

Enough of power-play

Dialogue is the only way forward

IN the last few days this newspaper has been highly critical of the manner in which the BNP's 'Dhaka Cholo' programme was handled by the AL. Today we would like to focus on the substance of the speech of the leader of the opposition at the 12 March rally, particularly on her ultimatum to the government. Begum Zia has given three months to the government to announce the restoration of the caretaker system, otherwise she will launch a movement to dislodge it.

BNP should know that there are no instances in our recent history of ultimatums causing the overthrow of a duly elected government before its term. And we feel that whatever political programmes the BNP undertakes it cannot dislodge the AL from power before the end of its mandated term. It has not happened when the BNP was in power between 2001 and 2006. And it is not about to happen now. And nobody believing in constitutional government can support it. This paper will be opposed to such an attempt.

However, while we feel the BNP's demand for a neutral mechanism to oversee the next general election is justified, we wonder whether the 29 March hartal call by the BNP under the current circumstances is at all justified giving the untold sufferings the people have been subjected to in the four days leading up to the 12 March BNP rally. The party has made its point clearly in spite of the government efforts to put all kinds of hurdles and we are certain the government too has taken note of that.

We emphasise that hartal is not an option and in fact one would have thought that the BNP would have built on the sympathy and the negative impact of the government's actions than to opt for a programme that will only add to the public woes and which will in all likelihood invite public ire.

To the government we urge the release of all those arrested en masse, and further make a clean breast of the folly they have committed in mishandling the issue and an unqualified admission of the great inconvenience it had caused the public to assuage their sentiments.

But most importantly, both parties should realise, having displayed their power, that there is no alternative to dialogue. And the sooner they involve each other in the process, the better will it be for us.

Poor healthcare service for children

Exercise strict oversight on the facilities

A survey of Save the Children informs that children aged between 12 and 18 do not receive proper treatment from public hospitals and health complexes. The survey, conducted on 466 children of 64 districts, shows that about 69 per cent of those could barely access healthcare facilities. In addition, many doctors were allegedly found to have been busy with personal talks with colleagues or pharmaceutical representatives while many others were found absent from work. In addition to murky environment, the survey mentions many other minor problems which do not allow the children to get the necessary treatment.

Most alarming, however, is the fact that the underprivileged children, especially slum and street children, remain largely outside the range of public hospitals and health complexes. One reason behind this is that all public hospitals provide treatment in exchange for money, however meager the amount. Another reason is that as street children they are often looked down upon. It must be stressed that these children are also entitled to basic healthcare services as much as the better-off ones and the onus is on the government to ensure that they are not left out of its scope.

Today's children are the future leaders, and a nation cannot prosper without capable leadership. In order to ensure that, the state will have to guarantee that our children have access to all the basic healthcare facilities, even more so because this is their fundamental right as guaranteed by our constitution as well as by the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the government to monitor that the doctors in these centers are doing their duty professionally. As an alternative, the government can open up a complaint cell where neglected children may



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE much 'dreaded' March 12 has passed rather peacefully. The inhabitants of the besieged capital city have heaved a sigh of relief, since the continuous propaganda campaign that the ruling Awami League (AL) leaders had been carrying out over the previous weeks, that something terrible might happen on that day, did not take place after all.

What was wrong with that day? What was so dreadful about it, if one is to believe what the government leaders were constantly saying? As everyone in the country knew it, the day (March 12) was set by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for holding its planned mass rally.

And the government did everything in its capacity to create obstructions so that people from outside the city might not join the opposition's rally. The public and private transport services plying between Dhaka and the rest of the country were forcibly kept off the roads. Even within the capital city movement of the motorised vehicles were not allowed on Monday (March 12). The launch services between Dhaka and other districts, too, faced the same kind of restrictions. The government action was not just limited to halting movement of public and private transports. It mobilised its entire law-enforcement machinery for keeping the city free from what it termed 'strangers (!)'. The hotels were closed to any new boarders; the dormitories were given surprise visits by plainclothesmen to check if any so-called 'strangers' were there. And

as if those measures were not enough, armed goons of the ruling party were let loose to drive away any pro-opposition marchers on the roads trying to move towards the venue of the rally.

It was all unprecedented. Worse still, there were even attempts at keeping some satellite TV channels like the BanglaVision, Ekushey TV and Islamic TV off the air for about three hours around the time when the BNP's rally was taking place, though in a restricted form at its pre-announced venue.

The extraordinary security measures mounted by the government through mobilising its law-enforcement machinery in battle

gears could well be justified, had the government actually slapped any official ban, such as section 144 or any other restrictive order on the 12 March rally. It was not even the case that any terrorist organisation had issued any threat against the rally or against the government on that date.

In fact, the government failed to show any valid reason behind the unprecedented security measures and other matching actions it had taken to virtually paralyse Dhaka on March 12 and two to three days preceding that date. The argument, if it can be accepted at all as one, that the opposition was trying to create an obstacle to the trial of 1971's war criminals was hard to sell. That is because, the opposition did not say anything against the war crimes trial in its

programme for the rally. On the other hand, what they had been saying all through is that they were trying to press home their demand for holding the next general election under an interim neutral or caretaker government.

Whatever justifications the ruling AL was trying place in support of its warlike posture against the opposition programme could hardly stand to reason. They were, for instance, constantly harping on the Jamaat bogey. The nation was being told by the AL leaders and ministers that the followers and activists of that party as well as other extremist-rightists elements might create law and order

situation in the city on the rally day. Strangely, the government was unable to produce any specific allegation against them. Neither could it give any intelligence report in support of its suspicion

and fears. True, some senior members of Jamaat were facing war crimes charges in the ongoing international tribunal. Surprisingly, the government, till date, has not even officially outlawed Jamaat from doing politics, nor has it cancelled its registration as a political party. But it is crying blue murder without let-up all the same against Jammatt's being a partner of the opposition and their participation in the opposition-called rally.

If the general public is to believe that the unprecedented security measures and other actions were

necessary to protect them from any subversive activity by any extremist elements taking advantage of the opposition-held rally, why is then the government not looking so worried over its own rally on March 14? It all defies common sense

In fact, the ruling AL has no credible argument to justify what it did surrounding BNP and its allied parties' rally of Monday. Even many of its sincere camp followers were dumbfounded.

The ruling Awami League must face facts. It must come out of its delusions of power, superiority and invincibility as well as the moral high ground it claims it stands on. If truth be told, it has made a terrible mess of everything.

It must realise that the ruling party and the government's only job is not to go after opposition in an endless manner. Left with only a year and a half in hand to perform, it needs also to concentrate on the election pledges it had made to its constituents and the people at large.

At the same time, it must be prepared to allow the opposition the space it is entitled to constitutionally and engage immediately with it in a dialogue as a first step towards ending the prevailing political standoff. The people already aghast at the never-ending face offs and slanging matches between the ruling party and the opposition want something better. They want to see a wind of positive change in the behaviour of the major political parties. And the ball is in the ruling the ruling party's court to give the possibility of constructive change a chance.

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FAHAD FARUQUI

HURRAH! For Pakistan has finally criminalised domestic violence against women and children. Offenders will face a minimum of six months behind bars and Rs.100,000 (\$1,100) in fines.

Every time I hear news of a man using physical force on his wife and children, I become furious. What is further infuriating is that as a man, to react the way I do is deemed strange. For some godforsaken reason it is widely accepted that it's a man's prerogative to correct women by force, especially if they are ungrateful (whatever that means) and if they don't obey the commands of their husbands.

Women who have been in such situations tell me that a wife can be beaten up for something as trivial as excessively salting food.

What astonishes me is the feedback I get on having strong views against domestic violence. While men try to justify abusive acts by putting the blame on the hypothetical woman for making the man go berserk, women tend to give me sympathetic looks, assuming that, perhaps, I grew up seeing my mother battered.

In reality, my upbringing has nothing to do with my views on domestic violence. In my view, violence towards women and children is the most heinous act a man can commit. Period. The need to overwhelm a woman by exerting force leads me to conclude that there's a deeper

problem with the people involved, more specifically with the man, and the nature of their relationship.

Though I am not married, I have had my share of quarrels with friends. The only way it is possible to have a healthy relationship is to curtail the ego and listen intently to one another. The act of beating your mate with the intent to cause bodily harm epitomises a monster of an ego.

The perception that a woman in marriage is property of the man is the root of the problem.

Every so often, I see men, educated men, who boast about not giving their wife the right to seek divorce. I don't particularly understand the thinking behind encaging a woman, who wants a divorce. Perhaps, it's the sadistic mentality at play.

There's another facet of the "women as property" mindset that is hard to reckon with. Marital rape is seemingly quite common in Pakistan according to anecdotal evidence, though I don't have the statistics and there is no way to get an accurate number in a country where beating a woman is deemed okay, but filing a complaint against an abusive, overpowering husband is a taboo.

I told Dawn's blog editor to think of this article as a message from one man (a male feminist, if you will) to another man. She kindly responded by writing: "I like the way you put it." And there is a reason for this: A woman may feel the dire need to protect another woman, but men should be equally concerned about the abuse of women.

Paradoxically, men who don't think twice about taking a swing at their wives often get worked up if a man beats the heck out of their loved one. You're a hypocrite if you think that it is okay for you to bash your wife, but not okay for your father to beat your mother or for your brother-in-law to beat your sister, or for your son-in-law to beat your daughter. The woman you're married to is someone's daughter and most probably someone's sister. And it is very

clear in my mind that you should treat others in the manner that you would like you and yours to be treated.

What irks me the most is when abusive husbands use religion as a license for beating (so to speak) ungrateful and disloyal women. Read the last sermon of the prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, which says in clear words: "Treat

your women well and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers." There is really no room for misinterpretation here.

Those men who mock their partners in life by saying that they've learned from the local mullah that there will be more women in hell because they disobey their husbands should consider reading up on what the religion actually says.

Turning a blind eye to the rights of women is an immense disservice to the woman who gave birth to you, your sisters, your wife, and your daughter.

I have been thinking about how certain men perceive women since my college days. I remember a disturbing encounter with two men, from a feudal background, one of whom said: "Women are like toilet paper, we use them and trash them." I instantly asked: "What about your mother and sisters?" and the dynamic of the conversation dramatically changed.

That evening my mother saw me contemplating on a leather recliner in my lounge. If my memory serves me well, the year was 1999. That mind-shaping encounter led me to think about morals and ethics more deeply. And there is one thing I can say with finitude: your life partner and your children are precious and should be treated in the manner you would treat something precious.

The writer is a journalist, writer and educator.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 14

44 BC
Casca, Cicero and Cassius decided, in the night before the Assassination of Julius Caesar, that Mark Antony should stay alive.

1900
The Gold Standard Act is ratified, placing United States currency on the gold standard.

1931
Alam Ara, India's first talkie film, is released.

1978
The Israeli Defense Force invades and occupies southern Lebanon, in Operation Litani.

2007
The Left Front government of West Bengal sends at least 3,000 police to Nandigram in an attempt to break Bhumi Uchedh Pratirodh Committee resistance there; the resulting clash leaves 14 dead.