

## Violence, prelude to hartal

*Targeted attacks on media contemptible*

VERY few will take issue with us when we restate that the 60 hour hartal, called by the BNP and the 18 Party Alliance, is completely devoid of rationale, but we feel equally troubled by the violence let loose by the opposition alliance activists, prelude to the hartal, particularly the recent targeted attacks on the media. Violence has been the most repetitively disquieting feature of the hartals called by the opposition alliance in the last five years.

BNP must bear the responsibility for the acts of violence carried out on the eve and during the hartals because the party has neither directed its or its alliance members to abjure violence, nor has it condemned such behaviour. Is the violence meant to inculcate terror in the minds of the people and coerce them to conform? We feel that no party that is sanguine about the moral justification of its cause needs to coerce the public to go along with its political programmes.

And alarmingly too, the pattern of attack has changed of late where the media, particularly those TV channels and newspapers, which were considered to be not so well disposed towards the opposition, have been picked out as targets. We find it preposterous that the opposition would on one hand talk about free media while on the other try to stifle the voice of those that are critical of them.

We condemn all such attacks. These are disturbing developments that cannot bode well, either for democracy or for the media.

## Political turmoil and public exams

*Consider the examinees' plight*

BUSINESSES, big and small; office goers, public and private; the common people -- no one is left untouched by countrywide shutdowns, not least of all, students.

Following the hartals enforced in February and May due to which several SSC and HSC exams had to be rescheduled, the current 60-hour shutdown called by the opposition may result in the postponement of Ordinary and Advanced (O' and A') Level exams. As these exams are held simultaneously around the world, their interruption may mean students losing out on the whole session and having to wait for the next available slots allotted internationally by the Cambridge International Examination (CIE) Board.

The impending political turmoil looming in the horizon may cause even greater disruption in the lives of students, including the 50 lakh scheduled to sit for their Primary and Ebtedai and Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) exams, scheduled to begin in November. Not only are students left unsure of whether or not the exams will be held as scheduled, the political instability and uncertainty also hamper concentration, as well as posing threats to security in their commutes to their study and examination centres.

Along with huge losses to the economy, the futures of lakhs of students are made uncertain due to frequent, prolonged and violent shutdowns. We urge the opposition and all the political parties to take these crucial factors into consideration and choose alternative paths to resistance

## Political unrest stunts tourism growth

ZIAUL HAQUE HOWLADER

TOURISM is a very fragile industry. Unlike other industries, the buyers (tourists) come to the product, i.e. to enjoy the service. The promotion and development of tourism also depends on image and a favourable socio-politico-economic condition. If there is any unrest, tourists will not come to risk their lives.

"We have already invested more the Tk.1,500 crore and want to invest more to attract foreign tourists in the country, but the current political situation is frustrating us," Mr. Khabir Uddin, President of Tourism Resort Industries Association of Bangladesh (TRIAB) said.

This season, there has been political unrest throughout the country. Some tourist generating countries have already put up a red-alert for their citizens to refrain from visiting Bangladesh. Many tour operators, specially the in-bound tour operators, are counting their losses, as many foreign tourists have already cancelled their bookings. Domestic tourism activities are also coming to a halt.

The potential foreign investors in tourism industry of Bangladesh are also feeling unsafe in investing here. More foreign investment in the tourism industry means more employment generation in the country.

In Bangladesh, the tourist season starts from October and continues till the end of February. During this period, tour operators earn their big bucks for the whole year. Unfortunately, political unrest is taking place during this period. As vehicles and transport cannot move due to strike, tourists have to stay in the hotels. In this way, tour operators and ground service providers at the tourist attraction sites lose their businesses.

A research showed that about 80 sectors are directly and indirectly involved with the tourism industry. When a strike is called it affects the tourism industry, involving all the 80 sectors. The WTTC revealed in 2012 that about 12,81,500 people were directly involved (1.8% of total employment of the country) and 27,14,500 were people indirectly involved in tourism sector of Bangladesh, which will reach 38,91,000 by 2023 i.e. about 4.3% of total employment of the country. What will happen to these people involved in the tourism industry if the political unrest persists for a long time?

Tourists want a congenial atmosphere for free movement and tension-free enjoyment. Bangladesh is a tourism potential country, and tourists like to visit the country. But political unrest dampens their interest.

The writer is Deputy Manager of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.

# When so much depends on a person

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

But more important than what transpired between the two leaders during their 37 minutes' talk, and what was its immediate outcome, is the extraordinary event itself that they talked. So we should now be reassured.

However, the future course of events will depend crucially on a number of factors: will the contact already made between them remain as a one-off event, or will they willingly meet again to sort out their differences over the shape of the interim government to conduct the next general election? We hope the answers to the preceding questions are positive.

But why is it that people should pin all their hopes on these two leaders alone and not on others in the parties they lead?

It may sound strange to outsiders who are not familiar with Bangladeshi style of politics, but not to those among foreigners who have to deal with politicians of Bangladesh. They will be no less excited than us over this development, which Awami League General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam has termed 'epoch-making.'

Come to think of it! An ordinary looking incident of the PM and the opposition leader saying hello to each other or talking over phone is such an exceptional incident in Bangladesh! And what an earth-shattering piece of news it can become when they do it to resolve a political crisis that has about paralysed the nation.

It is up to experts on our politics and history to discover how and when a society so rich in its experience of waging no end of struggles against colonialism for wresting freedom and against all forms of autocracies for establishing democracy and human rights has suddenly transformed into a mere shadow of its former self! Political parties have lost their internal democracy and dynamism so much so that all power has been concentrated in the hands of a

THE prospect of telephonic contact between the two party supremos seized the attention of the media and curious public the whole day on Saturday. Will they talk, and if so, when? Everyone was agog. Finally Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also the president of Awami League (AL), did phone the opposition leader and chief of BNP, Khaleda Zia, and talked with her. The whole nation was relieved. What they talked about we know from the media.

*The very fact that so much depends on these two persons is not something to exult in. The periodical crises that we have been observing over selection of the election-time government over the past many years has also a lot to do with this singularity in the leadership structure of the two dominant political parties.*

single person in each party. Small wonder these parties, and with them the constituencies and the government they represent, have become beholden to the egos of their supreme leaders!

It is exactly like how the Renaissance politician, philosopher and historian of Italy, Machiavelli, would say: "The prince is the state and the state is the prince." Here, too, we have two leaders, who veritably personify the two parties, AL and BNP. Anachronistic though it may sound in the 21st century, it is a fact of life in present-day Bangladesh.

Now that such leaders have established contact, the public is feeling reassured and will be waiting with their fingers crossed for a positive result to come out of the dialogue between them after the hartal. But the uncertainties will remain until the time they actually engage in talks with seriousness.

Let us assume that they are sincere, and will finally meet at the Gonobhaban, the official residence of the prime minister. If everything goes well and ultimately a consensus over the modalities of the conduct of the next general election is reached, the nation can hope to hold the general election for the 10th Jatiya Sangsad (parliament) and save democracy. But what if, God forbid, the opposite is the case, or the talks fail in spite of everything? The very thought of it sends shivers down the spine.

The very fact that so much depends on these two persons is not something to exult in. The periodical crises that we have been observing over selection of the election-time government over the past many years has also a lot to do with this singularity in the leadership structure of the two dominant political parties. The existing atmosphere of deep distrust and enmity between activists, leaders and followers of these parties can also be traced to a large degree to the personal equations of these two leaders. This is neither healthy nor safe for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

We believe Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda have been able to realise the importance of their personal engagement to overcome the current crisis centring on the election-time administration. In a similar vein, we would also want them to realise the danger that lies in their being the final arbiter in politics. They should allow more internal democracy in their parties for the sake of effective, fresh leadership to grow and take the lead.

Until the present leadership structure of AL and BNP undergoes a change, such crises will continue to haunt politics, elections and democracy indefinitely.

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

SYED NOOR HOSSAIN

AFTER watching the political drama in our country for a considerable time and listening to the talk shows on TV, participated by political pundits repeating much of the same thing day in and day out, I have reached a point where I am compelled to take a side for the sake of saving the country from man-made disaster.

Former prime minister Khaleda Zia, the current opposition leader in the Parliament, has been arguing for restoration of the caretaker government system. The problem is that the verdict of the Supreme Court has recommended its abolition. Based on the judgment, the present government passed the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, whereby the system of caretaker government was abolished.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is saying that, in the light of the constitutional amendment, parliamentary elections in the country will be held just like in any other country having this system of government. This means the parliament will not be dissolved and the prime minister will remain in power until the end of the next parliamentary election, when the president will call upon the new majority leader to form the government. Legally and constitutionally, no one can object to this.

Khaleda Zia's point is that the lawmakers of the ruling coalition passed the amendment without considering the "reality" of politics in Bangladesh -- the existence of mistrust among the politicians of the opposing groups and the public opinion. She fears that the parliamentary elections will not be fair under the ruling party and it will rig the election to remain in power.

By taking this position, the opposition leader is undermining the position of the lawmakers, who are elected by popular votes. According to the Constitution, the elected representatives are the voice of the people in the Parliament. It may be true that the current majority public opinion could be against the ruling coalition. But that happens in many countries, including UK and USA, when popularity of the ruling party or president/prime minister could go down below 50%. But that cannot be a reason for the government to dissolve the parliament, or the head of the government to resign. For good or bad, Tony Blair acted against the public opinion during the Iraq war because he considered it his privilege as the majority leader and prime minister. The same thing applied to President Bush.

There is nothing to object to, from the legal point of view and the parliamentary practice elsewhere in the world, about the prime minister's stand that the next parliamentary elections will be held as per law and the Constitution. And yet, to accommodate the opposition demand for a caretaker/interim government, Hasina proposed some compromise, within the constitutional frame-

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work, by saying that the next elections will be held under an interim government with ministers from both the opposition and the ruling coalitions. But Khaleda rejected it and stuck to her position to restore the old caretaker government. She suggested taking five persons each -- by the ruling part and the opposition -- from the last two caretaker governments and looking for a mutually acceptable person to head that interim government. She did not even realise that some of the persons she was talking about are dead, some are not in good health, and others are reluctant to accept a position in the caretaker government.

Khaleda's proposal means that: First, the Parliament has to pass a new constitutional amendment, abrogating the earlier amendment (15<sup>th</sup> Amendment) to restore the caretaker government. Such parliamentary action will go against the judgment of the Supreme Court. This will be a step in the wrong direction because the caretaker system of government was conceived as a temporary measure, the reason why the Supreme Court considered it unconstitutional; Second, we had seen squabbles in selecting the head of a caretaker government because a neutral person was hard to agree upon. As a result there was countrywide chaos and violence and an army-backed government took over as the caretaker government. Third, Khaleda once condemned the system of caretaker government by her famous statement that "no one except a child and a madman can be considered neutral!"

Khaleda, in a public statement, declared 60 hours hartal and termed the present government "illegal" from yesterday (October 27, 2013) and urged all -- including government organs -- to disregard the government. On television we saw that Khaleda's meeting was full of Islamic radicals who vowed to take violent action against the government if Khaleda's demand is not met. They are also bent on bringing Sharia law, proponents of which do not believe that women should take part in public life as equal with men.

The scenario at the moment is that the prime minister has invited Khaleda for talks. Let us see if the two ladies sit together, which they have never done before.

If Khaleda follows the path of civil disobedience and consequent violence, my fear is that the radical Islamists, who did not get a single seat in the present Parliament, will grow much stronger, thanks to money and support they are getting from outside, and challenge any established government. In the process, the police will also take tough stance and engage in random arrest and killings. The Islamists also intend to release all convicted war criminals. All in all, we may be heading to a nightmare scenario.

Let us hope for the best. Let good sense prevail in Khaleda to follow the constitutional path. She alone can save the country from disaster.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.

## LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Have consensus on basic issues

AL and BNP are at two opposite ends on the issue of polls-time government. Recently, they presented two formulas to form the interim government that reflected their uncompromising positions.

The PM wants the election under her command to secure her victory. On the other hand, Khaleda Zia wants the election to be held without any influence of the ruling party. However, this unlucky nation cannot come out of this vicious circle unless AL and BNP reach an agreement at least on the following issues:

- A permanent structure of the polls time interim government for the next 3/4 national elections.
- Do away with the practice of parliament boycott and cancellation of financial and other benefits of the MPs, if they are absent in the sessions.
- Reach a consensus on the fundamental issues of national interest. Remember that all development projects (power plants, bridges, flyovers, airports, roads and highways etc.) are going on with people's money. So those must continue even if the government changes.

Engr. Md. Aminul Hoque  
East Rampur, Dhaka

### Is life an experiment?

I regularly read the 'Quotable Quotes' that appears every day in your daily. On October 3 issue, a quotation of Ralph Waldo Emerson was published which read "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better."

I wonder what the implication of the above quote is. In reality, those among us who are experimenting with their lives to attain perfection seldom reach the goal while those experimenting on making money and false name and fame are getting through. I don't know whether my observation on the quote is appropriate or not but I think wrong experimentation on life is making it difficult for us to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong.

Professor M Zahidul Haque  
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture  
SAU, Dhaka

### Build strong cyclone shelters

As cyclones hit the coastal regions of Bangladesh regularly, government has built some cyclone shelters for the poor coastal people to take shelter during cyclones. But the condition of many of these cyclone shelters is miserable. The government should immediately repair the old cyclone shelters and construct big and strong ones in coastal areas in order to save people's lives when the disasters strike.

Shafkat Rahman  
BIAM Laboratory School  
Dhaka

### Comments on post editorial, "This politics is at the cost of Bangladesh," published on October 25, 2013

#### Nasirullah Mridha, USA

The two ladies' personal ego has been causing this crisis every 5 years. Unless they quit their respective posts, we will have to put up with their whims indefinitely.

#### Nazmul Haq

These two ladies do not care at all.

#### Snr Citizen

Another good analysis. It is true that the nation is held hostage! Only the media can strongly help to get out of this crisis. Hope constructive journalism continues.

#### Ball falling

"Why should we as a people be deprived of a growth rate of 6-plus percent just because AL and BNP want to fight?" Like it or not, 80+ percent people vote for these two parties.

#### Saleh Tanveer

Sheikh Hasina has made it a personal competition between her and Khaleda Zia about who can be more unbending, and Khaleda Zia seems to be taking up that challenge. It does not matter to them if the country suffers in the process.

#### Salim Ullah

We all have to pull together and think deeply over this matter as to how we can get rid of this vicious circle. Both the leaders would be held responsible for any unhappy situation.

#### T. Zaman

Sir, what you wrote is nothing but truth. Can I, a common man, file a case in a court against the presidents of the two leading political parties for the day-to-day mess they have been creating on the road in the name of hartals and andolons.

#### Akm Bari

The people have the right to peacefully demonstrate against the policy of the government. The key word here is 'peacefully'. However, the tendency of these political parties is to create havoc through burning buses, private cars and killing people during demonstration. Public should sue the leaders of these parties for the damage, not only at personal level, but also at national level.

#### Aasfisarwar

I would like to see the whole episode just from a different perspective. Let's imagine, BNP is in power and holding the views that election will be held under their leadership. Would you be able to write the same prescription?