

## BNP's hartal

*It was unwise, ill-advised and anti-people*

YESTERDAY'S hartal called by the BNP to protest the eviction of Khaleda Zia from her cantonment residence was totally uncalled for. It exhibited a total disregard for public convenience, particularly the millions who travel home for Eid holidays.

We feel that calling hartal was even more deplorable given the fact that the reason for it had nothing to do with public interest but entirely related to a personal issue, that of the vacation of a government-allotted house by the leader of the opposition.

The issue of Begum Zia vacating here residence has a lot of emotional content, particularly to her large number of followers. Rather, it was only expected that the BNP activists will have great difficulty in reconciling with the matter. In fact total non-acceptance was but only natural. While allowing for the emotional knee-jerk reaction on the part of the activists, we wonder why the BNP leadership could not dissuade their ranks from the programme considering that one of the biggest religious festivals was just round the corner.

No matter how justified one feels one's cause is, and no matter how strong the motivation may be to go for such programmes, when it comes to choosing options public comfort shall have to be given priority over every other consideration.

It is very unfortunate that the BNP had totally disregarded the potential hardship that the common man would be faced with due to the hartal, given the fact it is nearly the eve of Eid-ul-Azha, and a good segment of the people of the metropolis and its surroundings had started their homeward journey already. The hartal has caused serious dislocation to the travel plans of many wishing to join their loved ones, given that travelling on the eve of any religious festival, as it is, is fraught with tremendous uncertainties.

We reiterate our principled stand against hartal because it is an imposition, amounting to snatching the livelihood of the poor, causing tremendous hardship to the public and shutting down healthcare completely during the period of hartal.

There may be times in the future when the BNP may feel provoked to resort to hartal. We would like to assert the need for the BNP not to take such a step however emotion-ridden and sentimentally driven it might get. It would do well to avoid falling into hartal pattern without which the country has been so much better off all these months.

## Aung San Suu Kyi emerges into freedom

*World will watch what role she plays in shaping Myanmar's future*

THE release of Aung San Suu Kyi from her long confinement is truly a triumph for people who have held faith in democracy not only in Myanmar but also across the world. It is also a tribute to the resilience and determination with which Ms. Suu Kyi has upheld her politics and her values since returning to her country in 1988. That she and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) were not allowed to take power after their massive victory at the elections held in 1990 remains a dark chapter in Myanmar's history. Had Ms. Suu Kyi been permitted to form the government, the face of her country would be a whole lot different, and positively too, by now and Myanmar would be playing its due role in the international community. Unfortunately, the people of Myanmar, despite the inspirational leadership provided by Aung San Suu Kyi even in her imprisonment, are yet to see pluralistic politics reshape the image of their country.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the world's newest prisoner of conscience to be freed and winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace, has been released without conditions. On the face of it, her freedom is clearly a fresh new beginning for her. Deep down, though, there is the continuing suspicion that the Myanmar military junta may yet find the ways and means or the excuses to clamp restrictions on her movements and expression of views. The fact that a military-supported political party has 'won' the 'elections' held recently does not quite convince people that the junta has suddenly changed its position on the ways in which it thinks the country should be run. One need only observe the facts. The question of why the junta decided to free its long-term prisoner without conditions may legitimately arise. The answer lies in the fact that the regime has of late come under great pressure from the international community over its treatment of Ms. Suu Kyi. It reckoned that a face-saving way out for it was to provide a semblance of representative government to the country. Of course, such a change does not at all alter the fact that the military remains the pivot around which politics is likely to move.

The challenges before Aung San Suu Kyi are therefore huge. She will need to move with great caution and yet steely determination. The idealist that she is, she knows that her freedom without accompanying political changes in Myanmar will mean little. The country needs to emerge from the isolation it has largely been in since General Ne Win's coup d'etat of 1962. The key to Myanmar's future lies with how much of a role Suu Kyi can play in the days ahead. For the junta, it is important that it follow up on the democracy leader's release with moves to engage with her on political change in Myanmar. If it believes Aung San Suu Kyi has now been rendered ineffective, it will be making a mistake. The spirited manner in which her freedom was welcomed in global capitals is a patent demonstration of how indispensable she remains to the future of Myanmar.



COURTESY

## The eviction and the hartal

Khaleda Zia is not an ordinary individual. She is a public leader, former prime minister and now the opposition leader. So, even when it is about a house, one cannot ignore the fact that it is the house of a national leader. Naturally what happened on Saturday surrounding that house and its occupant cannot be treated as an insignificant event of no political consequence.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

WAS this haste necessary? If it was a purely legal issue between the opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia and the Cantonment Board, then there was no need for the ruling party to make any comment on the issue from the beginning. Sadly, the people's reading of the entire development over Khaleda Zia's Cantonment residence is quite different. Leaders of the ruling Awami League (AL) have been on various occasions in the habit of attacking the opposition leader on the issue. At the AL-organised political gatherings the issue has come up again and again. So, it would be naïve to think that the people at large will like to look at Khaleda Zia's eviction from her Cantonment house as purely a matter of legal battle between Khaleda Zia as an individual and the plaintiff, the Cantonment Board. On the contrary, the popular perception of what happened on November 13 at the Cantonment residence of the opposition leader will be seen as a nasty outcome of politics of hatred between the two major political parties of the country.

In a similar vein, if it was simply a legal

matter with no political bearing then the government could have waited till the result of the Supreme Court's hearing on the defendant's leave petition on the case. After the final verdict of the Supreme Court the question of evicting the occupant of the house would arise. But as posed in the beginning, the question will continue to pester the common man: what was the hurry for?

But Khaleda Zia is not an ordinary individual. She is a public leader, former prime minister and now the opposition leader. So, even when it is about a house, one cannot ignore the fact that it is the house of a national leader. Naturally what happened on Saturday surrounding that house and its occupant cannot be treated as an insignificant event of no political consequence.

So, any attempt at making light of the government action in connection with the eviction of Khaleda Zia from her Shaheed Mainul Hossain Road residence in the cantonment would be nothing but nonsense and chicanery. It is an action with serious political import, whether the ruling party may like to accept it or not.

And it cannot be denied that the entire slanging match centring on the opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia's cantonment

residence has been demeaning not only for the parties involved, it has also been greatly humiliating for the nation as a whole.

Could not the parties involved in the dispute solve the issue in a more decent manner? That would have been fair and dignified for all quarters.

Now about the opposition leader's claim or emotional linkage to the cantonment house. It has after all been brought to court for any reason, fair or foul. And once it has become a matter to be settled legally, there is no question of prejudicing the process on any other ground. However, the issue could well be settled out of court through a dialogue between the parties involved in the dispute. But that opportunity, too, was clouded by the political dust that was kicked up by both the ruling Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) over the issue. The public was being continually bombarded with tirades by the ruling party leaders on the 'illegality' or the 'iniquity' of the opposition leader in her, what they inferred, 'unjust insistence' to cling to her old claim about the ownership of the house. The opposition leaders had in the same way been threatening to make a political issue out of the dispute and solve it on the street politically. In fact, both the parties had gone to the extreme about the opposition leader's cantonment residence. And finally, the entire issue has been dealt with in such a high handed manner that it shocked even that section of the public that had no special sympathy for the opposition leader's entitlement to the cantonment house.

And what was the time chosen for the final action? When a very high profile for-

eign dignitary, the prime minister of Turkey, arrived in the capital.

The diplomatic community, too, has been keenly watching the drama of Saturday as reflected through the US embassy's reaction over it published in the newspapers next day. And they could also hardly keep their silence over the matter as the US embassy had suggested that the issue be settled through a dialogue.

But the opposition BNP's reaction to the incident by declaring a hartal the very next day was not also a wise one. If anything it was an impulsive, knee-jerk reaction. What political mileage they think the party has been able to gain through the hartal? Has it not caused serious dislocation to the travel schedules of thousands of people, who planned to travel to different districts and reunite with their families to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha? And why should they have resort to this controversial political weapon again to demonstrate their anger and protest at the government action?

Getting piqued, carried away or upset by events is not the way any political party of consequence should express its reaction to any incident. It only goes to expose the lack of political wisdom on the part of the leadership concerned.

Both the incidents, Begum Zia's eviction from her cantonment house in a hurried fashion and the opposition party's instant reaction to it through a hartal call, both taking place on the eve of a major religious festival of the Muslims, defy common sense. And we can only hope that good sense will prevail and that both parties will come to their senses in the long run.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a senior journalist.

## Boost for Maliki?

The deal, which will allow Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to keep the top post, comes after a horrifically bloody 10-day period in which dozens of Iraqis have been killed in bombings and shootings in Baghdad and Karbala. Maliki fought hard to keep his job, even though his electoral slate was not the top vote getter in the elections.

BABAK DEGHANPISHEH

AFTER a marathon seven-hour negotiating session Wednesday (Nov.10) night, Iraq's fickle politicians finally came up with a breakthrough deal to form a government, more than eight months after elections. The deal, which will allow Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to keep the top post, comes after a horrifically bloody 10-day period in which dozens of Iraqis have been killed in bombings and shootings in Baghdad and Karbala.

Maliki fought hard to keep his job, even though his electoral slate was not the top vote getter in the elections. He faced strong opposition from both Shiite and Sunni rivals, who accused him of being a sectarian player and an authoritarian. The deal is a big win for Maliki, who was a relatively obscure figure in Iraqi politics until he was chosen prime minister four years ago. It

also is a boost for Maliki's biggest patron: Iran. "It is a victory [for Iran]," says Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish parliamentarian.

Even before the elections in March, Iran had pushed hard for Maliki to merge his slate with the National Iraqi Alliance (NIA), the dominant Shiite group, to improve his chances of keeping the prime minister slot. Maliki refused to merge with the NIA, but made no secret of his close ties with Iran: last month, he took a high-profile trip to Tehran, where he met with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and other top regime figures.

Iran is also seen as the driving force behind radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's unexpected shift to support Maliki last month, a key development in breaking the negotiation deadlock. Sadr, who has been living in Iran since 2007, has had a deep-

rooted enmity of Maliki dating back to an assault on Sadr's Mahdi Army fighters in 2007 and 2008. Sadr reportedly set aside his differences with Maliki at the urging of Iranian officials, and chose to throw his influential 39 seats behind Maliki's bid for the prime minister post.

At the same time, Iranian officials almost completely shut out Ayad Allawi, the head of the Iraqiya slate, which received the most votes, primarily from Sunnis, in the election. An Iraqiya delegation travelled to Iran after the elections, but Allawi himself did not. Under the deal brokered Wednesday, Allawi will head up a new body called the National Council for Strategic Policy, which may have oversight of the Interior and Defense ministries, though the exact responsibilities of the council have yet to be hammered out. The Iraqiya list was also given the speaker of parliament post, which will be taken up by Osama al-Nujaifi, a Sunni. The Kurds, for their part, successfully pushed to retain the president post for Jalal Talabani.

The politicians did not get into the messy details of assigning ministries to various political blocs during the Wednesday meeting. But there was an agreement, at the urging of Allawi and other members of the Iraqiya list, to amend the Justice and Accountability Law, more commonly referred to as the de-

Baathification law. Members of the Iraqiya list have repeatedly argued that the law was used to target them unfairly in the weeks leading up to the election, when a handful of their prominent members were disqualified from running.

The new deal is still tenuous, and there could be changes made in the days and weeks ahead. But there is one key bloc that could upend the agreement altogether: the Sunni supporters of the Iraqiya list. If they feel that Allawi has sold them out to a government beholden to Iran, many Sunnis could withdraw their support for the political process altogether and instead back insurgent movements that have wreaked havoc across the country.

The attacks in the past couple of weeks have shown that the government is still incapable of securing the country completely, and that insurgents are making a bloody comeback. Stopping those attacks and the surging violence may be the key to winning the support of all Iraqis, regardless of sect. "I don't care who will be the president and who will be the prime minister, my big concern is to see any sort of people who work to improve services and maintain security," says Salman Khashan, 54, a commercial designer.

Babak Dehghanpisheh. © Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.