

BCL infighting taking a murderous turn

Will the ruling party move to protect its credibility?

THE Chhatra League's criminal activities which have already crossed a critical threshold are taking a newer dip with each passing day. Since the coming into power of the present government this student wing of the Awami League has often gone berserk in materialising its desires and demands. Deaths, injury and destruction were left in their wake to paint a sordid picture of what they are capable of. But, to our profound concern, no one in the government or the Awami League seems to be aware of the damage these elements are still causing to the credibility of the government and the country as well. We wonder when the prime minister will wake up, take full cognisance of the impact of such incidents on her own image, and act decisively.

In the latest turn of events the convener of the Jessore sadar upazila unit Chhatra League, Ripon Hossain alias Dada, was hacked to death, allegedly by armed activists of a rival group of the same organisation. The atrocious incident took place a day after the suspension of the district council of the organisation following a factional fight. The deceased leader was a candidate for the post of general secretary of the district unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League. Reportedly, the clash left at least 20 BCL men injured who have been blaming one another for the suspension of the council. There are allegations that such infights are the doings of a section of politicians in the Upazila Parishad and those associated with a member of parliament.

The premeditated murder in Jessore warranted immediate reaction and response from the Awami League high command, including the prime minister herself. But we have yet to hear from them. In the past also she was urged by the saner quarters to take stern action against criminal elements in Chhatra League but nothing materialised.

It goes without saying that the answer to stopping such acts of political murders lies in taking strong and exemplary action as per the laws of the land if we want to arrest the deteriorating situation in student politics. Therefore, the murder has to be treated as a gross criminal offence and must be investigated by the police without any fear or favour. The criminals involved in the homicide must be brought before a court of law, tried and given punishment. We once again urge the prime minister to come forward and deal with the matter with an iron hand so that she may engage herself in more important nation building matters and some of the good work she has done is not spoiled.

Protective laws for construction workers

The demand merits serious consideration

WE fully endorse the demand of the construction workers for new laws insofar as those relate to governing their remuneration and working conditions. Given that there are a large number of people that subsist on the earnings of these workers in an industry that produces revenue of more than 1000 crore every year it was about time the government took up the issue as matter of priority.

Needless to say, real estate and construction business has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade. The capital in particular has seen very large and tall buildings going up in recent times. Regrettably, sophistication in the type and size of buildings has not seen matching improvement in the working conditions or introduction of modern construction equipment. It is not uncommon for anyone passing by an underconstruction structure to notice the precarious manner in which masons and other labourers go about their work. Not only are they constantly putting themselves in danger they are also expose others around them to physical risk.

The existing labour laws notwithstanding, we feel that there is need to ensure on the part of the construction companies adequate safety measures for the workers that are missing at the moment. These measures must be spelt out clearly, violation of which should be made a culpable offence.

What must be guaranteed by law too is for the companies to provide appropriate tool and implements to go about their business more efficiently and safely. It was a sad sight for us not very long ago to see workers getting impaled on iron rods while trying to pull down a tall building in Dhaka; as many as fourteen workers were killed in that operation. Most noticeable was the crude and archaic method of their work.

It is disconcerting that some of the construction workers have been going without their wages for a long time. While there need not be a new law for this since payment of timely wage by the employers is obligatory under the existing labour laws, the apex body of the real estate companies REHAB must not fail to ensure that their members are up to date in payment of the workers' dues.

We feel that both the government and REHAB should in concert formulate necessary laws which would not only ensure the safety and wellbeing of the construction workers, it would also ensure better output of their work.

Let Sholakia be our Panipat

What followed next was interesting. The speaker suggested that the MPs to go to a field, rub oil on their bodies and then start a wrestling bout. The winner would come back to the House. The picture we visualise of the robust MPs actually wrestling in the mud is not a pretty one ... in fact ... it is just as bad as the language they used inside.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WE all have heard about and seen the open air gun-battles between rival groups of students belonging to BNP and Awami League on various campuses. There were deaths following those incidents and yet those gun-toting ruffians could not be brought before any court of law. They sail with impunity high above the laws of the land. The fighting seemed to be infectious and soon it found its way into our Parliament house.

So, one fine morning, we came to know about unabashed verbal battles between the MPs belonging to these two rival political parties inside the sacred precincts of the National Parliament. The abusive language and vulgar body gestures caused adrenalin of the MPs to spill all over the place and they were about to pound one another to death. The frantic shouting of the speaker could finally re-impose order in the House.

What followed next was interesting. The speaker suggested that the MPs to go to a field, rub oil on their bodies and then start a wrestling bout. The winner would come back to the House. The picture we visualise of the robust MPs actually wrestling in the mud is not a pretty one ... in fact ... it is just as bad as the language they used inside. But the speaker's idea reminded me that a couple of years ago, during the tenure of the last "democratically elected government of the 4-part alliance" we wrote in this column that instead of wasting state's money by holding expensive elections, politicians could face one another with dhal and talwar (swords and shields) and fight it out for supremacy in a large field. The winning side would form

the next government.

You see, the advantages of such a battle are many. Instead of shedding blood for the next five years, whatever blood has to be shed would be shed during the battle. The battle would exhaust the supporters and cadres to such an extent that they would not have any strength left to do mischief for the next two years. That means we would be comparatively safer for two years. The battle would leave many cadres dead, so the new government will not have too many pockets to fill with tender money and so on.

So, now that manonio speaker himself has put the idea in our head, let us see how we can help him. Taking the cue from him, we may request the politicians to select the wide field at Sholakia where the largest Eid congregation is held every year. That field could be turned into our Panipat every five years, or even before, to organise the battle. Before going into details, let us give a brief on the historic Panipat field where many battles were fought. The facts have been taken from the internet. "Panipat is an ancient and historic city in Panipat district, Haryana state, India. It is 90 km from Delhi on NH-1 and comes under the National Capital Region of Delhi. Three battles fought at the city were turning points in Indian history.

Panipat was one of the five cities (prasthas) founded by the Pandava brothers during the times of the Mahabharata; its historic name being Panduprastha. Panipat was the scene of three pivotal battles in Indian history.

The First Battle of Panipat was fought on April 21, 1526 between Ibrahim Lodhi, Sultan of Delhi, and the Timurid warlord Zaheeruddin Babur. Babur's force defeated Ibrahim's much larger force of



Winner forms the government?

over one lakh (one hundred thousand) soldiers.

The Second Battle of Panipat was fought on November 5, 1556 between the forces of Akbar and Samrat Hem Chandra Vikramaditya, the Hindu King of North India, who had captured the large states of Agra and Delhi defeating Akbar's forces. The Hindu king, also known as Vikramaditya, had won 22 battles against the Afghan rebels from 1553-1556, and had his coronation at Purana Quila in Delhi on October 7, 1556 and had established Hindu Raj in North India, before the 2nd battle of Panipat.

Akbar and Bairam Khan did not participate in the war and were stationed 16 km from the battle field, with the instructions to run away to Kabul in case of defeat. Hemu had a large army, and initially his forces were on winning spree, but suddenly Hemu was struck by an arrow in the eye and lost his senses. On not seeing him in his Ohda on the back of elephant, his army fled. He was later captured and beheaded by the Mughals. His head was

sent to Kabul to be hanged outside Delhi Darwaza and torso was hung outside Purana Quila in Delhi. The Second battle of Panipat, thus ended the "Hindu Raj" established by Hemu in north India, though for a short duration.

The Third Battle of Panipat was fought in 1761 between the Afghan king Ahmad Shah Abdali and the Marathas under Sadashivrao Bhau of Pune. Ahmad Shah won it but with very heavy casualties on both sides, especially on the Indian side. The famous Urdu shayar Maulana Hali was born in Panipat.

So, that was all about the real Panipat in history. Now, let us make our very own Panipat. If you think my suggestion is worth taking seriously then let us go visit Sholakia maidan in Kishorganj one day in a group, make necessary arrangements so that in a couple of years we may see our own Babur and Ibrahim Lodhi gathering a thousand men and fighting to their death.

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The tumor at the heart of the Afghan campaign

There are no good options here. Our leverage is limited, and the preservation of Afghan democracy, however weak, depends on our not hijacking the process as much as it depends on Karzai not hijacking it.

AZEEM IBRAHIM

THERE is a real danger that with each day that our brave troops spend fighting in the sands of Afghanistan, victory there becomes less and less worth winning.

That is a very serious charge, and I do not make it lightly. Like most people, I want to see a stable Afghanistan with strong institutions and real progress -- however slow -- toward the kind of democracy in which votes are chosen and not bought, and power changes hands according to preference not patronage.

But I just do not see that progress. Worse, the Afghan government is moving in the opposite direction. The actions of President Hamid Karzai are becoming increasingly indistinguishable from a man set on undermining Afghanistan's democracy and institutions, and concentrating

power in his own hands.

Let us go back to last year's elections. Despite being a step forward, they were still disappointing. Amid widespread fraud, Karzai opted not to campaign openly amongst the Afghan people, but rather to rely on backroom deals with regional strongmen (such as Mohammad Muhaqq, Rashid Dostum and Mohammad Fahim) to deliver their regions for him electorally. We know that the government bribed militants not to attack voters or polling stations, not because some intrepid investigative journalist got the scoop, but because the head of Afghanistan's Intelligence service, Amrullah Saleh, said so. That was, if you like, the policy.

Given that, we might have expected a concerted allied effort to ensure that the next elections -- those to be held for parliament next September -- will be a little

less dysfunctional than the last. To that end, the Allies said they would make their support for those elections conditional on President Karzai putting his house in order in certain limited ways.

He would have to fire untrustworthy officials from the body that organised the vote, The Independent Election Commission. He would have to give up his right to choose its chairman and leadership board. And he would not be allowed to weaken the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), the body which ordered the disqualification of the nearly one million votes for Mr. Karzai last year. Together, these would have constituted firm, if modest, steps in the direction of consolidation of Afghanistan's fragile democracy.

Last week, Karzai did the opposite. He did nothing to reform the Election Commission, and retains his grip over the body that organises the future polls which are supposed to decide his electoral fate. Moreover, he did not just ignore the international community's plea not to weaken the Electoral Complaints Commission -- that would have been too subtle. Rather, he stripped the UN of its power to appoint the majority of its members. He decided

that from now on, that power was to be held by one person only: himself.

And to add insult to injury, he issued this in a presidential decree while the parliament was in recess, a clear signal of disdain.

Most countries in the world are not clear democracies or dictatorships, but fall somewhere on the spectrum between the two. This decree is the clearest possible indication that when President Karzai talks about his desire to strengthen Afghanistan's democracy, he is being disingenuous. He is inching away from democracy, and doing it just slowly enough for the trend not to be splashed over the front pages of the newspapers in most of the countries that are sending troops to secure his country.

And therein lies the problem. Karzai is, for the moment, supposed to be the good guy, the guy whose regime our Forces are fighting for. Slow, steady erosion of his legitimacy should be viewed as nothing less than a slow-burn chronic tumor at the heart of our Afghanistan policy.

Unless we halt the trend, we face the very real prospect of many families sitting down to Christmas dinner in three or five years' time, without the sons, daughters, brothers or sisters who have been lost to a war that only served, in the end, to prop up another foreign dictator. However distasteful, that is the current direction of travel.

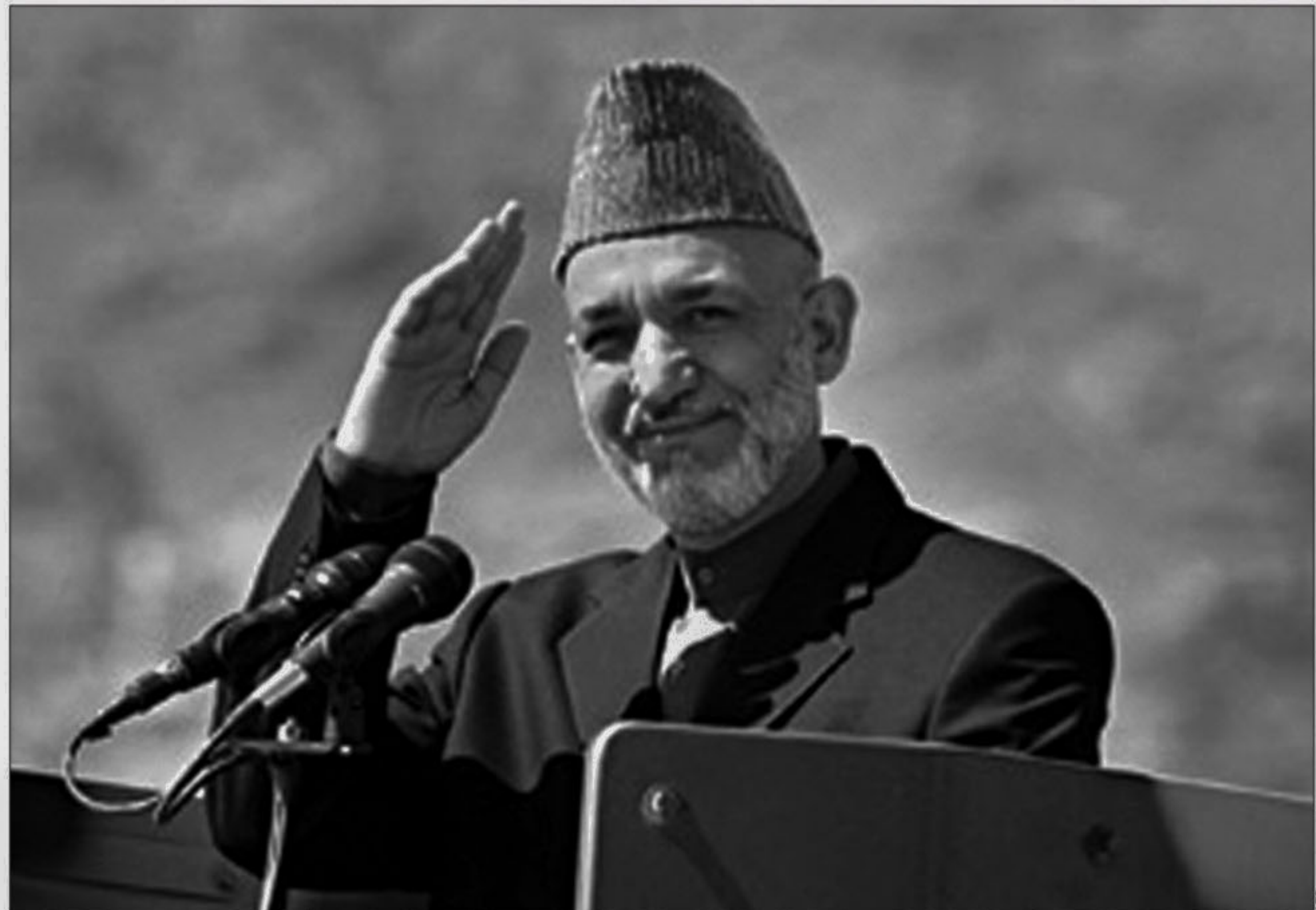
So what can we do?

There are no good options here. Our leverage is limited, and the preservation of Afghan democracy, however weak, depends on our not hijacking the process as much as it depends on Karzai not hijacking it.

I believe that the least bad option is to dilute his power by supporting the power-sharing agreements with moderate Taliban to which UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband this week said Britain is committed and which I have been advocating for the last three years.

Of course, the pace at which this can be done depends partly on those moderate Taliban themselves. The military initiative in the spring is likely to reduce the Taliban's incentive to fight and increase their incentive to talk.

But ultimately, if we are to avoid the kind of victory which is a disservice to those who fought for it, we will need to make power-sharing work, to make Afghan democracy more representative and rein in the excesses of its increasingly undemocratic president.



Waving democracy goodbye?

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