

Hartal a bad move

Look at the options

THE move by the Jamaat-e-Islami to call a two-day hartal on August 12 and 13 reflects once more the sad fact that all too often political issues are not handled in a political manner in the country. The Jamaat is naturally upset over its de-registration by the High Court. But, then, it should have been for its leadership to set matters right before the issue went to court. A political party which somehow ignores or flouts certain ground rules of political participation cannot expect things to go on as they usually or always have.

That said, this whole question of its de-registration is one the Jamaat leadership can look at afresh, with a view to correcting conditions for itself. Instead, by calling a hartal in protest at the HC decision, it has not only demonstrated insensitivity to public sentiments but has also shown a regrettable inability to go for some serious soul-searching within itself. Hartals in recent years have done immense damage to the economy besides putting up impediments to a smooth flow of citizens' lives. Add to that the mayhem the Jamaat has resorted to in recent months, particularly over the trials of its leading figures for war crimes. If one had thought the Jamaat would show a mature attitude to politics as a way of rolling back its past record, one has been proved wrong.

We strongly deplore the call for the hartal. And we expect everyone and every political party, even if they are aligned with the Jamaat, to desist from supporting the hartal. The interests of citizens are and always will be much more important than political adventurism. Let the Jamaat withdraw the hartal and go for a legal approach to its problems.

Wealth statement by judges

This will only elevate their position

FORMER chief justice Khairul Huq of his own volition submitted his wealth statement, leading the way for other judges to follow suit. In fact, a number of senior judges did submit accounts of their wealth and assets. But somehow their example has yet to be replicated. There is all the reason why the judges should reflect an image that in every sense is impeccable.

We believe that given the high stature of the judiciary it needs to strengthen its position by being the epitome of transparency and accountability. It is the judiciary that the people look up to not only as a dispenser of justice but also as an upholder of integrity and probity befitting their high office.

In such a context, it will be only in the fitness of things that the process a former chief justice has initiated will be followed through and the judges would live up to the standards set by him. Thereby their public image will not only be enhanced, public trust in the credibility of the judicial system will also be forcefully affirmed.

We implore the judiciary to lead the way in establishing transparency and accountability across the board, thereby enhancing further the high esteem the public hold them in.

FROM FOREIGN PRESS

The autumn of despair

EDITORIAL DESK: THE BRUNEI TIMES

WHEN the Arab Spring unfolded across the Middle East, analysts and commentators soaked in initial euphoria hailed it as a new wave of freedom and political reforms.

However, they did not pause for a moment to think what had happened to the Prague Spring. People still remember how that short spell of political freedom and liberalisation in Czechoslovakia was crushed as Soviet Union tanks rolled in.

The way dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were uprooted: the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria has somehow been able to withstand popular revolt but its foundations have been shaken.

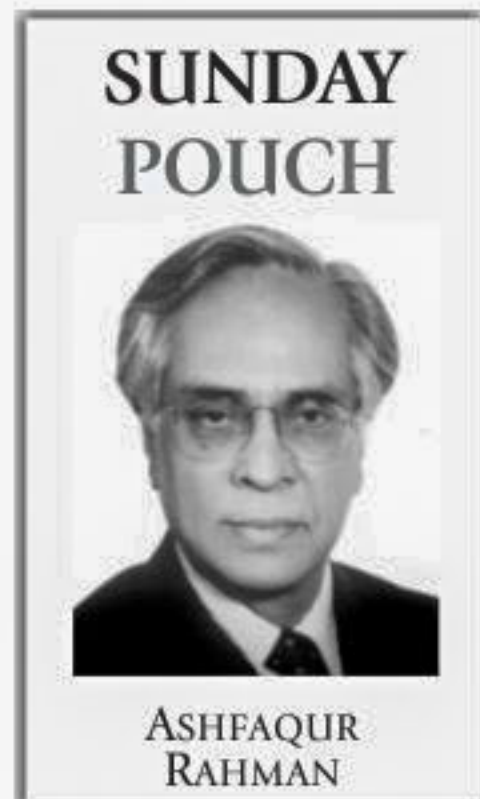
Unlike spring of hope, the entire Arab world is going through a season of darkness and despair. The countries which welcomed the Arab Spring with open arms are being made to pay much heavier price for the political and economic turmoil that followed close on the heels of Arab Spring.

Though Tunisia, from where the Arab Spring blossomed, saw peaceful transition to civilian rule, failure to revive the tattered economy has led to political strife. Libya is still going through pangs of coming to terms with new civilian dispensation.

However, Egypt and Syria are going through a war of attrition. The toppling of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt has plunged the country into a new round of turmoil and chaos while Syria, in a state of civil war for more than a year, has witnessed the worst kind of death and destruction.

People tend to forget that these countries are going through what is called "work in progress." The years of dictatorial and suppressive rule cannot be overcome within a fortnight. It will take years to consolidate the benefits of the Arab Spring but death and destruction should be avoided at all costs. Let's hope this autumn of despair passes as quickly as possible.

India factor in Bangladesh politics



SUNDAY POUCH

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

HEADLINES in Bangladesh newspapers screamed last week that our Foreign Minister Dipu Moni had returned from a three-day visit to New Delhi 'empty handed.' She had 'failed' to get firm assurances from relevant quarters that the Indian constitution would indeed be amended in order to allow the ratification of the 1974 Land boundary Agreement (LBA) signed between the two countries. She also could not get any hint from the Indian prime minister as to when the Teesta river agreement would be signed. So, on both counts, Dipu Moni returned to Dhaka with a grimace.

The Indian press reported all this with some pleasure. Earlier they had said that the foreign minister was travelling to Delhi with an 'arjee' (special request) for resolution of these two key issues. In a press conference in Delhi, Dipu Moni confirmed her fears after her meeting with the Indian prime minister and Arun Jaitley, the opposition BJP leader in the Upper House, when she said: 'If this bill does not go through and the Teesta water sharing deal is not signed, they will become important issues in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in my country.'

The question that begs an answer is why Dipu Moni initiated this demarche at so late a stage in the five year term of this Awami League led government? Why was the initiative not taken soon after India had agreed to implement the LBA this time round? For that matter, was it appropriate for our foreign minister to lobby on an issue about which the Indian side is bound to take care? Was this Bangladesh's burden or India's own?

We all know that the LBA cannot see the light of the day unless 2/3rd of the members in Indian parliament vote in favour of the amendment of their constitution as it involves transfer of land to a foreign country. We also know that the ruling Congress-led coalition does not command such a majority in the two Houses. It is therefore unlikely that the amendment could see the light of the day when the matter is again placed in the parliament this month.

The opposition coalition led by BJP has consistently opposed the LBA and is not likely to vote differently this time. Yet our government is reported to have merrily gone ahead and publicised that the LBA is being concluded. Now Dipu Moni has to carry the hollow can, till Awami League's (AL) term ends.

Are we to understand that this initiative was taken knowing very well that it is a futile attempt, and that it was to give our public an impression that this government did not leave any stone unturned to get the LBA implemented? If this is what it was, then indeed the India factor looms large in Bangladesh politics.

As regards the sharing of the waters of the Teesta river, the matter remains unresolved because of differences between the central government of India and the West Bengal state government led by Mamta Banerjee. India needs to resolve these differences first. Now that Mamata's Trinamool Congress has won handsomely in the recently held Panchayat elections in West Bengal, can we expect her to be generous and accommodate the legitimate demands

of Bangladesh? In any case, the volume of water flowing in the Teesta river in the lean season is much too little for it to be divided in any proportion, to meet the need of agriculture in northern Bangladesh.

It is nothing new, say many analysts, that Dipu Moni has returned empty handed from New Delhi. She has, according to them, been a party in giving away goodies to India without having India reciprocate Bangladesh's gesture. They point out that Bangladesh has unilaterally met India's security concern in northeast India. Further, as special consideration it has allowed oversized vehicles carrying electricity generating components to travel through Bangladesh from West Bengal to the state of Tripura.

Bangladesh is also making preparations to upgrade its road and port infrastructure to give transit facilities to India. Yet there have been no concrete steps taken by India to meet Bangladesh's requirements. Even the simple issue of stopping the abduction and killing of Bangladeshis along the fenced-off border between the two countries, though in fewer numbers now, has not been resolved. So the implementation of LBA and signing of a Teesta treaty remains a far cry.

The AI government, in the past four and half years, has wooed India and given away much to earn its goodwill. It is the Indian people who by and large are impressed. In many circles, the sincere gesture of Bangladesh to help India secure northeast India is appreciated. In a recent poll, the people there branded Bangladesh as the friendliest country not only in the region but also in the world. We seem to have overtaken India's traditional friendship with

Russia. The Indian press is also better able to understand Bangladesh's legitimate concerns. But elements within the Indian bureaucracy as well as the BJP see Bangladesh with a jaundiced eye.

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The political parties in Bangladesh are keenly aware of the need to maintain friendly relations with such a big neighbour. Even our mainstream opposition, the BNP, found it expedient to develop a friendlier attitude towards India. Yet the people in general want their national interest to be protected and furthered. They are not willing to compromise. These include among others, a peaceful and secure land border with India, equitable share of waters of the common rivers, a gain worthy and equitable demarcation of a maritime boundary, receiving compensation for giving India road and rail transit, etc.

Any political party that messes up these bottom lines will have to suffer heavily in the national elections. The people also dislike political parties that sit on the fence or oppose friendly ties with India. They want to see a proactive and pragmatic political engagement with India that brings results and not just rhetoric.

The Indian factor has already started to figure in the minds of the Bangladesh electorate. India, by raising expectations without substantive delivery, is only harming its own prospects. The opposition BNP is likely to also factor India while campaigning in the elections (if indeed it participates in the national polls). The AI is therefore on the verge of realising that mere hyperbole is not likely to bring votes for the party as it may not be able to show substantive results of cozying up to India.

The time for delivery by India is indeed fast receding.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Put Middle East peace to a vote

STACIE GODDARD

THE Middle East peace process is back. Intense efforts by Secretary of State John Kerry have paid off, bringing the Israelis and Palestinians together for direct negotiations for the first time in three years. But for many supporters of negotiations, the political news coming from Israel seems grim.

On Sunday, the Israeli cabinet approved a bill requiring that all territorial concessions be ratified by Israeli voters in a special referendum. On Thursday the bill cleared its first vote in the Knesset, and is on its way to becoming a Basic Law of Israel—tantamount to a constitutional amendment.

Supporters of the peace process are furious, believing that a referendum would be yet another obstacle to reaching a final deal. It was the Jewish Home Party, which supports continued settlement in the West Bank, that pressured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to bring the bill to Parliament.

But far from undercutting the peace process, a referendum is necessary to the legitimacy of a two-state solution. Formal public support of a potential deal could, in fact, be one of the keys to long-term sustainability of peace. Supporters of the peace process should get behind the referendum proposal.

Other compromises to long-term disputes in which a referendum was required, such as the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, demonstrate that national support is critical to building durable territorial settlements.

Any agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians—still a long shot—must do two things: Israel must cede some West Bank settlements to the Palestinians, and the parties must reach a compromise on the status of Jerusalem.

Israeli conservatives claim that concessions on these issues are out of the question and are a betrayal to the nation. Such attacks are a familiar, and often successful, tactic in Israeli politics. After the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, the Israeli right condemned Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as a traitor. A national referendum this time around would insulate Netanyahu from such attacks. If the prime minister could claim to have the support of the Israeli people, opponents of a deal would have a difficult time saying his government betrayed the country through compromise.

What if a majority of Israelis were to reject a hard-won settlement? That would be a real risk, but not an insurmountable one: In a poll for Haaretz, 55% of Israelis said they were likely to support a peace settlement in a national referendum. More importantly, the risk is worth it.

Politicians worked for years to end the conflict between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists before reach-

ing the Good Friday Agreement. Previous attempts to reach a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, such as the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, had failed. In substance, the Good Friday Agreement differed little from the prior attempts at settlement. But unlike Sunningdale, the Good Friday Agreement was endorsed by a national referendum. A resounding 71% of the Northern Ireland electorate approved the settlement. Both unionists and Irish nationalist parties used this popular mandate to stave off attacks on their legitimacy.

The referendum sent a powerful message: Those in favour of an agreement work in the name of the people; those that oppose it betray the popular will.

Israeli politicians looking at the Ulster example should note that success was not guaranteed; Northern Ireland's referendum worked for two reasons.

The first was active outreach. Opponents of Good Friday did not give up easily, and the unionist and nationalist politicians who drafted the accord worked tirelessly to counter their opponents' message that a vote for the Good Friday Agreement meant "murdering justice and murdering the rule of law." No doubt the Israeli right would campaign vigorously in the case of a national referendum. Leaders in Israel must be prepared to do the same.

Second, the Northern Ireland referendum worked because the people trusted the messengers. When Gerry Adams, long tied to violent republican movements, endorsed the agreement, this carried considerable weight with Irish nationalists. When David Trimble, a staunch proponent of Protestant rights, told his constituents the deal was sound, that message resonated.

Proponents of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process must likewise seek out a variety of messengers to justify territorial compromise. If Israelis are going to concede to a settlement on the status of Jerusalem, trusted religious figures should explain this to the public. If Israel must dismantle West Bank settlements, then the Israeli moderate right must justify this decision. Indeed, Netanyahu might be the perfect person to sell the peace to the Israeli public: His own hawkish history gives him the credibility to defend a territorial compromise and the attacks from his right flank that would come with it.

After years of stalled talks that have made a deal seem impossible, it is understandable that supporters of the Middle East peace process see the referendum as one more obstacle to a settlement. But a referendum has the potential to be a positive hurdle, which if cleared could construct a broad coalition in support of peace.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Spectre of unconstitutional govt

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at an iftar programme organised by a faction of the Dhaka Journalist Union on July 27, 2013 said, "If any unconstitutional and undemocratic government assumes office, no election will take place in next 10 years."

But we think she is wasting her breath. 95% people of the country want caretaker government system. People do not want to speculate, they want immediate relief from the unbearable situation prevailing in the country. This year people will celebrate Eid under the shadow of fear and anxiety, not knowing what might happen if the government does not agree to the people's demand of the CTG. They are in the grip of a foreboding calamity. We are praying for the deliverance from it.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Use of illegal fishing net

I refer to the photograph that appeared in TDS on July 19 related to the above subject. The current jal, though banned, is still used in the water bodies of Bangladesh. The production of monofilament synthetic nylon net should be stopped. Every concerned citizen should inform police if they notice the use of such nets.

Shafkat Rahman
BIAM Laboratory School, Dhaka

Police get it both ways

At long last the cat is out of the bag! The front page report published in a local English daily on July 29th reaffirms it. Sadly, it is finally we, the general people, who ultimately have to pay for all this indirectly, through higher price for foodstuff and our other daily necessities. On top of it, as taxpayers we are also paying for the police's salaries and benefits. From us police get it both ways! It is time to call a halt to this regular illegal gratification for some policemen that has been going on and on for many years.

Another related part of this story that was not published is, the internal bribe that policemen have to give to their patrons who awarded them the postings to these prime locations. 'Bokshish' is regularly taken from truck and bus drivers; usually at important highway crossings or bridges. Hopefully, this hearing by the court may help stopping this evil, at least for some time.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Protect city's natural environment

Dhaka, once termed as a city of mosques, has turned into a concrete jungle. The past grandeur of Dhaka with lush green trees, ponds, lakes and small creeks of rivers has been lost. The historic Dhaka city in the fifties and sixties used to be adorned with tall trees on both sides of the main roads. But now all the trees have been replaced with concrete buildings. It's time the government protected Dhaka's natural environment.

Mashudul Haque
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Murderer killed in Rab 'shootout'," published on August 1, 2013

Abbasuddin

RAB don't rely on the judiciary system of the country.

Mofi

I get a feeling that RAB orchestrated this drama and killed Tarek in a planned way. We wanted appropriate punishment for Tarek, but not this way!

Ash C.

Tarek has been put away for good so that he does not disclose identities of the real masterminds who obviously are very close to the ruling party.

Vikram Khan

Very clever; so we'll never find out which lawmaker or minister ordered the killing...

MH Khan

Dhaka city has undoubtedly become a dangerous city to live in. It is our political culture which is the root cause of crimes. Keeping goons in political parties is making our lives complex and dangerous.

Shahin Huq

All these deaths have marked a good inauguration for PM Sheikh Hasina's son's entry into politics. This is Awami League and it may remain so.

"Industrial plots up for grabs" (July 31, 2013)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

We have less forest area in our country. If government indiscriminately allows setting up industrial zones, one day the Sundarbans might be obliterated from our map.

Khondkar Saleque Sufi

Bangladesh must be extremely careful in setting up industrial zones near the Sundarbans.

Nahid Tahrira Rashid

Why is everybody hell-bent on destroying Sundarbans?

SM

Yes, after Cox's Bazaar, now destroy the Sundarbans!