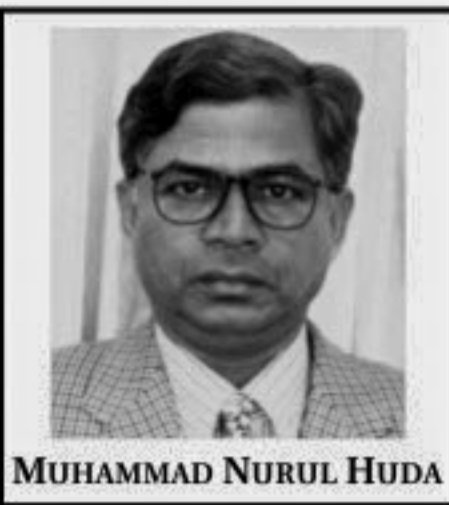


STRAIGHT LINE

When elected people will have no fear



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE lead report of "The Daily Star" of June 29 last quotes the honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as saying that unelected people will never be given the opportunity again to assume power and destroy democracy. The reference, understandably, is to the alleged issue of the caretaker government of the recent past.

The prime minister's remarks, apparently scathing, is, however, in line with the letter and spirit of the constitution of our republic wherein Article 11 states that "The republic shall be a democracy ... and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured."

No right-thinking people will take issue with the prime minister's remark despite the fact that the maintainability of the constitutionally incorporated caretaker dispensation remains a contentious issue in our polity. One could ignore the admirers of the quick fixers of the unconstitutional variety; one could also take no note of those quarters who think that democracy has not found its feet here on account of the incapacity of the political caliber to match the service caliber as was fondly propounded in Pakistan days.

Nobody in his or her right frame of mind will cast any doubt on prime minister's passion and concern for democracy. The national loss caused by the strangulation of democracy apart, her personal loss caused by the massacre of August 1975 was too monumental to bear. Since the unbearable tragedy has not deterred her from waging a relentless struggle for giving meaning and substance to a democratic system, it may be time once again to ascertain as to why unelected people have often dominated the centre stage of our political landscape.

If we retrace our steps we will find that in Bangladesh we have experienced nearly fifteen years of autocratic and authoritarian rule and as such the tyrannical predilections of supposedly democratic governments should not appear surprising. Autocracy and authoritarianism have brought the tone of public life to an all-time low. We have democracy without being able to ensure meritocracy in desirable measure. Ignorance, in competence and dishonesty has not been effectively manifest disqualifications for high public office. The individual has been dwarfed and sub-

ordinated to the State.

Democracy has not found solid feet because institution building has not been our virtue. On the other hand, we have depended on pliant public servants thereby failing to properly diagnose the political and constitutional malaise. It is thus no wonder that there is a demand for the umbrella of a caretaker government to oversee the national elections. The explicit unreliability of the political class caused by institutional erosion is an uncomfortable reality to live with.

It is worth remembering that the staying power of democracy varies from country to country. The

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timing of political breakdown depends upon the strength of political institutions and the severity of economic crisis. Collapse may not overtake an economically depressed country where the political institutions have acquired durability through time and tradition. The fragile institutions and pliant politicians combine to bend people to the whims and caprices of the insensitive rulers.

The question to ask is, do we witness a temper in our political discourse that presses a partisan advantage to its bitter end? Are we failing to understand and respect the other side and do we feel a lack of unity between all citizens? Those are pertinent queries as democracy depends upon habits of consent and compromise which are attributes only of mature societies.

The lawful government by the majority, under the rule of abiding law, and with freedom of opposition and dissent is not an easy achievement. Cynics in Bangladesh say that as the spirit of moderation is not prevailing, our society is degenerating into divisions with hatred replacing goodwill. Such environment facilitates the entry of unelected people.

Politics, in public interest, need to be restored to its edifying status. For that to happen our politicians must not have any claim to infallibility and their partisan considerations must not make them promise-bound never to become pragmatic. The right politician in the wrong party should be preferable to the wrong one in the right party.

In fact, in effect, we have nurtured an authoritarian structure that has specifically repudiated the idea of popular sovereignty. The politicians of all descriptions and bureaucrats of dubious credentials in their power-obsessed career have denied to our citizens' real opportunity to grow in self-reliance and responsibility. The development of a truly democratic consciousness has been impeded by the weight of our establishment.

In the not-too-distant past the nation found itself in a deplorable political scenario because constitutional bodies betrayed the trust reposed in them. This was so because partisanship was painfully dominant in the affairs of the State and comprehensive politicisation was deemed as pragmatic strategy.

The cynics say that we in Bangladesh do not appreciate that freedom must be taken in moderation and that our misplaced enthusiasm following independence resulted in the unfortunate discarding of the old norms of discipline and decorum, dignity and decency. We are oblivious of the fact that people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. In fact, regimes have been destroyed not by adversity but by abasement.

We have to hope and pray that institution building in Bangladesh, now, would mean that there will be a change from privilege to talent and to accent on caliber. It shall also mean that money is something to be earned rather than to be got or won; it shall mean putting extra effort before extra leisure; it will mean stopping our society from disintegrating into hostile factions; it will mean enabling our leaders to perceive the truth and empowering them with the courage to say it to the people; it shall ensure that there is no substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life and that persons are appointed to high public offices for what they are. When we make these a reality, unelected people will have no constituency to launch and elected folks will have no cause for fear.

The writer is a former Inspector General of Police and a columnist of the Daily Star.

It's a mistake

Unilateral amendment will gravely complicate politics

THE Constitutional amendments voted into law on Thursday have many aspects. Today we will confine our comment on the care taker issue.

The scrapping of the caretaker government (CTG) system is a move towards brinkmanship that has pushed the nation towards political uncertainty. We do not fully share Khaleda Zia's view that now political confrontation has become inevitable but we definitely feel that possibility of that confrontation has greatly increased.

The ruling party has not been able to make any case for the abolition of the CTG system. In fact it did not even try. It took the Supreme Court verdict in part and used it to suit its political end- to hold the next election under their government.

They totally ignored the suggestion by the SC that, for the sake of peace, and public interest, elections "may" be held under the Thirteenth Amendment for the next two terms. This is a clear sign of insincerity and political opportunism. The inexplicable hurry to do away with CTG even though the next election is two and half years away reveals an attitude of arrogance and disdain towards the opposition and raises doubts whether the government was at all interested in opposition' views. For that matter there were no attempts to solicit views from a wider section of the public, like civil society, professional groups or even the academicians and constitutional experts outside the ruling party orbit.

Voters will remember how they had to suffer through relentless hartals, sometimes extending for 5-7 days when AL was agitating for the CTG system. For it to now turn and say that CTG is bad is an intellectual somersault that public will find it hard to accept. In fact it is a sign of how disdainfully public opinion is being treated.

BNP's agitation for midterm polls was completely devoid of either any logic or any public support. But now, thanks to the AL, BNP has a serious issue to galvanise public support behind. While we have always stood against hartal, and still strongly urge the opposition not to subject the economy to this onslaught, the possibility of such occurrences has been greatly increased due to this unilateral amendment of the constitution.

From all counts we consider the government's action to be a mistake, and from which government will have to extricate itself. Prime Minister said that she is open to further amendment of the constitution if the opposition gives its suggestions. Passing the bill and then soliciting suggestions is self contradictory. But if it is a genuine sign of accommodation, then the government should go much further and engage in confidence building measures with BNP and create openings to prevent the political crisis which looks inevitable.

Managing body fracas in schools

Why must students suffer?

ACADEMIC activities of a village high school in Lalmonirhat remains suspended for the last one week following disputes over formation of a controversial managing committee. School authorities have kept the class rooms locked up. As a result, nearly 300 children cannot attend classes. They come to school everyday but go back without taking any classes. The students or their guardians failed to get any reasonable answer either from the headmaster of the school or any other teacher regarding abrupt closure of the institution.

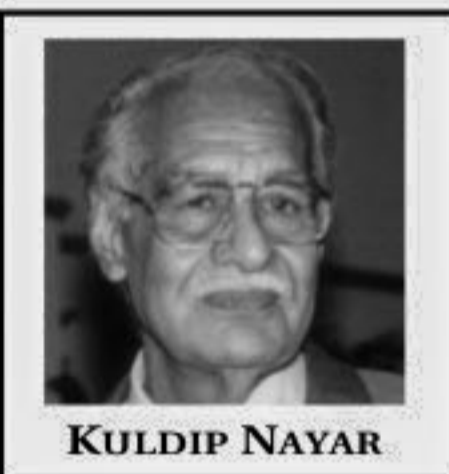
The dispute arose when the headmaster of the school recently formed the school managing committee from his chosen people from outside the locality for his personal interest. As tension mounted in the area, the headmaster and other teachers are absenting to avoid the rage of the locals; hampering normal schooling of the children.

Reports of influence peddling and highhandedness of the school managing committees in districts and rural areas are nothing new. Powerful people, who mostly figure in the local school committees, wield their influence to run the affairs of school according to their will.

From appointment of teachers and staff to managing of school funds, they try to wrest control over all matters. In most of these schools less competent people get precedence over genuine applicants for teaching or other positions. Alleged mismanagement of school development and teachers benefit funds is also a regular feature in these schools.

These conditions need to be addressed with seriousness. The education ministry and local authorities concerned should monitor the actions of the governing bodies and the school administration to ensure smooth running of the institutions. Hapless students should not suffer for the unscrupulous elements that sneak into the governing bodies of these schools.

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

GOVERNMENTS are out of steam after traversing some distance. It happens all over the world because the enthusiasm with which they start peters out, the promises which they make become remote and the schemes

which they take up lack push. This is the most charitable explanation of the Manmohan Singh government's non-performance. It has no sense of direction. How can it direct the nation? This comes out clearly as the government reaches midway to its five-year tenure.

Yet, it does not realise how strong the ground swell of public opinion against it is. The agitation by Anna Hazare gave evidence of that. People came out in the open in his support throughout the country. The government assessed the mood at that time correctly and sat with the representatives of civil society to draft the Lokpal bill. The issue is corruption and the government has to attend to it.

By reshuffling the cabinet, people's anger is not going to go away unless they see some concrete steps to eliminate corruption.. The battered government has to come up with the answer to explain why the system does not function. The government's ham-handedness can be judged by the way even the finance minister's office in the secure North Block was broken in to bug and leave chewing gums to mock at the entire exercise of security.

By changing portfolios the Prime Minister does not improve the efficiency of departments or quicken the pace of decisions. And what do you do about integrity? Practically all ministers of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are mixed up with a magnet in the corporate sector or the other. Ineptness has, in fact, become the hallmark of the government.

Even if you were to leave out corruption, which has been the maximum since independence, you would find numerous examples of sloth and slovenliness strewn all over the administration. Maybe, there is a purpose behind it, probably to cover up the fallout of unholy alliance between ministers and bureaucrats. The government seems to live under the illusion that the subsidies and pro-poor yojans (plans) keep the aam aadmi happy. Half of the allocation does not reach him and what reaches him tends to make most among the indolent and hopelessly dependent. Punjab and Haryana are two

Out of steam

examples where the agriculture labour prefers to draw a dole than work.

What depresses me is the Prime Minister's belief that nothing is wrong with the government and that its image has been damaged by the media and the judiciary in that order. He should realise that both are the consequence, not the cause. The cause is the series of scams which would have remained unexposed if journalists had not brought them before the public and judges had not pulled up the administration. Manmohan Singh goes by what the bureaucrats tell him or the senior ministers suggest. They are cut off from the public and do not know about its thinking. Having been a bureaucrat all his life Manmohan Singh should have known how to

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make the administration function quickly and responsive.

My feeling is that time is running out. The Prime Minister does not realise that he has no leeway and must act now if he does not want the situation going out of hand. He should compare his last tenure with the present one. Then it looked as if he had thought over the steps he was taking. Despite the pressure of coalition partners, he had his way. True, he performed less than expectations, but did not seem out of depth as he looks today.

In the current tenure, he does not seem to get anything right. Understandably, he feels uncertain because he has to manage some 24 parties and does not have the chunk of 60-odd members from the Left to depend on. (They themselves have been reduced to 16). But the coalition dharma does not mean that he should connive at the corruption of its members. The correspondence between him and ex-Telecommunication Minister A. Raja shows that he knew about the corruption of DMK members in the cabinet and still he did not do anything about it. Manmohan Singh should have at least warned the DMK chief K. Karunanidhi instead of

placating him. True, Congress president Sonia Gandhi dictates the terms and she was not willing to disturb the appcart in the beginning of the second term.

The issue of price rise is a serious one. There must be something wrong somewhere to allow it go haywire. By saying that inflation is "causing worry," the government does not mollify the angry nation. I get the impression that the rulers have no idea of coping with the ever-increasing prices. "We have no magic wand," is the stock reply when pressed to explain why prices are inordinately high. Why did the government let the situation reach such a pass in the first instance? No economist is required to tell the government that it is a question of demand and supply. What is required is productivity. The government has no immediate plans to do so. Probably, it has referred the matter to the Planning Commission which will tell us in good time what to steps to take. By that time inflation would have risen still further.

Has the government ever tried to cut its expenditure? I do not hear the word austerity in official circles any longer. Almost 75 per cent of petrol and diesel is utilised by vehicles of government and the public sector undertakings at the centre and in the states. Why doesn't the government reduce the cavalcade of cars and security personnel with a minister or a VIP? I thought BJP leader L.K. Advani would have been sensitive enough to voluntarily cut the number of cars and security men when he travels at least within New Delhi, a protected area. In fact, all opposition leaders in the country should unilaterally surrender all vehicles that follow them except the one which carries the security men. This may be one way to shame the government.

The prime minister and the Congress president are now engaged in an exercise to refurbish the image of the government. They should recall how Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri stressed on economizing the government expenditure. Shastri even gave a call for "miss a meal" since the food was in short supply. That spirit in leadership is lacking.

Concrete steps are required to convince people that the government is serious about eliminating corruption as well as avoiding wasteful expenditure. A government which appears out of steam cannot prove its dynamism by the Prime Minister's briefing to some editors. He should come out of the pardah more often and face the nation.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 2

1897
Italian scientist Guglielmo Marconi obtains a patent for radio in London.

1964
President Johnson signs Civil Rights Bill. The Civil Rights Bill - one of the most important piece of legislation in American history - becomes law.

1976
Fall of the Republic of Vietnam; Communist North Vietnam declares their union to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

2004
ASEAN Regional Forum accepts Pakistan as its 24th member.