

Hartals and mass arrests disrupt normal life

Let the parties narrow this widening gap

One more hartal has come and gone, with the usual disruption of life and damage to property which such political moves entail. Stray incidents of violence have occurred at different places of the country, with vehicles and the like coming under attack. Now that the hartal is over, it is our sincere expectation that it will not be repeated and that the political opposition will find alternative means of expressing its point of view on the issues. We have consistently made our position clear, which is that we have never had any reason to think that hartals or general strikes accelerate in any way our march to stable democracy or a vibrant economy. We believe that the end of autocratic rule in 1990 and the elections of early 1991 should have been an opportunity for our political classes to guide the nation toward a new, substantive democratic opening through eschewing hartals and promoting a spirit of energetic political engagement and cooperation in parliament as well as outside it. Unfortunately, at a time when we as a nation stand ready to take the necessary steps to catch up with the rest of the world in terms of political and economic advancement, we remain bogged down by issues that increasingly look more personal to politicians than fundamental to the national interest.

While we reiterate our stand against hartals, because they come in the way of political stability and an environment which holds up prospects of good foreign investment in Bangladesh, we also must record our grave concern at the mass arrests the government has been carrying out over the past few days. In the days when the BNP held political power, the nation was outraged by the sight of law enforcers arresting citizens at random prior to a hartal or agitational programme of the opposition (which the Awami League was at the time) and carting them off to prison without any consideration of their rights or the consequences. We had thought the practice had come to an end. It seems it has not. And much as government functionaries tell us that the authorities will not prevent an opposition hartal, the very fact that they undertake indiscriminate arrests of citizens as a way of thwarting the opposition in itself acts as a spur to continued political confrontation. That apart, by placing people under arrest on the mere assumption that they will contribute to disorder and indeed are supporters or activists of the opposition, the authorities are only undermining the very concept of rule of law they say they mean to uphold. The government, more specifically the ruling party, must note that such ill-advised moves can only enhance the level of popular ire at the way it is conducting things. Nothing can be more demeaning for citizens and more disreputable for a government than an utter disregard or a display of contempt for the people. We trust mass arrests will no more be a mechanism of handling crises in the future.

There is little doubt that the country is at a critical crossroads today with the ever-widening polarization between the major political parties. Unless the leading lights of both the ruling party and the opposition realise what is at stake today, it will be the nation which will come off as the worst sufferer. We, therefore, once more appeal to the government and the opposition to reflect on the situation and take the steps necessary to make democracy meaningful for the people. We pray that the politicians do nothing that will take the country to a point of no return. Let sanity prevail in all quarters.

A fresh impetus to Tokyo-Dhaka ties

Salient features of joint statement should be followed through

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Japan visit has produced some tangible results. Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina covered extensive field of cooperation, bilateral and international, in their talks. These were featured by marked identity of views, commitment and shared sense of purpose.

Japan's development financing for Bangladesh has been a high-water mark in the relations between the two countries. Our PM's visit has contributed to renewing and strengthening Japan's role in our infrastructure building process, bilateral trade and expanding the horizon of Japanese investment in Bangladesh.

It is heartening to note that Tokyo's contribution to construction of the Padma bridge, highest by any individual country, now stands at \$ 400 million with an additional infusion of \$ 100 million this time. This top-priority project worth \$ 2.4 billion, financed principally by the World Bank, ADB, IDB and Abu Dhabi Fund is to buttress connectivity between the capital and its eastern and western regions with considerable economic spin-offs.

In trade, Japanese assurance for relaxing GSP rules of origin for Bangladesh knitwear is a timely shot in arm of RMG export.

Japanese premier's expression of intent to work jointly with Bangladesh for formulating and implementing an Action Plan towards further enhancing Japanese investment needs to be followed through. The pointer to the need for an improved environment for investment should not be lost on us.

Japanese commitment of support to our disaster reduction measures in the face of climate change vulnerability is reassuring.

We are expecting Japan's help in social infrastructure building encompassing human capital development with skill diversification, an area in which we have a lot to learn and receive from Japan.

Of particular significance is the identity of views relating to peacekeeping operations to which Japan in the largest financial contributor and Bangladesh the biggest troops contributor. They share common views on combating international terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and, above all, UN reform. They are appreciative of their NGOs' contributions to international community.

Finally, Japanese prime minister's assurance of standing by Bangladesh in its endeavour for 'digital Bangladesh' and attaining the position of a middle-income country by 2021 is particularly welcome. Now, what we need is follow-up measures on the assurances and commitments by Tokyo as we do our part of the undertaking.

When politics worked on a higher plane

The underlying principle that defines politics is a commitment to people's welfare. It was precisely such an underpinning which kept politics and politicians going in the 1960s and 1970s in Pakistan. A throbbing was what characterised the profession, a particular reason being that most of the men who pursued politics as a vocation, indeed as public service, happened to be lawyers or had studied it.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN was the last time we had political leaders whose minds were exercised by questions of public interest? And can you think back on an era where it was in the nature of politicians to dwell exclusively and purposefully on matters relating to the constitution, to the future of their nations, indeed to an adherence to principles they thought ought to define their own places in history? In Bangladesh -- and that means we are speaking of the last forty years -- do you recall the last time you came across a leader who could reach out to an entire nation and shape dreams for them?

Give your memories a jog. Or go back to a recapitulation of history. In the 1940s, as the struggle for Indian independence took an increasingly concrete shape, there was noticed a stridency of purpose in the way nationalist politicians conducted themselves. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru went to prison, over and over again, because of their refusal to compromise on the issues they thought were fundamental to the struggle for freedom. Other men shared their concerns, even if not everyone agreed with their strategy.

Subhas Chandra Bose, snubbed by Gandhi and others in the Congress, eventually set out on a course he thought would take India swiftly to freedom. You may not agree with the way in which he sought to accomplish his mission, but you will certainly acknowledge the sheer patriotism which defined Bose, a trait he shared with Gandhi, Nehru and Moulana Abul Kalam Azad.

In the old days, principle was of essence. Politics was everything with it and nothing without it. For all your reservations about the movement for Pakistan waged by the All-India Muslim League, you cannot but agree that Mohammad Ali Jinnah and all the men around him were driven by a cause.

You could suggest that the arguments they placed in defence of the so-called two-nation theory were flawed in many places. You could even be absolutely dismissive of it, given that what followed the creation of Pakistan was not exactly edifying for the Muslims of the subcontinent. But what you cannot brush away is the serious academic debate that Jinnah and his colleagues in the Muslim League engaged in with the British colonial power and the Indian National Congress in their struggle for Pakistan.

The issues in the decade of the 1940s were of a kind that would have a bearing on history, and every politician involved in negotiating them stayed well above the petty and the personal as he sought a way out of the impasse.

The underlying principle that defines politics is a commitment to people's welfare. It was precisely such an underpinning which kept politics and politicians going in the 1960s and 1970s in Pakistan. A throbbing was what characterised the profession, a particular reason being that most of the men (there were precious few women, if at all, in politics in those days) who pursued politics as a vocation, indeed as public service, happened to be lawyers or had studied it.

Even the authoritarian class, exemplified by the likes of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, knew it would in the end be a mistake to ignore such men. And that is how you come to reflect on the deliberations at the Round Table Conference in early 1969. The issues dwelt upon concerned every Pakistani -- the Six Points of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the demand for a return to parliamentary government, the need for a break-up of One Unit in West Pakistan and the right of adult franchise.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not refuse to meet Ayub Khan, the man who had tormented him through the years. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was willing to forge an alliance with the Awami League as a way of forcing



Politics of the sublime.

the regime from power.

The negotiations were to prove abortive, of course. But they did point the way to some new and important configurations in history. Every participant at the RTC knew that on the shoulders of the politicians depended the shape of things to come. It was a thought which was plainly carried over to the talks that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Yahya Khan conducted among themselves in March 1971.

It was a constitutional crisis they were up against. It was the future of a country that hung in the balance. It is another matter that in the end both Bhutto and Yahya stabbed Mujib in the back. The point here is that all these men happened to be around at a defining moment in history -- Mujib in the making of it, Bhutto in trying to thwart its natural course and Yahya in molesting it altogether. For Pakistan, a world was destroyed in that year of grave discontent.

For Bengalis, tragedy would pave the way to a new day in the sun.

Observe, now, how politics gasps for breath in these times of unmitigated monotony. Khaleda Zia demonstrates a clear and telling inability to rise above the personal and attempts to convince us that her lost home in the cantonment can be a spur to social and political revolution.

For her part, Sheikh Hasina keeps faltering, keeps failing to reach out to those who have either been alienated by her politics or have not felt drawn to it. In the old days, the men around Bangabandhu were not afraid to disagree with him. These days, Begum Zia throws out anyone who refuses to be pliant. The men and women around Sheikh Hasina do not see beyond their leader.

It is not politics. It is a world where sublimity has fallen prey to the mediocre.

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High tension in the Korean Peninsula

The border between the two countries is a relic of the Korean War of the '50s. At the conclusion of the 1950-53 Korean War, the line was unilaterally drawn by the United Nations Command, beyond which South Korean vessels were not allowed to venture. While the Northern Limit Line (NLL) is now considered the de facto sea border by South Korea and America, North Korea has always disputed it, drawing a very different line of its own.

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ON November 23, the North Korean military fired artillery shells on and in waters surrounding Yeonpyeong Island, only 8 miles from the North Korean coast. The attack caused 18 military casualties (2 marines killed, 6 heavily injured and 10 lightly injured) and 5 civilian casualties (2 killed and 3 injured) on the South Korean side.

The Island lies two miles from disputed Yellow Sea border. About 1,600 civilians live on the island, and a marine garrison of about 1,000. Rich fishing grounds exist in surrounding waters. It was the scene of inter-Korean naval clashes in 1999 and 2002. In the 2002 exchange of fire, 13 north Korean sailors and 5 south Korean sailors were killed.

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak, on November 24, called the attack "a premeditated provocation and an indiscriminate attack against civilians."

Seoul has said it will send more troops and guns to border islands and change the rules of engagement to let the military hit back harder in the event of another North Korean attack.

The South Korean Defence Minister Kim Tae-young resigned on November 25 amid intense criticism of South Korea's response to an artillery attack. A commentator on the conservative South Korean daily Chosun Ilbo assailed the minister, saying that the military had been outgunned and under-prepared.

President Obama called the South Korean president to express US solidarity and talk about a coordinated response. British Foreign Secretary William Hague has also "strongly condemned" North Korea's actions and urged the countries leaders to "adhere

to the Korean Armistice agreement."

China expressed concern over the incident and called for both countries "to do more" to contribute towards peace.

On November 26, the Bangladesh government, in a press release, stated "any act of provocation is condemnable and should be avoided."

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The drawing of the NLL, with a northward curve from the land border, left in South Korea hands five islands that lie just off the North Korean coastline along the Yellow Sea.

On November 16, the South Korean joint chiefs of staff announced that the annual theater-level "Hoguk" joint exercise would be held from November 22 to November 30.

On the morning of November 23, North Korea sent a telephone message to the South Korean side demanding a halt to the "Hoguk" exercise. South Korea proceeded with the routine exercise as planned.

Later in the morning, according to South Korea, they fired shells from the southwest part of Yeonpyeong Island at waters toward the southwest (in diagonally opposite direction to North Korea) as part of a monthly artillery exercise. South Korea claims the waters where the shells descended is an area where many exercises had previously



been held.

North Korea, on the other hand, reportedly claims that South Korea "was derailing the process for improving inter-Korean relations, scuttling inter-Korean Red Cross talks and driving the situation to the brink of war by pursuing its policy of confrontation" with North Korea.

North Korea has declared that plans for a US-South Korean naval exercise on November 27-28 would bring the peninsula "closer to the brink of war," state media reported.

A long-standing policy of the Chinese has been not to destabilise North Korea because it will have a spillover effect on China in terms of refugees from North Korea. It continues to ask South and North Korean leaders to exercise restraint and refrain from using violence and taking provocative actions that cause instability.

It is reported that the North Korean artillery attack was a surprise to the Chinese leaders. During the recent visit to China by the North Korean leader Kim Jong-ill, it was reported that the Chinese side told the North Korean leader that they should communicate better so that China would not be surprised by North Korean actions.

Despite Chinese aid and support to North Korea, Chinese diplomatic initiatives keeping the Korean Peninsula from violent confrontation are defied by North Korea. Cai Jian, a Professor of Korean Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, reportedly stated: "At the moment China

has limited influence. On one hand, it is unhappy with North Korean actions and its provocative behaviour, but it still has to support North Korea."

Many observers say that the attack was meant to highlight the military credentials of the heir apparent Kim Jong-un, the youngest son of the leader Kim Jong-ill.

Another possible explanation behind the attack, according to them, could be that, with many Yeonpyeong residents reportedly saying they will not return to the island after the bombardment, North Korea may have advanced towards one of its goals -- if that goal is to reduce the islands' South Korean civilian population.

North Korean leaders are aware that they are safe from military retaliation because of possession of nuclear weapons. The stubborn refusal of the US to provide aid and concessions makes the North Korean leaders uneasy. Analysts suggest that the North Korean attack sends a message to the US and South Korea of North Korea's increasing frustration.

The attack has focused global attention once again on what is now one of the world's tensest flashpoints -- the maritime border between the two Koreas in the Yellow Sea.

Whatever may be the reason, the attack on the South Korean Island, killing defenceless civilians, is unacceptable and goes against all international norms.

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