

Hartal culture back with vengeance

Lessons ring loud and clear

WITHIN less than three weeks in this solemn month of December, we have had a hartals galore. Already, we have endured, with great pain and hardship, one road blockade-turned-general strike and three hartals called by BNP and Jamaat, including one by left parties. Another full day's hartal has been called by a combine of Islamic parties for today.

The blockade programme enforced by opposition BNP alliance and reinforced by the government on December 9 claimed the life of Biswajit Das. The innocent unarmed tailor shop employee bleeding to his death by unrelenting stabbings, without any help at any stage, bore a highly exasperating testimony to leaving the streets to the wolves by deliberate choice.

Then followed a full day strike on 11; a half day one on 13; and then on 18 December, a hartal was called by two left parties.

Left parties' hartal has taken most people by surprise; for, it does not fit in with their culture of political dynamic. No meeting or rally was held by them to articulate their demand for a ban on religion-based parties prior to hartal to sway public opinion in favour of their agenda. Suddenly, they called a hartal patently out of grain with the Left ethos as they tried to strike a note of visibility. And, then the home minister comes out welcoming the peaceful hartal, reportedly aided by government, evidenced by the fact that BRTC buses were kept out of the road -- that always ply on hartal days.

On the one hand, the government is encouraging hartal by looking at the face of the organising party; on the other, it goes the whole hog obstructing opposition called hartals -- in a display of double standards. All this is indicative of a new dimension to the bankruptcy of our politics and political parties.

We, as a paper, have been staunchly opposed to hartal called by any party. We think it can only be resorted to against military or extra constitutional governments, and never against a democratically elected government. We would, therefore, urge all political parties to practice the alternatives to hartal because the latter is anti-people and a prescription for mutual self-destruction.

Illicit money transfers from developing countries

Strong monitoring and enforcement of relevant laws necessary

ILLICIT outflow of money originating from crime, corruption and tax evasion has been causing massive haemorrhage of the economies of the developing world. In the decade between 2001 and 2010, nearly US\$ 6 trillion has thus been siphoned off those economies.

A widely circulated Bengali national daily, quoting the findings of Global Financial Integrity, GFI, a Washington-based financial accountability watchdog, says, over the reported decade, about US\$ 10. 40 billion have flown out of Bangladesh alone. This amount is equivalent to the total revenue earning target for FY 2012-13 of the NBR.

This is an eye-opener for a country that aspires to become a middle income economy by 2021 through increasing its GDP growth around 7.5 to 8 per cent annually.

The sensational scams involving Hall-Mark, Sonali Bank and Destiny group are an example of such unaccounted-for money falling through loopholes in the financial rules.

The main reasons for illegal transfer of money from the developing economies include political instabilities, high level of corruption, loopholes in the tax laws, black marketing, human and drug trafficking, bank secrecy and so on.

China, Malaysia, Mexico, India are some major victims of such capital flight.

The destinations of this huge flight of fund are some banks in the advanced countries as well as the tax havens like Switzerland, Singapore, Dubai, the Seychelles.

All this is a grave threat to the growth and development of national economies. So, the government should monitor and track down the sources and conduits of clandestine money transfers and curtail such outflows.

The measures may include enforcing money laundering laws, clamping down on secret bank accounts and reforming customs and trade protocols so that export/import payments cannot be used to hide illegal

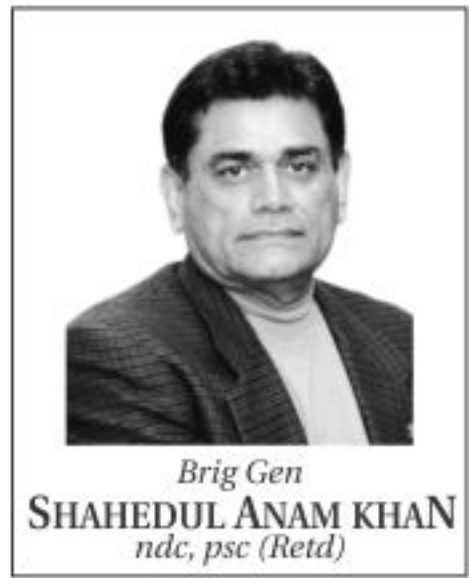
THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 20

- 1808
Peninsular War: The Siege of Zaragoza begins.
- 1924
Hitler is released from Landsberg Prison
- 1971
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto takes over as the fourth President of Pakistan.
- 1995
NATO begins peacekeeping in Bosnia.
- 1999
Macau is handed over to the People's Republic of China by Portugal.
- 2007
Elizabeth II becomes the oldest ever monarch of the United Kingdom, surpassing Queen Victoria, who lived for 81 years, 7 months and 29 days.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Conspiracy: Gripping AL psyche



THE risk of coming out with conspiracy theories consistently and attributing anything that happens to you to devious schemes is that you are likely to be taken as a part of that conspiracy. And that is what the ruling party has come to be thought of by many. With the government trying to make us believe in its postulation of conspiracy everywhere, its inability to go to the roots of those and exposing the "conspirators" is being taken as its unwillingness to do so, it being a part of so-called conspiracy, they think.

There are many different types of conspiracies. And one would not mind John Updike's kind when he says that America is a vast conspiracy to make its people happy. And one may even conspire to commit corruption as we have come to learn lately.

One is compelled to believe that, if everything bad that has happened in the country in the last four years is the result of conspirators succeeding in their schemes, there is something seriously wrong with the government agencies, for they have continued to fail in uncovering the plots. Or conversely, their missives were not given due importance. In either case it is a question of government failure to address its own concerns. I suggest

the government consider seriously the profound remarks of late US president Franklin Roosevelt, that in politics nothing happens by accident, and if it happened, you can bet it was planned that way. Therefore, if anything that the government does not want happens, it is for the government to find out who is making that happen and why.

Frankly, that has not been the case, and given that we have not had any plausible explanations of the four or five incidents, which the PM says are the results of devious plots against her government, we are unable to concur with her and those who believe so that all these are the work of national and international plotters. Therefore let us dissect some of the issues and see if they fit the conspiracy bill.

A government probe has found the Tazreen fire to be an act of sabotage. It is not surprising that the committee's conclusion has not found many takers, and has been rejected out of hand by rights activists and worker leaders. It is not because that the fire is not likely to be an act of sabotage, but the premise on which the case has been made out is rather loose. One is not certain whether the committee has

There is no doubt that the government is under strain on the political front. There are many fault lines in the area of governance which the opposition will exploit, and that it will use every ploy to put the government on the back foot to attain political mileage.

enough facts to support its finding, which is at best a conjecture. There could be a few other causes of fire which the committee did not feel obliged to inquire into. This is what happens when government leaders come out with their own theories even before the start of the inquiry.

Public pronouncements on Bishwajit's killing are even sadder. If we are to believe the government version then he was the victim of miscreants belonging to other parties who had infiltrated into BCL. And to hear that he, a Hindu, was particularly sought out and killed, just to run down the government as part of opposition conspiracy, is doing injustice to the intellect of the people. According to one newspaper there is no deep stab wound on Biswajeet's body, while in some, the autopsy is cited as having found one severe stab wound. If his killing was conspiracy then I suggest the conspirators are from within the party.

As per the government, even the issue of corruption is being inflated as a part of the same conspiracy. There is a conspiracy in the Padma Bridge loan issue too, as the PM says, where the international donor is "devising strat-

egies" to paint the government as corrupt. If the Padma project is finally scuttled, we do not know yet what might happen finally, the PM need not look outside her party to find out who the conspirators are.

Ramu incident is a different ball game altogether. What happened there was planned, going by the events. However, we are not aware of the findings of the various inquiry committees, and we do not know if those have been able to identify the perpetrators and the planners. Grapevine has it that some of the plotters belonged to the ruling party.

There is no doubt that the government is under strain on the political front. There are many fault lines in the area of governance which the opposition will exploit, and that it will use every ploy to put the government on the back foot to attain political mileage. Some political parties may even go to the extent of using all possible means to prevent the government fulfilling its plans, particularly those that strike at the very existence of those parties. And in that they may seek help of international expertise, as was perhaps done in the so-called Skype scandal. That being the case, should not an efficiently and astutely run government have expected these encumbrances to come their way? And should they not have adopted appropriate strategies to thwart and preempt such plots instead of attributing everything to conspiracy?

The writer is Editor, Oped & Strategic Issues, The Daily Star.

LIU LIU AND BENJAMIN HO

THE handover of China's leadership to president-in-waiting Xi Jinping has raised the prospects of a more reformist-oriented regime in China.

The reforms that are expected to be pursued span the spectrum of China's social life including the political, legal, health and educational fields. They have also raised the possibility that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policies under Xi will be more transparent.

Similar expectations preceded the rise of outgoing President Hu Jintao a decade ago. The hope that he would promote greater democracy and reforms proved overly optimistic. Instead, the Chinese media found itself increasingly muzzled and subjected to greater government regulation and opposition activists were subjected to strict curbs. Will Xi's leadership in the coming years prove to be different?

A recent report by Reporters Without Borders highlighted Beijing's harsh treatment of dissent over the past five years and the Chinese government's absolute control over news and information in the country. Over the past few years, social stability -- which the CCP prides above everything else -- has also been subjected to increasing stress.

Indeed, Beijing's massive economic stimulus programme had supported near double-digit growth (an average of 10% per year between 2007-2011), but had also resulted in rising levels of inflation, piled-up debt and social unrest. China was rocked by an estimated 180,000 protests, mass riots and mass incidents -- more than four times the tally of a decade earlier. This notwithstanding, the 18th National Party Congress witnessed several features that were substantially different from the past.

Firstly, Xi's speech at the end of the party congress met with wide acclaim both at home and abroad. Unlike his predecessor's opening address, Xi avoided most of the popular slogans that were often recited in official speeches. No mention was made of Hu or any of his predecessors. Instead Xi centred the core of his message around the need for the CCP to fight corruption and promising to continue China's "rejuvenation." Furthermore,

terms such as "the people," "the nation," and "improving the livelihood of the people" were frequently emphasised.

Xi's speech was also praised by some of China's social media sites for possessing a "human touch". According to Chinese microblogging site Weibo, which did a survey of Chinese online sentiments, Xi's speech received greater support from the online community -- many with strong reform voices -- compared to

Beijing's relations with Washington, Europe and Southeast Asia will need to be managed properly. Indeed, the CCP's ability to withstand the stresses of political change will be a crucial factor in ensuring its longevity and credibility, both in the eyes of its own people and the rest of the world.

the speech made by Hu 10 years ago.

Secondly, Hu's decision to give up his position as chairman of the party's Central Military Commission, thus ensuring a "clean break" with politics, was unusual in China's modern history. By doing so, Hu not only gave complete autonomy to the new generation of Chinese leaders to chart their own course, but also avoided criticisms that an "invisible hand" was behind the scenes, as was the case in the previous transition involving former president Jiang Zemin and Hu, which resulted in factional conflicts within the party.

Chinese scholars have noted that the increasing institutionalisation of China's policymaking processes had reduced the need for individuals to wield power in a hierarchical context, as was the case in the past. This has raised the possibility that the future of China's policies -- both domestic and international -- would be increasingly predictable and less subjected to private whims and fancies.

Thirdly, Xi's wife -- Peng Liyuan, a celebrated Chinese folk singer -- provided added star power, at least in public diplomacy. Foreign media have thus speculated whether Peng would play a low-key role -- in accordance with China's tradition -- or would be equally prominent, in the mode of White House First Lady Michelle Obama, thus boosting China's international image.

Over the past 20 years, Peng's achievements have arguably received greater public recognition than those

ing Chinese leadership. Both Guangdong Party Chief Wang Yang and Li Yuanchao, who heads the party organisation machinery, were overlooked in the selection of the standing committee in favour of party elders. Some political observers have suggested that the selection of the current seven was made under the strong influence of Chinese elder statesman Jiang and will likely change at the next party congress in five years' time when Jiang's influence is further weakened.



of Xi. This could usher an era of "creative diplomacy" instead of the usual "chequebook diplomacy" approach that Beijing is often accused of adopting.

Top Chinese legislator Wu Bangguo said in a speech in 2009 that the country would never copy the Western political system and that lawmakers should maintain the correct political orientation with the leadership of the CCP as the core. Moving forward, this fundamental feature of a socialist system with Chinese characteristics -- as reiterated by both Hu and Xi during the party congress -- would continue to be upheld.

Thus any changes -- or reforms -- made by the CCP government would necessarily be on its own terms, and will not be dictated either by external powers or internal pressures.

Indeed, the decision to reduce the number of members in the Politburo Standing Committee from nine to seven has led outsiders to question the reform credentials of the incom-

At present, much of the talk emerging from Chinese circles regarding Beijing's future is mostly political conjecture. It remains to be seen what kind of reforms this new generation of leaders would be able to push through. The next five years would be crucial for Xi and his administration as they respond to a Chinese population that is increasingly pragmatic and demanding while ensuring that party unity remains intact.

Outside of China, Beijing's relations with Washington, Europe and Southeast Asia will need to be managed properly. Indeed, the CCP's ability to withstand the stresses of political change will be a crucial factor in ensuring its longevity and credibility, both in the eyes of its own people and the rest of the world.

The writers are Research Analyst in the China Programme, and Associate Research Fellow in the Multilateralism and Regionalism Programmes at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, respectively.

© The Nation (Thailand). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.