

Tale of the tail-hangers

After showing disrespect to August 15, they are now out to defile March 7. Some over-enthusiastic tail-hangers in the party have concocted the idea of observing March 7 as the day "their great leader was sent to jail."

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THERE is a Bangla word *lejurbritti* to explain what sycophants can do and undo for a political leader by positioning themselves at the tail end. Whether they do more than they do anything worthwhile is a debate that will rage on for eternity. For the time being, if you allow, I would like to take the opportunity to coin the hyphenated word "tail-hangers" to depict characters who remain hanging by the tail of their leaders to do all sorts of unbelievable things for *ruti-rojger* -- to earn a few crumbs that is. If the leader kicks them they would say: "It was the political necessity of the moment and by kicking my butt the leader has created history." And thus the tail-hangers thrive and continue to make their presence felt

in Bangladeshi politics.

Politics would lose its charm if those tail-hangers were not around. They have been active in this part since the day Pakistan was created. These guys were always around as governments came and went by the dozen to keep the tamuddun of Pakistan intact. No matter who was in power, they would have their bagpipe and bugle under their armpit to let the world know about the great works their leaders were doing. And the pea-brain leaders could hardly realise what damage those tail-hangers were doing to their career.

With the creation of Bangladesh those tail-hangers quickly changed the tails they had been hanging by. From Pakistan lovers they became Bangladesh lovers overnight and began to swing from one tail to

another during the rule of Bangabandhu, of Ziaur Rahman, of H.M. Ershad, of Khaleda Zia and of Sheikh Hasina. They were responsible for whatever bad name the governments of the past had earned. Despite warnings from well-wishers, many of the leaders listened to their whippers and took wrong decisions. Thus, tail-hangers often succeeded in keeping worthy people away from the leaders.

Perhaps the best example of tail-licking was set some years ago when some of the tail-hangers could persuade their great "uncompromising" leader to observe her birthday on a day when the entire nation mourned the assassination of the architect of Bangladesh, the Father of the Nation. The sudden announcement of the birthday had stunned the nation, and even some sensible politicians belonging to the same party had expressed their disapproval of such tail-licking.

On that extremely mournful day, the tail-hangers collect a large birthday cake and cut it without an iota of shame or remorse, laughing and clapping around the leader who possibly has no faculty to feel that they were not doing the right

thing. They remain engrossed in their own distorted belief that what they were doing was called politics. But they are wrong. The birthday mockery, the laughter and the clapping cannot play down the sense of grief that takes possession of the nation outside the four walls of the birthday house.

Though they claim to believe in multi-party democracy and the creation of Bangladesh through the War of Liberation, they do not hesitate to be extremely disrespectful to the leader who had fought for the rights of the Bangalis against the Pakistanis since the fifties. Those tail-hangers never stop for a while to contemplate that most of their leaders would not have been anything more than muhurs in lower courts or shop-owners in their villages if Bangladesh had not been created. For that reason only they should show respect to the architect of Bangladesh.

In the latest binge of tail-licking, senior leaders of the same "democratic" political party have now come up with another "brilliant" idea of doing politics. After showing disrespect to August 15, they are now out to defile March 7 (imagine there are barristers, former vice-chancellors, university teachers, former army chiefs and highly educated people in that party). Some over-enthusiastic tail-hangers in the party have concocted the idea of observing March 7 as the day "their great leader, the prince, was sent to jail."

Senior leaders of the party, former ministers, went into fits of frenzy while talking about the "leader" who has yet to come out clean from various charges of corruption. The leader, having no academic background or exceptional brilliance as a political thinker, always remained protected under his mother's wings. And yet those veteran politicians, some of them freedom fighters in various capacities, are now ready to submit their career at the feet of such a man! All for a few crumbs! By Jove! What is left for the politicians to do next? Imagine! The man who personified corruption in this country is now being hailed by the tail-hangers as their leader!

Can this country ever expect ushering in of literate and honest people in politics and government? Why do tail-hangers always get the upper hand in pushing the unworthy into the front row?



Thou art the greatest, O king!

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Count the numbers when the numbers begin to count

Mukherjee finished his speech without a tremor, and Singh sat unperturbed on his front bench seat. They had learnt at primary school that governments do not fall because of numbers, they fall when they become uncertain or indecisive or provocative.

M.J. AKBAR

THOSE who began counting the number of MPs left inside the Lok Sabha when Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee finished his budget speech, before empty opposition benches, have a weak memory. They forgot where Pranab Mukherjee and Dr. Manmohan Singh, the two men who run this government, learnt their ABC. Pranab Mukherjee had a headmistress called Indira Gandhi. Manmohan Singh went to the more complicated seminary presided over by P.V. Narasimha Rao.

To clear any residual confusion, the prime minister is a politician of the more subtle kind. He was less of a politician when he was Rao's finance minister, which is why he would get exasperated and at least once sent in his resignation (which Rao ignored). He has now learnt to make the pace of power an ally rather than an adversary.

For the record, during the last phase of the budget speech, the government had only 274 MPs on its side, which is as bare a majority as is possible to have. Mukherjee finished his speech without a tremor, and Singh sat unperturbed on his front bench seat. They had learnt at primary school that governments do not fall because of numbers, they fall when they become uncertain or indecisive or provocative.

Mukherjee was a cabinet minister when Indira Gandhi ran her government for over two years without a majority in the House. Singh was finance minister of a minority government for at least three budgets; in fact, Rao began to wobble only after he purchased a majority in the House.

Perhaps this was the moment when Dr. Singh transitioned from bureaucrat to politician; survival in office became more important than the means by which he and his prime minister survived.

The prime minister and finance minister know that their government is safe because while the opposition may threaten it with a sequence of actions, it is not yet ready for the consequence, a general election. Not a single opposition

party, apart perhaps from Mayawati's BSP or possibly Jayalitha's AIADMK, would gain from an election, and some will certainly be whittled further. It is not just the government that knows this; opposition parties do as well. And yet the walkout by all opposition parties on Friday was neither insignificant nor meaningless.

For starters, it was not spontaneous. It could not have been premeditated since no one knew that the finance minister would send out a cordial invitation to a few bulls while sitting in a china shop packed with price-rise cutlery. But the joint action was indicative of an unspoken understanding that has been building among opposition parties. This has been developed out of a pragmatic assessment of predicament. The last election results were a clear signal that if the Congress is not checked, it will swallow up most of

their space, and do so without even an ungainly burp.

Ideology, therefore, has to make way for strategy. The Marxists cannot block the Congress in Madhya Pradesh; and the BJP cannot challenge the Congress in Bengal or Kerala. But it is in their common interest to keep the Congress down to what might be called manageable numbers in parliament.

This thought cannot have escaped some of the allies of the Congress in the government. Much as Mamata Banerjee may want to destroy the Marxists, she will not play second fiddle to Congress in the process. Some Congressmen are whispering about a privately commissioned opinion poll that suggests Congress would win if it fought alone in Bengal. If such whippers reach Ms. Banerjee, expect a circuitous response.

In politics, the surest way to break your leg is to try and win the Olympic gold in either the long jump or high jump. The only way to move forward is step by gingerly step.

Paradoxically, the absence of a clear horizon might actually help such a gradualist approach; you take the journey one milestone at a time and then wait to see if

anything cogent is visible on the horizon. The first bit is always floor management in parliament. If the opposition parties can find some issue that enables them to rise above their differences, then the very act of unity raises that concern into a national issue.

Moreover, if there is no unity on prices then opposition as a concept has collapsed beyond repair.

The second stage will be much harder, of course, because there are more contradictions in opposition than there are in UPA. But the next round of Assembly elections will be helpful in clearing opposition space. We will know, for instance, whether Lalu Yadav can dent Nitish Kumar, or whether the latter's eminence will move up to pre-eminence.

Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh either Mayawati or Mulayam Singh Yadav will prevail. Beyond that, events and circumstances will determine who does what.

Long before the end-game, there comes a midpoint. The numbers that matter are those that count at the end, not at the start or the middle.

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Governments do not fall because of numbers, they fall when they become uncertain or indecisive or provocative.

International Women's Day...

And what must yet be done for women

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day was observed with justified fanfare on Monday. In these past many years, there has been a growing awareness about the place of women in the Bangladesh social context, given particularly the perceived strides they have been making in a number of important areas. One can cite here the role women have been playing in such areas as micro-credit, especially in projects that aim at making them a factor in the household economy. At another level, there is the reality of Bangladesh's women turning to entrepreneurship through coming together in developing and promoting their individual as well as collective business enterprises. Additionally, women have been making their presence felt in some other vital areas, among which can be cited the arts and literature. In the recent past, women's contributions to literature have without question been a matter of pride for the nation.

So there are all the causes for us to conclude that in Bangladesh women have been making progress in their diverse fields. And yet there are certain glaring facts which must be pointed out about our inability to ensure for women a place commensurate with their skills within our social framework at this point. And in this context we could not but note that Bangladesh's women are yet to find themselves in a position where they can involve themselves in policy making or engage in the decision-making process. That remains, despite the clear advances women have made in education and professional expertise, a clear preserve of men in this country. It is here that substantive progress needs to be made. Moreover, there is the stark reality that despite women being a major factor in production, their contribution in most instances remains ill-recognised. One clear hint of this comes through the fact that women receive pretty low wages, so much so that they get half the wages generally paid to men. Discrimination thus remains a potent factor where women's proper role as factors of production is concerned. One other truth that could not be lost sight of is that the rate of unemployment for women is double that in the case of men. And this despite the fact that in the non-formal sector the degree and quality of work women do is stupendous and cannot be valued in terms of money. Their contribution to GDP remains a sadly unacknowledged reality.

Any observance of International Women's Day in Bangladesh cannot also fail to take account of the regularity of violence women are subjected to. That happens on both the domestic and social fronts. Women, especially in the rural regions, are all too often prey to torture and myriad instances of harassment over dowry and the like. On the bigger social scale, incidents of acid throwing remain a big source of worry for us. Tales of rape and murder of women, despite the gallant efforts being made by women's organizations and other bodies to improve conditions, continue to cause worries. In such light, International Women's Day could not but be a clarion call for us to do more in terms of making Bangladesh's women part of mainstream society, in that broad sense of the meaning.

National service programme

The selection process should be transparent

THE pilot project launched by the PM the other day is indeed a novel enterprise. It is an innovative employment generation project that comes as a beacon of hope to many. We are told that the project would eventually provide employment for more than three quarter of a million of unemployed youths in the country. The programme was very appropriately launched in the most poverty stricken area of the country, Kurigram, which for greater part of the year suffers from abject poverty. This is in effect an on the job training scheme guaranteeing employment at the end of the training period.

The project involves an initial three-month training of the selected unemployed youths in a variety of subjects that include nation and character building activities, disaster management and social welfare works, basic knowledge in health and family planning, physical education, forestry and environment, agriculture, public security, law and order and services of the union and upazilla parishads. And they will be paid a daily allowance of one hundred Taka. Thereafter they will be employed in various departments of the administration for a period two years.

The project needs to be carried through, given the tremendous potential it has to employ such a vast number of youth who find themselves without employment, and who, for lack of a permanent and secure source of earning, seek other ways of income, not always through legal means. Although on the face of it Tk. 100 per day may not sound very much, but the amount, we are certain, will help supplement the family income of a vast majority of those included in the project, and provide subsistence to many. A very good feature of the project is that the avenues for filling up ancillary posts of many public jobs have been opened up through this project.

There are a few things though we feel the government should keep in mind while operationalising the project. The curricula will have to be such that the trainees should be able to find employment elsewhere in both the private and public sectors, after the period of attachment with government agencies, or be permanently absorbed in that post.

The other equally important aspect is the selection of candidates. We understand that guidelines have been formulated and procedures devised in this respect. In spite of that, the government should ensure that the procedures are followed in a transparent and fair manner and see to it that the scheme does not acquire a partisan character and is not politicised to serve the ends of the party in power.