

KALEIDOSCOPE

Our population problem

A determined thrust awaited

WORLD Population Day was observed yesterday around the globe on the theme of "World at 7 billion" as the world is set to reach this number by the end of October of this year. Bangladesh, too, observed the day, but amidst major population control concerns.

Lack of clarity seems to be a key characteristic of the population problem in the country. For one, there is no clear statistic on the population itself, with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics claiming it to be 15 crore while, according to the UN report of 2008, it is over 16 crore. Perhaps more important is the absence of a clear vision towards population control. Bangladesh was held up as a success story in terms of population in the 1980s and 1990s, but the last decade has seen a sad decline in planning, motivation and action in population control programmes. Over 10,000 posts in the Directorate General of Family planning -- close to 200 at the deputy and assistant director levels -- are vacant. This shortage of personnel has had a direct impact on service delivery, with fewer service providers being able to reach an ever-increasing population. Just over 60 percent of couples use family planning, while the government target is to increase coverage to 80 percent by 2021. Overpopulation aggravates problems of food, water and sanitation, among others, while the challenge of the spiralling growth is exacerbated by global warming which is set to claim 17 percent of our already limited land.

Whether due to complacency, lack of motivation or absence of vision, our population control policies have lost their edge over the years. Change can only be brought about through a clarity of approach delineating accurate statistics, setting realistic targets and taking prompt action to meet them. We hope that, in coming years, the observation of World Population Day will not be simply a redundant show of colourful processions but a true celebration of success in the area of population control.

Hartal violence

Increasing intensity worrying

WE are sorry to note the disturbing drift towards violence during hartal which is assuming ominous proportions. Over the last several days, during which we saw the country suffer the severe consequences of general strikes for 48 hours and 30 hours consecutively called by opposition parties, much of the disorder could have been avoided, if only the situations could be handled more judiciously.

It was alarming to see in some places pro-hartal elements armed with sticks intimidating the public. And equally upsetting was the picture of armed anti-hartal elements under the cover of the police going after their rivals. The spectacle of the capital and other main towns being besieged by the law enforcing agencies and not by the picketers has drawn the attention of many observers. What is equally disconcerting is the attempt to preempt the pro-hartal groups by the police which managed to create more commotion than solve. We repeat, hartal is counterproductive and, in the context of today's politics, an anachronistic idea. Hartal hurts nobody but us. Yet hartal has not been proscribed by law. And we also ask now, as we have done in the past, whether or not the use of force by the police was markedly disproportionate to the need.

While we appreciate the concern of the administration for public safety, what is quite incomprehensible is the manner of ensuring it. What is alarming too is the way some people were barricaded inside the premise of a building or party office and the intrusion of the police inside buildings chasing after some pro-hartal elements and subjecting them to merciless beatings, when apparently all that they were doing was chanting slogans in favour of hartal. It would not be wrong to suggest that in many cases it was the police action, quite unprovoked, that compounded the situation. There were injuries on both sides, which unfortunate as they were, should have been avoided.

The essence of maintaining law and order is for them to understand the importance of holding back rather than taking precipitate action and creating desperate situations.

Are we living in a democracy?



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

THE country's major political parties and their student wings have a proud legacy of waging determined

struggles to restore people's right to vote and thus have governments of their choice. In the last such struggle, they ousted the military government of General Ershad in 1990. All were happy thinking that with the end of autocracy, democracy was not far away.

After two decades, since 1990s where we have been living under elected governments, what is our common perception about the democracy we have been officially practicing?

Can we honestly claim that we are happy about what the elected governments have been delivering in the name of democracy?

Let us consider the behaviour of the government during the 49-hour nationwide shutdown (hartal) called by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its alliance partners. We are emphasising here the role of the government and not of the police as such.

In fact the police being an organ of the state, it cannot act without the executive order of those in state power. And the stunned nation witnesses how a legislator and chief whip of Jatiya Sangsad (JS) or parliament was treated by members of the police.

Granted they were just discharging their responsibilities. But where do we draw the line between mere performance of duty and crossing the limit? On any count, it cannot be said that the police have just been doing their duty to maintain discipline and law and order during the opposition-called strikes or shutdowns.

For the time being, we would be concentrating on the behaviour of the state's security organs like the police towards the citizens when they are exercising their constitutional rights. For the right to speak, assemble and take out processions are very much within the bounds of constitutionally sanctioned democratic rights of citizens.

Whether calling a hartal is proper or not is not the real point of issue here. That is because the government has not yet banned the use of the political weapon of agitation called hartal.

Let us again come to the special case of how a legislator and opposition chief whip of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) or parliament was assaulted during hartal on last Wednesday.

How can the government justify the utter contempt with which a nameless and faceless servant of the state dealt with a legislator? Where did the police draw their arrogance from, if not from the high-ups of the

matters should break or compromise on her/his professional codes of conduct while on duty.

And what government staff, except a few, in a society that has a long history of struggles against autocracies of different shades and denominations, did not belong to one or the political groups in their youth?

Should that be enough reason for a servant of the state to display partisan bias in the discharge of his/her duty?

Things have come to such a pass that one can hardly find any difference between the behaviour of the police and other security organs of

To cap it all, the police as well as other servants of the state are getting more and more indiscreet in the use of power against citizens in general. At the same time, they are also flaunting their partisan bias shamelessly.

What kind of inference might a person draw from the aforementioned observations on the nature of incumbent elected government and those of the past? What kind of democracy are these? Or do they bear any comparison with democracy in the original sense of the term?

Quite to the contrary, what we are experiencing over the last two decades, on the other hand, rather fits well with what Fareed Zakaria, now GPS host for CNN and former managing editor of the prestigious Foreign Affairs magazine of the US government, has termed "illiberal democracy" as against "liberal democracy" as practiced in the West.

Liberal democracy is more than just holding "free and fair" elections to install an elected government. In sharp contrast to our recent experience, liberal democracy is characterised by a system of government that also practices "the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property."

Also called constitutional liberalism, it has a lot of difference with what we are passing for democracy in our country.

Our elected governments are priding themselves in having the elections officially declared "free and fair." But looking at the behaviour of the state's security and other organs towards its citizens the question that now stare in the nation's face is: Are we still a democracy?

The kind of political system we are living under on sufferance does not fit into the expectations of the citizens of 21st century. So, our struggle for democracy is not yet over. Having resolved our ongoing bickering over ensuring a free and fair election, it is time we launched the next phase of struggle. And that struggle will be over establishing our constitutionally granted rights agreed by the governments in theory, but largely denied in practice.

The write is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.



STAR ARCHIVE

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incumbent government? And if that is the fate of a respectable member of parliament (MP) at the hands of the police, what can an ordinary citizen expect from them?

Anyone keenly following the reports after Wednesday's incident would find that the fingers were being pointed at a particular police officer who was an erstwhile member of a pro-government student body. So the reports went, the particular police officer behaved in a partisan manner.

But under normal circumstances, there is no reason why a trained servant of the state in its security

the state under the present elected civilian governments and that under the military dictators of the past. The old story of police excesses are being told and retold in the same manner regardless of the nature of the government.

And it is also not that the accusing fingers are being pointed at the police alone. In fact, complaints are being levelled against the servants of the state under all other departments of the administration, too. Truth be told, with the passage of days, partisan attitude of the government servants have been becoming more open and unabashed.

Emerging world powers

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

IT is common knowledge that US is the only super power in the world. It is estimated that within the next fifty years US will continue to remain the only super power in world politics because of her vast economic and technological superiority over others.

However, countries like Russia, China, EU countries, and India have been progressing fast during the last two decades. Because of the fastest economic, technological advancement and political stability due to successful assimilation of free market economy and command economy, the leading economic and political analysts observe that among the emerging powers China has the brightest possibility to becoming the world's number one economic power within fifty years -- surpassing US.

Russia, China and India have some common characteristics. All of them want to see multi-polar world where they desire to be power houses. They have many characteristics for becoming great powers. Area wise they are big, they have huge population and they have large natural resources.

Despite this, they are afraid of breaking and there are differences of opinions about their future status in world politics.

Russia is an old and big country. After the fall of USSR it (Russia) has lost its old status as a super power.

Overnight it became a country of hunger, anarchy and uncertainty. Trade and commerce went under the control of the mafia group. However, its condition has improved a lot and has made it much more stable during the last one and a half decade.

When analysing the prospect of Russia to become a leading power-house, we need to look backwards. Till 1917 its Tsarists kings ruled the country for more than 500 years. Among the important past events were its defeat by Japan in 1905, its defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte and Germany in the first World War.

They not only defeated Germany, but also captured the whole of Europe. This indicates their potential for reemerging as a great power. However there is no likelihood that Russia would like to confront. Democratic Russia appears to be averse to confrontation with any other democratic powers like US, countries from EU and Japan.

Among Russia, China and India

only China may become the challenger to US because of their ideological and political differences. Area and population wise China is the 3rd largest country in the world. Her rate of economic growth is the highest at present. Within fifty years time her GDP may be equal to US, where at present her economy is regarded as

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the second highest in the world. It has the largest army and its progress in technological advancement is fast.

For better appreciation of future role of Chinese political influence we may look closely to its political ambition. So far China has not shown any desire for increasing its political influence on other states, usually done by other big and powerful states. However, its future handling of Taiwan crisis would determine its future ambition. After the fall of USSR Russia has been trying to extend its influence over her former republics.

Some experts think that the status of China would be much stronger

than Russia in the future. At present China does not have the technological capacity to build fighter aircrafts or submarines (fully), it is, however, progressing well to narrow down the current technological gap. At present she is the largest buyer of arms from Russia.

US and the West are more concerned about China to unite the system of free market economy with the command economy; right now the greatest challenge faced by them. Thus the possibility of her dissolution like the USSR appears to be extremely improbable. We may conclude that China has great prospect for becoming the second multi-polar power in the world.

India also desires to see a multi-polar world. It is already dominating regionally. However, we have not yet been able to see its political liberalism, maturity and internal stability -- all required in power domination.

India has problems of division and poverty. Its arms are not as modern as needed. Though already a nuclear power, she may not reach the level of China because of certain serious hindrances.

Under this circumstance, we may conclude that US will remain as the only super power in the world because of the technological and economic advantages over others.

The writer is a former Joint Secretary.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 12

1543

King Henry VIII of England marries his sixth and last wife, Catherine Parr, at Hampton Court Palace.

1812

War of 1812: the United States invade Canada at Windsor, Ontario.

1920

The SovietLithuanian Peace Treaty is signed. Soviet Russia recognises independent Lithuania.

1986

Dozens are injured in the second consecutive night of violence in Portadown, County Armagh, in Northern Ireland.

1990

Boris Yeltsin resigns from the Soviet Communist Party, bringing the radical-conservative split into the open.