

## STRAIGHT LINE

## Electronic media policy

*JS standing committee action laudable*

THE action of the parliamentary standing committee on Ministry of Information regarding the draft electronic media broadcast policy was only to be expected. The drafters have been instructed to make it compatible with the constitution and the RTI. We compliment the standing committee for this.

The draft policy, as we had commented on the issue recently, is a rank errant idea which has all the ingredients of a regulatory mechanism to control freedom of expression and thought.

We would like to make it clear that the media in general is averse to any kind of control mechanism which stifles it. And any free and civilised country, that takes pride in democracy and democratic norms in running the affairs of the state, would find such mechanism abhorrent.

The media should be, and is, guided by professional ethics, and it risks its credibility in the public eye should it not conform to that. We also feel that our media has matured enough to be able to judge for itself what is and is not derogatory or harmful to the interest of the state. And this should be done without being externally imposed from outside. If there was talk of all of some sort of electronic media policy it was in respect of the means and mechanism of granting of license and making electronic broadcasting trouble-free and at the same time enlarging the scope of media freedom.

It cannot be lost upon anyone, least of all the government, that the span of the term 'media' has increased manifold with revolutionary expansion of information technology. We have only to see the developments around us to see its impact. It is also worth remembering that it is not only the media but the government also that benefit from a vibrant and unfettered media.

It must be understood also that no one is above the law and any aberration on the part of the media is subject to law. Basically for the media we should have a strengthened Press Council.

## Release of US hikers

*A possible shift in direction?*

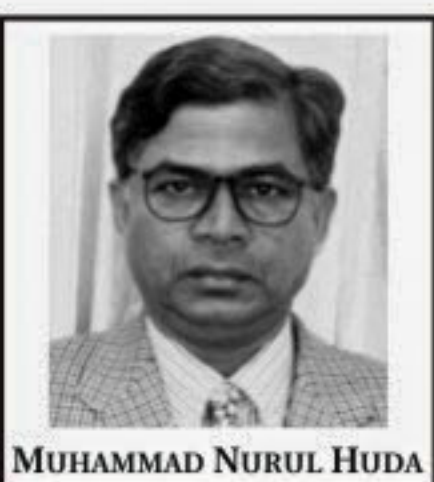
THE recent release of the two American hikers is a positive statement in the visibly new shifts in US-Iranian relations. The 1979 Iranian Revolution in which the monarchy was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic Republic gave way to tense mutual mistrust and lack of understanding not only between Iran and the United States but also between Iran and other Western countries.

In recent times however, there seems to have been a shift in the tightened and rigid policies which the two had embarked upon.

The political situation within Iran rings of conflict between President Ahmadinejad and the religious clerics in which it seems clear that between the two, the President is not the one who possesses real political power. Despite this fact, what has arisen is a common loosening of sorts of Iran's vision and attitudes towards the West and vice versa. It seems clear that the Ahmadinejad and the Ayatollahs have shifted towards a new found pragmatism leading to a more liberal attitude towards the West.

For its part, the United States has also taken a less hostile, stance towards Iran. Very recently, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had stated as did President Ahmadinejad that the two American hikers jailed in Iran for the last two years on suspicions of spying would be released within a few days. Could this suggest some sort of a back door negotiation between the two countries?

This would certainly be a much-awaited and welcome shift in the foreign policies of both Iran and the US. With the mounting tensions in the relations between Turkey and Israel due to the killing of Turkish citizens by Israel and the perennial conflicts between Israel and Palestine, flexible and friendly relations between the US and Iran would be a much welcome change.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ENRAGED observers say that the corroding contours of our confrontational politics were ominously exposed in the

mindless violence of last Monday that caused not only widespread destruction but also succeeded in creating serious concern in regulatory parlance and panic in law abiding hearts. The cynics observe that the same were the manifestations of the dynamics of our fledgling democracy and should cause no surprise.

The cynics stand is vindicated when we hear Jaamat lawmaker A.T.M. Shamsul Islam telling The Daily Star in no uncertain terms that "the showdown and anti-government agitation will certainly boost our activists' morale and also increase our organisational strength." The Honourable Member of Parliament added that from now on the intensity of Jaamat's agitation against the government will increase day by day.

Admittedly, citizens and residents of Bangladesh have cause to worry. Their premonition is that life-unsettling transactions including the paralyzing economy-wrenching hartals accompanied by large doses of violence would visit them in increasing numbers in the not-too-distant future. Political protests would, in fact, amount to plight of the public. The question is, why? And more importantly, are there ways to extricate ourselves from this mess?

Looking back if there is any serious attempt by caring Bangladeshis to understand the incidences of the malfunctioning of our polity by placing them in the historical, sociological and political context may turn out to be an agonizing experience. One suspicion could be whether our concern for democracy amounted to merely a false consciousness or worse, was it a crude legitimisation of the so-called politically driven conflict? Should we look for the roots of the problem in the phenomena of social exclusion, economic marginalisation, contests for power and

other contingent factors?

Although politics, without doubt, is an edifying activity, not many in Bangladesh would talk reverentially about politicians. Some would even go to the extent of depicting our politicians as active participants in the creation of disorder. Their malevolence has been criticised as planned and diabolically purposeful.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately, we have witnessed violence that has been purposive. In our polity we have seen political motivations ranging from local

as social approval. The so-called political circumstances have often obstructed accountability of the culpable individuals. There is good reason to doubt that considerable number of officials abnegated their responsibility to protect all citizens regardless of their identity.

Political activities, partly on account of historical factors, have assumed a dominant agitational character. Over the years, since after liberation and more particularly during the anti-autocracy movement in the eighties

of opposition political party to venture beyond the immediate confines of party office. The untenable scenario is that the government would not issue prohibitory orders restricting or banning assembly of persons, but would transmit verbal order to embarrassed law enforcement personnel to virtually quarantine the opposition elements in a limited space.

In an exasperating situation as above, there is a desperate and frantic bid to defy the authority and such defiance requires lot of raw physical courage in addition to hardship and endurance. Clearly, such functions can be effectively performed by those who have a greater gift of the brawn. These may sound funny but are field realities with which the political operatives of the opposition have grappled. Breaking the ban or being able to defy the quarantine is considered a very important achievement. The goons are no small players in this game. One has to be in the thick of the happenings to feel the pulse of the men, matter, and movements.

The disenchantment of our people with the state of politics and our politicians has to be appreciated. The premonition that elections and their corruption, injustice and the power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given cannot be summarily dismissed. It is perhaps time to take freedom in moderation. It is also time to see if our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens.

For our democracy deficits to gradually lessen and disappear, the political parties have to make the crucial choice between absolute power on one hand and the restraints of legality and the authority of tradition on the other. They have to decide on whether to constitute a moral association maintained by duty or a physical one kept together by force. They have to say whether executive action violative of the rule of law has to be tolerated and if the balance between legislature, executive and the judiciary has to be rudely shaken.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

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turf wars to more ugly and vulgar race for quick riches; from teaching a rival group a "lesson" to polarising communities into voting blocs.

Politics did enter into a situation in which hired thugs who perpetrated violence were assured of protection from prosecution. Very few felt ashamed as politics in our parlance acquired a pejorative connotation by the fact of its manifest association with conflict and violence. The civil society has been undermined by the stimulation of politics based on division and acrimony.

Cynical observers of our social scene are of the distressing view that there is a functional utility of violence for politicians. Such opinions point an accusing finger towards the suspected state complicity in the perpetration of organised acts of violence and the inordinate delays in securing justice for the victims. This delay is alarming as it sends a clear message to potential delinquents that no harm will come to them in the event of repeat performances of criminal activities.

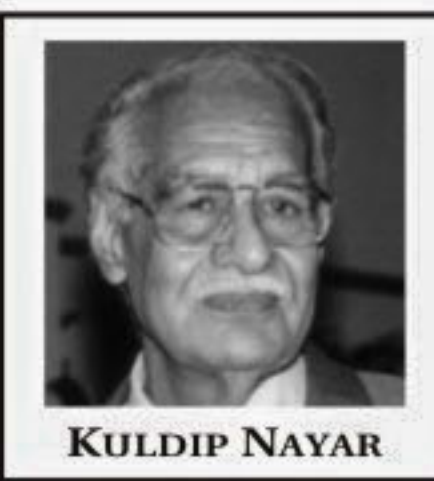
In Bangladesh we need to seriously acknowledge the significance of authoritative approval or condoning of violence because such action is construed

leading to the fall of the military dictatorial regime in December 1990, political protests demanded crude physical courage from the field level activists of the political movement. As the dictatorial regime primarily depended on brute power and looked towards non-political quarters for its sustenance, it did not bother about the excessive use of force by the state apparatus. It had no qualms in utilising dangerous goons to intimidate and if necessary liquidate political party workers and leaders. A section of the law enforcement personnel sadly turned out to be a willing partner in such patently illegal acts.

All in all, the political scenario became so desperate and menacing that only the very physically brave and intensely committed workers could dare to take to the streets to face the insensitive actions of a despotic government nearly bordering on megalomania.

It is a sad commentary on our political reality that howsoever eloquent we may be on the subject of freedom of speech, assembly and movement, we can be the worst of autocrats when under a clear democratic dispensation the government of the day would not allow assembly and protest gatherings

## BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

FUNDAMENTAL parties throughout the world think of newer ways to expand their base in the community they seek

to radicalise. India's Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is no different. It feels that it should increase its support among the Hindu community, 80% of the electorate, and not bother about the rest, including 12% Muslims electorates who, in any case, do not vote for the BJP.

The three-day fast by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was meant to get more support from among the Hindus. The ambiance of the hall where the fast was undertaken, the saffron-clad gurus and sadhus and the speakers chosen -- all reflected the Hindutva ethos. Therefore, there was no room for any diverse viewpoint. The protesters were arrested long before they reached the venue. Modi refused to wear the skullcap which a Muslim Ulema offered because this did not fit into the proclaimed objective of the fast, even though called Sadbhavana (conciliation). A mere memorandum on behalf of the victims of the 2002 pogrom was not entertained at the reception.

Has the purpose been achieved is the question that the BJP leadership must mull over. Crowds are no criterion because Modi's appeal was in the name of Gujarati chauvinism. He talked about the pride of six crore Gujaratis even in the full-page, state-sponsored advertisements in leading newspapers. Moreover, the people were attracted to the place that was air-conditioned and offered free food, costing cost the exchequer more than Rs.6 crore. Much more money has been spent on dinnings to the ears of Gujaratis that Modi has revived their "pride," which was hurt when Jawaharlal Nehru was preferred to

Sardar Patel, a Gujarati, as India's prime minister after independence. Patel's photo became the backdrop of the dais.

True, Modi has changed the Gujaratis, who have returned him with a majority in the state assembly poll twice in a row. This happens when the top man rules in an authoritarian style as Modi does. The developmental work goes to his credit. But the Gujaratis are a gritty, hard working community and will do well in every clime. I found them on the top of the ladder in the UK 20 years ago when I was India's High Commissioner at London.

*The nation is not prepared to face the situation where Hindus are arrayed on one side and Muslims on the other.*

Modi's fast was not meant to project the progress of Gujaratis, but to appeal to the Hindu electorate through television channels, which unashamedly telecast a purely fundamentalist show all the 24 hours. It is difficult to say whether the fast had the desired effect. But it is clear that even the BJP allies of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were overwhelmingly against him.

The NDA convener, Janata Dal (United), wanted Modi to assuage the feeling of hurt which Muslims bore. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, heading the government with the BJP's support, walked away from journalists when asked to comment on Modi. Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal's presence was because the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal is likeminded and tends to be communal in its outlook. Apparently, the BJP's purpose was to project Modi on the national scene. The party did not attempt in any way to wash away the bloodstains on Modi's administration.

What kind of governance was being praised when the Muslims felt insecure and when the chief minister's own senior officials, two IPS and one IAS officers, said in their affidavits that Modi was responsible for what happened in 2002? The judgment by the Supreme Court, with which the BJP has gone to town, has only sent the case back to the trial court and has not commented on allegations against Modi because it wants to judge when the case comes before it for appeal.

The Special Investigation Team has exonerated Modi personally, but the

of fast cannot wash away the sins he has committed. He should, at least now, when he wants to play a bigger role, apologise for the 2002 riots. The Congress was late in admitting its fault for the 1984 killings of Sikhs but Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at least offered apologies. He enhanced the compensation to the victims' families, something which is not even on Modi's agenda.

The unthinking BJP is now concentrating on L.K. Advani's rath yatra, which he had announced before Modi's fast. The party forgets that Advani is not Anna Hazare who has come to symbolise the right against corruption. Rightly, the RSS is not enthusiastic about the yatra. I have witnessed Advani's yatra from Somnath temple to Babri masjid before the latter's demolition. It is apparent that the BJP wants a similar kind of polarisation which resulted in the death of hundreds of Muslims. But the same card cannot be played twice.

The BJP continues to confuse the issue. The voters are not wooed through hatred against the minority community. The party should have learnt the lesson from the last two general elections which it lost. Even the Congress government's mis-governance was preferred to the BJP's plank. The nation is not prepared to face the situation where Hindus are arrayed on one side and Muslims on the other. The resurgence of terrorism has made people still more worried about the future.

It is not that the RSS does not see the danger. But it wants to come to power through whatever means it can employ. The BJP has to reach out to the Muslims, a taboo in its lexicon. Citing the support of Kashmiri leader Mehbooba Mufti does not help when she says she never uttered the words that Modi was not anti-Muslim. Surely, his deeds say so.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 24

- 622** Prophet Muhammad completes his hijra from Mecca to Medina.
- 1180** Manuel I Komnenos, last Emperor of the Komnenian restoration dies. The Byzantine Empire slips into terminal decline.
- 1674** Second Tantrik Coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.
- 1852** The first airship powered by (a steam) engine, created by Henri Giffard, travels 17 miles (27 km) from Paris to Trappes.
- 1968** Swaziland joins the United Nations.
- 1988** National League for Democracy is formed by Aung San Suu Kyi and various others to help fight against dictatorship in Myanmar.
- 1996** U.S. President Bill Clinton signs the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty at the United Nations.
- 2009** The G20 summit begins in Pittsburgh with 30 global leaders in attendance. It marks the first use of LRAD in U.S. history.