

## A party and its falling heroes

### Call off hartal

Shun the practice for good

THE BNP in its wisdom has again called a country-wide dawn to dusk hartal on 30th Nov to demand actions to resolve the miseries of the people, to save democracy and defend the country's interest, according to it. It is fully aware, we are sure, as the rest of us, that saving democracy or upholding the country's interest can never be achieved through hartal nor boycotting the parliament. Hartal will certainly not end people's miseries.

We are opposed to hartal in principle and we have said so every time a political party has chosen it as an option. It is counterproductive; instead of solving problems, it exacerbates the old ones and creates newer problems for the people.

When the BNP talks about people's miseries, or democracy or the country's interest, may we ask what new ideas or proposals has the party given to the country in the last two years? Has it been true to its election manifesto, we ask? May we remind what BNP's position was on hartal when it was in power. Are we to understand that when in power for the BNP hartal is illegitimate but a valid expedient when out of it? Is it justified to call for hartal just because it lost the last election? Is your hartal better than 'theirs'? We are constrained to say that calling the hartal is a knee-jerk reaction that betrays lack of sensitivity to public pulse.

There is no indication that the BNP has played its part of an effective and efficient opposition, or fulfilled the expectation of the electorate that voted for the party? There is very little thinking behind the policies it has adopted. What we hear are its bland criticism of government policies without anybody explaining the reason for the party to have taken a particular position on a particular national issue. That we feel stems from the one-person character of the BNP with no internal democracy and all decision-making authority vested in one individual.

We fail to see any rationale for hartal, and only very recently we had implored upon the BNP leadership to abjure the path of hartal no matter what the provocations might be. One cannot miss the real motive, which we are certain, has had to do more with the eviction of Begum Zia from her cantonment residence than any of the pious intentions that the party has expressed. But embarrassing as the issue may be, does it justify putting the people in problem by calling hartal? It is even more bizarre given that Begum Zia has gone to court yesterday against her eviction before the disposal of an appeal on the matter pending with the Supreme Court.

An effective opposition offers alternative solutions to national problems instead of merely criticising. Hartal will not further BNP's cause; it will merely alienate the people from the party. Call off the hartal.

### Delay in textbook printing is worrying

Monitoring system needed to avert such crises

THE distribution of textbooks at the primary school level may not run according to plan. Obviously, it is cause for worry especially when one considers the fact that distribution is supposed to begin in the next thirty-eight days. One could suggest, of course, that this period of more than a month before distribution of the textbooks can get underway is good enough for everyone concerned -- the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), teachers and pupils. The problem here, though, is that so far only 28 per cent of the textbooks have been sent to the various upazilas for distribution. As to the rest, no matter what the assurances are regarding a meeting of the target, there is the fear the distribution schedule may not be maintained.

It is clear that those responsible for the printing of the textbooks as also an availability of paper for such printing have not been serious about the job they were expected to do. Where the matter is one of what the printers have been doing, clearly they have adopted a lethargic approach to their work. As for the paper suppliers, they have not been able to keep to their commitment and are perceived to be close to a breach of contract with the NCTB. As we understand it, the printing of as much as 75 per cent of textbooks for classes IV and V are in jeopardy because the paper suppliers, in this instance Nipun Enterprise, were unable to provide the NCTB with the necessary quantum of paper till Tuesday evening. Of course, the suppliers have suggested that they will procure paper from other sources to fulfill their part of the bargain. That is not the point. What is of critical importance here is that they have failed to keep to their promise, with the result that a very large number of primary schools across the country are now faced with the stark possibility of coming by no books for an uncertain period of time.

Swift and corrective action needs to be taken over the matter. In this context, we are reminded of the Herculean efforts which went into the printing and supply of textbooks last year, particularly after a fire gutted large numbers of books and manuscripts. The strenuous efforts the authorities expended at the time to tide over the crisis were indeed laudable. Even so, questions now arise as to why we get bogged down in the kind of problems which assualt us at the moment. Exigencies and emergencies are matters the authorities, especially the NCTB, should be prepared for rather than face them at the eleventh hour. There must be a system in place which can monitor the whole process of paper supply and printing of textbooks from beginning to end. That process must include a mechanism for detecting early signals of trouble as well as making mid-course corrections. It is not a comfortable feeling knowing that children in primary schools will need to wait for a good length of time before they can come by their textbooks.



Najmul Huda is gone. Mannan Bhuiyan is dead. Oli Ahmed walked off a long time ago. Mir Shawkat Ali, unable to stomach his party's love affair with the old local collaborators of Pakistan, has finally transited to a world beyond mortality. Sheikh Razaque Ali lost interest in the party years ago. Tanvir Ahmed Siddiqui was unceremoniously dumped not long ago.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE Awami League is a re-generated party in opposition. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party is an organisation in disarray every time it goes out of power. That has been the lesson we have learnt over the years. And the truth of this lesson comes to us anew through the move by the BNP to throw Najmul Huda, one of its foremost spokesmen, out of it for the audacity of dissent he has late of for.

There are a whole lot of things you may find disagreeable about Huda where his pursuit of politics is concerned. But that he has sometimes stated some rather harsh and unpalatable truths about his party and about his leader, in this

instance Begum Khaleda Zia, has demonstrated a certain courage in the man.

His argument that Begum Zia was misled by her lawyers on the matter of her cantonment residence was well made. His irritation about the BNP's calling a hartal on as spurious an issue as the party chairperson's residence, and that to a couple of days before Eid, is a sentiment whole swaths of people share in this country.

Barrister Najmul Huda was only stating the obvious: by putting a brake on life and movement all across the country only because she could not accept the humiliation of having been forced out of property she ought not to have held on to for so long. In fact, Begum Zia has lost face before the nation.

Now Begum Zia has come back with a vengeance. Mind you, it is not the BNP per se which has shown Najmul Huda the door. Again, if you turn the argument around, the BNP is Begum Zia. It moves through her. It stumbles because of her. It is a party over which she exercises unethically undemocratic authority, conferred upon her by her dynasty-obsessed loyalists.

She has now decided that Najmul Huda, long her acolyte as well as her late husband's, has committed apostasy and so must run out of the organisation. Neither she nor her acquiescent party colleagues have cared to notice the worsening of an already bad image the party suffers from. The BNP does not go to Parliament because it has lost the election. Forget the points and the demands it cites as explanations for such disturbing behaviour. These are more an excuse to stay away from doing its job than a genuine interest in promoting public welfare.

It is the historical nature of the party which matters. Every time they have lost an election, Begum Zia and her colleagues have misconstrued their defeat as the end of all beautiful things in life. In the BNP politics has mattered little. Personalities, those of the Begum and her sons, have been the pivot around which it has moved. Its lawmakers are little embarrassed about distancing themselves from the job they were elected to do.

You get a sense of all that is going wrong with the party when you see all those BNP men and women happily observing the birthday of the elder child of their chairperson and yet not caring to pause and ponder the issue of the grave damage the chairperson and her children have inflicted on the country in the recent past. And when a rare BNP outlier, Najmul Huda for instance, calls up the courage to speak the truth, the party, more specifically its chairperson, swoops on him in unmitigated wrath.

Such self-inflicted wounds have exacted a terrible price on the BNP. Its inability to understand that Badrudez Chowdhury was president of the republic, thus meant to operate above the politically partisan, led it into committing an act that was as bizarre as it was crude. It compelled the president of the country to resign through a systematic, well-organised hurling of epithets at him. It was a blunder that drove President Chowdhury from office.

In times closer to those we inhabit, the

party's manifest insensitivity toward a dying Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan promises to be an enduring shame for its leadership. Begum Zia did not have the time or the willingness to pay respects to Bhuiyan once he had breathed his last, which in itself was a rekindling of the thought that in the BNP it is a cardinal sin to speak of reforms, to speak one's mind.

Bhuiyan, having turned his back on leftwing politics, had spent years building the BNP brick by brick as it were. It was the BNP that repaid him with ingratitude. Nevertheless, in death, Mannan Bhuiyan turned out to be bigger than the party which had repudiated him. His funeral, peopled by politicians across the spectrum, was a measure of how he had paid back Begum Zia and those around her in their own coin.

The trouble with a political party which does not respect its own, which has no room for tolerance, which refuses to read the writing on the wall is that it loses the common touch and slowly goes out of steam. Angry politics is dangerous politics, for the anger can soon dwindle into the anarchic and the adventurist. Begum Zia is angry over her lost cantonment residence. She and her colleagues are angry over losing the election in October 2008.

There is danger here for all of us. Notice the BNP wallahs -- and they include men we thought had better political judgement than the rest of the pack in the party -- speak drily of removing the bricks, one by one, from the home -- now a truly sacred museum) which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman lived and died in. It is all a going back to its roots. The BNP barged into Bengali lives through making a mess of their history. Given the chance, its unhappy, desperate elements could someday pounce, and literally too, on all those spots we hold dear in our collective life. Vigilance is called for.

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It is not a pretty position for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to be in.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanstar@yahoo.co.uk

## Obama's emotional trip to Indonesia

On the same day at a press conference, the president said his childhood years living in Jakarta with his late mother and Indonesian stepfather had helped shape his own understanding of the world and respect for the diversity of humanity.

HARUN UR RAHSHID

PRESIDENT Barack Obama arrived in Indonesia on November 9 and told reporters he was "deeply moved" to return to the country of his childhood after he was forced to postpone the visit twice. He arrived in Jakarta despite a cloud of volcanic ash spewing out from Mount Merapi in Central Java, which has severely disrupted air travel across the region.

On the same day at a press conference, the president said his childhood years living in Jakarta with his late mother and Indonesian stepfather had helped shape his own understanding of the world and respect for the diversity of humanity. "Because Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands, hundreds of languages, and people from scores of regions and ethnic groups, my times here helped me appreciate the common humanity of all people," he said.

He said: "And while my stepfather, like most Indonesians, was raised a Muslim, he firmly believed that all religions were worthy of respect. In this way, he reflected the spirit of religious tolerance that is enshrined in Indonesia's constitution, and that remains one of this country's defining and inspiring characteristics."

Overed 6,500 people, mainly students, cheered and laughed as Obama joked in Indonesian and interrupted his speech to mimic the call of street vendors selling satay -- an Indonesian specialty -- which he remembered from his childhood.

He marvelled at the transformation of the sleepy city of Jakarta he once knew into a bustling metropolis and noted the country's parallel evolution from authoritarianism to democracy and a burgeoning alliance with Washington.

shaw thing," he said.

This is the foundation of Indonesia's example to the world, and that is why Indonesia will play such an important role in the 21st century," Obama said in a speech at Indonesia's national university during a visit to Jakarta.

The speech was aimed at engaging Indonesians in their embrace of democracy since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, as well as following on the themes of religious tolerance of his Cairo address.

In a keynote speech in Jakarta, President Obama lauded Indonesia's philosophy of unity between people of different faiths and ethnicity as an inspiration to the world. Mr. Obama's speech in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, is seen as a follow-up to last year's outreach to the Islamic world from Cairo. In Jakarta, he admitted that the task he set in last year's Cairo speech of forging a "new beginning" with Islam remained incomplete and there was "a lot more work to do."

Earlier, Mr. Obama made a much-anticipated visit to Istiqbal Mosque, the largest in Southeast Asia. Imam Haji Mustapha Ali Yaqub led Obama and First Lady Michelle -- looking elegant in a silky flowing chausseur pant suit and beige head covering adorned with gold beads -- around the vast, domed structure in central Jakarta.

After arriving from New Delhi, Mr. Obama and his wife, Michelle, travelled straight to the presidential palace for a series of meetings. He signed a "comprehensive partnership" that both nations said would expand their relationship beyond the traditional preoccupation of security.

The comprehensive partnership covers economic, security, political and environmental realms. It aims to double educational exchanges between the two countries. It will also include enhanced dialogue between non-government groups on the contentious topics of corruption and human rights



For Mr. Obama, who has identified himself as the "Pacific president," it is a key ally. He thanked it for sponsoring the US membership of the East Asia Summit, a group of Asian nations that includes Australia. Mr. Obama said that it would be the chief multilateral institution to manage security and political issues in the region. "Indonesia will be a critical partner, a critical leader in that," Mr. Obama said.

President Obama and Indonesian President Dr. Yudhoyono spoke at length about US and Indonesian issues in the 5th East Asia Summit was held in Vietnam on October 30th, in particular its role in solving the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, arising from China's claim to much of the resource-rich area. "We don't expect that we are going to completely eliminate some of the misunderstandings and mistrust that have developed over a long period of time, but we do think that we're on the right path."

Mr. Obama said he was "deeply moved" when Indonesia awarded a posthumous medal to honour his late mother Stanley Ann Dunham, who spent years in Indonesia studying microfinance and seeking to empower women.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation, spread out across a strategically important, resource-rich archipelago, with vital sea lanes through which pass 40% of the world's sea-borne

oil, including a third of China's supply and 70% of Japan's.

It is run by a democratically elected government and is a member of G-20 and OPEC. It is traditionally a non-aligned country but is leaning towards the Western nations.

China's rise and its huge funds (\$6.6 billion) for Indonesia's infrastructure have worried the US. China's trade with Indonesia has more than doubled between 2005 and 2009. Following a strategic partnership agreement in 2005, high-level military exchanges have increased and Indonesian officers are being trained in China.

However, China's assertiveness in claiming the disputed islands in the South China Sea has opened an opportunity for the US to come closer to ASEAN for re-engagement with them.

In July, US lifted a ban on cooperating with Special Forces unit implicated in past human rights abuses. The US has provided \$47 million in equipment to beef up maritime security, and participated with Indonesia in a nine-nation military exercise last year.

US officials said that, as with Mr. Obama's trip to India, his visit to Indonesia was designed to reinvigorate relations in the Asia-Pacific region with an "inspiring" emerging democracy and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN. Genava.