

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Untamed, Hasina had her say



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

SHEIKH Hasina born to political adversity and growing up through a hostile environment appears to have an uncanny ability to brave and tackle tough encounters.

Remember, how against the advice of most of her colleagues, she had walked into the jaw of enraged army personnel in cantonment raring to vent out their anger to the newly inducted PM in the backdrop of BDR massacre of army officers on deputation at Peelkhana. Her risk-taking paid off in terms of calming the frayed nerves.

Last week, in an entirely different setting though, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came again into her elements in Stephen Sackur's Hardtalk with her over BBC.

Before coming to the quality and merit of her replies to Sackur's searching questions, a word for Sheikh Hasina's newsworthiness in the Western media will be in order. Hasina is making news more because of controversies she has created rather than her achievements. Though her scorecard in certain areas is "impressive" that is obscured by her largely self-complicated politics.

In the last week of May, the widely read weekly *Economist* placed Sheikh Hasina under its Leader column taking and giving a world view of how political leadership in Bangladesh is made up of and where it is faltering. It patronisingly suggested that India persuade Hasina to step back from what it saw as a ruinous course, thereby overstepping its journalistic remit.

Then comes the encounter with Sackur. Usually,

when pushed to a corner by Sackur's torrential reeling of unpalatable facts and figures, most interviewees would curtly say: "Let me finish ..." to get a reprieve to make their points. Sheikh Hasina's way of wriggling out of a shoehorn situation was repeatedly interjecting -- "Listen, listen" She thus got herself a leeway to hammer home her line of thinking.

But her frequent "nos" and denials meant she was

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psychied up to defend her position at any cost. Political jostling with local audience is one thing but addressing an overseas audience is another; in her first major encounter she has come through reasonably well, even exceeding some people's expectations.

On corruption and human rights violation, Sheikh Hasina traced these back to former regimes and said she could not improve the situation overnight. Historically, she may be correct, but on her track record on these issues, she being in charge for three and a half years on a massive electoral mandate, she had no convincing answer.

On the pointers to "souring relations" with World



Bank and Professor Yunus, Sheikh Hasina was rather amusingly witty in trying to make the best out of a bad situation. She put counter-question to Sackur asking why did it occur to him that she had termed Professor Yunus "bloodsucker of the poor" when she had not specifically named him? But the next moment she refers to Grameen taking 30-45% interest on its loans thereby betraying her actual feeling in an unguarded

moment. This is a factual inaccuracy by a wide margin as has been clarified by Grameen Bank after her BBC interview.

On the World Bank issue she tried to circumvent Sackur's insistence that her government publish World Bank letters since it couldn't do it as a matter of WB-client relationship ethic by basically parrying it. Since the resident World Bank chief iterated that Bangladesh government is free to publish WB letters, the onus is on the government to make the whole thing public. Naming does not mean shaming or culpability if actual corruption has not taken place.

The retaliatory theme on Professor Yunus was somewhat watered down by Sheikh Hasina maintaining that Professor Yunus tried to float a political platform when she was in custody. Then she quipped to Sackur in so many words, "have you thought about" why he failed to form a political party? The ire, however, comes through but in a sugarcoated fashion!

Sheikh Hasina may have sounded convincing to overseas audience when she claimed had there been corruption how could the AL government have made so much economic progress? Also, her comments on progress in social and economic sectors and way the country is bracing up to climate change might have gone down well with her audience.

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

'Enjoying such freedom, if one fails to run the administration successfully then he should resign'

Professor Nazrul Islam, former UGC Chairman and, currently Chairman of Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), talks to A.B.M Shamsud Doza and Zaheen Zaema Khan of The Daily Star on the ongoing crisis in public universities.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you look at the ongoing crisis in public universities?

Nazrul Islam (NI): The ongoing situation in public universities, to be very brief, is very sad. This should not have been happened.

At this time, there are a number of important universities that are experiencing some kind of turmoil, like Buet is still in a crisis. The other big problem was in Jahangir Nagar University, which seems to have been brought under some kind of control with the appointment of Dr. Anwar Hossain as vice-chancellor. He has shown tremendous efficiency by organising an election for VC. This did not happen easily because the group that opposed Sharif Enamul Kabir and pulled him down also opposed the process of panel election. This was very unfortunate because this group did not oppose sitting of the Senate for budget. If they had opposition to the Senate then they should have opposed at that time. So, this was definitely some kind of motivated action, and it was not desired. Moreover, unrest created by a group of teachers, not by the teachers' association, is not also acceptable. If you demand democracy then a democratically elected body should have raised it and started agitation. Interestingly, the person who resigned received the highest support from the Senate. If you believe in democracy then you should have honoured it, but, because of special circumstances, the second-highest vote-getter was selected. There is nothing wrong in that, the government can do it, they can even pick the third person, but not anybody nonelected.

TDS: What about Buet?

NI: The Buet problem remains unresolved. In Buet, it is the teachers' association that raised opposition and made the demands, that way it is democratic. The teachers' association, which represent all the teachers in the university, is not satisfied with the performance of the vice-chancellor and even raises charges of irregularities and partisan attitude against him. They made their demands peacefully all the way, but then closing down academic activities and not attending classes are not acceptable. I think it will also be resolved but the threat that they will resign en masse was possibly too extreme, particularly when the minister had called a meeting with the senior academics. But in less than an hour they declared that they were going to resign en masse, which hampered the negotiation process.

Involvement of employees and the students with the teachers is again unfortunate and rather unprecedented; it has set another bad example. Anyway, the teachers' demand may be genuine and the vice-chancellor and pro-vice-chancellor could have

stepped aside and let there be an investigation. But there was an investigation, a committee of three was setup by the government, and they should have waited for the findings of the inquiry. The findings of the inquiry were made public, and they found nothing wrong. Then the vice- chancellor and pro-vice chancellor themselves suggested setting up a judicial inquiry committee, but the teachers are not waiting for that. They are not going through the process, and that is the problem. Their only demand is whatever you do we want them out, and that is not a good example. The government does not feel very happy about it because it appointed these two people, though they may not be the best. But if they have committed any offence then it should be investigated first.

The post of pro-vice-chancellor is new, and was established with some motivation to appoint somebody partisan to the government. Prof. Shafiullah, the immediate past VC of Buet, was appointed by BNP, but the Awami government let him continue up to his contract period. This government created the post of pro-VC to have some balance. But it does not work well. Another serious objection is that he is junior to 50 to 60 academics, and that is not in the tradition of Buet. So that tradition has been broken and that is why the teachers feel hurt, and they have a good reason to feel so. Even when he was appointed pro-VC there was not much opposition. They waited to see what happened. But when he was not performing well or not behaving in a very transparent or just manner they started agitating. So, that is also justified. They waited, and gave him a chance. Then the appointed VC, also, did not have a good track record because he had to leave Khulna University. According to the teachers, he also did not perform very well or justifiably. So that is an objection. Anyway, they may have good reasons for raising the objections but when classes are closed down it is a loss for the students and the nation. Nobody expected this in Buet.

TDS: Besides these two we also have problems in other universities.

NI: Yes, some of them may be justified and some may be totally unjustified. Look at Pabna Science and Technology University for instance; students are agitating because the grading system is not acceptable to them. The academic council decides what the grading system should be. But students with grade point below the set grade point want to be promoted, and that is not acceptable. Universities should have a standard.

Some people think that they can also create a problem in their university seeing a problem in another



Professor Nazrul Islam

university. It is a kind of disease, a chain reaction. If the vice- chancellor and the university authorities are sensitive or responsive to the needs and demands of the teachers, students and employees, they can respond and act immediately before it becomes a problem. Sometimes some motivated people may do it for whatever reasons and then it becomes difficult for the vice-chancellors. Sometimes local politicians interfere in university affairs.

TDS: Public universities enjoy autonomous status. So when issues go beyond their control what can be their last resort, and what role can UGC play in that case?

NI: Public universities are autonomous, except for finance. UGC also monitors academic performance of the universities. Our universities have very good administrative structure. If any problem arises at department level, department authority will solve it; if they fail, it will go to faculty; if it is not solved there then it will go to VC; if the VC fails then UGC will come. I think through this structure any problem could be solved.

Another important thing, in Bangladesh university teachers enjoy most freedom. They are not accountable to the students. Enjoying such freedom, if one fails to run the administration successfully then he should resign.

Sometimes, if necessary, UGC can come forward voluntarily if the situation becomes critical. Actually, UGC is the government representative that governs the universities, both public and private. It cannot interfere, but can intervene. UGC can only intervene when asked for, or when the situation is too difficult for the VC to solve alone.

TDS: Any example of such intervention by UGC?

NI: The case of Mowlana Bhashani University of Science and Technology is a very good example. At that time I was the UGC chairman. Students of Food

Science Department, who had only passed the first year, started agitation demanding that the department should be called food engineering department because some of the students went to a food processing company, probably for internship, and the company said that they did not recognise any food science people, and that they had to be students of food engineering. There was absolutely no ground for this agitation. They read science, not engineering, in their curriculum. To take an engineering degree they must have 75% engineering courses, or at least 51%, but they had only 15% or 20% engineering courses. They agitated for month after month, closing down the university and vandalising assets. UGC and the VC of the university took a strong position against this improper demand, and we succeeded in getting the students back to the classroom.

TDS: Do you think it is necessary to review the University Act, 1973?

NI: I think it should be revised. It has become holier than the constitution. Why doesn't the university community itself look at it from a dispassionate perspective?

Nowhere in the world will you find such provision of elected VC, even elected by students. It does not work. Student election has not taken place for 20 years. So how will it work? We should be more pragmatic.

TDS: It seems that there is a loophole in choosing VCs. Do you have any solution?

NI: Only 4 universities have panel selection system, but in other universities government appoints them. In Buet, also, government appoints the VC. The main thing here is that they should have the guts to sustain their performance in running the university.

If you look at the Dhaka University situation, Dr. Arefin was supposed to give election, but he has not done it yet, and this is really creating problem, even among his supporters.

When I was in UGC, we suggested a search committee for selection of VC, which is practised worldwide. I think it would be a good solution. We prepared a configuration of the search committee comprising former VCs, national professor and so on, but no bureaucrat. If a bureaucrat was included he could only be a non-voting member of the committee. We can even hire Bangladeshi professors who are working in important positions, even VC, in international universities. My bottom line is that it should be selected by academic persons, not outsiders.

I want to also suggest that there should be a search committee for appointing the UGC chairman too. I think the present system should be reviewed.

TDS: Now, about students. They have been demanding activation of students' unions for a long time. How do you look at it?

NI: I am always in favour of an elected student body to look after students' demands. As it is in the law, you have to make it happen. But it is very difficult. We have to bring student leaders in confidence to give student election. This is a national demand.