

Blatant coercion to thwart BNP rally

AL elected to govern, not to suppress the opposition

YESTERDAY we witnessed the naked and blatant use of not only the state's coercive machinery but also of the AL's party goons to thwart the BNP rally by infusing fear and panic in the minds of the public. Not only RAB and the police but also its party cadres were found preventing free movement of transport and people on the roads and highways and on the riverine routes, by force. It was shocking to see party goons empowered to coerce, harass and assault political opponents.

In trying to project its so-called strength, and by bringing the country to a standstill practically by an undeclared hartal by the government, and by putting the capital practically under siege, the AL has only exposed its weakness.

Would we be remiss to ask the government to explain why the public transport systems were off the road when even during the times of opposition-called strikes these are made to operate, sometimes with police protection to show that the hartal was unsuccessful? There is very little the public can do when the government calls hartal.

We protest in the strongest possible terms the government's attitude of going to any length in exerting power so as not to allow any political space whatsoever to the BNP. And we protest also the fact that the media, particularly the electronic, were prevented from performing their task properly.

The way the issue was handled doesn't speak much of the AL's political acumen. The party that came to power with 4/5th majority three years ago is now unwilling to permit a legitimate opposition to organise any mass activity. And in the process of thwarting the BNP by the use of brute power the public have been made to undergo not only humiliation but prevented from carrying out their day to day activity for the last three days.

The AL's actions, attitude and talk do little credit to the credentials of a political party with a long tradition of struggle for democracy and people's political rights. All their talk of being the upholder of democratic principles has been made to sound hollow by the way they have handled the issue.

We have been equally surprised by the shameless, blatant and cynical distortion of facts by some senior government and party stalwarts. They have exposed a convoluted mind by trying to paint a completely different picture than what we have been seeing and reading in the media. In doing so they are only fooling themselves, not the people. In the process there is a sever erosion of public confidence and trust in the leaders.

We would like the AL to realise that it has been elected to govern and not to suppress the opposition.

Substandard work at river ports

High cost to vessels and human life

WE are concerned at reports of alleged low-quality renovation and development work at Barisal river port, not only causing losses in the crores through damage of vessels, but putting hundreds of lives at risk. As it is, a large number of passengers go missing or die in launch accidents every year, and one can do without faulty ports adding to the casualties.

In separate incidents earlier this year and the middle of the last, a steel frame dropped from a crane on the pontoon shed, and the pontoon and gangway were damaged when some launches hit them while mooring at the port, causing huge loss, not to mention the panic caused among passengers. While the incidents have been investigated and the owners of the launches fined, because they are ruling party leaders, they have been able to appeal for waivers and have not yet paid the fine.

Responsibility falls upon the port authorities for negligence in monitoring the work and use of inferior materials in constructing and developing the port. Work on the ports has also been slow, with the deadline for completion of the development work having been extended four times. Those responsible for implementation of the project, also ruling party leaders, have pointed to the increased cost of construction material for the low standard and quality of work and delay in implementation.

We hope that the matter will be taken up without delay, those responsible held to account and replaced by sincere, responsible and efficient personnel in order to get the

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT was our misfortune to have been born in Bangladesh. It doesn't matter which party is in office. We common citizens have always suffered, will always suffer."

That was a young man, speaking for himself and yet for many others like him, when asked for his response

to the shutdown of the nation's capital by the government yesterday. The shutdown, of course, was caused by the government's misplaced belief that if things went on as usual, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party would or might cause absolute chaos in the city through its political programme scheduled for March 12. That day has come and gone. And gone too, perhaps, is a huge swathe of public support for a political party which rode back to power three years ago on the strength of a four-fifths majority in parliament.

When you sit back and reflect on everything that happened prior to and on March 12, you ask yourself why a putatively democratic government chose to act the way it did on the day. No buses traveling toward Dhaka were allowed into the city. No launches were permitted to dock at their designated spots at Sadarghat. For a while, their passengers could get on to boats and touch land. That too stopped when ruling party goons made sure that boatmen did not approach the river vessels. Within the city, all significant modes of public transport stayed off the roads. Tens of thousands of citizens, men and women, people who have over the decades placed faith in democracy, were compelled into watching democracy mutate into sheer insensitivity at the hands of the powers that be.

And then came the falsehood of it all. The minister of state for home denied any government role in a suspension of transport movement to and within the capital. Earlier, the minister for home went dismissive about a circular in the police department relating to what ought to be done about handling the opposition rally. Senior leaders of the Awami League waxed eloquently untrue about the reasons behind the action against the opposition. It was to prevent the BNP

from creating chaos that such cautionary action had become necessary, said they.

On the streets, in homes, in offices not a soul was around to defend the actions of this Awami League government. Perhaps the man who needed to be present at his workplace despite all this absence of transport said it best. "If the authorities could decree a suspension of road communication, they might very well have ordered offices closed," he mused bitterly. But the government did not do that. It appeared to be offering a curious philosophy of life: no vehicles

The consequences of such hauteur you can now see before you. Suddenly it is a BNP made resurgent by a bumbling ruling party. Khaleda Zia is no more the politician in a state of shock at loss of power. On March 12, as she addressed her party faithful, she let the message sink in that she was on her way back to office.

will operate and no offices will remain closed. It conveniently forgot the poor, deprived, huddled masses.

There were other bitter, secular voices who made themselves heard on March 12, on the day before it. This is not the Awami League we voted for, they said in plaintive tones. This is not the Awami League we know. Which pushes your imagination into newer territories of inquiry: when was there ever a time when Bangabandhu and his generation of Awami League leaders turned away from the people and went about trying to swat

their political adversaries down? They fought their own wars, but they made sure that the people did not become collateral damage. In the old days, it was always the people the Awami League spoke for and stood by. On March 12, on the day preceding it, the Awami League simply did not care. All it wished to see done was for the BNP to be forced into a position of genuflection before it. The BNP could not be given space.

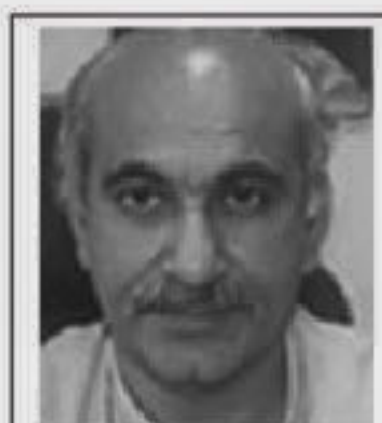
And yet the truth today is that it is the Awami League which has rehabilitated the BNP, which has almost ensured that a party which indulged in unprecedented corruption in the five years till October 2006 returns to office at the next election with a vengeance. In these past three years, with a purposeful, clean government in charge, the corrupt elements of the BNP as also of the ruling Awami League should have been brought to justice. Had the Awami League governed well, it could have initiated serious investigations into allegations of Pakistani ISI money flowing into the BNP's electoral coffers. The prime minister accuses the BNP of collaboration with the intelligence services of a state we ran out of our land forty one years ago and yet will do nothing to act.

But her government has acted, in a bizarre way, through placing citizens at the mercy of politicians, her party's politicians. Her government has infuriated citizens through informing them in so many words that their self-esteem is of little consequence, that they can walk or sprint or run or crawl but they cannot complain.

The consequences of such hauteur you can now see before you. Suddenly it is a BNP made resurgent by a bumbling ruling party. Khaleda Zia is no more the politician in a state of shock at loss of power. On March 12, as she addressed her party faithful, she let the message sink in that she was on her way back to office. Her self-assurance was unmistakable. Her politics may be wrong, her record in government is dismal and deeply embarrassing. But she knows that that sordid past may now be behind her, now that the Awami League is doing all it can to give her a third opportunity in the sun.

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BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is one colourful aspect of elections that has been sadly neglected in the coverage of this vibrant game called democracy. This is the Post Campaign Trauma Syndrome, or PCTS, as it is known among experts. Needless to

point out, this afflicts only losers, since winners are simply too busy celebrating to have time for analysis. Angst is for losers. But here is what winners miss: the sudden flowering of creativity. Defeat is a splendid tonic for imagination, taking the also-ran towards the realms of if, but and into that wide, wide world of the infinite alibi.

In some, albeit rare, instances PCTS displays different symptoms. There can even be -- although this may sound particularly difficult to believe, given that we are discussing politics -- a sudden descent into silence. Examine, for instance, the BJP's reaction to the results of Uttarakhand. No one has anything to say, because to say anything would evoke such a spread of bathos as to shift attention from where the BJP wants us to go, to Punjab and Goa.

The BJP was defeated in Uttarakhand by the BJP. Its leader, Major General B.C. Khanduri, who resurrected a party killed by corruption and complacency, was sabotaged by his BJP predecessor Romesh Pokhriyal. Pokhriyal sent his henchmen to defeat Khanduri, which they did successfully even as all around them BJP candidates won because of Khanduri. The general, an honourable officer, knows how to face the enemy in front. When he joined politics he should have taken special courses in back stabbing. He did not. That one seat also made the vital difference in numbers, since it edged Congress ahead and into office. Will the BJP do anything about this scandal? Probably not. It would have been fun if BJP spokesmen had tried to offer explanations for Uttarakhand. That would have tested the fertility of their poetic licence.

Other parties were not smitten by similar reticence. Mayawati does not include poetic licence within her talents and if she has any, is loath to waste it on journalists. She gave a press conference that was depressingly matter of fact. She pointed out that she had not been erased from the electoral map of UP, as Lalu Prasad Yadav



CSA IMAGES

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had been from Bihar. She had a point: she may have won only 80 seats but she came second in 208. Uttar Pradesh has become a two-horse race, and BSP is around for the next battle.

The Congress has by far the finest talent for alibis. If alibis were the principal requirement of electoral victory, Congress would be in power for eternity. Congress is quick. Others may labour over the finer points of logic, and debate whether one element might not turn counter-

productive. But Congress has no qualms. It shoots from the hip with speed and conviction, and if the ammunition is only a sequence of blanks, no problem: the primary purpose, of making noise, has been served, for television loves noise with an owner's possessiveness.

The Congress rationale for its stunning defeat in Punjab was that the breakaway Akali Dal of Manpreet Badal had taken away its vote in 23 constituencies. Ahem. Did Manpreet take the Congress vote or Akali supporters? Who encouraged Manpreet when he turned prodigal? The Congress had begun laughing all the way to Chandigarh the moment the Akali ruling family split, confident that Manpreet would lop off the Akali base, making a Congress victory easier. Sukhbir Badal has won despite a split, not because of it. He could even argue that his margins would have been greater if the party had been united.

Congress explanations for the massacre in UP have to be, I suppose, even more ludicrous. You need a large dose of hallucination to defend the indefensible. Congress leaders have begun to adopt a long face while intoning that it was not their leader Rahul Gandhi's fault; the infrastructure on the ground was missing. Really? Rahul Gandhi must have mislaid the infrastructure in all of two years then, since in 2009 the Congress won 22 Lok Sabha seats, with a lead in 96 Assembly segments.

The other excuse is that the choice of candidates was poor. Who chose the candidates? Akhilesh Yadav did not select Congress candidates. Rahul Gandhi did. Rahul Gandhi was given total control of all aspects of the UP campaign, and a full repertoire of media accompaniment to trumpet his imminent arrival on the centre-stage of national and international affairs. The simple fact is that the Congress lost around 7% of its vote, largely because Muslims deserted the party, and that sent it back into the 20-30 seat band. If it wants to recover it must recognise facts.

It is axiomatic that you have to be dumb in order to be dumbfounded, but political parties are not run by dumb people. They only pretend to be dumb, in the hope that the people are too dumb to see through the artifice. It is a hopeless hope.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 13

624

Battle of Badr: a key battle between Muhammad's army the new followers of Islam and the Quraish of Mecca. The Muslims won this battle, known as the turning point of Islam, which took place in the Hejaz region of western Arabia.

1920

The Kapp Putsch briefly ousts the Weimar Republic government from Berlin.

1921

Mongolia, under Baron Roman Ungern von Sternberg, declares its independence from China.

1954

Battle of Điện Biên Phủ: Viet Minh forces attack the French.