

There simply is no alternative to dialogue

Any further vacillation on this will be a recipe for disaster

IN a somewhat predictable turn of events, BNP has called a 36-hour countrywide *hartal* on the heels of ten of its senior leaders, including secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, having been sent to jail. Effectively, therefore, with Hefazat-e-Islam's shutdown call for today we are looking to consecutive three-day long *hartal*. This development adds to political tension and shouldn't have occurred at this juncture.

The possibilities of further *hartal*, adoption of tougher programmes, and equally hard line resistance from the government loom large for all concerned to see and act on to roll back to normality, rationality and a forward-looking track, overall.

It is a critical watershed that national politics has reached. Yet, it holds a potential to be turned into a defining moment should the contending political powers so decide. Here is a crisis to be treated as an opportunity. What the political forces need to do now is to deliberate on the transformed objective situation so as to be aware of the new dimensions to the political crisis creeping in by default. Thus positively geared, they can try and quickly get on to a path of engagement and discussion aimed to make a sustainable and constructive dialogue take place.

The forces of circumstances dictate that talks be held on an urgent and sincere basis. Anymore foot-dragging on the long-pending talk initiative is a sure-fire way of compounding an already complicated situation. One trend that has become palpable is that demands keep increasing without any regard for what is legitimate and what is not. And the other facet of the dimensional change we are witnessing is that the extremist agendas are on the ascent. The people are caught between two extremities, one of obscurantism and the other of emancipated liberalism. Not quite a healthy situation to be in.

Given such an inherently explosive situation, the major political parties in the country have no alternative but to sit for talks to thrash out their differences. Any further procrastination can have disastrous consequences on the nation's future.

Assault on female journalists

Outrageous behaviour

WE condemn Saturday's attack on journalists, particularly on the several women journalists, by some of the participants of the Hefazat-e-Islam's rally at Shapla Chattar. One of the female journalists had to be admitted to the hospital in a bad physical state. A few other women journalists were subjected to taunt and insults that have left them severely traumatised.

The journalists were performing their professional duty. And it was very uncivil of those that indulged in passing lewd comments at the women journalist questioning their right to be in that area in the first place.

It is an unacceptable prejudice to suggest that women folks should remain indoors couped up within the four walls of their house. And when it was the responsibility of the rally goers as Muslims, to ensure the safety of the women journalists, they indulged in the most un-Islamic act by abusing them and causing one of them bodily harm.

If religion is what these radicals are pinning their views on, then they are not only ignorant about the teachings of Islam but are also lamentably unaware of the history of Islam, where the women folks accompanied their men folk into battles in some instances. But religion aside, no human being invested with a modicum of sensitivity, would ever think of roughing up a woman.

We also express our resentment at the way a few other journalists were beaten up by the long march participants. And in doing so they have exactly done the opposite of what Islam teaches. They have neither displayed patience nor respected the rights of others to hold and express opinions that may not conform to theirs.

To have questioned about one's right to free movement or the right to choose professions of one's liking is a clear abridgment of a person's freedom which is unacceptable.

However, we note that Hefazat-e-Islam has tendered apology for the behaviour of some among them towards women journalists. While we appreciate this, we would impress upon them the necessity for ensuring that such

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 8

1864
American Civil War: Battle of Mansfield -- Union forces are thwarted by the Confederate army at Mansfield, Louisiana.

1913
The 17th Amendment to the United States Constitution, requiring direct election of Senators, becomes law.

1918
World War I: Actors Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin sell war bonds on the streets of New York City's financial district.

1929
Indian Independence Movement: At the Delhi Central Assembly, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt throw handouts and bombs to court arrest.

1950
India and Pakistan sign the Liaquat-Nehru Pact.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Government messes it up again



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

IT was again another big mess-up by the government. Failing to dissuade the leaders of Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) from withdrawing their long march to Dhaka, the government finally gave it permission to hold a rally at the end of the long march at *Shapla Chattar* in the commercial hub of the capital, Motijheel. But to counter HI's programme some 27 civil society and cultural bodies including *Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee* (Nirmul) and *Sammilito Sangstrik Jote* (Jote) on Thursday announced their 24-hour nationwide *hartal* between the evenings of Friday and Saturday.

Now let us look at how the *Nirmul's hartal* programme was made successful. Too familiar a pattern again became visible. It may be recalled that similar methods were used by the government to foil the BNP-led opposition's March 12, 2012, rally in Dhaka to realise their demand for installing the system of caretaker government to hold the next parliamentary election. Though the government gave the opposition the permission to hold a rally under strict conditions, it cut off the capital city from the rest of the country by imposing a virtual *hartal*. The situation across the country on April 6, 2013, was also more or less like what it was on March 12, 2012.

Even a child could understand who was making Nirmul-called *hartal* successful. Some units of the ruling Awami League and its front bodies like Bangladesh Chhatra League, however, made no secret of their active involvement in the *Nirmul's hartal* to resist HI's long march to Dhaka.

Chittagong Awami League city unit's president ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, in particular, vowed to resist JI's programme if, what he said, it created anarchy. A day before the



AFP

The government allowed HI to hold its rally in Dhaka all the same, but failed to win its trust, or gain anything from it in exchange for the allowance. This does not speak well for a government that came to power with a huge public mandate.

HI-declared (April 6) long march, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) even engaged in a bloody clash with HI workers at Kamrangir Char in Dhaka to foil their march. Similar bloody encounters between AL activists and HI's marchers took place at Sunamganj. As the day dragged on,

control over different party units and front organisations? And what message does this convey to the people at large about the government's principles and moral position on the issue?

If, on principle, the government was against the HI's demands and the

further incidents of clashes between HI marchers and BCL and AL workers were reported from different parts of the country. On April 6, a Bhanga AL leader was killed in a clash with the long marchers. And in every case, the attackers were reported to be workers of AL and its front organisations.

The question that arises is: Are the ruling party AL and the government it leads at variance with each other? Otherwise, how could the government's final position on the HI's programme come into conflict with that of the party's different units and the front organisations? Has then the central command of the ruling AL lost

proposed long march, why didn't it stick to its gun from the very beginning and say no to their demands as well as the long march declared by HI? A party like AL, that takes pride in its legacy of struggles against autocrats for democracy and to realise people's rights need not be told that no movement succeeds unless that is based on principle. And once at the helm of affairs, the real challenge of how far the party in question is able to live up to its professed ideals and principles come to the fore. But in its latest dealings with the HI it could hardly live up to that challenge.

For, failing to act on principle, the government shilly-shallied over HI's demands all through out. The government did not behave any differently even when it agreed to meet HI's demands to punish what they termed 'atheist' bloggers. And finally, the mess-up. The government allowed HI to hold its rally in Dhaka all the same, but failed to win its trust, or gain anything from it in exchange for the allowance. This does not speak well for a government that came to power with a huge public mandate.

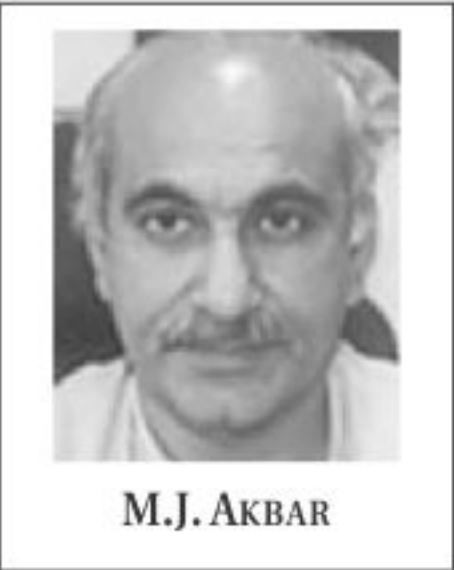
Next, the post-HI rally reactions of the ministers. The Home Minister MK Alamgir thanked HI for holding their programme peacefully and then said that the government would consider its demands with importance. But the Information minister Hasanul Haq Inu, in his interview with the BBC at its *Sanglap* programme dismissed the possibility of the government's considering HI's demand to award death punishment to a person alleged to have blasphemed. Are the home and information ministers representing the same government? And if so, who is reflecting the government's actual position and telling the truth?

It is all symptomatic of a government that has no control whatsoever of what it says or does. At the same time, it is also dangerous, especially when the incumbent is left with a few more months in office. Forces out there to fish in the troubled waters are lying in wait.

The writer is Editor Science & Life, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: sfallim.ds@gmail.com

BYLINE

When spin meets reality TV



M.J. AKBAR

Rahul Gandhi his job. It was a public pledge, made through a press conference; since then he has repeated the offer whenever asked. Five years later, it is Rahul Gandhi who is ducking the question even as Dr. Singh has begun to philosophise about a third term.

As we enter another election season, the Congress, with its discordant chorus over a prospective Prime Minister, has made one significant Opposition weakness irrelevant. Both camps will now leave the answer to circumstance rather than intention.

The much-awaited contest between Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi, hyped by TV news stations anxious for ratings, could well be the non-event of this teenage century. Rahul Gandhi is uncertain in his mind. Modi is uncertain about the partners BJP needs to form a possible government. Nitish Kumar has made it clear that he wants a BJP without Modi at the top; indeed, if he was going to part with BJP there would be no need to harp on this subject.

Naveen Patnaik in Orissa or Mamata Banerjee in Bengal or Jagan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh do not

make a statement a week on Modi. The Congress has not given up on Rahul Gandhi; it cannot, but he seems to have evolved into a long-term project. All his sympathisers point out that he has time; in ten years the latest Gandhi will be only 53. Does this leave Congress with a short-term problem? The party has reconciled itself to the fact that the interim will be fluid. Its fondest hope is that the worst-case scenario, defeat in the next general elections, will blossom into a best-case opportunity if the next non-Congress alliance flounders in the manner that the V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar governments did between 1989 and 1991.

In the meanwhile, it is the job of party spin doctors to maximise the positive side of whatever Rahul Gandhi chooses to do. But spin has a problem when it meets reality television. The audience of industrialists at the CII convention, where Rahul Gandhi projected India as a beehive -- possibly with a Queen Bee at the helm and drones alongside -- was far less important than the audience outside watching this performance live on television.

A daily newspaper sympathetic to Rahul Gandhi polled its readers on the impact of his CII speech -- 85% thought he had not addressed concerns about his leadership abilities; only 10% were positive.

Industrialists come to such events pre-programmed. They have learnt that the best insurance is to praise the powerful in public; it may not help, but it cannot hurt. It does not matter who is in power. If L.K. Advani becomes prime minister they will sing paeans to the wisdom of grey hair. If Modi becomes PM, they will turn Gujarat into an economic model for every nation from America to Zaire.

And if Rahul Gandhi is PM during the next CII convention, all those who rooted for Modi in the elections will wear a badge saying "India is safe under Rahul for 50 years." Don't blame industrialists. They lead a tough life.

The popular reaction is what matters. A daily newspaper

which is reasonably sympathetic to Rahul Gandhi polled its readers on the impact of his CII speech. An astonishing 85% thought he had not addressed concerns about his leadership abilities; only 10% were positive. This probably reflects, in part, the widespread middle-class anger against Congress, but even if that were so what is evident is that Rahul Gandhi is not yet the answer to this seething rage. He could be tomorrow,

but he is not so today.

Perhaps the great dilemma of Rahul Gandhi is that he is less interested in political glory than his supporters are. Leadership in politics is a compelling, consuming profession which demands 18-hour days. Most of these hours are spent in that difficult art of being nice to strangers and leaving them with some hope that there is something better on the horizon.

The rest of the time is taken by implementing policy if you are in government or offering alternatives if you are not. Politics is a business of detail. Short-cuts are an invitation to accidents, and you cannot drive on both sides of the street. If you have been in power for nine years, you cannot give a lecture on systems failure.

You have to explain why you did nothing about the system. Curiously, this is one job which does not become less demanding during the fallow phase. Whether you win or lose an election, you have to grind away if you are a serious player.

Rahul Gandhi's CII speech was heard on TV by precisely those young voters who, buoyed by high expectations, supported Dr. Manmohan Singh hugely in 2009. Perhaps such expectations had nowhere to go but down. Rahul Gandhi was perfectly placed to inherit their affections, but they are searching for other heroes in 2013.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.