

Your political game, our death

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HERE are two news items in *The Daily Star*, both on the front page. One under the heading, "Arson: Victim loses battle for life after 4 days." The other under the titled, "Abdin Assaulted: Court orders for probe."

The news of the former says, "Mosharraf Hossain, the only breadwinner of a six-member family, succumbed yesterday to burns he suffered when miscreants torched a truck in Natore on Wednesday during *hartal* hours. Mango trader Mosharraf and two others were injured when a band of six to seven persons set fire to a mango-laden truck on Natore-Dhaka highway at the district headquarters around 11:30pm Wednesday, the first day of the 48-hour shutdown called by BNP and its allies."

Mosharraf's fault was to defy the *hartal* imposed by the main opposition alliance for the greater "benefit of the masses." Mosharraf being one of those "toiling" masses could not save himself even though he did not venture at broad day light and instead chose to drive his truck at dark hours of night just prior to midnight.

No, Mosharraf was not fortunate enough to get any visitation from anyone, neither government or nor the opposition, nor for that matter from any foreign diplomats or human rights groups, let alone any financial help while he was fighting for his life at the hospital.

According to his family, "Tk.2 lac worth of the mangoes he bought have been lost and they have already borrowed Tk.50,000 to bear the expenses of his treatment."

The second news, outcome of the same *hartal* that stated: "A Dhaka court yesterday ordered the Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner to take legal action, upon investigation, against the policemen responsible for the assault on Opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abdin Farroque."

The plaintiff, a fellow MP of Mr. Farroque's own party told the TV reporter, "I filed this case to invoke the conscience of the 15 crores people of this country to tell them how repressive this government is that a front ranking opposition lawmaker could not escape the wrath of the members of the law enforcing authority."

Like his fellow party colleagues, from Tetulia to Teknaf, he termed the incident "unprecedented." Even a Dhaka University Professor in a press analysis termed the incident "unprecedented" and in his view

he has never seen such an oppressive regime; seemingly eclipsing his memory to what happened to Mohammed Nasim, a former home minister, and the mayhem that the BNP-Jamat government carried out following the October general election of 2001 on the opposition supporters and members of the religious minorities.

Unlike Mosharraf, Farroque was privileged to get the visitations of score of his party men including his own party chief, other sympathetic politicians, and even the diplomats of two of the most powerful



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nations on our planet, a rare honour for the opposition chief whip.

Obviously, Mosharraf was not born with such a fortune, since the visits of the honourable diplomats were obviously guided by politics not humanity.

Both the incidents, the manhandling of Farroque by the police and death of Mosharraf in the hands of opposition activists are not unprecedented, irrespective of which of the two political parties is in the helm and which one is in the streets. But the fundamental differences are that Farroques are the major stakeholders of this political game while Mosharraf's are innocent bystanders and are tragic victims of crossfire.

When their party rises to the helm of the state ministerial births are reserved for Farroques, while Mosharrafs never become any party or privy to extortions or tender manipulations, no matter which party wins the political game.

Whether the policemen, those who assaulted Farroque, are brought to book or not, he has already ripped enough political benefit to last the future years of his political career. But for poor Mosharrafs, they lose their inalienable right to lives for the cause for which they are not stakeholders by any stretch.

And the families of Mosharrafs' not only lose their near and dear ones but also the loss their breadwinners plunging the families into irreversible calamities.

And their legal suits usually never see the light of the day although Article 27 of the constitution vehemently proclaims: "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

This brings down to the legality and morality of the so-called democratic right "*hartal*." But is *hartal*, truly a democratic right, let alone basic right as some carried away analysts term? This is a million dollar question and the answer is most likely to be influ-

enced by the side of the political fence one belongs to.

If one is a supporter of the government of the day, *hartal*, in his view, is an utterly undemocratic act that infringes on the freedom of an individual. On the other hand, if one has any degree of sympathy for the opposition, it would be the only democratic right under opposition's disposal to protest the undemocratic, if not autocratic, postures of the government.

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Burning a mango-vendor or an auto-rickshaw driver to death is certainly not a democratic exercise by any means. Other than Bangladesh, and a few instances in neighbouring India, this political culture is probably not prevalent in any other part of the world. The question is: Why does it happen in Bangladesh? It is, in fact, an act of desperation on the part of the opposition parties to ventilate their grievances against the wrong doings of the government.

In a parliamentary democracy, the parliament is supposed to be the principal forum where the opposition should raise its voice pointing to the misrule of the government. Both the government and the opposition have to share the blame, probably, at this time opposition carries the lion share of the blame for their continued absence from the parliament.

The most discouraging precedence that happened in the successive elections is that boycott of the parliament did not negatively affect the chance of winning an election by the opposition party, since misrule of the incumbent took the centre-stage in deciding the mandate of the voters.

Our citizens at home are probably too immune to so many of these wrong-doings that the tragic deaths of Mosharraf's do not so much invoke (may be they are helpless) their conscience in asking themselves why these non-stakeholders have to meet fatalities in the recurring political games of the two political rivals.

Sitting thousands of miles away from my homeland and living in one of the finest democratic societies on our planet, my heart profusely bleeds. My heartfelt condolence is for the bereaved, though it hardly lessens the burden of their grief.

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Why is the CTG system a big deal?

BRIG. GEN SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

BNP with its Islamist allies, who had opposed the liberation of this country in 1971, are seemingly on a war path to realise their demand ostensibly for a neutral caretaker government (CTG) to oversee the next parliamentary election, which is now two and a half years away.

It is difficult to believe that the opposition has decided to take to the streets by compressing *hartals*, lasting as long as 48 hours at a stretch causing both immense suffering to the people and damaging the tottering economy further, for the sake of a CTG about which BNP's attitude has always been cynical from the very beginning.

When the idea of a neutral CTG was mooted by AL, following an engineered by-election result of Magura-2 constituency in favour of the then ruling BNP candidate in 1994, BNP fought tooth and nail against the move. Begum Khaleda Zia had scorned the idea of neutrality and brushed it aside by saying that nobody is neutral except a lunatic and a minor.

True, BNP under tremendous pressure from the opposition led by AL had to amend the constitution towards a CTG system in 1996 but it always looked askance at the system.

Under the CTG system three parliamentary elections have been held so far. BNP lost twice and won once. AL on the other hand lost once and won twice. Begum Khaleda Zia cried foul and questioned the neutrality of the CTG each time her party lost the election. She accused the last CTG, headed by Dr.Fakhruddin Ahmed, of having engineered the election in favour of AL.

Sheikh Hasina also cried foul and blamed the CTG when AL lost. She made very scathing remarks against the then chief advisor Justice Latifur Rahman whom, on the other hand, Begum Khaleda Zia showered favours upon by allowing him to stay in the posh and sprawling state house and enjoy state hospitality during the entire duration of her government. So much for the neutrality of the CTG system and the self-conflicting stand of BNP and AL on the system.

Now that the CTG system has been scrapped from the constitution by the government in line with the supreme court verdict, Begum Khaleda Zia and her like minded politico-religio wise men and women are waging a sort of war on the streets to bring back the lunatics and minors to take charge and conduct the

next parliamentary election.

Let us look at the CTG system which was a brain child of the BNP. A motley hand-picked council of 10 advisors headed by a chief advisor to be appointed by the president would constitute the CTG which would govern the country and conduct parliamentary election. It is clearly an aberration of democracy. It runs counter to the basic principle of democracy which is enshrined in our constitution as one of the four fundamental state principles, to have in place an unelected dispensation no matter how transitory, to govern this country of 160 million freedom loving people and conduct an election of such national importance. The question is: Can the votaries of the CTG claim to be the custodians of democracy in this country?

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We have been experimenting with this undemocratic, grotesque and unique CTG system as the exclusive preserve of our politicians all these years but practically to no purpose, because neither BNP nor AL has come to terms with the system whenever they lost during the election. Both cried foul and questioned the neutrality of CTG. The problem with BNP and AL, or to be precise with Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, is that they are in no mood to accept defeat in election. Come what may, they must win and rule the roost. But the reality is that in election one wins and walks in the corridors of power and the other loses and walks down the streets.

But let me say in fairness to AL that this time the government took a giant step forward towards democracy when it decided to establish all parliamentary standing committees in the very first session of the National Assembly. It was again a rare democratic gesture when the BNP, despite its reduced strength in the parliament, is well represented in the standing committees. Two standing committees are headed by opposition law makers.

Besides, all standing committees are headed by members of parliament including ministerial committees, where concerned ministers have to attend as members and answer queries.

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This is despite the opprobrium BNP has indulged in by calling the landslide victory of the AL led alliance government as having been engineered and manipulated, the government being allegedly a puppet of foreign country and the prime minister being allegedly a chief minister of that country.

Full credit goes to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for keeping her cool! A small step by Begum Khaleda Zia towards the government in the true democratic spirit would have paved the way to democracy. But that is not to be in this godforsaken land where in the words of Syed Badrul Ahsan of *The Daily Star*, the garden is buried deep under the weeds we have watered for years.

40 years on we are an independent country afflicted with mounting poverty and a great crisis of national unity. As a nation we have to decide once for all whether we would watch power hungry politicians

tearing this country apart through *hartal* packed politics of confrontation and violence on the streets, setting ablaze buses and cars, shutting off all mills and factories, commerce and industries, all educational institutions and virtually holding peace loving people of this country hostage, all in the name of grabbing state power.

CTG is not the main issue of those who are flexing muscles on the streets. The main issues are the trial of war criminals of 1971, the trial of those who master minded the August 21 grenade attack at the AL rally, the trial of those involved in the Chittagong arms haul case, the policy of empowerment and emancipation of women, the principle of secularism having been restored in the constitution et al which somehow have a bearing on religion being an issue. It is time we mobilised the peace loving people to say "no" to *hartal*.

The writer is former Military Secretary to the President.

Laptop takes over confab



THE theatre was so quiet the audience could have been asleep. In fact, several of us were, it being 9 a.m., a time known to professional journalists as "the middle of the night."

An academic conference was about to begin. Hundreds of professors had taken their seats and were watching the stage expect-

tantly as the first speaker approached the podium, opened her mouth and... Stopped.

She stared at a dialogue box in the middle of the big slide show screen. "You must restart your computer for recent updates to take effect."

The naughty ones among us sniggered. Tee hee! It was kinda funny to see this tiny black laptop wresting control of the event from the organisers. The would-be speaker used the cursor to click the word "Restart later."

The box disappeared. Phew.

Fifteen minutes later, the cheeky computer interrupted again with the same request. Indeed, it popped up every 15 minutes for the next two hours.

No cancel option was offered at any time.

Just in front of where I was sitting, organisers had frantic conversations about what to do. The thing was spoiling the rhythm of the conference and making naughty members of the audience snigger.

"Can we ditch this computer and plug in a new one?"

"No. All the presentations were pre-loaded onto this one, and some of the files are huge."

We audience members realised that the battle between the brainiacs and this small, uppity laptop was actually more interesting than the conference proceedings. Speechmakers soldiered on, pressing "Restart later" every 15 minutes.

But then the computer changed the game! With the next interruption, it tried a new tack: "The system will be restarted in five minutes.... 4:59.....4:58.....4:57....4:56..."

It was like watching the countdown on a time-bomb in a James Bond movie.

To add to the drama, the speaker was one of the clip-mike wearers who was wandering around the stage in his own world -- and he hadn't noticed the seconds ticking away on the screen behind him.

We were all wide awake now, watching this gripping, edge-of-the-seat stuff!

Would the countdown get to zero and crash his presentation before he noticed? Would the other speakers in the audience shout out to warn him? Or would they keep silent?

When the countdown got to five seconds, he noticed what was happening and raced to the podium -- but failed to reach in time. The laptop shut itself off. The big screen went black.

This tiny little Thinkpad X60 notebook computer had succeeded in halting a conference run by the world's smartest human beings. There was a spontaneous round of applause.

I think Microsoft, the company that made the software, should have programmed the computer to jump up and take a bow.

These days, laptops rule. Your columnist has several times found himself with his head bowed in supplication to his malfunctioning computer, mumbling: "Please have mercy on thy humble servant and WAKE UP!"

In India, people give pooja (blessings) to their laptops as part of the Devali celebrations. In the financial district of London, laptops are blessed as part of the harvest festival at churches. It all makes sense to me now.

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