

R&H engineers seeking 'protection'!

Could there be a more ridiculous plea?

THE engineers of the Roads and Highways Department have demanded that no organisation other than the communications ministry should take action against them for their mistakes. It is very difficult not be amused by these demands. Coming as it does from a highly educated, and what one hopes, responsible section of the society, it is simply bizarre.

Reportedly, these gentlemen were seeking the 'protection' of the ministry for any past or future mistakes that they might have committed or might commit. That is to say they want that no outside agency should have the mandate to enquire into their activities, and that they should be responsible to their minister and the ministry only. Apparently, the appeal stemmed from their having come under the surveillance of the ACC for allegation of corruption.

We find the demand outlandish for many reasons. We wonder why the R&H engineers should get into panic if they have no skeletons in their cupboards. And one has not forgotten that during the past CTG quite a few R&H officials made voluntary disclosure before the erstwhile truth commission and sought mercy for their wrongdoings, including the then chief.

We wonder whether these gentlemen understand the inanity of their plea. What if every other ministry sought the same dispensation for their 'mistakes'? And what exactly is the definition of 'mistakes'? Does it mean financial indiscipline and irregularity in the use of funds and the like? If that be so, shouldn't others who commit the same 'mistakes' be excused too?

Without sounding denigrating we have to say that the R&H department has had a very bad performance record. And allegedly, much of the poor conditions of the roads and highways are due to defalcation and misuse of funds. And we are glad that the communications minister has emphasised on zero tolerance for graft.

A public servant who works with due diligence and with probity should not have to worry about any investigation from inside or outside their own department. In fact, it should be welcomed rather than abhorred.

A spate of highway accidents

Lack of highway patrol underlined

DESPITE the increasing number of accidents on the highway, killing and maiming of people, and the repeated concerns expressed over culprit drivers being set free, not much effort is visible on the part of the authorities to redress the dire situation.

A BUET study reveals that the highway accident fatality rate in Bangladesh is more than 100 per 10,000 vehicles, this being one of the highest in the world. It is borne out by the headline on our Thursday issue: '16 dead and 18 injured' in separate road mishaps throughout the county in just the last two days.

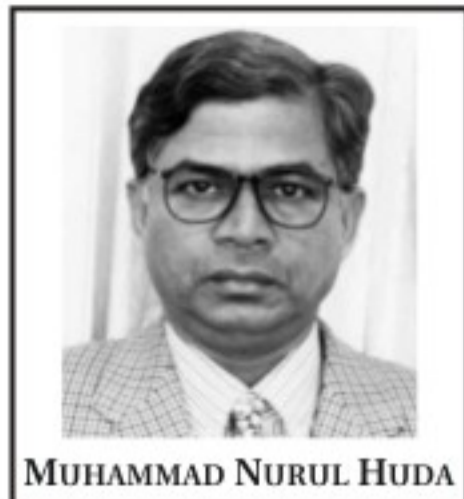
This situation is strikingly similar throughout the country. Barely two-lane highway spaces are encroached upon by makeshift bazaars while drivers of vehicles, big or small, engage themselves in mindless races without the slightest respect for human lives.

Worn-out road stretches are vulnerable to accidents; rash overtaking manoeuvres add to the tally of fatal accidents in general, let alone the reality of over-loading and novice drivers at the steering wheel.

Officials of the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, the only regulatory body other than the law enforcers, openly admitted that up to five lakh drivers ply vehicles without valid licences. Even drivers with valid licences are mostly unaware of traffic rules because the country lacks proper driving schools to train up drivers.

The 2000-strong highway police contingent was created in 2005 to secure the highways against crimes and prevent accidents. But they are to be rarely seen. Besides, they, being attached to the district police authorities, have no autonomous identity. They are ill-equipped as well. This is an area that requires immediate attention of the government so that there is no apology of

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

political life and affairs, and the adjective 'politic' means judicious and sagacious. Apparently, those claiming to be engaged in political activities are presumed to be honourable men and women that have taken vows to protect, promote and nurture public interests.

However, the incidents of December 18 in Dhaka that "left one person dead, several injured and public and private vehicles damaged" convey an altogether different version of political activities in our part of the world. The question is: Are political protests meant to increase and multiply public woes? Shall protest meetings and demonstrations evoke fear in ordinary citizens? Do we have to think twice before venturing into public roads no matter how urgent it may be to attend a business of any sort?

There is no dispute as to the right of dissent in a supposedly pluralist society, but shall mindless violence be the dominant modus operandi of registering protest or showing disagreement? The possession of destructive devices like cocktail bombs and the deliberate torching of vehicles are undoubtedly ominous portents in an independent but fledgling democratic polity.

Nobody would question the politician's prerogative to rule. The historical fact is that people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or

THE Oxford dictionary defines politics as the art and science of government and quite clearly refers to

leaders. It is, therefore, a sad sight to witness the continued demeaning of politics and politicians in our midst.

The question is: Has politics become dirty because we see many of our politicians occupied solely in maintaining a system, which is poisoned by collective poor faith and polluted by individual avarice? Are our politicians served by deception and craftiness instead of vision and imagination? Has the near breakdown of politics been caused by the fragility of our institutions? Such worries should bother a concerned citizenry.

Have not the bigwigs of both Awami League and BNP pressed their partisan advantage to a bitter end, never understood and respected the political opponent, and hardly ever

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stressed the importance of unity between all citizens? Did not they realise that, since the spirit of moderation did not prevail, our society has degenerated into divisions and hatred has replaced goodwill?

Politics brought to the fore a lot of dirt because our democratic experience did not depend upon habits of consent and compromise that are attributes of a mature political society. We did not seek to establish and sustain a lawful government under the rule of abiding law and with freedom of opposition and dissent.

Living in a democracy entails hazards. In such living, there is no particular concern or mercy because

democracy demands the cooperation of all perceptive citizens in the business of running the country. Sadly, that has not been our experience.

In Bangladesh, politics, in its wider connotation, should really mean taking one's agenda in one's own hands. It should be about the process of change; how society is organised; what its power structure is; who the actors are; how they interact with each other and with the outside world. It is also about social responsibility, about participation, about inclusion. It is about ideas and new concepts and their implementation.

When we restrict politics to politicians and their antics, and intermittent interventions by the military, we exclude the above-

mentioned subjects from purview. Politics in such a situation becomes a spectator sport. Quite naturally, in such a scenario, the people have neither a role in selecting the players nor any part in the game itself. Therefore, the people also share the strengths and weaknesses of the players.

In our parlance, the best politician or a good bureaucrat should no longer be the person who never says no to his voters or friends. The distinction between public property and private gains has to be firmly established, and accountability restored. Doling our favours at public expense can no longer be tolerated. We have to get acclimatised to institutional reforms

as against short-term gains.

Politics should touch our daily lives. For residents of urban centres, the issues of law and order, shortage of water and electricity, lack of a public transportation system, and unemployment should be the focal points of our politics. Issues which concern citizens' lives are political issues.

The colonial masters introduced the concepts of modern governance: a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary; and, of course, modern universities and colleges for social science, medicine and engineering. If we succeed in rejuvenating all those, we will have excelled in the art of politics.

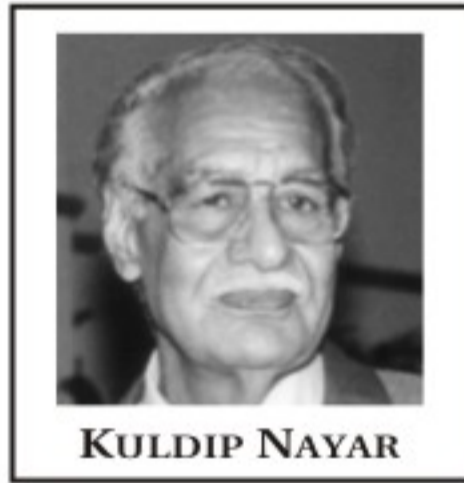
Let us remember that the staying power of democracy varies from country to country. The timing of political breakdown depends upon the strength of political institutions and the severity of economic crisis.

However, collapse may not overtake a country marked by economic failure where the political institutions have acquired durability through experience and tradition.

If political protest acquires a violent character to the clear detriment of public peace and pursuit of happiness then the ominous scenario of an apathetic electorate is a distinct possibility. Public apathy would mean bad government owing to the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. The great French thinker, Montesquieu said in the eighteenth century: "The tyranny of a Prince in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy."

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BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

good name. The passing year, 2011, is no different except that the shadows have lengthened. Corruption darkened the atmosphere throughout the year and what it exposed was that the system was reeking with graft. Non-governance tormented the nation further.

In 2011, many skeletons tumbled out of the government's closet, one after the other. Early in the year, Commonwealth games were a splendid success but it got sullied by bogus contracts, exaggerated charges and poor workmanship. When Chief Organisator Suresh Kalmadi and his aides were arrested, the nation felt humiliated. Even though India won the world cup in cricket, the stigma of Commonwealth games scandal did not go.

Still worse was another skeleton that tumbled out of government's closet was the 2G spectrum relating to mobiles. A sum of Rs. 40,000 crores had been denied to the state exchequer, the mother of all scandals. Telecommunication Minister A.Raja was arrested. Another minister M. Maran, also from Tamilnadu, representing the ruling Congress ally, the DMK, resigned from government. It was a triumph of media and public pressure.

However, one positive development was the emergence of the Gandhian Anna Hazare who demanded the establishment of Ombudsman (Lokpal) machinery to deal with corruption. Hazare was in real the face of civil society's resentment against government. Thousands came on the streets to demand the Lokpal. So heavy was the public pressure and Hazare's threat to go on fast that parliament had to extend its winter session for the relevant bill.

A new kind of India began taking

INDIA is always a story of shadows and sunshine. Which of the two prevails at a particular time gives it bad or

shape. People felt that their voice counted if they would only raise it. It was a heartening to see all political parties except the ruling Congress, collecting on the same platform. Unfortunately, the government was busy in locking the stables after the bullocks had run away and did little to regain the credibility. Non-governance told upon the economy. Prices began to rise, the inflation touching a double figure.

Still worse was the fall in the industrial production, only 5.4% growth against last year's 10.6%. Investors, both foreign and Indian, held back their hand and the rupees against US dollars fell by 18%. Optimism of the past, particularly the people's self-confidence, sagged and they were stung with the fear of further slide down.

True, India will maintain 7% growth in the next year. But at least 9% is required to eliminate poverty. It will be a challenging year again. Probably what India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said that the next generations were sentenced to hard work is true.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the messiah of economic reforms, brought before parliament the proposal of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in retail to attract reportedly 100 million dollars and the Pensions bill to utilise the accumulated money for development. The fear of big joints like the Wall Mart crowding out small shopkeepers and snapping direct ties between farmers and local mandis made all political parties including the allies of the Congress to close their ranks. It was yet another blow to the prime minister whose graph of popularity came down by a few notches more. People's confidence in him is shaken because they do not see him raising the growth rate to 9% as he had done earlier. Now it is hovering around 7%, the minimum to avoid the lay offs and dire unemployment. The ruling Congress has retrieved a bit of

reputation because BJP has supported it on the Pension bill but putting a limit of 26% on FDI.

The last days of the year has seen measures to give security of food to the poor, nearly 65% of the population. Congress President Sonia Gandhi, who does the back seat driving has pushed the unwilling prime minister to own the measure. However, the project will put a burden of Rs.95,000 crore on the over-stretched exchequer. But it may win the Congress votes in the forthcoming elections in five states, including UP, Punjab and Uttrakhand.

The prime minister's belated firmness is visible from the announcement that Kundan Kalam 1,000 MW nuclear power plant will open in Tamilnadu despite its Chief Minister Jaya Lalitha's opposition. The same determination is reflected

steps on easing visa facilities. The prime minister has visited Russia and has also met Presidents of China and America to underline the importance of equation with India. New Delhi expects to become the Security council's permanent members next year because China, the only country to be bar the entry, has given favourable hints.

The biggest plus point of India -- and it holds good for the next year and the year after -- is that the country is settling down to its democratic and secular ethos. Hindu and Muslims have learnt that they have to coexist. True, the minorities are increasingly assertive because their slice from the cake continues to be small. But their fight is democratic and within the precincts of the constitution. Their disappointment is in the slow process to bring Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, guilty of pogrom, to book.

The joint command of security forces eliminated Kishenji, a key leader of moist who are demoralised because of his absence but not deterred since poverty and under development in most areas still help them to thrive. New Delhi considers moist's repulsion as the biggest achievement in the year.

However, the stalling of parliament over minor problem has evoked cynicism over the system. People accept that parliament is the apex body. But the proposal to have the presidential system of government is being seriously discussed in influential quarters.

True, India will maintain 7% growth in the next year. But at least 9% is required to eliminate poverty. It will be a challenging year again. Probably what India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said that the next generations were sentenced to hard work is true. Yet the confidence which the persons have developed in themselves and in the country, sustains hope that 2012 will see the sun light increasing and the shadows receding. Optimism is a moral duty of every Indian.

The writer is an eminent Indian Columnist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 24

1951
Libya becomes independent from Italy. Idris I is proclaimed King of Libya.

1956
The United Nations Emergency Force takes over in Egypt after British and French forces withdraw from Port Said and Port Fuad ending the Suez Crisis.

1968
The Apollo 8 spacecraft and its crew of three astronauts become the first manned space mission to orbit the Moon.

1974
Former UK minister John Stonehouse has been found in Australia after apparently faking his own death.

1979
The first European-built rocket, Ariane 1, successfully blasts off into space.