

Shubho Nababarsha 1418!

We are reinvigorated

THE advent of Baishakh is always cause for a renewal of the Bengali soul. This morning, as we ring in Bangla Shaal 1418, it is once more time to reassess ourselves, indeed to recall the cultural traditions we as a people are heir to. It is of special significance that over the years the beginning of the Bengali New Year has increasingly been a reflection of a rejuvenated spirit among the people of Bangladesh as also among Bengali-speaking people elsewhere around the globe. Particularly remarkable has been the constant reassertion of the sentiment that Pahela Baishakh marks the essentially secular character of our national ethos, be it in matters of faith, of music, of our reading habits, indeed of our way of life.

For Bengalis, Baishakh is certainly a recapitulation of history inasmuch as it is a recalling of the social background that accords significance to the season. Since the times of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, Baishakh has been a time of stock taking of the year just gone by and of an opening of accounts, or haal khata, for the one just ushered in. In clear terms, therefore, there is a rather pastoral quality about Baishakh, indeed about every turning of the season in Bangladesh, that one does not miss. The economic aspects of life related to Baishakh are a reminder of the social realities upon which our heritage is grounded. The agrarian nature of life in this land, at once predominant and timeless, has lain at the core of collective life in historical Bengal. Beyond and above that has been the cultural heritage, enriched through the passage of time and history, which has regularly injected substance into life and living here.

Pahela Baishakh, then, is a symbol of all that is good and beautiful and profound about life and culture in a Bengali ambience. It is also a time for us to look ahead into the future, through pledging to rekindle and renew the values and mores which generations of Bengalis have asserted and upheld in their lives again and again.

Shubho Nababarsha to all our readers, patrons, friends, indeed to all Bengalis in Bangladesh and beyond it!

Constitutional amendment issue

Draw the opposition into dialogue

THE national dialogue that the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) committee on constitutional amendment has proposed to hold must be sincere in involving the main opposition and other political parties represented at the JS.

The reported move by the JS committees provides us with at least a glimmer of hope amidst the gloom of prevailing political ambience hostile to any constructive dialogue. The confrontational nature of politics, especially between the ruling Awami League and the Opposition Bangladesh Nationalistic Party (BNP) places a huge challenge before the government to draw the latter into a meaningful dialogue.

In the given situation wider political participation across the political spectrum requires of the ruling Awami League to address as many irritations on the path to a meaningful dialogue as feasible. We would like to believe that the government's overture to the main opposition to represent itself at the dialogue is a serious one.

The ruling party should be persistent in its effort to persuade and engage the opposition in the national dialogue.

In that event, the Opposition for their part should reciprocate ruling party's offer with good grace. Unlike many other issues of day-to-day nature against which the JS has witnessed numberless boycotts and walkouts, the present one is of deeper national significance in which all the parties have an equal stake. It is our sincere expectation that the opposition will be able to judge the issue purely on its merit, and will not politicise it unnecessarily.

Lastly, we hope that both the ruling party and the opposition would be earnest to make the proposed dialogue for constitutional amendment a success.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 14

1294

Temür, grandson of Kublai, is elected Khagan of the Mongols and Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty with the reigning titles Oljeitu and Chengzong.

1699

Khalsa: Birth of Khalsa, the brotherhood of the Sikh religion, in Northern India in accordance with the Nanakshahi calendar.

1865

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated in Ford's Theatre by John Wilkes Booth.

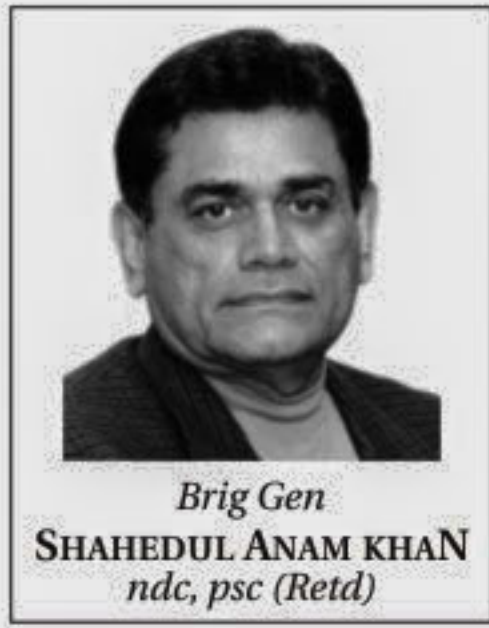
1912

The British passenger liner RMS Titanic hits an iceberg in the North Atlantic at 11:40pm. The ship sinks the following morning with the loss of 1,517 lives.

1971

A procession is brought out by pro-Pakistan Bengali politicians against what they call Indian interference in Pakistan's internal affairs.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen.
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

does one witness a ridiculous attempt to do everything to lose the next election having been put in power "by default."

Interestingly, in spite of the differences between the two major political parties with practically no consensus on any issue, national or international, there is perhaps an understanding on one matter, an accord of view if you like, which is to get the other party to power in the subsequent election. In fact both the major parties share a common recipe in this regard. And this is evident in the actions and comments of the government of the day.

We have been seeing this happening since 1991, and no one needs to waste much time in trying to find out why no political party has ever "won" two consecutive elections since 1991, a benchmark year of our political history. The present government is no exception, which seems to be fulfilling the requirements of the "unwritten accord" and paving the way for its opponents to prevail in the next election.

The first ingredient in the recipe for losing the next election is to throw the election pledges out of the window, and try to look as if you never uttered those words. Therefore, when the government is confronted with price rise, and it was one of the major electoral issues, the only getaway for it is in depicting what the price of things would have been had the "other party" been in power.

When party appendages try to command the public works by controlling all the bids for construction projects, and when the student wing of the party exercises controls by brazen force on the halls of residence in the public universities, the best that the party can do is for the party chief to de-link herself as their

POLITICAL parties in Bangladesh do not win elections, it is the incumbent that loses. But nowhere



AMADUL HUQ/ DRINKNEWS

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patron.

Look at the short shrift given to the institution of local government where instead of strengthening it, as promised in the election manifesto, everything is being done to tie it to the apron strings of the MPs. The UZ parishad chairmen and vice-chairmen have had little to do since they were elected to their posts more than a year ago. So much for the commitment to strengthen local government!

The best recipe resides in poor governance, of which law and order is perhaps the most important, having to do with the physical aspect of human security. The situation in this regard is always flaunted a being the best ever in the country, yet rise in instances of political killings, murder

and abuse of women and the weaker section of the society suffer the ratchet effect, as we are experiencing presently.

The unsuccessful attempt to justify extrajudicial deaths makes the commitment of the government to provide good governance look inane. What is even worse is the fallacious argument that the matter of cross-fire deaths has been ingrained in the psyche of some law enforcing agencies as to have become a culture which will need time to discard; the effort to shift the blame on the predecessor is very palpable in these argument.

No agency in a civilised society can arrogate to itself the role of judge, jury and executioner. And thus one is deeply pained when

other countries confer all kinds of uncomplimentary appellation to the special forces of the country, who otherwise have done a tremendous job in other areas like successfully countering terrorism in the country.

There seems to be a predisposition for circumventing the process of the law by the party in power. Therefore, while it had shocked us to see a murder convict become the beneficiary of the presidential pardon during the 4-Party alliance rule, having remained a fugitive for a long time, we were not surprised to see similar acts of benevolence by the present government in the case of several death row prisoners belonging to its cadre; it even went one step ahead than its predecessor by granting pardon while the case was still under review of the apex court. And of course there is the matter of withdrawing "false cases" which has brought the probity of the government in question.

The Yunus case has pitted the government against itself, it being at a loss to justify the action against Dr. Yunus as being anything but motivated by principles and rule of law. Without going into the legality of the actions of the parties concerned, what is shocking is the well orchestrated vilification campaign against the Nobel laureate, its appalling manifestation we witnessed both in the parliament and outside that belie the argument of the government that the matter has to do with rule of law.

And the most recent example of providing the opponent with grounds to excoriate the government and notch up political mileage is the comments of the finance minister on the share market scam probe report. One cannot engender public confidence by exposing through actions and words that the government has something to hide.

The government is only in the mid-term of its tenure and there is always scope to make a mid-course correction.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

In Ivory Coast, democrat to dictator

VENANCE KONAN

IN 1982, when I was a student in Abidjan, I went on strike for Laurent Gbagbo. President Felix Houphouet-Boigny -- Ivory Coast's first president, who ruled for more than 30 years -- had forbidden Gbagbo, then a democracy activist and history professor, from holding a conference. The government detained about 100 of us demonstrators at a military base, where we spent two days without food. We didn't regret it; we had pinned our hopes for democracy on Laurent Gbagbo.

But look at Gbagbo now: Soundly defeated at the polls last November after a decade as president, he refused to concede, plunging Ivory Coast into chaos. Those who protested were tortured and killed; his soldiers fired on gatherings of women and shelled a market, killing dozens. It's only now, after United Nations and French troops have intervened and he has been besieged in his home, that he may be prompted to give up his hold on power.

How did the man who was once seen as the father of Ivorian democracy turn to tyranny? Was it the corruption of power? The intoxication of going from having nothing to everything all at once? Only a year before he was elected president, in 1999, I remember him denouncing Slobodan Milosevic, saying: "What does Milosevic think he can do with the whole world against him? When everyone in the village sees a white loincloth, if you are the only person to see it as black, then you are the one

who has a problem." But in the space of 10 years, he became deluded by power, a leader whose only ambitions were to build palaces and drive luxurious cars.

After last fall's election, Gbagbo and his wife, Simone, refused to accept the results, in part because they had become evangelical Christians, and their pastors convinced them that God alone could remove them from power. Every day on state TV, fanatical clergymen called Gbagbo God's representative on earth, and the winner of the election, Alassane Ouattara, the Devil's.

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Many young Ivorians, poor, illiterate and easily brainwashed, believed this.

More prosaically, Gbagbo and his cronies -- guilty, among other crimes, of stealing from the public coffer -- fear being brought to justice before an international tribunal, so much so that they have decided to hold on to power no matter the cost. The fear of losing everything can make a dictator, even one who once was a champion of democracy, lose his mind.

The hopes we had in 1982 are long gone now. I was one of many people who denounced Gbagbo's brazen attack on democracy, and on January

10, his militiamen burst into my old house in Abidjan looking for me. I went into hiding after that, and friends helped me flee Ivory Coast for Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso, and then France.

I am much luckier than those who have been killed, wounded or raped, those who are languishing in Liberian refugee camps or living without water and electricity. My friend Oumou tells me that her neighbours are burying their dead in their buildings' courtyards. If they go to the cemetery with the bodies of relatives who have been shot in the fighting, they are consid-

poured into the streets to topple our dictators.

But in Ivory Coast, we failed; Houphouet-Boigny stayed in power until his death, just as Omar Bongo did in Gabon and Gnassingbe Eyadema in Togo, while Paul Biya is closing in on 30 years in Cameroon. The seed of democracy had been sowed in Africa, but it grew slower in some countries than in others. I believe it will grow again in Ivory Coast, once Gbagbo is gone.

I saw him on TV last December, when, despite the protests, he was inaugurated for another term at the presidential palace. Simone Gbagbo wore a white dress, as if she were a bride. At the end of the swearing-in, she conspicuously kissed her husband, and the small crowd applauded. The president and his wife were well-matched in delusion: The whole country knows that Simone lost her husband's favour once he became president, and he has since taken a second wife -- younger and, it is said, more beautiful. The kiss, like the ceremony, fooled no one.

When I heard that international forces were bombarding Gbagbo's bases, that was the image that came to me: Laurent, wearing the medals and sash of the office that he refused to give up, and Simone in her wedding dress, the two entwined forever in their tragedy, which is also that of their country.

The writer is a journalist and novelist. This essay was translated by The Times from the French.

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