

## PM's reaction to loss of Habiganj seat

*Such wisdom be reflected in other areas too*

THE Prime Minister's remarks, made at a meeting with the UK Chapter of the AL in London, that the loss of the Habiganj seat in the recent by-election might have cost the party a seat in the parliament but has gained the AL a political victory by ensuring a free and fair election, are very wise indeed.

The PM deserves compliments for seeing her party's defeat as a gain for democracy. Seldom, if ever, do we get to see defeat being glorified, more so by the party in power. She has very correctly identified the ramification of the election results and acknowledged the voice of dissent. And this augurs well for a change in our political culture. In past, defeat was always laid at the doors of the rivals, and the agencies were blamed for the wrong reasons.

Indeed, the recent elections have been a victory for democracy and politics, and all concerned, including the ruling alliance, can rightly take credit for having conducted the elections with the least amount of disruptions.

We believe that the PM has come out with profound thoughts, and come as they do, after an electoral defeat, that many considered to be a benchmark of the her party's performance of the last two years, reflect a psyche that has been able to not only internalise the reality but accept it with good grace.

In this context we would hope that such an attitude, driven by enlightened thoughts, are extended to other areas of the activities of the party, of the government and of the administration too. We would hope that other dissenting voices are given weightage and due consideration since that would ultimately help the party and the government to devise remedial measures.

Unfortunately, our experiences of the government's attitude to those who chose to see differently with its policies, or were critical of its actions in certain respects, have been rather disappointing. Castigating one's critics or maligning them through a well orchestrated agenda of the government, or denigrating the name of an institution or a person of international fame, or even taking legal action for critical comments in newspapers, do little to enhance the credibility of a party which had fought against government opacity, for freedom of expression, right of association and right to information.

While welcoming the refreshing change in attitude of the PM we would hope that it will be sustained and would indeed rub off on her party and cabinet colleagues. And we hope too that the opposition would also have the prudence to accept the reality instead of offering what are, at best, tenuous criticisms.

## The rising spectre of crime

*Police force must be galvanized into action*

THERE are serious questions we must raise again about the overall law and order situation in the country. The murder of a journalist and his wife in Dhaka a few days ago has only confirmed fears that there is a slide where security of life is concerned. We are yet to see the police come up with any clues relating to the killings. Add to these incidents the shooting which left the guard of a residential building in Dhaka's Shyampur badly injured. There is then the killing of a trader in East Rampura. The pattern appears to be distressingly familiar. As if to add to such a feeling, we now have from Bogra the story of a girl studying in class seven falling prey to stalking. By itself stalking is a crime, but what makes this incident worse is that the stalker allegedly tried to take the girl's life by slitting her throat.

The incontrovertible fact today is that there are criminal elements around, not only in the capital but elsewhere as well, who clearly feel they can commit crimes with impunity and get away with the act. The failure of the law enforcers to check crime or to take swift action once crimes occur has led to circumstances where criminality is busy extending its reach, to a point where citizens are once more left with a feeling of helplessness. Only the other day the higher functionaries of the state asked the people to help the police in combating crime. Of course the people will always be there to assist the police in any way they can to detect crime. The bigger question is whether the police are ready to respond to acts of criminality or to anticipate them and take preventive action.

All too often, it has been seen that criminals somehow get away or even when specific complaints are lodged with police stations, little follow-up action follows. So what is of fundamental importance here is that the police administration must inject energy into the way it works through making the police speedily responsive to crime. While it is necessary to look for clues to an act of criminality, it is more important that the law enforcers first get down to the business of tracking down those who have committed it or may have had a hand in it.

Governance is all about reassuring people on their basic needs. One important need is a guarantee of life through keeping tabs on those who would threaten life.

## People power in Egypt

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE spark of people power that erupted into flames in small Tunisia is now raging through the Middle East. The biggest of the Arab countries, Egypt, is at the moment boiling. The regime of Hosni Mubarak is witnessing the worst challenge to its existence during its nearly three decades of rule with an iron fist.

Tens of thousands of people, an overwhelming proportion of whom comprises the youth, are on the streets and fighting pitched battle with police in Cairo, Alexandria, Ismailia, Suez as well as in other parts of the country. Egypt's venerated armed forces that the 82-year-old president had deployed to quell the mass upheaval and safeguard him and his authoritarian rule, are unwilling to crush the uprising using brute power. On the other hand, they are reported to have been fraternising with the crowds demanding the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.

And Mubarak, in his desperate bid to hold on to power, has already dismissed his cabinet of ministers, appointed his first ever deputy Mr. Omar Suleiman, the erstwhile chief of Intelligence, as vice president and Ahmed Shafik, the former aviation minister, as prime minister.

But the choice of Suleiman, known for his Israeli connections, as a successor, if you will, has hardly been a prudent one, if only for his history of extreme loyalty to the president. He even saved Mubarak once from an assassination attempt. Given the mood of the protesters on the street, any second attempt by him to save the president from the present predicament may turn out to be counter-productive.

But will the Egyptian people, who have come out in thousands on the street since January 22 in the wake of Tunisian dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's flight from Tunis amid a similar popular upsurge on January 14, be placated by such cosmetic changes with the actual rein of power still in the president's hand?

Will they trust Mubarak and allow him to continue in power, forgetting the absolute poverty under which about half of the country's 84 million people are living? Will they forgive the ruling elite, which is corrupt to the

marrow, to continue plundering the nation's resources like before? Will the youthful members of the new generation under 30 leave the street without having any assurance for job and the promise of a better life in the future?

Mubarak's offer of an olive branch in terms of more democracy and economic improvements as assured in his Friday's televised address to the

against any chaos. That means he is still betting on his continued grip on the state of affairs in spite of the popular revolt that has shaken his edifice of power at its base.

The question that naturally arises is where is the president drawing his strength and arrogance from in the midst of such a deep political crisis that the nation is going through and the challenge thrown to his authority?



PHOTO: AFP

*Now the people of Egypt have woken up. They are not going to accept any window dressing in the name of political reform in Egypt with the same old Mubarak or any of his alter ego continuing in office.*

nation would hardly have any appeal to the angry masses out there. Because the Egyptians are left with little faith in him, considering the history of his rule, which is tarnished by denial of democracy, gagging of press freedom and suppression of any criticism or opposition to his rule.

Strangely though, in the face of the wrath of the masses, the embattled president is still trying to put up a bold face as he warned the public

The explanation lies in his government's staunchest international ally, the US and its attitude towards Egypt at this moment. Is the US yet ready to get rid of Mubarak?

From the US president Barack Obama's televised address, it appears, though, he has advised Mubarak not to use brute force to quash the popular revolt, but take "concrete steps" to advance political reform within Egypt. He, however,

stopped short of defining what such steps should be. The still bigger question is: given the volatile atmosphere all around and his (Mubarak's) authority teetering on the edge, is Mubarak at all in a position to take up any long-term reform measure and also deliver it?

The fact of the matter is that the US does not want to see a post-Mubarak power vacuum in Egypt, which it considers as its Middle Eastern anchor of stability, and a bulwark of peace with Israel -- a peace deal that was reached in 1979 when President Anwar Sa'adat, Mubarak's predecessor, was in office.

Since then the US has been counting on Mubarak's secular, dictatorial though, regime as the pivot of its Middle Eastern policy. Now that the crowd outside the president's house is fuming for a decisive change, it has become totally dicey, who would succeed Mubarak.

If the US pushes too hard for a change, like it did in the case of Iran in 1979, or Phillipine in 1986, that may prove to be equally fatal for US's interest in the region. In that eventuality, the spectre of Muslim Brotherhood, the only effective opposition Egypt is left with after all the oppression and the work of the hated secret police, will get the upper hand.

But can a façade of secularism that is devoid of democracy and freedom, be a real safeguard against extremism in the region? Was not the police state of Tunisia's Ben Ali a secular one? Are Yemen and Algeria are also not governed by secular dictators?

In fact, these dictators have been denying their countrymen freedom and democracy for long with the support of USA, on the hollow pretext of fighting Islamic extremism. Meanwhile, these corrupt, police states have been fleecing the people, depriving them of all kinds of freedom.

Now the people of Egypt have woken up. They are not going to accept any window dressing in the name of political reform in Egypt with the same old Mubarak or any of his alter ego continuing in office.

The Egyptian people have suffered too long. Their march to freedom must not be stopped halfway.

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## When Mirpur stood liberated

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET us get the facts straight. When Bangladesh stood liberated, as a whole, on December 16, 1971, there were yet small pockets where Pakistan's defeated soldiers were putting up last ditch resistance. That resistance would come to an end within days. But there was, unbelievably, one small portion of the country which non-Bengali collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army kept in their grip for a month and a half after liberation.

Mirpur, right here in the centre of the capital and peopled by Biharis who had emigrated to Pakistan at the time of the partition of India in 1947, was clearly in little mood to give in. There was the Indian army which clearly felt that any attempt to storm Mirpur would leave a lot of casualties, for the non-Bengalis were armed to the teeth.

And here is the reason why the Biharis were so adamant about keeping the state of Bangladesh at bay, despite the clear indication that with Pakistan itself gone they could not hold out for long. A number of leading figures among the community, having actively assisted the Pakistan military in the formation of such killing squads as Razakars, al-Badr and al-Shams, were now in possession of large cache of arms left in their hands by the Pakistanis.

There is Quazi Rosy to tell you all about it. And there is Syed Shahidul Haque, popularly known as Mama, to remind you of the gathering gloom which would descend on the Bengalis inhabiting Mirpur in the stirring times that were 1971. Even as a resurgent Bengali nation, led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman, brought Pakistan to a grinding halt in March 1971, the non-Bengalis in Mirpur went on a spree of coercion and intimidation of the Bengali population in the locality.

Hartals were conspicuous by their non-observance. Every day that went by, even as the regime engaged in what would turn out to be a fictitious attempt at a settlement with the Awami League leadership, the Mirpur non-Bengalis picked fights on the flimsiest of pretexts with their Bengali

Bengali Medium High School in 1971? There are, even today, those living embodiments of Pakistani terror some of you might spot on your way home.

The graphic arts institute and the physical training institute in Lalmatia (and you see them opposite Mohammadpur police station) were the dark caves where hundreds of Bengalis were brutalised in medieval ferocity by the local collaborators of the occupation army.

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neighbours. Mama reminds you of the notoriety typified by the likes of Akhtar Goonda. And what happened to Akhtar Goonda later? He was put on a list of distressed stranded Pakistanis after 1971 (in the Ziaur Rahman years) and sent off to Pakistan.

The tragedy of Bangladesh has been two-fold. In the first place, there has been a systematic distortion of history. In the second, there is the inexcusable historical amnesia we have suffered from. How many of us remember the incidents and events shaping themselves around Mirpur

tors and then there were the Biharis from Mirpur. For them, the moment of glory came encapsulated between March 25, 1971 and January 30, 1972. It all began, in its blood-curdling form, when on March 27, 1971 (and this was the time when the army was massacring Bengali academics, students and other citizens all across Dhaka) the non-Bengalis stormed the home of the poet Meherunnissa in Mirpur. One by one they hacked her family to death before tearing her apart.

Into this killing field stepped the fledgling Bangladesh military in the

last days of January 1972. On January 30, as the soldiers prepared to enter Mirpur and liberate it, film maker and writer Zahir Raihan linked up with them. He had earlier been informed by a voice over telephone that he would be able to find his sibling Shahidullah Kaiser, kidnapped by the al-Badr on the eve of liberation in December, in Mirpur. He dashed off, would not wait till the operation against the armed collaborators was over. He would lose his life as the Biharis opened fire on the soldiers.

So would many of the brave men who had set out to free Bangladesh of the last vestiges of Pakistani occupation. One of the soldiers who survived the massacre swears he saw Zahir Raihan's corpse. And then the corpse, along with other corpses, simply vanished. No one knows where Raihan's remains and the remains of the others lie.

Mirpur stood liberated, eventually, on January 31, 1972. It came at a cost. Those who lived to tell the tale might tell you all about it again. Helal Morshed Khan, Ainuddin, Amir Hossain, Mokhlesur Rahman, Osman Haider Chowdhury are the names you remember. Read Jufikar Ali Manik's revealing Muktiyuddher Shesh Ronangon Mirpur.

Postscript: The discovery of human bones, along with remnants of clothing, medicines and other items beneath Noori mosque in Mirpur Section 12 in 1999 triggered a new search for the remains of those who were murdered on January 30, 1972. We may never know who the owners of the bones were. But those bones speak for us, of us. They are us.

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