

Hartal signals a return to destructive politics

BNP must raise its concerns in Parliament

BEGUM Khaleida Zia has given out a call for a hartal on 27 June. It is a decision at once regrettable and with implications for the future. We have argued, consistently since our inception, that hartals are the worst manifestation of politics gone awry. Now that hartals are back, thanks to the BNP, we can only say that destructive politics we thought was in the past is now back in full force. It is a sign of political bankruptcy on the part of the BNP and only points to the thought that the party has nothing substantive to offer in terms of democratic politics. Reportedly, some senior BNP leaders had sounded a discordant note on the hartal option but were apparently ignored by the party chief. Be that as it may, the fact that the call for hartal has come from an individual who has been prime minister on more than one occasion not only surprises the nation but also leaves it bewildered.

It is all a sign of confrontational and divisive politics coming back into the political arena and we at this newspaper cannot but condemn the move. While we do think that a significant part of the responsibility for such a swing to confrontational politics lies with the ruling Awami League and that the BNP is not solely responsible for the gathering mess, we do wonder, though, how a recourse to hartals can restore normalcy in such critical areas as power and gas supply, issues around which the BNP has been trying to rally the nation. We have little wish to delve yet again into the old sordid politics of claims and counter-claims, but it is difficult to understand how hartal can ensure supply of power, gas and water? Opposing a government for the sake of opposition, long a bad tradition in this country, has never paid dividends. But, of course, if the BNP does believe that the government is indulging in corruption and is incompetent, there are the standard political procedures for it to make its position known.

We agree that some of the issues Begum Zia raised at her Paltan Maidan rally on Wednesday, namely, the chaos caused by the Chhatra League, the manipulation of tenders and political appointments, have merit and are of grave concern to citizens. But such issues, we have argued long and hard, must be raised and discussed on the floor of Parliament. Unfortunately, the BNP has regularly come up with lame excuses, one after another, and over spurious issues, to avoid being in the House when the Jatiya Sangsad is in session. Begum Zia herself has demonstrated an appallingly negative attitude towards the Parliament through her irregular presence in it. Hartal certainly is no way to go about demanding a solution to the problems faced by citizens day after day. If the BNP means business and if it is serious about its stand on matters of public concern, it simply must go back to the JS. In these past sixteen months since the general elections, the party should have developed a well thought out constitutional strategy to keep the government on its toes in the House, for Parliament is the pivot around which democracy works as it does elsewhere across the globe.

Let Begum Zia rethink the hartal decision -- in the interest of democratic politics and economic stability and overall citizens' welfare. The times demand responsible politics rather than demagoguery.

Unsafe supply water

Ward off an impending health disaster

THE report carried by a leading Bangla daily that the pipe water supplied by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) contains bacteria and dissolved solid matter must have been a shocker for the residents of the capital city. The fact that out of the 22 samples of water examined by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI), only seven have been found to be safe for drinking, is distressing enough. Now the users of WASA water would be left wondering if the supply water of their particular block is safe or not.

Since it is a matter of serious health concern, the authorities concerned should come out on the issue in clear terms to assuage public sentiment. For WASA managing director (MD)'s contention that the supply water has no reason to be impure at its source is hardly reassuring, when he in the same breath also stated that the pipelines may be at fault as they might have sprung a leak or two or that the aging pipes are in bad repair at some places.

The WSA authority's disclosure about the leakages in the pipe lines rhymes well with the (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B) scientist's view that impure supply water has a lot to do with the rising number of diarrhoea patients in his hospital.

Now what should the consumers of supply water do? Should they stop using supply water until the leaks in the pipes are repaired or the old pipes are replaced? And since that is not forthcoming, they will be compelled to drink this water and continue to expose themselves to serious health hazards. The situation calls for a massive repair and maintenance activities by WASA. Sorry to say, WASA authority has not said anything clearly on this score.

In this connection, we appreciate High Court's having issued the order that has made the government to test WASA water to discover the existence of bacteria and dissolved solid substances in it beyond acceptable limits.

But the fact remains that the discovery itself will not help the suffering public.

Regrettably, it is also not for the first time that the WASA water has come under fire. Reports on foul smelling water, presence of faecal substance in water and so on has long been in the news. But so far the authorities have done precious little to address the problem.

To all appearances, the latest report on bacteria in WASA water is only the tip of the iceberg.

The government and the WASA authorities should take immediate steps to ensure the supply of clean water to the consumers before it turns into a full-scale health disaster.

A general in his labyrinth

What he did last week was part of it, an affirmation that a general in our time also couldn't get out of his labyrinth. He must have surely done some thinking. He must have surely gone back and forth in his mind in the process of formalising a successor.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

FOR the first time since he appeared in politics, this former military strongman has proved himself a man of vision. Last week he was able to look so far beyond himself that he actually saw the future. And, what he saw in that future is at once tragic and trite. He saw he was going to die and his party needed another leader. So, he anointed his younger brother as his successor.

Foregone conclusion: family business stays in family hands. All said and done, blood is thicker than democracy. Those who didn't know got themselves warned. The General asked them to leave the party if they didn't like his choice. Perhaps he has raised his men in blind obedience. He knows they aren't going anywhere.

So much to thank the former general, he has added a new dimension to our political cliché. After daughter, wife, and son, he is the first to bring in a brother. Indeed, politics is a funny business in

this part of the world. The people are the source of power so long as that power runs along bloodlines.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells us about another general from another time. In *The General in His Labyrinth* he chronicles the final months of Simon Bolivar, the Latin American liberator, before Bolivar's death from tuberculosis in December 1830. The General lived haunted by the guilt of ordering summary executions of former comrades, his fall from power, and the depression of perceived failure. "Damn it," he sighed. "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!"

Does a similar voice scream inside the conscience of our general? Who knows, he also may be struggling to break out of his own labyrinth. Maybe that's why he must have done some of the most outrageous things in life. He may be fighting the ghosts of his guilt for taking this country for a ride for nine years too long. Who knows if he ever wakes up floating in his own sweat, having nightmares about inveighing a nation's soul. It will be

interesting to find out if his conscience ever keeps him awake at night.

It happens to most other people on earth. Facing death, conscience churns like an angry sea and washes up on the shore of guilty conscience the garbage dumped in a lifetime. Does the general ever feel sorry? Does he ever feel bad for misusing power, for crushing students under a speeding truck or cutting down precious lives such as Nur Hussain, Raiful Basunia or Doctor Milon at their primes?

Nobody knows what goes on inside the mind of a former dictator. Nobody can tell. But it would be interesting to know what he does about his past. How does he cope with it? Can he filter his memories and sort out the unpleasant parts?

The approaching end of life is a sad business. This is when even the most victorious man faces defeat. This is when even the most successful life feels contrite over the few eggs he may have broken to make an omelette. Does our man the general realise it? Does he suffer from compunctions? Does he want to write poems about it?

We don't know if the former dictator in his lifelong passion for power and pleasure ever got to know what poetic justice is. What he did last week was part of it, an affirmation that a general in our time also couldn't get out of his labyrinth. He must

have surely done some thinking. He must have surely gone back and forth in his mind in the process of formalising a successor.

In the end he couldn't find anyone more trustworthy than his own brother. And you bet, he didn't read what Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "I think the evil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness." In passing the mantle to his brother, the general has also passed that judgment on him. Instead of escaping his labyrinth, he has trapped his brother inside it.

People close to the general tell me he had no choice. The party was going to disintegrate without him, that choosing of his brother as his successor was the only way he could try saving it. People close to the general also tell me it doesn't matter. The party is going to split before the general's body is lowered in his grave.

Garcia writes that prior to his death Simon Bolivar saw the truth. "The only thing lacking for me is to die," he lamented. In so much as our general saw truth last week, he too saw death. But he mixed it up with future. Had the general chosen his successor by an election, he would have saved both.

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Terrorism's supermarket



For a wannabe terrorist shopping for help, Pakistan is a supermarket. There are dozens of jihadi organisations: Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Al Qaeda, Jalaluddin and Siraj Haqqani's network, Tehrik-e-Taliban, and the list goes on.

FAREED ZAKARIA

FAISAL Shahzad, the would-be terrorist of Times Square, seems to have followed a familiar path. Like many earlier recruits to jihad, he was middle-class, educated, seemingly assimilated -- and then something happened that radicalised him. We may never be sure what made him want to kill innocent men, women, and children. But his story shares another important detail with many of his predecessors: a connection to Pakistan.

The British government has estimated that 70 percent of the terror plots it has uncovered in the past decade can be traced back to Pakistan. Pakistan remains a terrorist hothouse even as jihadism is losing favour elsewhere in the Muslim world. From Egypt to Jordan to Malaysia to Indonesia, radical Islamic groups have been weakened militarily and have lost much of the support they had politically. Why not in Pakistan?

The answer is simple: from its founding, the Pakistani government has supported and encouraged jihadi groups, creating an atmosphere that has allowed

them to flourish. It appears to have partially reversed course in recent years, but the rot is deep.

For a wannabe terrorist shopping for help, Pakistan is a supermarket. There are dozens of jihadi organisations: Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Al Qaeda, Jalaluddin and Siraj Haqqani's network, Tehrik-e-Taliban, and the list goes on. Some of the major ones, like the Kashmiri separatist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, operate openly via front groups throughout the country. But none seem to have any difficulty getting money and weapons.

The Pakistani scholar-politician Husain Haqqani tells in his brilliant history, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, how the government's jihadi connections go back to the country's creation as an ideological, Islamic state and the decision by successive governments to use jihad both to gain domestic support and to hurt its perennial rival, India.

Describing the military's distinction between terrorists and "freedom fighters," he notes that the problem is systemic. "This duality ... is a structural problem, rooted in history and a consis-

tent policy of the state. It is not just the inadvertent outcome of decisions by some governments." That Haqqani is now Pakistan's ambassador to Washington adds an ironic twist to the story. (And a sad one, because the elected government he represents appears to have little power. The military has actually gained strength over the past year.)

In recent months Pakistan's government and military have taken tougher actions than ever before against terrorists on their soil -- and Pakistani troops have suffered grievously. And yet the generals continue to make a dubious distinction among terrorists. Those that threaten and attack the people of Pakistan have suffered the wrath of the Pakistani Army. But then there are groups that threaten and attack only Afghans, Indians, and Westerners -- and those groups have largely been left alone.

Consider the tribal area where Faisal Shahzad is said to have trained on his visits to Pakistan: North Waziristan, where the deadliest groups that attack Afghans, Indians, and Westerners hole up. Although last year the Pakistani military took the fight to South Waziristan, a haven for groups that have launched attacks inside Pakistan, the generals have refused to go into the North, despite repeated entreaties from the United States and Nato.

As far as the Pakistani military is concerned, there's always a compelling reason why now isn't the right time to go

there. And the respected Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, an expert on the Afghan insurgency, recently reported that Pakistan continues to have influence with the Afghan Taliban and is using that leverage to force the Kabul government to do its bidding rather than to broker a peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Until the Pakistani military truly takes on a more holistic view of the country's national interests -- one that sees economic development, not strategic gamesmanship against Afghanistan and India, as the key to Pakistan's security -- terrorists will continue to find Pakistan an ideal place to go shopping.

Over the past four decades, much Islamic terrorism has been traced back to two countries: Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Both countries were founded as ideological, Islamic states; over the years the governments sought legitimacy by reinforcing that religious ideology, and that made the countries hothouses of militancy, fundamentalism, and jihad.

That trend is slowly being reversed in Saudi Arabia, perhaps because King Abdullah could make it happen as the enlightened ruler of an absolute monarchy. It may not be so easy for Pakistan to overcome its jihadist past.

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