

## Casualness in public statements

*More responsibility and respect for facts are expected of national leaders*

THE Opposition leader in parliament Begum Khaleda Zia in her speech at Barisal has accused the government of creating artificial power crisis. While criticising the present ruling party Awami League for its failure on many fronts, she further averred that the government's policy to buy electricity from India was tantamount to handing over the key of our power to that country.

One wonders if the leaders of our country make statements at public meetings only to pander to the fears and prejudices of the gullible audience! How without substantiating their claims with facts for a change?

It sounds rather strange that a national leader who had done her stint in power twice as prime minister now passes the buck conveniently to the incumbent government when it comes to the crisis of power. Can she deny the fact that the ongoing power crisis is a legacy of her own government? For during her last stint in power, the total power produced in the country was around 3,000 MW against the demand for the same at 3650 MW.

So, she herself left a shortfall of 650 MW. Considering that the demand for power increases at the rate of 10 per cent of the total demand at a certain time, when she left office the demand for power had already increased by an additional 365 MW. Or in other words, when the next government took office a demand of over 4,000 MW was already created.

Moreover, contracts for most of the newly installed power plants such as the 450 MW Meghnaghat power plant and the 360 Mw Hariapur plant that came into operation in her time were signed during the previous Awami League government. The only exception was the 80 MW Tongi power project which, too, was completed in March 2005 and came into production one year and a half later after going through a number of glitches in production.

So, her claim that the present power crisis is artificial does not stand to fact.

In the present context, on the other hand, the different power plants produce around 4,000 MW of power, while the total demand is around 5400 MW, officially, though unofficially it is around 6200 MW. To meet this growing demand the present government is diversifying the sources of power from gas to other options such as coal, nuclear power and green energy. It is also looking for the prospect of importing some 500 MW power from neighbouring India through a bilateral deal.

The fact that the country is at the moment going through an acute power crisis is too obvious to be missed by the opposition leader.

But in her characteristic attitude towards India, she has again expressed fear and opposed import of power from India. Is she not aware of how EU and ASEAN countries share power sources for their mutual benefit?

Can we not expect more respect for facts and responsibility from our national leaders when they make public statements? For half-truths are worse than lies.

## Natore court action against policemen

*One more reason why 'crossfires' must come to an end*

A court in Natore has issued warrants of arrest against twelve policemen and seven other people on the charge of murdering a young man through so-called crossfire in August 2009. The move is significant considering the manner in which the youth was killed and the way in which his death was passed off as a matter of routine law and order. It brings to the fore once again the critical issue of 'crossfires' which have aroused, naturally, public fury at home and outrage abroad. Sadly enough, these 'crossfires', which first became regular practice on the part of the security forces, have continued even under the present elected Awami League-led government. What is infinitely of grave concern is the fact that despite their pre-election position against 'crossfires', the leading lights of the government (and that includes the home minister) have instead tried defending such questionable acts as part of law enforcement measures.

We at this newspaper have consistently argued against such a wanton manner of disposing of individual lives because of the sheer illegality and absence of morality involved in it. While we welcome the move by the Natore court against the policemen and others, we must also make note of the truth that unless similar action is taken in other instances of 'crossfires', it will be difficult for citizens to feel safe at the hands of the state. And we speak of citizens for the simple reason that governments -- the BNP administration between 2001 and 2006, the Fakhruddin caretaker government and now the AL government -- have with regularity upheld 'crossfires' despite condemnation of such acts all across the country. The worry is that when it is a government which sanctions such extra-judicial murders, it is the very fundamentals of democracy which are rudely shaken. In a dark manner of speaking, every instance of a 'crossfire' is effectively a matter of the government, through its security agencies, taking the law in its own hands. That in effect is setting a dangerous precedent in that the government is putting itself in a situation it cannot eventually wriggle out of with ease.

It is our considered opinion, as we believe it is of large numbers of citizens, that the practice of doing away with individuals in the name of 'crossfires' must swiftly be brought to an end. A 'crossfire' goes against every moral value and against every instance of legality. Indeed, it has the potential of giving rise to a culture of impunity that will for long taint the security organs of the state. Lest our law enforcers mutate into vigilante squads through these 'crossfires', the government must come forth to put an end to the practice, firmly and swiftly.

## A sense of proportion



LITON RAHMAN/DRK NEWS

PR generally favours third/minor parties. Of course, the problem is that in Bangladesh, the third parties, at least the ones anyone votes for, are even worse than the big two.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE recent UK elections have provided a pleasant diversion for us political junkies. It's been quite thrilling, really, with much cloak and dagger intrigue and dramatic twists and turns.

And the excitement is still not over. In fact, the fun is just getting started. People all over the world are eagerly tuning in to see how the odd couple marriage between the Tories and the Lib-Dems plays out.

The most gripping story-line is the fate of the UK's electoral system. Already the likes of BBC and CNN and al-Jazeera are filling up their air-time with pointy-headed analysts armed with complicated-looking colour-coded charts explaining the finer points of different voting systems.

First-past-the-post. Proportional repre-

sentation. Alternative voting. Right now my head is swirling with the intricacies of all the various combinations and permutations.

While I am mildly interested in how it all plays out in the UK, my thoughts turn more frequently to how the question would play out here at home in Bangladesh.

Here we have a first-past-the-post system modelled on the Westminster system, and I have often wondered whether there might be an electoral fix to our chronically dysfunctional system of government.

Though, let's be perfectly blunt. The dysfunction is too great to be solved by any quick fix. Ultimately it is the people operating the system that is more important than the system itself, and unless mind-sets change, it will be more of the same, regardless of what system we have in place.

The caretaker government system is a

good case in point. It originated as a fairly ingenious fix to the problem that no incumbent government could be trusted to hold fair elections. But it took us barely a decade to figure out how to game the system. We're smart like that.

So there is little doubt that whatever system we might switch to, it won't take us long to figure out the loop-holes and revert back to chaos and confusion.

Still, it is true that right now we do have a very lop-sided system. A small advantage in votes typically translates into a massive majority of seats, as happened in 2001 and 2008.

But, of course, this works for both sides, BNP in 2001 and AL in 2008, and has the added benefit of helping provide a stable governing majority. Whether working for both sides is the same thing as working for the country as a whole, is, I fear, a rather different question.

On the flip-side, proportional representation (PR) generally favours third/minor parties. Of course, the problem is that in Bangladesh, the third parties, at least the ones anyone votes for, are even worse than the big two.

The last close election we had was in

1996, with AL getting 37 per cent of the vote and BNP 34 per cent. This translated into 146 seats for AL and 116 for BNP, not too different from the 112 seats and 101 seats that PR would have resulted in (out of 300).

The JP's 16 per cent of the vote would have garnered them 49 seats instead of 32 seats, and the Jamaat-e-Islami's 9 per cent would have translated into 26 seats instead of 3.

Ultimately it wouldn't have made much of a difference. AL would still have required JP's help to form a government and BNP/JI would be in little better position than under the prevailing system.

In 2001, however, it would have made a difference. AL's 40 per cent vote share would have been good for 120 seats instead of the 62 they actually got.

In fact, BNP and allies' 46.5 per cent of the vote, far from giving them a commanding 216 seats in the house, would have left them shy of a majority. The big winners would have been JP, whose 7 per cent vote share would have translated into a queen-making 21 seats.

In 2008, AL and allies would have ended up with 171 seats (including 21 JP seats) far short of their actual 263, and, once again, JP would have been the net beneficiary.

Now, of course, the argument goes that with a PR system in place, more progressive, more democratic minor parties could gain a foothold, but, at the very least, the potential pitfalls would equal the gains.

The fairness and the third party empowerment arguments, therefore, both seem to cut both ways. But I think that there's another argument for PR. A better one, at least in Bangladesh.

Right now, MPs rule the roost. Much lip service is given to empowering local government, but in the end it is the MPs who run things. PR would by definition empower local government, since under PRMPs are not tied to a constituency.

Sure, this wouldn't solve all our problems, it might just shift them one step down. But still, the people would be closer to the local development decision-making process, and government would be more accountable and, one hopes, effective, as a result.

Of course, then, the question is: Why should anyone want to be an MP?

This question was, in fact, put to a bemused Rahul Gandhi, when he visited Bangladesh last year, and was extolling the virtues of local government in India.

He explained patiently that he had become an MP, not to dole out patronage or to get rich through graft or even to run local development in his constituency, but to debate issues of national importance and pass much-needed legislation. You know, like what people are supposed to do in a legislature?

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## What's wrong with the world?



CHUDI/GETTY IMAGES

But nothing is wrong with this world in this century that wasn't wrong before. It's the same paroxysm of withdrawal and return that has repeatedly renewed the old. It's the same inexorable illusion that all that glitter is obviously gold.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

GILBERT Keith Chesterton wrote a book in 1910 that reads like it has been written yesterday only. His uncanny description of what was wrong with his world back then will sound familiar to those who find so many things wrong with their own world today.

Hundred years ago Chesterton warned about greater disparity than ever between rich and poor. He talked about families falling apart, schools being in utter chaos,

and basic freedoms being under assault. "What's wrong with this world?" is the title of his book.

Is there anything wrong with this world? A compromise answer would be to say the answer is as good as the question. The world changes in form, but not in substance. Many centuries ago volcanoes erupted, rivers flooded and droughts scorched the earth. Those things still happen, frequencies and intensities at variance.

We're the same human beings in the high noon of history as we were in its early

dawn. We may have outwardly changed, but inwardly we're still seething with the same old genetic rage. We still kill, steal, snatch and rape. We still lie, cheat, conspire and hide. Have a good laugh at our sophistication. It's just a pretension that we're what we're not.

Chesterton tells us that idealism is what the common man knows is right. It means idealism is a condition of life where this man wants his family, his home and protection for both. At this point the English writer introduces his three characters. Hudge is Big Government, Gudge is Big Business and Jones represents the common man.

Hudge and Gudge are enemies, and Jones gets crushed between them. Jones wants ordinary things for which he pays extra-ordinary price. He marries for love. He wants to build a small house. He also wants to practice his religion, be a grandfather, become a local hero and die a natural death.

But Hudge and Gudge conspire and they take away from Jones his property, his independence and his dignity. Thus, the world has never changed for the common man. It has never changed for him since he was thrown out of Eden.

In so much as the history of the world is the history of the common man, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the enlightenment, conquests, inquests, revolutions and rebellions have emerged out of common man's unwavering ambition to find his way out of the cosmic chaos. This man always knew or believed he knew he was going to find the way he was looking for.

Then Chesterton draws the most chilling conclusion: If the common man previously lost his way, he has now lost his address. Religion is banned from the classrooms. So are parents. So is common sense. Each subject is taught in a vacuum. Each profession is increasingly narrow. People know more and more about less and less.

Hundred years later that still holds good. Hudge and Gudge are still hatching their plot against Jones, while he doesn't

know what to do. Once he didn't know where he was going, but now he has forgotten where he was before. If the common man is disillusioned in this century, he was also disillusioned in the previous centuries. Ideologies have been always based on his idealism, but an ideal world forever eluded him.

The world moves in circular motions. Need and greed, fear and anxiety, privation and plenty, subservience and supremacy, birth and death, victory and defeat turn the wheel of life as much today as they did hundreds of years ago. Is there anything wrong with the world, then? The answer is it's more an existential refrain than actual complaint. That's perhaps how the world has been since the dawn of mankind. That's perhaps how it will remain until the last star falls from the sky.

It's part of human destiny to live and languish. It's part of human destiny to moan and groan. But nothing is wrong with this world in this century that wasn't wrong before. It's the same paroxysm of withdrawal and return that has repeatedly renewed the old. It's the same inexorable illusion that all that glitter is obviously gold.

Eighteen hundred years ago Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius had a striking realisation. "All things from eternity are of like forms and come around in a circle," he said. This world has been repeated, like the same show runs in a theater at different times to different audiences.

If birth and death are two doors of life, pain and pleasure are its two windows. People have invented fire, they have invented electricity and they have invented technology. All their inventions have, however, failed to find the human beings within them.

This is what is wrong with the world. We forget the doors and focus on the windows. Then blame everything on the room.

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