

Shibir ramps up bellicosity

Civic peace at stake

In a show of force, Jamaat-e-Islami's student front, the Islami Chatra Shibir went on a rampage across the country on October 10. In their protest against the incarceration of party leadership, the student body committed acts of arson and vandalism in a number of districts. They showed no temerity in taking on the police and one of their workers was shot dead in Chuadanga during a standoff with members of law enforcement.

Ever since the commencement of the war crimes trials, Shibir has shown no hesitation in the use of violence to create terror and panic, although legal means have not been exhausted in the trial process. The incidents that have occurred merely confirm what has been witnessed in the past, that the body is willing to employ any means it sees fit to challenge the law of the land. Given the provocative circumstances, with a belligerent crowd hurling bombs at them, the police had to act in self-defence. It is regrettable that in the process a person had to lose his life.

It is highly regrettable that Shibir men chose to desecrate a Puja Mandap at Damurhuda upazila in Chuadanga. Every time there is political tension over the sentencing of war criminal suspects, attempt is made to disrupt communal harmony. It is high time that such tendencies are nipped in the bud. We strongly urge the law enforcement agencies to adopt a well thought out strategy to curb Shibir violence.

Corporate bodies avoid responsibility

CSR not part of company vision

A survey conducted recently by an international organisation took a look at 24 companies and their contributions to social development. It was found that only four companies had some form of social development schemes running under the aegis of "corporate social responsibility." Although nearly half the respondents hold the belief that CSR and compliance would increase their business opportunities, yet only 16 per cent actually make the effort to do something about it.

Although the ministry of labour made amendments to the Labour Act-2013 that made it mandatory for private companies to have a 10 per cent apprentice system, the survey has found that 79 per cent companies have no such system in place. While the authorities seem very happy to have made changes to the law there appears to be no concerted effort to make companies compliant to the amendment. Unless the private sector comes forward to make provisions to induct unemployed youth, the drafting of laws or their amendment hardly have any impact.

It would seem that some corporate bodies like CSR to the beautification of the city. On the contrary, if implemented properly CSR could be used to fund meaningful projects like combating child labour or reaching out to vulnerable children and youth engaged in hazardous work environments. While one such pilot programme is being implemented by an international organisation, it is up to the ministry of labour to make sure the private sector complies with the Labour Act to bring about meaningful change in society and economy.

The Statesman

The debt crisis

EDITORIAL

WITH the shutdown in America entering the tenth day on Wednesday, there is as yet no sign of a way out of the fiscal calamity. But more than the gridlock, which has already thrown the public health system out of joint, is the looming crisis over the debt ceiling, one that could drive the country towards default. Positions have hardened on both sides of the Democrat/Republican divide with Barack Obama personally informing John Boehner, Speaker of the House of Representatives, that he would not sit down to negotiate conditions on raising the debt ceiling.

In a sense, the US president has ignored the warning advanced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that the country faced the prospect of recession or "worse" should the stand-off over deficit persist. In the span of a week since the shutdown, it is the dispute over the debt ceiling that has triggered the deepest alarm. "If there was a problem lifting the debt ceiling, it could well be that what is now a recovery would turn into a recession or even worse," is the IMF chief economist, Olivier Blanchard's caveat. And beyond the legislative portals of Washington and the White House administration, the shutdown has had an impact on health services with hundreds denied the opportunity to undergo clinical trials at the National Institute of Health. There appears to be an element of disenchantment with the Republicans, and public opinion increasingly blames the House of Representatives for the stalemate. Arguably, this may have prompted Mr. Obama to deliver his "no-surrender message" to Mr. Boehner, specifically emphasising the need for a "clean bill" that will raise the debt ceiling without strings, one that may yet win the support of some Republicans given the mood-swing. Notably, a survey for The Washington Post and ABC News points to 70% of Americans blaming the Republicans for the budget stand-off ... compared to 51% for the president.

The legislative disconnect, a quirky outcome of the elections, has had an impact on public mood. Clearly, the polls are tilting dramatically against Mr. Boehner and his fractured Republicans. Mr. Obama may seemingly be on course to win a political victory, but the economic crisis defies a formulaic prescription. The crisis was ignited with the failure to pass a federal budget last week; it has now become considerably graver as the possibility of not raising the debt ceiling grows. Small wonder the markets, driven to the edge, appear to be disoriented. Five years after the jitters, the alarms are resonant in Wall Street again.

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Dignity of public servants

STRAIGHT LINE



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A senior politician belonging to the ruling political party has taken the public servants to task by warning that those employees who would not obey the orders of the government would be sent home (read sacked) for non-compliance. The media has taken issue with such intemperate utterance and has doubts if he realises the difference between lawful orders and illegal directives, and if he can really see the difference between party interests and imperatives of good governance.

Politicians belonging to the opposition have also taken an adverse view of such warning. They have termed this as manifest evidence of the ruling establishment's deliberate effort to politicise the administrative framework with a view to obtaining unfair advantage during the upcoming national election. They have urged the public servants to remain upright, neutral and impartial and act strictly according to the law. Cynical observers have commented that the opposition politicians expect the servants of the Republic to remain strictly impartial until they assume the mantle of power.

Concerned citizens might like to know if servants of the Republic could be intimidated in such blatant manner. What is the Constitutional position of such public servants? A relevant question would be whether the public servants could look upon their position as appointed representatives of the Republic.

In western democracies, generally, the constitutional and practical role of the civil service is to act with integrity, honesty, impartiality and objectivity to assist the duly constituted government, of whatever political complexion, in formulating policies of government, carrying out decisions of the government and in administering public services for which the government is responsible.

Civil servants are duty-bound to give honest and impartial advice to ministers and to "endeavour to deal with the affairs of the public sympathetically, effectively, promptly and without bias or maladministration of public money." They are also required to conduct themselves in such a manner as to "deserve and retain the confidence of ministers and to be able to establish the same relationship with those whom they may be required to serve in some future administration." Civil servants must not misuse their official position to further their own or another's personal interest.

About conduct of civil servants it is imperative that the civil service avoids creating the impression of political bias. The anonymity and political neutrality of civil servants are reinforced by the rules restricting political activity. This is obvious because civil servants have to serve governments of all political persuasions. Therefore, it is imperative that civil servants, whatever their private political views, should not be seen to be politically active in a manner which would inevitably compromise their neutrality under one political party or another.

One has to agree that there are some elements in the principles of governance in a democratic country which are more or less immutable over time and space. Random use of the term colonial in a pejorative sense does not in reality promote the interests of good governance. The concept of independent institutions free from political influence, to the extent possible, got firmly rooted in the constitution and the laws made from time to time not only

in India but also in other British colonies. India and Pakistan, in 1947, did not have a problem in adopting the concept.

In Bangladesh, the issue of morale of the civil service with a view to maintaining a positive work environment and the imperative of a politically neutral civil service has not received due attention of the politicians. The marked indifference to civil service reform measures may have been caused by the political government's deliberately keeping grey areas that enable them to manipulate the career prospects of senior civil servants. In addition, the lurking distrust on the part of the political leadership may have prompted them not to have a merit-based administrative system.

Citizens of a democratic polity could justifiably ask if there was a dignity of difference. In other words, whether dissent or difference of opinion, as opposed to those of the establishment, is a healthy attribute of a pluralist dispensation. One has to admit that cultivation of prejudice damages the tolerance, liberality and compassion that are the hallmarks of a democratic culture.

The question is, can we in Bangladesh defend a liberal principle by retaining a medieval prejudice? Don't we witness a temper which presses a partisan advantage to the bitter end and does not understand and respect the other side and does not feel a unity between all citizens?

It is time perhaps to appreciate and recognise that democracy depends upon habits of consent and compromise which are attributes only of mature political societies. Lawful government by a majority, under the rule of abiding law, and with freedom of opposition and dissent is an exceptional human achievement. Therefore, we have to be pragmatic to understand that if the spirit of moderation does not prevail, Bangladeshi society will slide into divisions and hatred will replace goodwill.

Discerning observers wonder if a good number of our public leaders personify the arrogance of power, the exact opposite of the unfeigned humility of caring guardians. Some have pretensions to infallibility while others appear to be under a solemn promise never to become wiser.

The dignity of difference has to be ensured in our context because that would guarantee the harbouring of a certain extravagance of objectives whereupon men and women would wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications.

If difference is not accorded dignity, then the individual would be precariously subordinated to the State and our nation will be made up of one-dimensional human beings. When we dwarf our folks to turn them into docile instruments we will find that no great thing can really be accomplished with small men.

Holding a different view on national issues should be a respectable stance because that will ensure that arbitrary power does not wear the garb of constitutionalism. The dominant impulse must be the freedom from fear, pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear, fear of the official class.

The dignity of difference will be catalytic in establishing true leadership by unleashing the full power of the organisation and releasing the potential and energy of all concerned. When groups function harmoniously the synergistic effect of such harmony will be felt at the earliest. The sustained harmony will ultimately ensure the good of the country in the years ahead.

The unfortunate reality is that the dignity of our public servants is unfavourably impacted both at the entry level and during subsequent progression. The vision and wisdom of the political bosses can reverse the adverse scenario. We have to appreciate that a partisan and pliant bureaucracy marked by cringing behaviour is not conducive for a strong and mature political government.

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The unfolding scenario of Indian politics

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

INDIAN domestic politics is on the verge of entering another era; one of confusion and uncertainty perhaps. It appears that the workable bi-coalition system, that ushered the vast multiethnic nation towards progress, is under increased threat. Federal power is getting diminished and has reached a stage of helplessness. And now further fragmentation looks ominous; signaling greater political ambiguity.

On the other hand, the right wing BJP is expecting some resurgence in the upcoming election utilising the anti-incumbency factor and riding on their new maestro Narendra Modi who, despite his controversial role in as chief minister in 2002 Gujarat riot, demonstrated success in development and consequently in the provincial elections. The BJP considers that he can evoke both hinduata emotion and developmental aspiration. Ironically, this has weakened the BJP-led NDA alliance with its second largest partner JD(U) of Bihar's popular Nitish Kumar, who quit on Modi issue. It also triggered a rift in the BJP top brass, too.

Indian democracy heralded a 'Dominant Party System' for first four decades after independence in 1947. Indian National Congress party was at the helm of that. The party has been almost perpetually led by Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty. Last two decades were marked by somewhat stable 'Coalition Politics.' National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by BJP and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the secular Congress gave some political stability to the worried Indians.

But the increasing polarisation of political entities coupled with emergence and reemergence of many new or old ones have engendered a fuzzy state of affairs in Indian political landscape. 'Third Front' is being talked about yet again. The quicksilver Mamata Banerjee is advocating for a 'Federal Front' and, surprisingly, found some support from BJD's Naveen Patnaik in Orissa and JDU's Nitish Kumar in Bihar.

The demise of the old Janata Dal, which had some trans-provincial appeal, has weakened the prospect of the restoration of a credible 'Third Front' which requires at least one clear trans-provincial party. There are already a 'Third front' and even 'Fourth Front.' Uttar Pradesh's Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP is the largest non-UPA, non-NDA party now. But due to its consistent provincial focus in the past, it is unlikely that other provincial parties would rally behind it for a longer haul.

There are coalitions of parties being formed in some of the provinces, and this trend is set to proliferate in coming days. The social stratifications along caste or language in provincial regions are being utilised by power hungry politicians for political mobilisation. Social cleavage or sub-identity rather than governance and development are taking the forefront in this division.

The danger in these complex developments is that the unifying thread of Indian social fabric might get weakened

and India might become a less cohesive state. For neighbours like Bangladesh, which has no way to avoid its big neighbour, there would, in such case, be no credible central Indian authority to deal with. Political stalwarts of neighbouring Indian provinces would call the shots for their narrow political points, like Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal is doing, and Indo-Bangladesh relation would lose direction. The national parties do not have the courage to take on these regional outfits considering their own political regression domestically.

While the BJP is counting on the record and promises that the investment and developmental champion Narendra Modi brings to their fold, the Congress is repositioning itself as a pro-poor party focusing on social security schemes that had done the trick for them in the last election. Schemes for the rural poor, like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNRES), by the first UPA government attempted to implement the 'trickle-down' effect of economic growth and gained great support in the Indian countryside.

Despite financing issues, this UPA government also undertook a scheme called 'Food Security Scheme' aimed at providing food and fuel cost to poor Indians. It is to be seen whether this endeavour can carry the UPA-2 through in the coming national poll. UPA also lost important regional allies in last couple of years.

Meanwhile, the political fission continues. For example, in one of the large Indian provinces where there were traditionally two main parties, i.e. the Congress and the Telugu Desham, there are now four such entities with addition of YSR Congress and TRS. In Maharashtra, another key province with India's commercial nerve centre Mumbai, had the Congress and sometimes the old Janata Dal. Now there are Congress, NCP, BJP, Shiv Sena, MNS, all with electoral potential. Same is the case in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar and some other places.

It's unlikely as of now that the Modi factor or the late 'Food Security Scheme' or Rahul Gandhi would be able to reverse the fragmenting trends of Indian politics with four to five national level fronts already there or taking shape, and numerous smaller parties and their alliances rising at provincial level. For that to happen, there needs to be bigger and sustained stimulus, which is not on the horizon for foreseeable future.

So far, by and large, Indians had been somewhat successful in adapting to the new political and social landscapes. We hope they can do it again. The general sense that prevails in South Asia now is that a stronger central authority in New Delhi has greater chances to deliver for its people and for its neighbours. Now it is to be seen how things work out for India through the actions of the concerned stakeholders who have freedom of initiative, and how that impacts Indian domestic politics and the rest of us in South Asia.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Declining fish stock

Majority of Bangladeshis' total intake of protein comes from fresh water fish. But it is quite frustrating that many families are deprived of a regular diet of fish in their meals due to its unreasonable prices. The price of a little Hilsha is Tk. 350 to Tk. 400. This price is unaffordable to many families of our country. What is the reason behind this high price? The straightforward answer is the decline in fish stocks.

To feed the rapidly growing population, overfishing is taking place. During the monsoon, many fishermen illegally catch mother fishes which would give birth to thousand others. As a result, the fish stock declines and the price rises.

We want a change of this situation. Application of stringent law could be a solution but awareness among people is the most important thing for changing this situation.

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Day care centres at workplaces

Day care centres are very essential in the present day corporate and competitive life as the number of nuclear families is increasing. Women are participating in all the sectors of activities to support their families and to become self-dependent. A mother having children aged below 6 years faces huge obstacles going to work leaving her children at home. Day care centres can solve this problem. If public and private organisations take the initiative to set up in-house day care centres, it will give some relief to the working women.

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