

GROUND REALITIES

An argument against hartals

Abuse in the name of law

Mobile courts to curb protest unacceptable

INDEPENDENT lawmaker Fazlul Azim's questions in the Jatiyo Sangsad on the ramifications of mobile court operations during hartal hours reflect broad public concern over the issue. Despite Home Minister Sahara Khatun's belief that these courts foiled looting and prevented deaths during the 36-hour hartal called by the BNP and its allies, the glaring fact is that democratic practice does not condone the operation of such courts. It is our considered opinion, as we are sure it is of citizens across the spectrum, that setting up mobile courts to nab protestors and send them off to prison in the name of the law is truly an abuse of the law. A general strike, for all one's reservations about its timing and necessity, is an act of political protest which has not been declared illegal. As such, why curb it through dispensation of instant justice that falls far short of minimum requirements of a legal action such as right to defence and presentation of witness and evidence? However much the home minister may claim to be acting under law, for the public in general such arbitrary action is reprehensible. For the state now to weigh in by placing opposition activists under arrest and subjecting them to summary trial and eventually carting them off to jail is simply unacceptable. Political agitation must be met by political means. Indeed, we recall the ruling Awami League's earlier statement that the just-ended hartal would be tackled politically.

People cannot and must not be terrorised in the name of the law. We realise that the political gap between the ruling party and the opposition is too wide to be bridged any time soon. If the government thinks that a short-circuiting of the political process in handling agitation will work, it is making a big mistake. High-handedness has never worked in democratic politics. We therefore urge the government to rethink this entire matter of letting mobile courts loose on opposition activists and make sure that the exercise will not be repeated in future.

Let the government heed public opinion on the issue. We reiterate our opposition to ham-fisted measures to silence any kind of public protest.

Re-fixation of launch fares

Ensure efficient and secure service

EVERY instance of fuel price hike becomes an occasion for the launch owners and operators to demand upward revision of fares. Whether it is proportionate to the increase in cost of operation gets lost in the owners trying to exact maximum advantage from the situation. They reel off a whole series of cost increases like; increased salaries of workers and repairing costs of vessels as justification for their inflated demand.

They claim that there has been an increase of 150-200 percent in repairing costs while salaries of workers went up by 65-150 percent. These figures are seldom contested by the government so the owners get away with their demand and the government eventually settles for a particular notch.

Since there is no organization to represent the vessel users' viewpoint it is the government which is obliged to safeguard their interest. In principle, we are not opposed to fare hike per se if there is a rationale for it. But this must be linked to better services to the customers in terms of amenities, punctuality and above all passenger safety.

Let's not forget that launches are the bulk carriers of commuters. As such, efficient management of the services is of crucial importance. We have known launches to have had poor designs and having been constructed in a shoddy manner so that they meet with fatal accidents, not least by ignoring weather signals.

Therefore, the vessels should be pressed into service only after they pass strict fitness and safety tests conducted by competent authority. Monitoring and vigilance would have to be ensured on a regular basis to checkmate overloading and guarantee adequate safety gears for the vessel. Other areas like, operating vessels on rotation, taxes on river route maintenance, vessel survey issues ought to be kept under constant watch. Necessary steps should also be taken to curb corruption in the sector.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A general strike, a hartal, became a necessity in June 1966. The Ayub Khan regime needed to be informed that the state of Pakistan could

not take Bengalis for granted. Hartals turned into inevitability in 1969 because of the overpowering collective desire of the nation to send a condescending, illegitimate regime packing.

In March 1971, hartals lent force and substance to a non-violent non-cooperation movement because we meant to give ourselves a new, secular identity. In the 1980s and through the early 1990s, sustained hartals, sanctioned by the political classes and endorsed by the nation, rid the country of the cabal that had seized power in a coup in March 1982.

From the perspective of history, a hartal acquires significance and immediacy when the broad objectives of a society come under assault. When bye-elections are subjected to rigging by the powers that be, when a caretaker administration formed through a clear subverting of the constitutional process means to preside over an election that has dire predictions of disaster attached to it, hartals become a means to an end. A hartal turns into a credible weapon when a government in office seeks to ride roughshod over popular sentiment and organises non-participatory elections.

Hartals become an acceptable means of protest when constitutional

politics goes missing, when illegitimacy is the crude principle on which a class or classes of individuals attempt to undermine the democratic aspirations of citizens. Barring such stipulations, a hartal turns into an irritant, an instrument that rains blows on a nation's self-esteem and leaves it wounded badly in the knees. Such hartals have the huge capacity of leaving societies maimed and bloodied.

There is a time for general strikes or shutdowns to be enforced, in the larger interest of the greater mass of citizens. And yet such strikes or hartals cannot be the norm for all times.

Those politicians or political parties who, in Bangladesh, indeed in any country, seek to advance their dubious causes through imposing and then enforcing a hartal are only regurgitating a truth we have always known of. It is simple, it is glaring, it is all out there.

In its most basic form, a hartal in these times, especially in Bangladesh where an ever-present requirement remains for democratic pluralism to dig deeper roots, is a potent sign of the clear absence of intellect that has come to shadow the world of our politics. Nothing can be more telling than a hartal putting a nation through asphyxiation at a point in history when the rest of the world is moving ahead to make itself a better place for those who inhabit it. A hartal in these

times comes wrapped in things spurious, for it reflects only the narrow political outlook of those who, unable to rise to the level of the visionary, look upon it as a sure-fire way of clawing to power.

Of course, all politicians have their sights riveted on the heights of power. They dwell on the moral and constitutional means of scaling those heights. Hartals, incidentally, cannot be the means of climbing to that gleaming peak whence glorious authority flows.

In these fast-moving times, with the rest of Asia becoming a dream of a tourist spot for people from across the globe, with Europe endlessly perfecting the art of bringing nations together, with the Middle East venturing out courageously on to the dusty road to democracy, hartals are a misnomer, an embarrassment which threatens to turn the country into the backwaters of history. A hartal in this day and age is a grave pointer to an all-encompassing dark reality: it underlines the patent absence of sophistication in a state of politics that ought to have been better.

You cannot create job opportunities for your people through calling a hartal. You cannot settle fundamental questions, those that have a bearing on the future, through ignoring Parliament and opting for pointless agitation on the streets. Hartals yielded dividends, and justifiably too, in the past. These days, hartals are an

undeniable sign of blinkered political vision... or of no vision at all.

A hartal imposed by men and women who have held high office, who in the years in power long argue about the baneful effects of a shut-down on the country, is a shame because it throws up images of men and women unhappy at losing high office, angry with an electorate that pushed them into opposition. A hartal in these critical times is a mark of the querulous. Embittered politicians are a nation's misfortune. They are unhappy with themselves, deeply troubled at thoughts of the long wait they must endure for the next constitutional means of a return to power. They push citizens into a state of nervous brooding, and foreboding, about the future.

But good, well-meaning politicians point to light at the end of the tunnel. They do not lead people into the unfathomable darkness of dungeons. They wait in Parliament; they keep the government of the day on its toes through incisive questioning and academic reasoning. They have ministers perspiring and panting and fumbling for answers.

Hartals in this second decade of the twenty-first century demean citizens and question their intelligence. They keep children from going to school; they compel factories into idleness; they deprive the poor of a day's wages, leaving them hungry; they make a nation the butt of bad jokes in the outside world.

Every hartal today is a reason for citizens to suppose that politics has gone into exile and anarchy, lurking in the bushes, waits to pounce on the land.

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The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Dying to tell the story

UMAR CHEEMA

WE have buried another journalist. Syed Saleem Shahzad, an investigative reporter for Asia Times Online, has paid the ultimate price for telling truths the authorities didn't want people to hear. He disappeared a few days after writing an article alleging that al-Qaeda elements had penetrated Pakistan's navy and that a military crackdown on them had precipitated the May 22 terrorist attack on a Karachi naval base. His death has left Pakistani journalists shaken and filled with despair.

I couldn't sleep the night that Saleem's death was confirmed. The fact that he was tortured sent me back to a chilly night in September, when I was abducted by government agents. During Saleem's funeral service, a thought kept haunting me: "It could have been me."

Mourning journalists lined up after the service to console me, saying I was lucky to get a lease on life that Saleem was denied. But luck is a relative term.

Adil, my 2-year-old son, was the first person in my thoughts after I was abducted. Journalists in Pakistan don't have any institutionalised social security system; those killed in the line of duty leave their families at the mercy of a weak economy.

When my attackers came, impersonating policemen arresting me on a fabricated charge of murder, I felt helpless. My mouth muzzled and hands cuffed, I couldn't inform anybody of my whereabouts, not even the friends I'd dropped off just 15 minutes before.

My cellphone was taken away and switched off. Despite the many threats I'd received, I never expected this to happen to me.

Sure, I had written many stories exposing the corrupt practices of high-ranking officials and pieces criticising the army and the intelligence agencies. After they were published, Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's prime security agency, always contacted me. I was first advised not to write too much about

them and later sent messages laced with subtle threats. But I never imagined action was imminent.

On September 4, I was driven to an abandoned house instead of a police station, where I was stripped naked and tortured with a whip and a wooden rod. While a man flogged me, I asked what crime had brought me this punishment. Another man told me: "Your reporting has upset the government." It was not a crime, and therefore I did not apologise.

Instead, I kept praying, "Oh God,

dumped nearly 100 miles outside Islamabad with a warning not to speak up or face the consequences.

The following months were dreadful. I suffered from a sleep disorder. I would wake up fearing that someone was beating my back. I wouldn't go jogging, afraid that somebody would pick me up again and I'd never return. Self-imposed house arrest is the life I live today; I don't go outside unless I have serious business. I have been chased a number of times after the incident. Now my son asks me ques-



MATT ROTA

Pakistan is at a crossroads and so is its news media. In a situation of doom and gloom, Pakistani journalists offer a ray of hope to their fellow citizens, and they have earned the people's trust. Even former Prime Minister Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain has admitted that people who once went to the police with complaints now go to the press.

why am I being punished?" The answer came from the ringleader: "If you can't avoid rape, enjoy it." He would employ abusive language whenever he addressed me. "Have you ever been tortured before?" he asked. "No," I said. "These marks will stay with you forever, offering you a reminder never to defy the authorities," he replied.

They tortured me for 25 minutes, shaved my head, eyebrows and moustache and then filmed and photographed my naked body. I was

tions about my attackers that I don't answer. I don't want to sow the seeds of hatred in his heart.

When Saleem disappeared, I wondered if he had been thinking about his children, as I had. He had left Karachi, his hometown, after receiving death threats, and settled with his wife and three children in Islamabad. From there, he often went on reporting trips to the tribal areas along the Afghan border. Tahir Ali, a mutual friend, would ask him: "Don't you feel scared in the tribal areas?" Saleem

would smile and say: "Death could come even in Islamabad." His words were chilling, and prescient.

The killing of Syed Saleem Shahzad is yet another terrifying reminder to Pakistani journalists. He is the fifth to die in the first five months of 2011. Journalists are shot like stray dogs in Pakistan -- easily killed because their assassins sit at the pinnacle of power.

When Daniel Pearl was brutally murdered by militants in Karachi in 2002, his case was prosecuted and four accomplices to the crime were sentenced. This happened only because Pearl was an American journalist. Had he been a Pakistani, there would have been no justice.

Today, impunity reigns and no organisation is powerful enough to pressure the government to bring Saleem's killers to justice. Journalists have shown resilience, but it is hard to persevere when the state itself becomes complicit in the crime. Now those speaking up for Saleem are doing so at a price: they are being intimidated and harassed.

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But this trust will be eroded if journalists continue to be bullied into walking away from the truth. News organisations throughout the world must join hands in seeking justice for Saleem and ending the intelligence agencies' culture of impunity. An award for investigative journalists should be created in his honour, as was done for Daniel Pearl. No stronger message could be delivered to his killers than making him immortal.

The writer is an investigative reporter for The News International. He was a Daniel Pearl Fellow at The Times in 2008.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 15

763 BC

Assyrians record a solar eclipse that is later used to fix the chronology of Mesopotamian history.

1215

King John of England puts his seal to the Magna Carta.

1389

Battle of Kosovo: The Ottoman Empire defeats Serbs and Bosnians.

1909

Representatives from England, Australia and South Africa meet at Lord's and form the Imperial Cricket Conference.

1994

Israel and Vatican City establish full diplomatic relations.

1996

The Provisional Irish Republican Army explodes a large bomb in the middle of Manchester, England.

2002

Near-Earth asteroid 2002 MN misses the Earth by 75,000 miles (121,000 km), about one-third of the distance between the Earth and the Moon.