

Nazmul Huda's expulsion

Is there any place for dissent in our political parties?

NAZMUL Huda, an eminent lawyer and a long time BNP leader and two-time cabinet minister, has been expelled from his party for "breaking organisational discipline" and doing things "against the interest of the party". In our view the expulsion speaks far more of the BNP as a party and its constitution than it does about Nazmul Huda who, either as a politician or as an individual, is not the focus of our comment. What interests us is the core question whether or not there is any place for dissenting views within the BNP, or for that matter any of our political parties.

Let us examine the process that was followed in expelling Huda. No 'show cause' notice was served nor was he given any opportunity to explain his action that a most rudimentary practice of democracy demands. BNP constitution bestows total power on the chairperson without any check and balance making for a most undemocratic set up, including the power to expel without any 'show cause' notice. This brings out the bigger question should one person enjoy such powers? How can a party that proclaims to stand for democracy have a party constitution that is fundamentally so undemocratic? May be time has come for the BNP rank and file to raise this question. The only problem is that raising such a question may lead to expulsion.

This brings us to the principal reason for our comment, what is the place of dissent within our political parties, especially the two big ones. There are those who will say that organisational discipline requires that all leaders and workers put a unified face forward on any decision taken. Such discipline can only be demanded if the decision is taken in a democratic manner in the first place. What if a decision is taken purely arbitrarily? Then also nobody can differ? What constitutes breach of party discipline and who decides? Is it the personal likes and dislikes of the just one person? We know it is, but we question, whether it should be.

How is a party to decide on policies and actions if there is no scope for open discussion where different and differing points of view can be aired? In the specific case of Huda, he is guilty of saying that BNP lawyers erred by not asking for a "stay order" from the Supreme Court. Then he is accused of saying that the hartal call eroded some public sympathy which BNP gained when Khaleda Zia was forced out of her house. What is so subversive about these views especially when it is shared by thousands of BNP supporters and millions of ordinary people of the country?

The truth is there is no place for dissenting views within our political parties. This single fact is responsible for the autocratic nature of our leaders and the development of the type of sycophancy that has become the hall mark of our political parties. We think our political parties, especially AL and BNP, are big enough, strong enough and with sufficient ideological moorings to permit divergent views to operate within them. They must democratise party culture for the sake of greater democracy. Unless they do so these parties will not become modern political parties and will not be able to attract young, educated and energetic workers and leaders who can take our politics to greater heights and our country to higher level of prosperity.

Malaysia job market reopening

Break new grounds

IT is heartening to know that Malaysia which had tabooed hiring Bangladeshi workers in March last year has signaled a positive response. The welcome change of heart is reflected on the process already initiated by the country to regularise 3lakh undocumented Bangladeshi workers hitherto virtually living a fugitive's life. This itself is a good piece of news, let alone the fact that upon completion of the process of absorption, Malaysia will accept new Bangladeshi hands in keeping with its growing requirement in the economy. This also sits in with Malaysia being one of the favoured destinations for our workers.

Let's not forget that Malaysia has been hosting half a million of our workers before it put a lid on fresh recruitment. Thus the waiver comes as icing on the cake. All this is a tribute to the intrinsically friendly bilateral relations between our two countries and a measure of Malaysian goodwill for us. The two countries should endeavour at the government to government level in particular to see that the business develops into an honourable, mutually respectful and legalistically sound two-way traffic.

Government has also to be credited for negotiating persuasively with the Malaysian government which too showed generosity to our workers for the uncertain plight they were in.

But, of course, there are a couple of serious lessons to be drawn from the experience and for the concerned to live up to them. First and foremost, the curse of undocumented labour is attributable to the dubious machinations of private recruitment agencies in the main. A part of the onus is obviously placed on Bangladeshi missions in host countries who hardly keep a tab on their workers or intervene before things blow up. It is learnt that recruitment agencies sent more workers than there were effective or approved demands for. Such illegality should be avoided if we are to retain goodwill for Bangladeshi workers.

It is also pleasing to note that Canadian Saskatchewan province usually recruiting farm labour from Caribbean countries is evincing interest in employing Bangladeshi farmers. The Canadian government is going the right way about it: They are to establish an institute to train the workers who would be selected for migration. We, for our part, should lay emphasis on pre-service training.

We urge our government to launch a massive drive, on a well-informed basis, to seek out employment opportunities in countries facing severe manpower deficit in certain areas.



Determinants of fertility decline

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MOHAMMED ABUL KALAM

THE relative contributions of the levels of development and of family planning programmes to fertility decline have been a subject of enquiry and controversy for several decades.

The debate arose in the 1960s, when family planning programmes were first introduced with the objective of reducing the population growth rate, which was singled out as a major cause of poverty.

There were two principal schools of thought, the family planning enthusiasts and the developmentalists. The former believed that there was a strong latent demand for contraception and that the provision of family planning services would therefore bring down the birth rate. Proponents of that school were responsible for the well-known "contraceptive inundation" programmes in many developing countries.

The opposing school of thought, the developmentalists, pointed out that demographic transition had been achieved in all developed countries without official family planning programmes. Their main argument was that mere availability of modern methods does not ensure their effective use; people have to want to reduce family size before they accept family planning methods. And such a change in family size is rooted in the objective material and institutional environment of the people.

The more extreme proponents of this view appeared to rule out the possibility that supply of contraceptive information and services can make a major impact on such an important personal sphere of people's lives.

Since the 1960's, the pendulum of evidence has swung in both directions. For the

family planning proponents, there was considerable success in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, they were jolted in the mid-1970s, especially after the World Population Conference at Bucharest in 1974. By the late 1970s, however, more convincing evidence of the effectiveness of family planning programmes had been accumulated.

The large difference in opinion on the relative impacts of socio-economic development and family planning programmes on fertility decline stems partly from the initial theoretical assumptions or political prejudices of commentators. Additional diversity of viewpoints arises from the varying definitions of programme impact that may be found in the literature.

Many evaluations take as their starting point the number of couples who use contraceptives provided by a government programme, and calculate the number of births prevented by the programme from this figure, on the implicit or explicit assumption that couples would use no method in the absence of government services. This calculation is termed the gross effect, and its underlying methodology is now fairly well established.

There has been no definite research confirmation of the thesis that high levels of death in infancy and childhood sustain high birth rates. Indeed, fertility transition has started at widely varying levels of infant mortality, both in developed and developing countries.

Evidence concerning the impact of parental education on reproductive behaviour is overwhelmingly strong. Even a modest exposure to primary schools increases the propensity to delay marriage and to use contraception within marriage, although the concomitant effect on fertility

may be weakened by countervailing influences such as reduced duration of breast-feeding.

The impact of education is perhaps attributable not so much to its influence on the economics of child bearing but to the fact that it engenders a greater responsiveness to new knowledge and ideas and a greater sense of control over one's life. After all, the reproductive revolution is essentially a shift from a regime where parents exercise choice and make conscious decisions.

The obstacles to this transformation may have been underestimated by analysts. It is relevant here to note that maternal education has an equally powerful effect on the mortality of children. It is likely that similar socio-psychological mechanisms operate in both spheres of family formation.

However, these relationships do not offer any quick solution to reduction of birth rates. The further promotion of mass education, particularly for girls, may not influence fertility until today's school children marry -- a lag of nearly twenty years. No doubt political and community mobilisation and adult education can achieve the same net results more quickly than formal schooling.

While social development must be pursued as a vital part of broad population policies, it offers no shortcuts to the reduction of fertility. For short-term impact, improvements in the quality and quantity of family planning programmes must still receive top priority. Moreover, there is growing evidence that such programmes can be effective even among populations that are still predominantly illiterate, poor and agrarian. The steady progress of the Bangladesh family planning programme is one evidence.

Despite the dangers of attempting generalised prescriptions for programme improvement, there are important areas such as the quality and the quantity of interactions between service providers and potential clients, which are key ingredients of success. Quality depends upon sound training of outreach workers, adequate mobility, close and sympathetic supervision, and carefully planned work patterns.

Many would agree that the setting of goals or targets and rewards for achievement are also necessary features of effective grass root management of family planning programmes. It is likely that the greatest improvements of programme impact and efficiency can be made by closer attention to these features. Researchers have a great potential contribution to make, but this will require a shift in priorities and even closer collaboration between managers and the research community.

The quality of services also involves the provision of choice in both the methods and the modes of delivery. Research suggests that widening of the range of methods offered within a programme usually leads to an overall increase in the number of users. Clearly, the needs and tastes of couples vary. When one method is found unsatisfactory, perhaps because of side effects or inconvenience of use, an efficient programme should be able to offer an alternative.

The number of interactions between service provider and client is the frequency of contact. While Bangladesh recognises the need for improved quality, the need for greater quantity varies considerably. With a developed transport and communication system and where birth control and is now an entrenched habit, there may be no need for further increases in the density of service points or further improvements in the ratio of out-reach workers to eligible population.

Choice also implies a diversity of delivery systems. The government should no longer attempt to create monolithic delivery systems, which discourage participation by other organisations. Rather, contributions from these organisations can greatly enhance the cause of family planning by launching innovative schemes and by catering to the needs of special groups. The future should see an ever-growing collaboration between the public and private sectors.

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His voice's master

What is the tensile strength of silence? Lawyers can afford to manipulate their narrative as easily as they stretch their accent. Dr. Singh used to have an authentic voice, which is why Indians trusted him. He lost that voice during the worst crisis of his long life.

M.J. AKBAR

THOUGH for the week: if accent-fraud were a criminal offence, how many serving members of the ruling establishment would be guilty? To speak English well in a country which has inherited it as a service-language is commendable. To speak it badly is perfectly understandable, since it is a foreign tongue. But to speak it in a pseudo-imitation of a style that even an abashed BBC has quietly abandoned is unforgivable. You could not have got solicitor-general Gopal Subramaniam's haw-haw syllables from central casting, but that may be only a minor sin in his latest curriculum vitae.

Perhaps a pseudo-argument comes more easily to those who acquire a pseudo-accent; it is possible that he believes that unctuous loyalty to his client -- in this case Prime Minister Manmohan Singh -- combined with sonorous homage to the goddess of truth, are sufficient substitutes for fact. He chose to tell the Supreme Court, and then the people of India through television, that he had gone through every rele-

vant file and could say with authority that the prime minister had replied to every query by the persistent Dr. Subramaniam Swamy on the 2G spectrum scam.

Before the end of the day the prime minister had accepted that the second highest lawyer in government had lied to the Court and the people, and changed his lawyer to the highest in the land, Goolam Vahanvati. The response of lawyers, including political ones, employed on behalf of the prime minister shifted to evasion.

Whenever crisis induces a government knee to jerk, the first tendency is to jab in the direction of media. The messenger is so often the first victim. And so an upwardly mobile minister like Kapil Sibal advises media not to "pillory" the prime minister.

But the prime minister is not under strain because of television or newspapers. His credentials are in doubt because of the remarkable diligence displayed by integrity-activists like Prashant Bhushan and judges of the Supreme Court who felt compelled to ask him why he had not bothered to respond adequately to a scam spreading in public view.

This was not a sudden, one-off, grab-and-run operation. It was a carefully and intelligently laid out scheme by the DMK, which insisted on the telecom portfolio because it knew the rewards that lay in the allotment of licenses. The prime minister is in trouble because the DMK took care to keep him informed through letter about how precisely it was going to subvert systems and determine pricing without consultation or due process, and received his acquiescence through acknowledgement of its letters.

The crucial letter was sent not by A. Raja but by Dayanidhi Maran, in February 2006. Maran could not have been more explicit: he wanted pricing, the key that opened the treasure house, out of government purview. This was the price of power, and Dr. Singh and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi paid it.

If you want to understand the political twist in this tale, look for the answer to only one question: who leaked the Maran letter to a television channel? Maran himself could not have done so, since he is not suicidal. Equally, those on the PM's side can be ruled out, for the same reason. The BJP or other opposition parties did not have a copy, and if they had one, they would have held a press conference, not handed it over to just one trusted correspondent.

The leak came from someone in government who wanted to weaken Dr. Singh. Why? Obviously because he believes that a weakened prime minister has become vulnerable, there might be a vacancy at the top soon, Rahul Gandhi is

not ready to take the job, and therefore he could become the next PM.

Prime ministers and their press advisors should actually stop worrying about journalists and start worrying about that anonymous tribe which turns out jokey sms-es. The PM may have maintained his studied silence but the mobile companies who had benefited from DMK largesse did not. The joke about the 2G spectrum that turned viral was marvellous: "PM breaks his silence. The only 2G I know is SoniaG and RahulG." Ridicule is far more devastating than criticism.

As it so happens, SoniaG and RahulG did, in different ways, offer their support to Dr. Singh. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi chose to deliver a small sermon with no names mentioned, as if the crime had been committed by the US Congress rather than the Indian National Congress. But the great damage was done not by what the opposition said, but by what the PM did not say: his silence. The law acknowledges that silence is the best defence when words might become self-incrimination. But the law of public life is not equally generous to silence.

What is the tensile strength of silence? Lawyers can afford to manipulate their narrative as easily as they stretch their accent. Dr. Singh used to have an authentic voice, which is why Indians trusted him. He lost that voice during the worst crisis of his long life.

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