

# Impolitic and undemocratic

## Lift ban on assemblies

MUCH that we are opposed in principle to any restriction on political parties' right to assemble, demonstrate and hold rallies, it is the timing of the DMP's imposition of a ban on all demonstrations and rallies 'until further orders' that we find patently condemnable.

The PM in her address to the nation only on Friday sounded conciliatory outlining an offer to the opposition to end the nagging political stalemate but on the very next day a wholesale restriction was slapped on opposition's scheduled programmes.

It has been ill-advised, impolitic and not to mention thoroughly self-defeating. The snappy move allowed no time for deliberation and germination of ideas on the PM's offer for an all-party interim government to oversee the general election. Furthermore, it called into question the ruling party's sincerity. Whereas the post-speech situation required a careful nurture of an environment congenial to confidence building leading to a meaningful engagement for a conclusive result to end impasse, a contradictory signal has been put across the political landscape.

Yet, we would like to believe that not all is lost. Thankfully, the restriction on professionals' convention was lifted by the DMP in time for the opposition leader to preside over it. Now, the ban on pursuit of political programmes by the opposition should be completely lifted to test their part of the obligations. The window of opportunity for talks should be reopened and made good use of, thick and fast.

# Hatirjheel gets polluted

## Authorities must act quickly

IT is unfortunate and regrettable but nevertheless a reality that the Hatirjheel project, which was considered a classic example of environmental restoration when completed nearly ten months ago, may be reverting to character. A picture carried in this paper yesterday depicts a dismal image of a beautiful area because of the pollution of the lake.

The project per se was not only to resuscitate the area that had all but become a wasteland but also to solve the drainage problem of the city. The project although inaugurated hastily was a whiff of fresh air to which the people flocked in the evenings and on holidays, because of the fresh ambience of the area. But it is now losing its charm.

The authorities must act quickly to prevent the degradation of the twin lakes and indeed the surrounding area. Dumping of solid wastes and outflow of sewage into the lake have created environmental problems for the residents of the area.

We understand that this is all due to the poor sewage and waste management in the capital, and the problem is primarily structural as well as technical. But whatever may be the reason for the pollution, both WASA and Rajuk, whose project it is, must take all necessary measures immediately with the help of the BUET, who were associated with the planning and execution of the work, to arrest the situation. Otherwise, instead of being the largest surface freshwater body in the Capital it will very quickly become the largest polluted water body of the city.

# Major cycling issues and solutions

RIDWAN QAUIUM

TO identify some of the major issues that cyclists are facing in Dhaka, a poll was conducted among the BD Cyclists members in a social network for about two days. The three main issues that cyclists have identified are lack of safe parking places, bicycle theft and safety on the road.

Most of the cyclists have mentioned that several developments in Dhaka do not have a proper place to park bicycles safely. This is why they often have to take the risk of parking cycles at unattended places, only to find out that their bike has been stolen. Cyclists are making customised locks as well as buying expensive locks but nothing is stopping their bicycles from being stolen.

Since, there are no bicycles lanes in Dhaka, cyclists have to travel with mixed traffic here. The heavier and bigger vehicle seems to have the right of way here. Also, awareness about cyclists among other road users is quite low. Cyclists say that sometimes drivers of motorised vehicles and even rickshaw pullers purposely try to put them in an awkward and unsafe position. All these make cycling a challenging task in Dhaka.

The three main cycling issues are also some of the major issues in Bangkok. The public and private sectors in Thailand have taken several steps to resolve the cycling issues in Bangkok. For instance, to resolve the issue of lack of safe bicycle parking areas and bicycle theft, the public and private sectors have provided bicycle stands in several places throughout Bangkok.

To ensure safety of the cyclists, the city authority is re-stripping many roads in Bangkok to provide bicycle lanes. Besides the main roads, there are several alleyways and neighbourhood streets in Bangkok which generally are not used by motorised vehicles. A private firm has developed a Bike Map which shows cyclists how they can commute within the city by traveling on these alleyways, thus avoiding traveling with the mixed traffic.

Cycling is undoubtedly one of the most sustainable and cost-effective solutions to reduce traffic congestion. Similar to Thailand the public and private sectors may also consider taking joint initiatives to promote cycling by providing bicycle lanes and safe bicycle parking areas. This will help to promote cycling and in the end help the residents of Dhaka to lead a healthy life in a livable city.

The writer is a transportation engineer working in Thailand.

## KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

SCARCELY 24 hours had passed after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her address to the nation called upon the opposition to join parliament for a dialogue and also invited it to participate in her proposed all-party election-time administration, when the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) banned all kinds of political meetings, rallies, sit-ins, human chains, etc for an indefinite period.

The government is yet to make it clear what prompted it to go for such a draconian measure at such a time when the political arena should be abuzz with meetings, rallies and parleys among various political parties and groups in anticipation of the upcoming election. Snatching people's constitutionally granted right to meet, assemble and hold rallies, unless there is a serious emergency situation like war or socio-political crisis of dangerous proportions, is highly undemocratic. We are not aware of any such threat to the country or society, for had there been any the PM would have spelt that out in her Friday's address to the nation and warned the people of the danger accordingly. But there was no such hint in her speech.

She called upon the opposition not to go for belligerent and violent movement in support of any of their demands. But such rhetoric-laden criticism that she levels against the opposition from time to time is also nothing new in her speeches. Then why this sudden ban on political activities? Is it then, as many political watchers are saying, to foil the Dhaka rally that the BNP has called for October 25? If a political party, which is a major player in the upcoming national poll, is thus denied the right to assemble or hold rally, how will they be convinced of the PM's sincerity about her offer of talks or invitation to join her proposed election-time government?

In fact, the opposition BNP has already reacted very negatively and declared that it would defy the ban and stage protest demonstrations in the districts against it.

So, the administration's decision to ban political meetings has been an ill-timed one. It has been impulsive, which reflects negatively on the government's self-confidence at this point of time.

The ruling AL must face facts. In a democratic set-up, it

# Election time government: Need for scenario mapping

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

BY all indications, the prime minister's proposal for an all-party election time government (ETG) is likely to be turned down by the main opposition party. The PM did not offer a full-blown solution to the political stalemate, but a potentially important step towards reaching a mutually agreeable framework for ETG. Whether or not the high hopes raised by the PM's speech on October 18 will be transformed into a solution, or catalyse another reportedly in the offing from the opposition, remains in the hands of the two top leaders.

In substance, the PM's proposal is the same one she mentioned during her interview with BBC World Service, just as an idea. It has now taken a more concrete shape though some critical questions still remain open. For instance, what will be the size of the ETG, and how would the number and portfolios be distributed? The bigger question is about the head of the ETG, on which the opposition has clearly taken a strong stance more than once. No less important is the question whether the election will be held before dissolving the Parliament which, given the lack of mutual trust between the contending sides, is widely viewed to be detrimental to the level playing field needed for free and fair election.

If the PM's speech contained clarity on these questions, the hopes could be higher, although in a rather unique context of distrust bordering on mutual hatred. Even if such questions were addressed in the speech, reactions would not be free from skepticism. Be that as it may, there were indications in the PM's speech, at least prima facie, that questions like those could be discussed if the opposition responded positively.

In any case, the ball has landed in the opposition's court, at least for a while. When the party stipulates an alternate proposal of its own, it will be clear whether it is going to contain any of the positive elements of the PM's proposal to constitute an all-party ETG or whether it will stick to the demand for non-party caretaker government.

In the meantime, in less than 24 hours after the PM's speech, the government imposed a ban on meetings, processions and rallies. Whatever may be the motivation, this act by the police authority is ill-advised to say the least, as it has created the space for raising the question whether it is consistent with spirit of the PM's proposal. Credibility of the ban is questionable because of the unnecessary rush 5 days before the opposition rally due on October 25, which is clearly the main target.

In all fairness, if the rationale is to prevent disorder and violence by "axes and choppers" as called upon an opposition leader, the task of the law enforcement authority is to prevent disorder and violence by banning the carrying or use of such weapons or tools. Law enforcement agencies do have the responsibility to ensure that exercise of one's right is not at the expense of another's. But nothing in a democratic society can justify depriving the people of their constitutional rights. The opposition can hardly be challenged if they now take this as an example of them being pushed out of the course of a negotiated solution.

Be that as it may, the PM's offer has the potential to lead to realisation of a "golden dream." Imagine for a moment that

# A wrong move, at a wrong time

looks ridiculous if a government in its last days tries to behave like when it was in its early or mid-course in power. In fact, the government is shutting itself off from the outside world exactly at a time when it should rather open up further.

All this does not send the right signal. But wrong signals are coming in profusion from every corner of the government, day in and day out. Ministers, advisers and different leaders of the government have been speaking to the media on every conceivable occasion, but are in conflict with one another. Take for example, some such remarks that came immediately after the PM's overture to the opposition in her nationwide address.

One of the ruling AL's central leaders, Kazi Zafarullah, and an adviser to the prime minister, H.T. Imam, made it clear from their remarks that AL would go for forming the all-party interim government and hold election even if the BNP did not respond positively to the PM's proposal. Oddly though, they could not wait to hear the opposition's response to the PM's formula. This couldn't-care-less attitude shown by these government leaders towards the opposition just after PM's address gives the lie to her call for dialogue and the invitation to the opposition to join her all-party poll-time government. And if one takes their comments at face value, what remains of the proposed 'all-party interim government' where the major opposition is left out of the arrangement?

All these remarks are only adding to the confusion in the public mind about the government's real intentions about the election.

But this kind of unpredictability in the behaviour of governments in their final months falls into a pattern since the post-autocracy experiment in our democracy began some 23 years ago.

The governments that came by turns became more aggressive, intolerant, undemocratic as their last days in office draw closer. The incumbent AL government does also look like one getting inexorably drawn into a similar kind of maelstrom.

To avoid it, the government, if it is really sincere about the PM's assurance of holding a free, fair and credible general election with the participation of all political parties, must stop behaving like a bully and lift the ban on political activities in the capital. For the answer to the challenge, if any, to democracy, perceived or real, is not authoritarianism, but more democracy.

The writer is Editor, Science & Life. E-mail: sfalim.ds@gmail.com



the PM went a step further and said explicitly in her speech that she would be open to discuss matters related to the size, relative share and distribution of portfolios of the ETG cabinet. She could also declare that she was willing to discuss whether or not the Parliament should be dissolved before election to ensure level playing field. She could have indicated the same openness regarding the head of the ETG. Indeed, she could even offer that in greater national interest she would be willing to relinquish her claim to this position. Wouldn't she and her party be remembered for unprecedented political maturity and acumen delivered at a critical stage?

The other possibility of this "golden dream" scenario could be if the leader of the opposition had not only welcomed the offer without procrastination but also declared that her party would join the all-party ETG even with the present PM as head, subject to mutually agreeable settlement of other issues mentioned above. She would also have set an excellent precedent to follow.

In either case, which unfortunately remains a chimera, we would have the elections smoothly conducted by a sufficiently empowered election commission and arrangements for a reasonably neutral administrative arrangement. In keeping with our political tradition the losing side would in any case question the credibility, but it could be an election to have met the national and international expectations.

The second possible scenario could be a "silver dream" in which the government pushes ahead with the election under the 15th Amendment in which the opposition eventually decides to join. Unrealistic as it appears, election is hypothetically held before watchful eyes of the media and national and international observers. Since the opposition would have joined election by choice, and assuming that the election is held in a manner that is found acceptable by national and international observers, smooth transition would take place even though questions would still be raised by the losing side about credibility.

The third possible scenario is a "bad dream" in which the government pushes ahead with the election under the 15th Amendment, but the opposition doesn't take part and makes all-out effort to resist it. Nevertheless, election is held amidst violence, use of force and bloodbath, but its credibility will be questionable. To recall a similar experience, the tenure of a government elected without the main opposition party/coalition is likely to be short-lived at best, creating an unpredictably long period of uncertainty.

The final one is a "nightmare" under which none of the above is possible while the street battles, including all possible levels of violence, create such mayhem that the situation goes beyond the control of democratic political forces. As unpredictable as the implications of this nightmarish scenario are, what is certainly predictable is that the political forces would create their own Frankenstein in both political space and beyond.

The sooner our leaders apply political acumen and consider public interest to resort to the drawing board for strategic scenario mapping, the better for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

The writer is Executive Director, TIB. (Views are author's own, and may not necessarily reflect any official position.)

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

## Harping on the same string

There is a limit to people's patience. We have become tired of hearing from the prime minister and other leaders of the Awami League that under the supervision of this government six thousand elections have been held in a free and fair manner. How could the national election be compared with these elections? Do they think that people are fools?

Sheikh Hasina is repeatedly saying that if people give their verdict in her favour, she will come to power, otherwise not. Our question is then, why is she not allowing them to cast their votes in a congenial atmosphere? Why is she not reinstating the caretaker government? We hope she will feel people's pulse and act accordingly.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

## The approaching storm

BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia is now threatening to wage a new type of movement after October 25, if the government does not restore the caretaker government system in the constitution. On the other hand, our PM Sheikh Hasina is stubbornly refusing to budge an inch (or hair!) from the present constitution. Now it seems that the prospect of a political consensus on the election time government is fading away with the passage of time.

The common people of the country are very much worried about the present political deadlock which may end up in dangerous confrontations between the supporters of two hostile camps.

Only our top political leaders' sagacity and far-sightedness can save the country from the approaching political storm which may ultimately jeopardise our existence as a democratic nation.

Md. Mohsin Ali  
Nutan Courtpara, Kushitia

## Nothing is right on the road

During my more than two years' stay in Houston, Texas, USA, I perhaps heard honking two or three times while commuting between work and home. Here in North America, both in Canada and the USA, people only honk when there is something wrong.

Back in Bangladesh, people start honking as soon as someone hits the streets. What does this imply? It means nothing is correct and everything is wrong. All this is a cumulative result of misrule and misconduct by the regimes in power over four decades. Apparently, the overall situation in Bangladesh has reached the point of no return. We can only hope for the best.

Saleh Mohammad Ayub  
Houston, Texas, USA

## Comments on news report, "PM for all-party govt," published on October 19, 2013

### Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Hasina's vague outline of election time government could not mislead BNP. The uncertainty would be persisting unless PM gives up her post during the poll.

### Molla A. Latif

The proposal for solving the political problem could be more specific and clear i.e. who would be the head of the all party government, what would be the ratio of MPs from the parties, what would be the number of the ministers and state ministers, should Jamaat also be included in the government, etc. This open proposal will convey a weak message to the opposition and they will find the holes to escape and create anarchy in the country instead of taking it positively for a discussion.

### Zman7

While the PM is trying to resolve the political crisis, the authors of this news piece are claiming that PM's proposal is nothing new in the politics; and "almost a similar proposal was rejected by Sheikh Hasina in 1994." I just wonder what good the opposition and the nation will gain from such media analysis!

### Spiderman

APM belongs to the entire nation and not just to the blind followers and admirers of AL. She misused this opportunity by spending most of her time for so-called achievement propaganda.

### Shahin Huq

Such a recycled speech! She has not mentioned anything new. It is obvious that she wants to be the head of the so-called interim government. Why will the people of Bangladesh trust her? If she is serious about free and fair election, what stops her from giving power to a neutral caretaker government for holding acceptable elections?

### God propose man dispose

The opposition leader should do the same thing like the PM. She should arrange a press conference or address the nation and propose the details of interim government:

- 1)Parliament got to be dissolved by October 25.
- 2)PM/ Speaker/ President or any party leader can't be the head of interim government.
- 3)LCRD and home should be given to opposition or a noble person from society accepted by all.

### SM

Not specific at all. What is the due time and who looks at whose watch to make that call? And citing the constitutional sections written based on your dictation is like citing your own book as reference to prove your own case where the reference material is corrupt with manipulation -- it is not impartial and it was not bipartisan (accepted by majority) when the constitution was amended.