

## PM on elections

Are we back to where we started from?

PM's Wednesday's comments on the election time government make two very important points: first that she wants the parliament to be where the talks with the opposition should take place, and second, she wants a similar type of election government as there are in other parliamentary democracies like UK, India, Australia, etc. Does this statement mark a shift from her earlier call for talks anywhere and at anytime? This seems to be in direct contrast to the position indicated by the head of the UN team at the end of their latest visit indicating that a formal invitation to the opposition about talks was in the offing. PM's comments imply that there is no immediate prospect of such a letter.

On the other hand we are aware that BNP will have to return to the parliament in the next session to stay within the permitted limit of continuous absence. So why not use the occasion to make a formal presentation of their demands. This will help to break the deadlock.

As for the PM's second point, we are also at a loss to understand whether her previous insistence that there cannot be any "unelected person" in the election time government is now replaced by her demand that there cannot be a "non-partisan government" either. The difference is significant as there were some talks about finding acceptable team for an election time government and having them elected through a by-election process.

The ruling party's practice of asking for talks on the one hand and closing options on the other is not likely to results in talks which the people in general want. Its indifference towards a peaceful solution of the present political crisis is both incomprehensible and extremely shortsighted, which is likely to increase political unrest and the resultant violence.

## Mahasen strikes

Bangladesh spared the worst

We thank the Almighty that Cyclone Mahasen that made landfall at mid-afternoon yesterday had spared Bangladesh its full fury. From available information at the time of going to press Mahasen was getting weaker gradually. It has not been as destructive as we had apprehended, and Cox's Bazaar and Teknaf, who had feared the worst, have gotten off lightly.

We are happy to note that response of the government and the relevant agencies has been timely. People were being regularly warned from the very day the low pressure developed, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why there has been no loss of Bangladeshi fishermen in the storm. In the affected regions the local administration was able to evacuate nearly a million people to safer areas. However, there were many who were unwilling to leave their homes till the last minute. And this would have proven dangerous had Mahasen been more severe or lasted longer.

However, there have been several deaths, and the coastal areas, including the Chars, have been inundated, causing loss to standing crops and homesteads. And no time should be lost in providing rehabilitation facilities to the affected people, given that Aila and Sidr victims are to be fully rehabilitated yet.



## Smarter, richer politics

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

POLITICS does not merely enrich our knowledge about the world we are part of. It also makes some people, the practitioners of politics for instance, a good deal richer than they were when they started out on their journey in the service of the people. You don't have to go far and wide for evidence of what you see around you. With the June 15 mayoral elections in parts of Bangladesh approaching, go visit Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna and Barisal. You will be thrilled to note that four of the mayoral candidates in these places -- Badaruddin Kamran in Sylhet, Khairuzzaman Liton in Rajshahi, Talukdar Abdul Khaleq in Khulna and Shaukat Hossain in Barisal are today happier than they were five years ago. Vicariously, we as citizens who toil from dawn to sundown, with not much of good things coming our way, are happy that our spirited leaders have presided over a rise in their economic fortunes. Are we, really?

Kamran had Tk. 2 crore 21 lakh as his personal wealth in 2008. Today it is a whopping Tk. 5 crore 16 lakh he is master of. Liton, son of the Mujibnagar icon AHM Quamruzzaman, started off with Tk. 2 lakh 44 thousand five years ago. Today, he must be positively happy with that money magically turning into Tk. 58 lakh 75 thousand. Khulna's Talukdar Abdul Khaleq had a measly Tk. 3 lakh 62 thousand in 2008, which now is a stupendous Tk. 4 crore 67 lakh. In Barisal, Shaukat Hossain possessed a minuscule Tk. 6 lakh 12 thousand in 2008. He is today the proud owner of a hefty Tk. 3 crore 46 lakh.

Politics, as you can see, is wealth generating. Gone are the days of poverty stricken politicians who walked from village to village, in various modes of borrowed transport, and ended life in near penury. Today's politicians are smarter, leaner, richer and healthier. They own gigantic vehicles, faux palaces for homes and keep their flunkies happy. The emaciated citizen, along the road or in the village, is impressed.

One silly question, though: why do politics and money come together in a climax?

## Intellectuals at actuals

## CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

German philosopher Hegel has compared "idealising the actual" with "actualising the ideal." In plain words, "actualising the ideals" is the highest point of intellect, which, for example, is characteristic of prophethood. A prophet comes to earth to actualise all ideals. Amongst the non-prophets, the greatest man is the one who idealises the actuals: beliefs, commandments and morals.

By all means, people who wish to profess intellectualism must be moral people. They must practice what they preach because any gaps between the two breed contempt and misunderstanding. If one is notorious for corruption, if one is an unconscionable practitioner of double standards or has track record of abusing power or adopting unfair means, one should abstain from telling others what to do or how to live. Retired civil servants should also know that people can't forget they had hunted with the hunters before running with the rabbits.

In one of the most recent examples, a permanent fixture on the talk show circuit made an erroneous claim that exposed the danger of armchair intellectualising. This man showed a picture that could have changed the context of history if it were not flawed by mistaken identity. The man he identified as Bangladesh's Shah Azizur Rahman was, in fact, Pakistan's Fazal Ilahi Chaudhry!

Which makes the matter even more poignant. If recognition of the apparent is difficult, the comprehension of the abstract mustn't be easy. How can anybody expect to become an authority on any subject unless he or she has the professed knowledge? How can one become an intellectual simply because he has the gift of gab, big bank balance, good connections or a telegenic face?

It's possible in the same way musclemen unleash their reigns of terror. Intellect today is intimidating because lack of knowledge and information are being consistently compensated with loud voice. Intellectuals at actuals are using their words like sticks and stones, and they're seriously hurting.

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A N old adage says that sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you. If you're reading what are being written these days and listening to what are being said, you know words are no less lethal than sticks and stones, if not more. So much misinformation is going around us, so many facts are being twisted everyday, and such false claims are being made that it's hard to tell who is punching with words and who is wording the punches. The writers, speakers and thinkers forming the intellectual community in this country are flexing their brains like muscles.

Common between them is lack of considerations. One intellectual recently said on television that 10,000 people were killed on the night of March 25, 1971. On another channel another like-minded intellectual claimed that number to be 200,000. The same speaker worked out an absurd arithmetic, when he said that at the rate of one truck loading 100 dead bodies, it required 200 trucks to carry 2,000 dead bodies if that many died in police action against the Hefajat activists. Two other intellectuals sitting next to that man and the moderator of the show kept mum. They either didn't notice the blooper or cared not to correct that the total number of trucks needed was only twenty.

A few months ago, a leading national daily conducted a survey and turned the fraction of a point difference in popularity between two politicians into a screaming headline on the front page. Error in judgment or

function of poor knowledge, what should have been considered as statistically insignificant was splashed with hard-to-get exuberance. The daily subsequently tried to explain the mistake, but failed to convince readers why such a big deal was made out of such a narrow difference.

So why isn't anybody checking their facts and figures anymore before spitting them out? It's probably because the intellectuals are no longer bothered about accuracy in the same manner neighbourhood hooligans thumb noses at law enforcement. The brain squads in this country are operating like hit squads. They are busy doing hatchet jobs for the political parties.

That makes it scary. It tells us we aren't even safe in the corridors of our knowledge and understanding. There can be tons of examples of how television talk shows, newspaper reports, columns, seminars and workshops regularly insult our intelligence as opportunists use the shadows of controversy to hijack our common sense. That should also tell us why after streams of deliberations and reams of writings, we are more confused now than ever before.

In Rajasthan of India, there are lower caste women, who are hired as professional mourners upon the death of upper-caste males. In the western countries there are funeral homes to organise burials. We have got organised groups talking and writing about national issues, the permutation and combination of the same faces dominating intellectual scenes.

German philosopher Hegel has

## Multinational realities: Forging a new Nepali nation-state

Now that the country is heading towards fresh polls, it is time political leaders and civil society spent some quality time discussing the basis upon which the new Nepali nation state will be built. Unconsciously, Prachanda has initiated the discourse by invoking Prithvi Narayan Shah.

K.R. SIGDEL

JUST as the major political parties in Nepal start brushing up their agenda for the soon-to-be held Constituent Assembly elections once again, an oft-ignored discourse on nation-building seems to have begun at a very latent level. The parties have so far been hedging an unsettling question: what could be the basis for building a new Nepali nation-state to which all people, who have grown assertive of their distinct identities, would like to belong to? Can we find that rare commodity under post-2006 circumstances?

When United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) Chairman Prachanda recently announced that he would play the role of a "modern" Prithvi Narayan Shah (the king who united multiple principalities into modern Nepal in late 18th century) in building a "new and united Nepal," he was speaking not only of his troubled psychology but also of the general disenchantment brought about by the rarity of that commodity upon which new Nepal's identity will be carved.

All of a sudden, Prithvi Narayan, who was transformed into a villain from a hero after 2006, became a useful symbol for Prachanda. But what brought about this transformation?

What we'd like to believe is that the failure of the Constituent Assembly has lent the political forces some extra time for reflection and to realise the need to construct a national narrative for future Nepal. The leaders seem to have just come across a more serious question of building a nation-state, which goes beyond the ongoing debate on state (institutional) restructuring. They are at a loss over the very core of new Nepal's identity.

The earlier values and symbols, though mostly monolithic, that provided the basis for the construction of Nepal as a Hindu state have died out. The same could be said of the dominant culture-biased symbols such as the Nepali language as the only 'unifying' official language of the country, the 'national' dress, the 'national' festivals, the institution of the monarchy and several other symbols that have been rightly questioned and scrapped for failing to represent the multinational realities of Nepal.

What has followed is an explosion of identity politics driven by a multitude of assertive minority groups, each reinforcing their distinct identity and rights. Then came the popular discourse of federalism catering to these aspirations. No doubt, it is quite an achievement that the emphasis on identity has politically empowered minority groups.

But in flowing with the current of identity politics, the parties have either feared or just hedged the necessary discussion on finding a broader narrative that could represent the whole nation-state in the making. Given this reality, the question is how will new Nepal be formed? Do we believe that a nation-state can survive without a shared identity?

History shows that identity is crucial to the long-term survival of a nation-state. Identity is a factor that both creates and implodes nation-states. The history of nation-states, as political scientist Charles B Keeley revealed, has witnessed four major models in practice when it comes to dealing with multinational reality and building a nation-state: the first way is the path Bhutan adopted -- ethnic cleansing, where the ruling elite eliminates differences by force. This is too outrageous for any modern state to follow.

The second model is cultural homogenisation, which promotes a single dominant culture through planned assimilation and naturalisation. But given the politics of identity and inclusion, the idea is simply too regressive for new Nepal to adopt.

The third model creates a "supranational identity" under certain common values or cultures, such as in the United Kingdom, Kenya and Indonesia. But has all of Nepal figured out those common values or symbols capable of justifying the concept of a supranational identity? This could be a matter of further discussion.

The fourth model is confederation, to which Nepal's federation process seems closer. The basic conviction is that states which find themselves insecure because of their size, capacity (military or economic) and any other reason tend to merge into a bigger nation-state under a confederation, such as in Switzerland. Just the opposite of this process, a unitary state may implode into multiple independent states or stay intact in a confederation.

The path Nepal has been following seems conceptually problematic. States come into confederation because of their desire to belong to a single national identity, but the process of federating a unitary country, as in Nepal, is basically driven by desire to assert separate distinct identities rather than a broader supranational identity. Though there could be a desire to stick to some identities of the old unitary state, the major force that propels the whole process is the desire to assert separate identities. This very contradiction makes Nepal's move towards federalism inherently problematic. Unfortunately, any extended discussion on this issue has been circumvented for some reasons.

One of the reasons is that expressing concern over the broader national identity is perceived as subordinating individual ethnic identities. The popular discourse on ethnic politics has been stretched to the extent that any argument that attaches greater importance to national identity would be simply regressive.

Now that the country is heading towards fresh polls, it is time political leaders and civil society spent some quality time discussing the basis upon which the new Nepali nation state will be built. Unconsciously, Prachanda has initiated the discourse by invoking Prithvi Narayan Shah. If the parties still prefer evading this issue, they are supposing that the new Nepali nation-state does not need any special binding factor for its survival and sustainability. History begs to differ.

## LETTERS

## TO THE EDITOR

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## Religion advocates tolerance

Bangladesh is a country of religious harmony. People of different ethnicities and cultures have been living here for thousands of years. But recently, the peaceful co-existence has been disrupted by some religious extremists. But every religion advocates tolerance and unity in diversity. Why do we forget the teachings of our Prophet (pbuh)? We should have the moral principles to foster a sense of brotherhood among us. Otherwise, peace in the society will be ruined forever.

Swapan Biswas  
Jhenidah Govt. School

## Break the political standoff

May be the last three months were the most eventful time in our political calendar. Everything was looking uncertain and morbid. Hope was fast fading, conflict was looming and confidence was being shattered. At that crucial juncture, the rescue of Reshma alive gave us new hope. If our rescuers could find a person alive under the rubble of a collapsed building after 17 days, our political parties can certainly find a path to peaceful resolution of the current impasse. Long live Reshma! Kabir Hossain Taposh  
Banani, Dhaka

## Can't we be more sensible?

No religion in the world allows anarchy and killing. Religion is a precious gift bestowed upon humanity by the Almighty. Today our motherland has plunged into deep insecurity. Who are responsible for this state of affairs? Are we not pushing our country backwards? As we have no right to label every blogger an 'atheist', in the same way we cannot call every tupa-korta clad person a Jamaat-Shibir activist.

Firdaus Ahmad Mizan  
Department of Bangla  
Jahangirnagar University

## Memories of 'gonoroom'

I am a fourth-year student of DU and had a seat in the 'gonoroom' of Mohsin Hall while studying in the first year. My story of living in a 'gonoroom' is nothing less than a story of war, because we fought sleeplessly with 'army' (bugs) and 'air force' (mosquitoes) until we got our seats in a single or double room. Sometimes we even lit fires to kill the insects. We preferred to sleep in the morning because the insects did not bite during daytime. After 9 months of distress, I finally got a seat in a double room and slept for two days continuously. I would like to dedicate this letter to all the 'gonoroom' gladiators who have been fighting to get better seats.

Misbah Uddin Sumon  
Haji Muhammad Mohsin Hall, DU

## Quota system in BCS

The quota system in BCS plays a vital role in determining the future of the candidates. There are quotas for freedom fighters' children, women, indigenous people, etc. Quota system in some cases is appreciated, but the concerned authorities ought to reconsider the percentage of quota in the respective categories. Many qualified candidates fail to get admitted in the BCS because of quota system. The government should reconsider this issue.

Bidit Chowdhury  
Mirpur, Dhaka

## Fight for what's right

For only one person's fault, nearly 1,200 people died at Savar. The owner is a killer. We said "Punish him and punish everyone involved." If that is our stance, why aren't we demanding punishment of those people for whom the economy is collapsing? So we punish the owner of the building, then what? What about all the buildings built without any consideration for safety? What about the corruption infested government departments, whose policies are relaxed in the face of money and power? The truth is, as a nation, we lack the courage to fight for what is right. And when Savar will be forgotten, we will go back to our ordinary lives, and will not even think about the persisting problems in our country.

Asifur Rahman Khan  
Sr. Creative Supervisor, Asiatic MLC

Comments on news report, "Govt to acquire Rana Plaza land" published on May 15, 2013

## Dev Saha

Good news! Please acquire the land legally because in the past Rana family acquired that land by force from its legal owner.

## Salahuddin Jamal

Acquiring in other words means awarding Sohel Rana with inflated price of land. Government's land illegally grabbed by BGMEA in Hatirjheel can conveniently serve the purpose of whatever the government intends to do for Rana Plaza victims. Government can return the Rana Plaza land to its original owner.

## Muzaffar Siddique

This place should be turned into a modern hospital for garment workers and can be dedicated to the victims of Rana Plaza disaster.

## M M Mortayez Amin

We came to know from newspaper reports that part of the Rana Plaza land was 'khas' land and a part was owned by a Hindu gentleman whom Rana evicted to build the plaza. The government should verify this information and handover the land to its real owner.

## Mailboy

Will there be any sort of punishment, or just a casual scolding by the authorities?