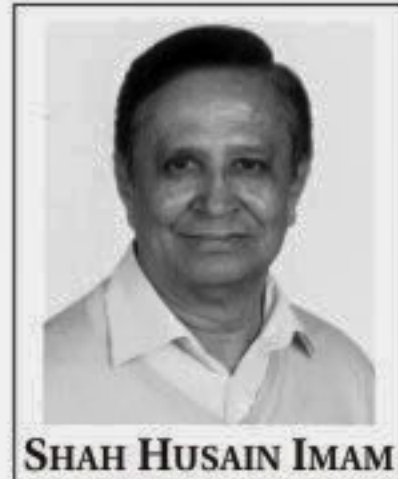


PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

History will be their judge



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia have been twice prime minister and twice opposition leader over the last two decades. They have some more years of power politics left to them. Already, they have exceeded the staying power of Srimati Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto with the exception of Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga ruling slightly longer, as destiny played out differently among the South Asian pantheon of women leaders.

All this is rare honour for our two leaders. Also, a precious opportunity fortuitously offered to them to be serving their people. How far they have lived up to popular expectations is a question that often exercises the minds of people.

The general election results have been an expression of choice between two alternatives, the balance usually tipped, to a large extent, by an anti-incumbency factor. Importantly, the core vote base of Awami League and BNP are more or less evenly matched with their allies' vote banks taken into account. It is the 20 plus percent of swing vote that determines the outcome of a general election.

With twenty years of leadership performance behind them, Hasina and Khaleda have left a track-record of their own, and emerged as experienced and battle-seasoned leaders in their own rights. In the minds of people, therefore, their persona rather comes unhinged from the sympathy waves they had been riding as daughter and wife of an assassinated father and a husband respectively. Nor can it perhaps be said that Sheikh Hasina is basking in the reflected glory of Bangabandhu, nor Khaleda Zia in that of Ziaur Rahman. Not at least in the same way they did in the initial years of taking over the mantles of Awami League and BNP, the former emerging from much-needed shelter in India and the latter stepping out of her home as a housewife-turned-party chief.

There was no question that the succession issue could be resolved in any other way given the inherent and symbolic capacity of the two women to hold their parties together in diffi-

cult circumstances.

The whole point is: about long-enduring players in national politics with so much of their own legacies, the last of which we are yet to see, it's not just the electorate they turn to for a verdict, they also stand before the bar of history. It is their choice whether they are judged by history harshly or regarded highly for delivering to their high callings.

Post-municipal election and by-poll results, an atmosphere of sobriety existed for a short while between Awami League and BNP before souring down the line. For BNP the out-

but one case (16 in total) against her from the BNP and caretaker government days have been quashed through court proceedings and some by decisions from a review committee. The outstanding case dates back to Khaleda's rule when Sheikh Hasina as the opposition leader was prevented at Jahangir Gate in her attempt to see brutally wounded Humayun Azad at the CMH.

After the recent poll results a realisation may have dawned on the BNP camp that the electoral processes could be relied on as their hype on vote rigging stood more or less belied.

takes hold of the public mind absurd observations from top leadership would swiftly erase it.

Frivolities apart, its off-putting upshot difficult to trifle with though, there are more serious follies those in power tend to commit. For instance, Chittagong airport named after Awami League leader M.A. Hannan during AL rule was renamed overnight as Shah Amanat Airport when BNP came to power. The AL gave the BNP a taste of its own medicine by renaming Zia International Airport as Shahjalal Airport.

The sweeping name changes with the change of guard may give vicarious pleasure to the parties doing it by turn. But to the people this is demeaning the image of the leaders; extravagant that it certainly is at the expense of the national exchequer. But that is just one aspect of the potential disruptive effects of political vagaries we remain vulnerable to. The other more serious and disastrous ramifications may lie in store: the delisting of development projects left unfinished by a preceding government, tampering with education and health policies and the outright sense of doom coming from the possibility of overturning agreements after a partial but structured implementation up to a point when abandoning would cost dearly.

How long will this gamesmanship continue? We have made election process reasonably safe but have never been able to utilise the outcome in fostering and sustaining stable conditions. The turmoil begins from the vanquished party's wholesale rejection of poll verdict and then it festers as the ruling party strays into a corralled shell of arrogance and a make-believe world. We have to take a leaf from the tradition of graceful acceptance of election results whichever way they go as in Great Britain and India and make it into a formalised ritual when poll results are out.

Can't some of the friendliness Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia exuded between them while held in detention in the residences meant for deputy speakers during the immediately preceding military-backed caretaker rule? Are we to see good gestures only under severely stressful conditions and not in a normal clime when it is the best time to grow?

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.



SADATUDDIN AHMED

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come of local elections in particular was a morale booster for the depths of frustration the party had sunk in. Their marginal presence in parliament was topped off by a plethora of corruption and criminal cases against Begum Khaleda Zia and her two sons hanging fire from the caretaker government days. There are 23 cases altogether, 5 on alleged corruption against Begum Zia, and 14 against Tareq Zia and 4 against Arafat Koko on charges of money laundering, extortion and the like.

With Hasina coming to power all

It is worthwhile to note that since the Chittagong mayoral election, a pattern of ruling party's non-interference in the elections under the watchful eye of the Election Commission has been sustained.

In fact, Sheikh Hasina claimed BNP won the Habiganj-1 by-poll but the AL is the winner on the side of democracy. But the irony is that on the back of such a heart-warming remark, Sheikh Hasina came out blaming the BNP for the high prices and chaos of stock market crash! Unfortunately, before a good feeling

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL HOSSAIN

THE chairman of the probe committee on stock market manipulation has foretold his investigation. In an interview last week he said he might not be able to punish the culprits, but he would at least reveal their identities. In his subconscious mind, the man charged with a critical task appeared to be hamstrung by his own labyrinth.

Since the interview appeared in a popular daily, there has been no dearth of people who have read it and claimed they knew it from the day this committee was formed. They knew, many boast, this probe committee was not going to turn the trick. In so much as one may not fully agree with them, one has to accept that it was a little too early for the chairman to concede defeat.

Frankly, it sounded like a concession, as if a posse was being organised knowing fully well it wasn't going to capture the bandits. This is the man who is supposed to be the credible face of an investigation. He is supposed to give us confidence. He is supposed to send fear into the hearts of those who have played fire with other people's money. Not a few hundred or thousand but 3.3 million investors are pinning their hopes on this man. Instead he gave it away last week when he said he might not succeed in bringing the offenders to justice.

The chairman, however, has promised to do something. He has vowed to expose the wrongdoers if nothing

An investigation foretold

else. Well, it is possible that he didn't mean what we are thinking. He probably wanted to sound forceful and determined. Maybe this was his way of telling us that he was going to take this investigation seriously, that he would produce results, names if not

interview are puzzled whether the chairman is putting his money where his mouth is.

So, what the committee chairman has said was not only inappropriate but also downright irrelevant. His job is to lead the investigation and do it

He has said before the investigation what should have been said after it was completed. Those who have read his interview are puzzled whether the chairman is putting his money where his mouth is.

indictments. And, he told us what he did. If those coelacanths of crime will still swim at large, he at the least will mark them for identity.

In that case, the choice of words has betrayed the man, because the sound bite had the ring of diffidence instead of confidence in it. It sounded like he was having doubts about his own investigation, although there is every chance that he might prove to be right in the end. Still, there is something called the order of sequence. He has jumped the gun, so to speak. He has said before the investigation what should have been said after it was completed. Those who have read his

in an honest and impartial manner in accordance with his reputation. He is known to be an upright man albeit with a partisan flavour, which is fine. In these days looking for non-partisan people for political appointments is as futile as searching for the Holy Grail.

And what good would it be, if he does as he has promised, if he leaves us with the names of the market manipulators? We probably know them already since, for the last fifteen years, those names have been blowing in the wind. May be the investigation will add a few new names to that list. What difference will it make if we

know once again who have defrauded us only to know once again that they cannot be touched?

This is the lasting legacy of an exceptional time that went down in history by its digital name. In this country we carted loads of people to prison on corruption charges during 1/11, and then saw them being released because the charges against them couldn't be proven. That particular episode has forever done away with the shame of being named in this country. It will take decades before the damage is repaired. It will take decades before calling someone a thief will bring again a blush to his face.

If we brush up our memories, a probe committee was formed in 1996 after another stock market manipulation. That also was a three-member committee headed by a former vice-chancellor. One of the members told me that when a prime suspect was called to testify before the committee, his mobile phone was repeatedly ringing. Every time the phone rang, the suspect excused himself to take the call. Every time he returned to the table, he politely informed the committee that he couldn't avoid the call because it was from a "big brother" in the government.

Since the chairman has given us heads up on his investigation, we need to return the favour. If he is going to interrogate suspects, he must ask them to switch off their mobile phones. If those phones ring, the investigation doesn't have a future.

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Extra-judicial killings

High time for remedial action

THE chairman of the National Human Rights Commission makes a valid point. If indeed the security forces have had to act to defend themselves in crossfires and in the process shoot alleged criminals dead, there must be ways of validating such claims. Professor Mizanur Rahman has suggested --- and one cannot but agree with him --- that only the judiciary can determine if the principle of self-defence is a cause for law enforcers to kill their would-be assailants in extra-judicial manner. No one argues that in a skirmish where the Rapid Action Battalion and the police must defend themselves from criminal elements, they will do all they can to save themselves.

But then comes the critical issue, which is that the extra-judicial killings that have so far occurred in the country have nowhere been proved to have been definitive accounts of battles between the law enforcers and criminal elements. We have been told over and over again that those losing their lives were leaders of gangs that had fired on the security personnel and so had to be repulsed. It is a refrain which by now has turned into a cliché, for the simple reason that there has hardly been an instance in these so-called crossfires of any member of the security forces being killed or wounded. More amazingly, apart from the man killed in so-called action, no other criminal element 'launching' the attacks has been nabbed or wounded or killed. That is where worries have regularly been expressed by individuals and human rights bodies. The public expectation was that under the present government extra-judicial killings would be brought to a swift end. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Worse, senior government figures have of late given the impression of justifying these sordid acts as being defensive on the part of the law enforcers.

Unless remedial action is taken, popular faith in the rule of law will take a slide. For the government, it is important that it go back to the policy of zero tolerance it had earlier iterated about all illegal acts.

Unstable edible oil market

Government should act fast

THE skyrocketing cooking oil price has dealt another blow to the consumer public. Faced with losses as they are bound by the government-fixed price tag on the bottled cooking oil, refiners have slashed their supply substantially, thereby leaving the market at the mercy of the middlemen, who have taken full advantage of the situation to charge the customers unfairly. On this score, the refiners' point that the upward trend of oil price in the international market is behind their quandary cannot be dismissed out of hand. But what fails our understanding is why the government has been simply looking on while the crisis in the cooking oil market was going from bad to worse? And if the refiners' contention is grounded in fact, why hasn't it taken apt measures to offset the instability in the market or even revise the price of bottled oil in keeping with the international market as well as with the consumers' and the refiners' interests?

Unfortunately though, our past experience says that, whenever the government tried to fix the price of any essential commodity, the market had gone through similar hiccups. One wonders, why has it become the hallmark of the government intervention so much so that whenever it is in place to discipline the market, it rather worsens the consumers' misery? And what happened to the government's monitoring mechanism when supply shortage pushed up the price of loose soybean oil to such an extent that it crossed the threshold price set for bottled oil?

The prevailing volatility in the cooking oil market should not be allowed to continue for long as it is hurtful to both the consumers and the producers. The government's trading wing, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), needs to play a hands-on role in this respect and create a buffer stock of different essential items including cooking oil in order to act as a counter-vailing force against any such price spike in the future.

In the present circumstances, the government must act fast to remove the cooking oil prices anomaly that is

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 11

- 1861** United States House of Representatives unanimously passes a resolution guaranteeing noninterference with slavery in any state.
- 1953** Russia breaks diplomatic relations with Israel.
- 1964** Greek and Turks begin fighting in Limassol, Cyprus.
- 1978** Censorship: the People's Republic of China lifts a ban on works by Aristotle, Shakespeare and Dickens.
- 1979** Iran's premier Bakhtiar resigns, Ayatollah Khomeini seizes power. Islamic revolution of Iran establishes an Islamic theocracy under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.
- 1986** Iran begins Fajr-8 offensive against Iraq.
- 1990** Nelson Mandela, a political prisoner for 27 years, is released from Victor Verster Prison outside Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2010** A European Union summit discusses the possibility of bailing out Greece's economy.