2009" in the House on November 10, 2009. Those two bills were sent by the

speaker to the relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee for further scrutiny, and their fate is still unknown.

It may be mentioned that the Bangladesh Parliament has a poor record of passage of private members' bills. Available records show that out of over 300 bills submitted by private members, only 6 (all from treasury bench lawmakers) have been passed since independence.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury has earned the people's appreciation by placing "The Members of Parliament Conduct Bill 2010" in the House in his capacity as a private member. He has acted as the conscience of the Parliament. Will the government and the Parliament, which is heavily dominated by the AL members, take the bill in good grace? The people will, therefore, be watching the fate of the bill with great interest.

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