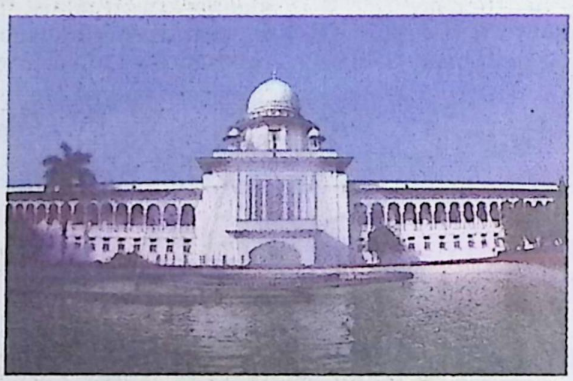
"Let's talk about it"

ZAHIR HASSAN NABIL

With the onset of violence and other dreadful manifestations of confrontational politics, people are becoming more and more anxious about their wellbeing and the nation's welfare for the last few weeks. The businesspeople's anguish over incessant hartals has never been more extreme. Civil society came up with recommendations to solve the political unrest preceding the upcoming election. The proposal for dialogue between the two major parties Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been unanimously declared as the only way to solve the political impasse that is now crippling the nation.



The law is not a stumbling block to form a caretaker or some other type of interim government.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQUE

But such advice has fallen on deaf ears, getting an upper hand in the confrontation seems to have become more important than that of the nation's call for a resolution. The intolerance and disrespect amongst political leaders, as they hurl inflammatory remarks at each other, have made the possibility of a civilised dialogue next to impossible.

It is, however, not the first time the two leaders have been unwilling to discuss things for the betterment of the nation.

Professor Emajudding Ahamed, former vice-chancellor of Dhaka University, draws on how the two leaders have always veered away from talks. "We have seen arrangements for dialogue twice. In 2003, Abdul Jalil and Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, both now deceased, failed to convince their leaders for a conversation."

The professor recounts the failed mediation in 1996. Australian Governor General Sir Stephen Martin Ninian, on behalf of the commonwealth, spent 42 days convincing the two leaders to form an interim government by drawing five politicians each from their respective parties, with the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia retaining her position. But the then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina did not conform.

"In democracy, dialogue is the best way to end crises. Politicians must consider the present crisis as a national crisis and convince their leaders. But they developed a feudal attitude and weakness for power politics, and not pro-people politics. How can their party create a democratic aura in the country when they don't have democratic ethos within their respective parties?" he adds.

Professor Ahamed notes that our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has presented her own peace model before the world. "Shouldn't she initiate a peaceful dialogue in her own country?" he proposes.

Despite examples of failures, all is not lost. Asif Nazrul, professor of law at Dhaka University points out that the two parties have had the experience of finding a common ground. "These two parties have had discussions during the movement against HM Ershad's autocratic rule in the 1990s. There were three coalitions– of the AL, the BNP and the leftists. There were regular discussions amongst these three coalitions through their liaison committees, which is a unique example of an inter-party discussion."

Professor Nazrul presents another example that after Ershad's fall, the BNP compromised their preference for a presidential form of government over the AL and the leftists' demand for a parliamentary government. "And this was possible only through discussion," he comments.

But this time, the two major parties seem to be impervious to the people's call for sitting together to resolve their differences. Asked why the revulsion for dialogue, professor Nazrul explains, "The politicians in the presidium or the cabinet are absolutely loyal to the party chief; they cannot persuade their leaders into having a dialogue. Despite wishing for a dialogue, they consider it inappropriate to propose until their leaders says so. Politicians known for taking individual stances in both parties have either passed away or been spared of their policymaking role."

Professor Nazrul reminds that with the election approaching, some critical issues can be given due consideration only if a dialogue takes place. "The election commission must undergo massive reformation to be acceptable to both. Strengthening the