

BNP's "Dhaka Cholo"

Govt's unprecedented clampdown on opposition programme

WE wait with a great deal of foreboding and apprehension to see how today passes. We are praying for a peaceful end of this day hoping that both the parties will act judiciously to prevent further worsening of the situation.

Regrettably, the utterances and actions of the AL are more than clear hints that it has made the BNP's 12 March programme a prestige issue and would not, under any circumstances, allow any political space to the opposition and is even willing for a confrontation with them. And that has brought about an unacceptable and unhappy situation particularly for those living in the Capital.

It has been a very miserable situation obtaining in the capital over the last 48 hours. The measures undertaken by the government in the last two days with all the state machinery at its command have made the capital look virtually like a city under siege. The near deserted roads looked as if there was an undeclared curfew. It has been most difficult for commuters to get about due to lack of public transport, putting the citizenry under untold sufferings. The Dhaka-Chittagong highway yesterday was virtually empty of passenger transports due to fear and police harassment. Not ever have we seen the government on its own cutting the capital off from the rest of the country. There has never been an instance where the government has so foolishly cut off its nose to spite its face.

However, even if everything went off peacefully today, how do we escape from the existing cloudy political situation? While the government has used every ploy to strangle the BNP's programme, what if the opposition calls a repeat of the same programme? Will the government be able to replicate all the extremely insensitive, harsh and callous measures every time without seriously harming its political credentials and without incurring people's ire further?

So, where is the end to all this acrimonies and confrontational politics that people are so fervently hoping for? We feel that the only respite lies in the two sides involving in discourse and not diatribes. And the lead must come from the ruling party. That is a must for the sake of the country.

Women on the move

Commuting is another challenge for women

A recent report by this paper reveals that women commuters in Chittagong city are facing all kinds of hurdles when trying to travel on buses. This is hardly news as we know that all over Bangladesh women are finding it increasingly difficult to move from one place to the other.

Women are now required to travel all over the city for many reasons. With the growing number of women commuters come an increasing number of obstacles. Bus services are the most commonly used by women commuters, but getting on a bus seems to be one of the biggest hurdles for them. After waiting for hours when a crowded bus arrives, she must shove her way through to get on the bus, sometimes being pushed away by male commuters or even the rude bus conductors, leaving her stranded on the streets.

Despite the designated number of seats for women this is hardly enough to accommodate the growing number of women who need to take the bus to go to their destination. In previous years governments have tried to solve the problem by providing a few buses exclusively for women so that they could travel with relative ease. We don't know what happened to those special buses.

Given the overwhelming need for public transport in general, as the economy is growing, and with it its female working force, the government is obliged to provide safe, affordable bus services for women.

Reviving the previous endeavour to provide buses exclusively for women could be part of the solution. In addition to that there has to be a widespread awareness campaign to urge citizens to be more courteous to women travellers and allow them to travel without the fear of being groped or physically intimidated to make them step aside. It is unacceptable for a democratic, civilized society to allow such blatant discrimination against

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- March 12
- 1918

Moscow becomes the capital of Russia again after Saint Petersburg held this status for 215 years.
- 1930

Mahatma Gandhi leads a 200-mile march, known as the Salt March, to the sea in defiance of British opposition, to protest the British monopoly on salt.
- 1967

Suharto takes over from Sukarno to become Acting President of Indonesia.
- 1993

Several bombs explode in Bombay (Mumbai), India, killing about 300 and injuring hundreds more.
- 1993

North Korea nuclear weapons program: North Korea says that it plans to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and refuses to allow inspectors access to its nuclear sites.
- 2011

A reactor at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant melts and explodes and releases radioactivity into the atmosphere a day after Japan's earthquake.

Returning to CG is essential

M. A. S. MOLLA

GENERAL elections have never been free and fair except under "consensus" (in 1991) or "constitutional" (1996, 2001) caretaker government (CG) in Bangladesh. On the other hand, each and every general election held during CG period has been free and fair, although the losing party raised unfounded allegations of rigging; every time it had to comply with the people's mandate.

After the brutal murder of President Mujibur Rahman along with most of his family members, and jail killing of the most capable leaders, a political vacuum was created. The country was under military and quasi-military regimes for about a decade and a half, and the elections under these regimes were below the acceptance level. A type of "democracy" was reestablished in early 1991 through the first CG (of "consensus").

However, on forming the government, BNP leaders forgot the national consensus on the need of a caretaker government (CG) and rigged some by-elections. The then opposition Awami League, having support from many parties including the Jamaat-e-Islami, led an all-out movement for making the CG provision constitutional. The alliance was victorious in getting the provision passed by the shortest-lived parliament in early 1996.

The people realised the importance of AL-Jamaat's "discovery" of politicians' inability to help hold a fair election and their "invention" of the CG system to ensure free and fair general elections. The people

rewarded AL in 1996 election with victory. Should the AL high command forget this truth and kill the CG that was the AL's baby?

Now, the AL chief and the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina points her fingers to the two-year long unusual interim government of 2007-2008 and the Supreme Court (SC) verdict (that is yet to be published in full) against the CG provision. But she forgets that the unusual interim government, though structurally similar to the constitutional CG, was not a

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true CG but was an ultravires interim government of "need." The "need" was felt because the BNP-Jamaat alliance manipulated the CG system to their advantage. The constitutional CG of October 2006 was ill-formed and was made totally non-functional on resignation of some advisers. It should also be noted that the needful interim government actually "rescued" the falling statecraft and, apart from its staying for long two years and attempting some unrealistic steps like the "minus two" formula, people at large would still appreciate that government's governance, which our "democratic" leaders often fail to provide. Yet the people want to prac-

tice their voting rights properly to have democratic governments.

Even the incompletely published SC verdict has ruling for holding two more general elections under CG that the learned SC judges thought necessary. We all understand that the very concept of unelected CG goes against the spirit of democracy. Even when the AL led a movement for CG in 1990s, it was not in line with the democratic principles but was felt essential. The CG system could be essential until our politicians attain maturity in

conducting general elections under its own custody, people don't have trust in a partisan interim government, and they interpret such logic as plots to stay in power for long.

People are worried that a party government transformed into an interim one may resort to rigging in the general election. In addition, the opposition is up and doing for reinstating of the CG provision, and have said they will not participate in the next general elections under a partisan interim system. It is claimed by some that the major opposition now also supports a system of interim government, instead of CG, if that is formed by leaders from both the government and the opposition.

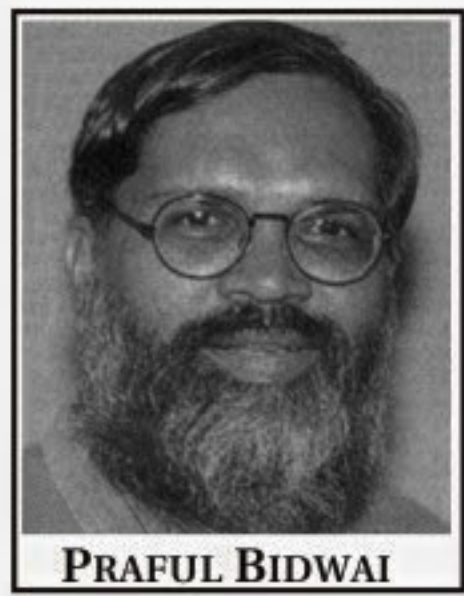
Since the majority of the people don't believe in the sincerity of any party government in conducting a fair general election, and a combined interim government would also fail, the government party must return to the essential CG system. This may happen even after forming a government on winning a farcical election, as was held in early 1996. The delay in taking steps for returning to CG is causing sufferings to the people from hartals, demonstrations etc., and is just pushing more and more people to the opposition camp.

It's high time that the AL high command realises this truth. In essence, CG is not only still possible but also essential for democracy in Bangladesh. The need is to close the loopholes in the 13th Amendment that was inserted in 1996 for creating the CG system.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Congress must correct course or perish



PRAFUL BIDWAI

PEOPLE in five states comprising one-fifth of India's population have delivered a devastating blow to the Congress party in the just-concluded Assembly elections. The political landscape has put the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at a disadvantage in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

The Congress faced a rout in India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh, being reduced to the fourth position. This reverses the gains made in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, when it won the equivalent of 90-100 Assembly segments (of 403) and got an opportunity to rebuild its organisation.

The Congress lost in Punjab, where it was confident of winning. In Uttarakhand, it scraped past the BJP, but didn't win a majority. It suffered a stunning defeat in Goa. Its victory in Manipur in the Northeast doesn't compensate for this.

The Congress's leadership must reflect self-critically and painfully candidly on the party's poor recent showing in West Bengal, Maharashtra municipal elections, by-elections elsewhere, and in these five states.

The Congress is clearly on a downward course. If it looks for lazy, superficial solutions, it will only accelerate its decline.

The UP result has changed the political complexion of the Hindi belt. The Samajwadi Party won the largest number of seats bagged by any party in two decades in UP, pushing Ms. Mayawati's Dalit-based Bahujan Samaj Party to a distant second.

Some commentators have attributed the UP result to growing irrelevance of identities like caste and religion. They argue that a new kind politics is emerging, and voters are now choosing "the future over the past, performance over rhetoric, sin-

cerity over cynicism."

Yet others say the result is explained by erosion of the BSP's social base. Not only Muslims and upper-caste Hindus, but many Dalits too moved out of its fold because they got nothing but symbolic patronage, not substantive empowerment, from her. Her arrogance and inaccessibility also contributed to her poor showing.

Another factor, they speculate, was Akhilesh Yadav's emergence as a suave and affable campaigner. He has tried to transform the SP's image by disassociating it from musclemen, and projected it as a modern party

caste Hindus).

This had little to do with Ms. Mayawati's "poor governance." In fact, she ran a passable administration by UP standards. She sent many notorious criminals to jail. Her last tenure saw less corruption than under previous chief ministers.

The savarna resentment arose from many class- and caste-related factors. The BSP's was not just a government led by a Dalit party; it was a Dalit government. The relative success of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has pushed up wages to upper-caste landowners' resent-

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not opposed to the English language and computers. The SP, it's claimed, might have attracted some Dalit votes.

It's undeniable that many upper-caste Hindus who strongly supported the BSP in 2007 deserted it. Many Muslims too gravitated to the SP once they realised that the BJP wasn't a threat and the BSP was unlikely to win. Some were tempted by the SP's promise of 18% reservation in government jobs.

However, significant numbers of Dalits didn't move away from the BSP. Its estimated vote-share declined from 30.4 to 25.9%. This doesn't suggest much erosion of its Dalit base, which by most accounts got consolidated. It defies credulity that Dalits would rally behind the SP, a party of the Yadavs, their traditional oppressors.

The primary explanation for the SP's stunning victory is identity-related: consolidation of an anti-Dalit sentiment among *savarnas* (upper-

ment.

Ms. Mayawati also started collecting electricity bills and the sales tax, which *savarna* shopkeepers rarely pay.

Governance under the BSP was certainly better than the *goonda raj* widely attributed to Mr. Yadav, with his links with shady businessmen and Bollywood stars. It's true that Ms. Mayawati splurged hundreds of crores on Dalit theme-parks with grand statues. But as I found out during a recent visit to Lucknow, this isn't necessarily resented by savarnas: they believe these monuments have brought architectural distinction to the city.

Draining the UP exchequer to favour business cronies isn't a BSP monopoly. It has long been practiced -- and with a vengeance -- by the SP. Certain business groups are salivating at the prospect of lucrative contracts under the SP.

Ms. Mayawati was loathed and resented because she is a successful

Dalit woman leader and UP's first-ever chief minister to complete his/her term. She's too independent-minded and angular to be amenable to pressure.

The SP was well-placed to exploit the anti-Dalit backlash because it seemed best-gearred to dislodge the BSP, and ran an energetic campaign. This, and the reconsolidation of the party's Muslim-Yadav core base, gave the SP a massive head-start.

The Congress assumed it could perform impressively on its own although it lacked a strong organisation and a platform to distinguish it adequately from the SP. Both targeted the BSP. But the SP reaped disproportionate gains from this because it had a well-defined M-Y core, and pitched specifically for Brahmin support.

The Congress's poor performance in the elections is closely related to UPA-2's failure to fulfill the promise of *aam aadmi*-oriented "inclusive growth," and its pursuit of pro-rich, pro-Big Business policies that dispossess the poor. Its government has become synonymous with loot of natural resources, elitist projects and corruption scandals.

That's why the Congress lost in Punjab and Uttarakhand the anti-incumbency advantage arising from the ruling parties' astronomical corruption, nepotism and *dhakkashahi* (winner-takes-all-style rule by force).

The BJP too fared poorly, except in Goa. It lost four seats in UP, seven in Punjab, and four in Uttarakhand. In UP, the BJP state president, and a former speaker, both lost.

The Congress must not fool itself that it has an ace vote-puller in Rahul Gandhi. Mr. Gandhi failed to convert sympathy for the party into votes. Nor can the Congress succeed in the next Lok Sabha election with the existing government leadership and policies. It must free itself of the Manmohan Singh burden and correct course. Or, it will perish.

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