

## GROUND REALITIES

## President's talks shaping up well

*BNP's joining the process welcome*

OUR thanks to the BNP for its prompt and unambiguous decision to join the President-initiated talks on reconstitution of the Election Commission, the present incumbency coming to an end in February 2012. It is a sensible and responsible move by them. The spirit with which the opposition is coming forward to take part in the consultative process is indeed laudable and should be reciprocated.

The formation of a new Election Commission is an issue on which the opposition has a huge stake. Their spokesman emphasised that the 'old issues remained' implying the caretaker government question. It is a sign of maturity on the BNP's part not to have made its joining talks conditional on the issue. In addition to the pressing need for reconstituting the EC, the two issues, the other one being the caretaker issue are not contradictory of each other. In fact, mutually acceptable reconstitution of the EC is crucial to the holding of the national elections in a free, fair and credible manner. When this is achieved, the rest can follow.

Let's not miss the point that the opposition's positive response to offer of talks with the President is marked by opening of a channel of communication, manifestly a relief amid an increasing polarisation between the major political parties.

The prime minister in her interaction with media editors on Monday expressed her strong commitment to strengthening democratic institutions in the country including the Election Commission. In consonance with this, we hope the government would hear with respect the opposition's suggestions towards the formation of the EC and be accommodative to them.

Now that the presidential talks are getting underway in a representative fashion and the opposition has expressed its intent in getting involved in the consultations, both sides should consciously endeavour to maintain a congenial atmosphere to carry the process forward. They should refrain from giving any negative signal to each other by way of irresponsible utterances denigrating in any way the view points of each other. Rather one expects a reconciliatory atmosphere to be ushered in by careful and sagacious handling on both sides from day one.

## Primary terminal examination results

*Raises hopes for the future*

THE pass rate percentage in the primary education terminal examinations has seen a steady increase in the two years since its inception, hitting a record high at 97.26 percent this, its third, year. A number of factors have been identified as having contributed to the improvement, including free textbook distribution, stipends and certificates for students, training programmes for teachers followed by monitoring and evaluation, better care of students by both teachers and guardians as well as students' own awareness of academic issues. The fact that over 1 lakh students have achieved GPA-5 also shows the amount of talent which exists in our children and the potential for the future.

However, there are still schools with no success, that is, zero pass rate, and though the number has decreased, it remains a cause for concern. Of equal, if not greater, concern is the dropout rate, which, though also on the decline, is still high. Although government measures to address the issue, such as providing stipends and meals, have helped somewhat, poverty still plays an important role in keeping students out of school and at work instead. This is especially so in the case of girls who, if they fail once, are discouraged to go back to school. More intensive efforts in the form of incentives for poor students, may be necessary in this regard.

Overall, however, from what the latest results show, the picture of the future is bright and we congratulate the students on, and take hope in, their achievements. With a steady government commitment to primary education, we may be optimistic that the pass rate will continue to increase and the dropout rate to decline. Most importantly, we wish that our children will be benefited by a standard education system which will build the founda-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU do not often come across politicians like Abdur Razzak, at least not in these less than exciting times. To be sure, you do not always agree with Razzak or people who share his political beliefs, but you do know that with such people life is always a matter of principle, to be lived on the high plateau of values. Back in the 1960s, when he was a student, Razzak waged his struggle, along with so many others, against the Ayub Khan regime with a determination which bordered on dignity. When you think of Razzak, you are likely to recall as well everyone else who made those days of struggle something of a stirring exercise in defence of democracy.

It is the names we remember today -- Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni, Rashed Khan Menon, Saifuddin Manik, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, A.S.M. Abdur Rab, Nure Alam Siddiqui, Shahjahan Siraj, Sirajul Alam Khan, Abdul Quddus Makhan and lots more -- that reconnect us with history. These were the young who informed us, through the 1960s and the early 1970s, that nothing could be more dynamic in a transformation of history than the belief of youth in its ability to cause miracles.

That belief was to undergo change among quite a few of these young and not always for the better. But, again, it is all a matter of perception. You could argue that the formation of the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) in the early 1970s was quite an adventurist enterprise, that Rab and Siraj ought to have stayed with Bangabandhu and contributed to a firming up of his leadership in the difficult times following the liberation of Bangladesh. But

there is too the equally strong argument that had the Father of the Nation not opted to attend the conference of the Siddiqui-Makhan faction of the Chhatra League in July 1972, had he not sided with either the Siddiqui-Makhan group or the Rab-Siraj group, had he indeed sought to unify them on a single platform, Bangladesh's history post-1971 would be a lot easier for us to handle.

Speaking of which one is reminded of the conflict which at a point threatened to undermine the Mujibnagar government itself during the War of Liberation. Moni, Razzak and a good number of Young Turks during the war proved instrumental in giving shape to the Mujib Bahini, a force that clearly ran coun-

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ter to the larger, more authentic Mukti Bahini. And the Mukti Bahini, operating under the authority of the government led by Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, sought to bring into its fold all classes of Bengalis irrespective of their political affiliations and convinced that a comprehensive guerrilla war was called for if Pakistan was to be defeated.

It remains a question as to what extent the Mujib Bahini undermined the Mukti Bahini and thereby helped to draw a clear line between fanatical Awami Leaguers and those Bengalis who believed that the struggle for liberation needed to draw into it every citizen and not merely those who had voted for the Awami League at the December 1970 elections.

Abdur Razzak, as one whose devo-

tion to Bangabandhu's ideals was beyond question, was part of the Mujib Bahini. After the war, he was again part of the young group which Bangabandhu did not or could not ignore. Which begs the question: was the rift caused between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmed a consequence of the closeness these young maintained with the Father of the Nation?

Go back to the war. It was a time when Moni and his loyalists fought pitched battles with Tajuddin Ahmed and even sought to have him removed from the office of wartime prime minister. To his credit, Tajuddin survived. More crucially, it was under his intellectual leadership that the war was eventually won. If Tajuddin had not been

1971? You could certainly shoot back your response, that history is never a matter of what might have been. Of course it is not, but think of the shadows which came over us when Bangabandhu and Tajuddin parted ways. Both of them were murdered, together with others, and all within a matter of months. And we have lived in infamy ever since.

You could be reasonably certain that these questions might also have vexed Abdur Razzak, for like the seasons and through the seasons he matured into a well-meaning, more tolerant leader. When he had his Baksal, again his own way of upholding Bangabandhu's legacy, merge with Sheikh Hasina's more powerful Awami League, he informed us as much that realism was what defined him in his forties. He did well as Awami League general secretary, did well in ministerial office.

In Razzak was manifested a true sign of political evolution. Always a decent man, it was his increasing sense of tolerance, his respect for other opinions, which helped expand his political landscape. He should have risen higher. In a system where political dynasties are alien concepts, he might have been prime minister. In Sheikh Hasina's second government, he could have, along with Tofail Ahmed, made a difference for the country. That he was ignored, that politics was rapidly being pushed aside by the growth of a cult of personality are facts you cannot turn away from.

As Abdur Razzak prepares to meet his Maker, it is an arid landscape of politics we turn our gaze to. Our world is so much the poorer now that he is gone. The others will go too. That brave generation of freedom fighters will pass into the ages. And then what?

The writer is Executive Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

## | The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# Springtime for toxics

PAUL KRUGMAN

HERE'S what I wanted for Christmas: something that would make us both healthier and richer. And since I was just making a wish, why not ask that Americans get smarter, too?

Surprise: I got my wish, in the form of new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards on mercury and air toxics for power plants. These rules were long overdue: we were supposed to start regulating mercury more than 20 years ago. But the rules are finally here, and will deliver huge benefits at only modest cost.

So, naturally, Republicans are furious. But before I get to the politics, let's talk about what a good thing the EPA just did.

As far as I can tell, even opponents of environmental regulation admit that mercury is nasty stuff. It's a potent neurotoxicant: the expression "mad as a hatter" emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because hat makers of the time treated fur with mercury compounds, and often suffered nerve and mental damage as a result.

Hat makers no longer use mercury (and who wears hats these days?), but a lot of mercury gets into the atmosphere from old coal-burning power plants that lack modern pollution controls. From there it gets into the water, where microbes turn it into methylmercury, which builds up in fish. And what happens then? The EPA explains: "Methylmercury exposure is a par-

ticular concern for women of child-bearing age, unborn babies and young children, because studies have linked high levels of methylmercury to damage to the developing nervous system, which can impair children's ability to think and learn."

That sort of sounds like something we should regulate, doesn't it?

The new rules would also have the effect of reducing fine particle pollution, which is a known source of many health problems, from asthma to heart attacks. In fact, the benefits of reduced fine particle pollution account for most of the quantifiable gains from the new rules. The key word here is "quantifiable": EPA's cost-benefit analysis only considers one benefit of mercury regulation, the reduced loss in future wages for children whose I.Q.s are damaged by eating fish caught by freshwater anglers. There are without doubt many other benefits to cutting mercury emissions, but at this point the agency doesn't know how to put a dollar figure on those benefits.

Even so, the payoff to the new rules is huge: up to \$90 billion a year in benefits compared with around \$10 billion a year of costs in the form of slightly higher electricity

prices. This is, as David Roberts of Grist says, a very big deal.

And it's a deal Republicans very much want to kill.

With everything else that has been going on in US politics recently, the G.O.P.'s radical anti-environmental turn hasn't gotten the attention it deserves. But something remarkable has happened on this front. Only a

few years ago, it seemed possible to be both a Republican in good standing and a serious environmentalist; during the 2008 campaign John McCain warned of the dangers of global warming and proposed a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions. Today, however, the party line is that we must not only avoid any new environmental regulations but also roll back the protection we already have.

And I'm not exaggerating: during the fight over the debt ceiling, Republicans tried to attach riders that, as Time magazine put it, would essentially have blocked the EPA and the Interior Department from doing their jobs.

Oh, by the way, you may have heard reports to the effect that Jon Huntsman is different. And he did

indeed once say: "Conservation is conservative. I'm not ashamed to be a conservationist." Never mind: he, too, has been assimilated by the anti-environmental Borg, denouncing the EPA's "regulatory reign of terror," and predicting that the new rules will cause blackouts by next summer, which would be a neat trick considering that the rules won't even have taken effect yet.

More generally, whenever you hear dire predictions about the effects of pollution regulation, you should know that special interests always make such predictions, and are always wrong. For example, power companies claimed that rules on acid rain would disrupt electricity supply and lead to soaring rates; none of that happened, and the acid rain programme has become a shining example of how environmentalism and economic growth can go hand in hand.

But again, never mind: mindless opposition to "job killing" regulations is now part of what it means to be a Republican. And I have to admit that this puts something of a damper on my mood: the EPA has just done a very good thing, but if a Republican -- any Republican -- wins next year's election, he or she will surely try to undo this good work.

Still, for now at least, those who care about the health of their fellow citizens, and especially of the nation's children, have something to celebrate.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 28

1612

Galileo Galilei becomes the first astronomer to observe the planet Neptune, although he mistakenly catalogued it as a fixed star.

1885

Indian National Congress a political party of India is founded in Bombay, British India.

1956

Chin Peng, David Marshall and Tunku Abdul Rahman meet in Baling to try and resolve the Malayan Emergency situation.

1972

Kim Il-sung, already Prime Minister of North Korea and General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, became the first President of North Korea.

2009

43 people die in a suicide bombing in Karachi, Pakistan, where Shia Muslims are observing the Day of Ashura.

2010

Arab Spring: Popular protests begin in Algeria against the government.