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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Unprincipled politics costing dear

How long will the people be held hostage to it?

WITH the five BNP leaders sent to jail on non-specific and apparently trumped up charges such as 'attempted murder of cops and creating violence in the capital' and the party leadership virtually immobilised, the atmosphere is rife with speculation as to what lies in store for the people. Particularly mind-boggling is the desperately repressive mode the government has gone into. The situation is all the more compounded and being pushed into dire straits due to unabated shutdowns making a tally of 204 hours in the last three weeks alone.

There is a complete u-turn in the overall context; how close we were getting into a possibility of unlocking of horns between the contending political parties through a start to a dialogue process! The bottom line the major political parties appeared to be settling for is a meeting at the secretaries' general level which could be an ice-breaker in time generating a momentum for hammering out a consensual package on poll time government at the highest level.

Rather than building up on that positive note following the telephonic conversation between the two leaders, what we have now is a diametrically opposite scenario.

The violence packed pre-hartal and hartal days are claiming innocent lives, costing the economy dearly and severely disrupting education schedules, not to mention a growing sense of insecurity among the citizenry and the shying away of business orders and investments. How long will the nation be held ransom to the whims of the political supremoes?

Santhia incident

Support call for a judicial probe

WE fully endorse the call of the civil society members for holding a judicial enquiry into the attack on minority communities in various parts of the country. It is regrettable that despite the many incidents of minority repression very few cases have been instituted and even fewer people punished.

The most recent incident in Santhia of Pabna district has more of a political and economic colour than religious. And regrettably, the political parties have been active in giving a twist to the matter that suits their party. The minority community in Santhia was primarily a victim of extortionists who belonged to both the major parties and, reportedly, to the underground elements reported to be active in that area.

What we fail to understand is the unwillingness of the Pabna police to arrest the known perpetrators, some of whom are alleged to be members of the ruling party. And the fact that the police have been rather inactive in this regard has been acknowledged by a senior member of the party.

We have reasons to believe that political influence is hampering the handling of the case. We urge the law enforcing agencies to address this issue without political prejudice. And the government must ensure that issue of minority repression is tackled promptly and severely. No one, irrespective of party affiliation, should get away with such heinous acts. We are constrained to believe that there are more sinister motives behind the attacks on the minorities and, unless tackled promptly, might endanger our national security.

Dialogue: Need of the hour

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

IS hartal a democratic exercise? This is a million dollar question and the answer is most likely to be influenced by the side of the political fence one belongs to. If one is a supporter of the government of the day, hartal, in his view, is an utterly undemocratic act that infringes on the freedom of an individual. On the other hand, if one has any degree of sympathy for the opposition, it would be the only democratic right under opposition's disposal to protest against the undemocratic postures of the government.

A person sitting on the political fence will probably agree that hartal, especially the way it is imposed on the people these days, is by no means a democratic right. Burning innocent Monirs and Shumis to death is certainly not a democratic exercise by any means. Other than Bangladesh, and a few instances in neighbouring India, this political culture is probably not prevalent in any other part of the world.

Democratic rights and freedom of expression are half-understood in Bangladesh society. For instance, a few years ago, the Canadian PM asked the governor general to prorogue the parliament indefinitely in face of a no-confidence motion tabled by the opposition. The action of the PM was unethical, but not unconstitutional. There was a national outcry denouncing the PM's action. No, the opposition parties, with more than 60% support in the Gallup poll, did not resort to hartal but had to wait until the PM called the parliament sitting at a time convenient to him.

ASTOUNDINGLY, all that is happening at this time in the political sphere of Bangladesh is being termed as democracy, by both sides of the aisle. All the activities are being carried out in the name of 'democracy' and are solely for the "welfare of the people." First and foremost among them is hartal, which is being called by the opposition and is being 'spontaneously' observed by the people, as claimed by the opposition. But the real truth is diametrically opposite.

The opposition parties claim that hartal is a democratic tool to express people's support for the cause, whose realisation they demand. However, politicians fail to comprehend the basic rule of democracy that explicitly prohibits the infringement on the democratic right of others. Calling of hartal and the imposition of the same are not the same phenomenon.

At this time, there are two proposals on the table: an all-party interim-government as proposed by the PM and a non-partisan government as proposed by the leader of the opposition. However, there needs to be a dialogue to come to a formula, the bottom line of which would be to ensure fair and credible election. Both the leaders are acknowledging that there needs to be a dialogue without any pre-conditions. However, in the telephone conversation, there were pre-conditions from both sides. While the PM insisted that the opposition leader withdraw the hartal and sit down with her immediately since she (PM) called within the stipulated time frame as declared by her in the public

meeting. The PM said: "You gave an ultimatum of two days. I called you within those two days, but now you are saying that you will continue with the hartals and join talks after 29th. Then what is the validity of your speech based on your stance today?" The opposition leader turned the request down and in the process 17 lives were lost.

The leader of the opposition, also, gave her condition before sitting for dialogues. It went like this: "No, you have to state that you will accept a non-partisan government and I will withdraw the hartal."

So, it was a question of hartal or withdrawal of the same, and a non-partisan government or an all-party government. Given the existing constitutional framework and the vagueness of the sketch of the non-partisan government given by the leader of the opposition, the PM's proposal to have an all-party government certainly carries more merit.

In fact, an all-party government is a new concept and does not require any amendment to the constitution; the composition of it should be the principal agenda of the dialogue. AL has indicated that it would accommodate the number of the ministers according to the percentage of votes obtained in the last election and an open-minded discussion might give BNP close to half of the cabinet posts in the interim cabinet.

The PM has even asked the opposition to list the ministries it wants and there is a strong likelihood that the main opposition might bargain for a few important ministerial portfolios that could be strong deterrent for any potential fixing of the election results. In addition, even the head of the interim government is not a forgone conclusion; it is up for discussion as well.

AL stands on a high moral ground because of the record of holding six thousand or so local elections in a free and fair atmosphere. If there is any bias during the functioning of the interim government, the opposition cabinet ministers will have avenues of recording their protests, including the ultimate action of quitting the cabinet, through the free media; although that might plunge the country into crisis, but AL will have to bear the entire brunt of it. In fact, BNP has nothing to lose but to gain all out of it.

If BNP does not take part in the election, its support base may transfer its allegiance to JP, a party that holds more or less similar views vis-à-vis war crimes trails and the values of our Liberation War. In 1986, when BNP boycotted the election, 207 MPs of the '79 parliament contested with the JP ticket. A similar scenario would have been repeated if Moeen U Ahmed would have formed a political party. During those times of despair for BNP, there was hardly anyone left to light a candle in the BNP office. Is the BNP leadership aware of the consequence?

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.



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Hindutva's dark legacy

PRAFUL BIDWAI
COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHATEVER it is countless sins, the Sangh Parivar can never be accused of having produced a half-way tall intellectual. No Hindutva star, from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh founders, to the present leaders of its 30-odd affiliates, including the BJP, remotely fits the description "intellectual".

Parivar "thinkers", including Deen Dayal Upadhyay with his Integral Humanism philosophy, show very little acquaintance with history, political theory, culture, economics or social movements.

They have an extremely narrow, semi-literate Hindu-supremacist worldview, which doesn't even comprehend the richness and diversity of Hinduism, which it mindlessly glorifies.

RSS cadre training is based on half-baked business-oriented economics, authoritarian politics and Hindu Rashtra. It denies that India has for centuries been a multicultural, multireligious society, where Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and agnosticism/atheism, coexisted with Hinduism, itself composed of many strands and sects.

Rather, it glorifies one, puritanical, upper-caste strand, embodied in the Bharat Mata symbol. Bharat Mata was enslaved by "outsiders". It's time to liberate her and create a proud, powerful Hindu Rashtra, which makes the world tremble. That's the Parivar's true goal. Democracy is only a means.

When the Parivar strays into history to claim unique greatness for Indian civilisation and denigrate liberal-secular ideas, it becomes a laughing stock.

Take Narendra Modi's recent incursion. He claimed that Bihar defeated Alexander the Great on the Ganga's banks; Chandragupta founded the Gupta dynasty, Ancient India's "Golden Age"; and Takshshila, the great seat of Buddhist learning, was in Bihar.

But Alexander was halted at the Beas in Himachal. Chandragupta founded the Mauryan empire. And Takshshila is in Pakistan. Mr Modi's "fake encounter with facts" confuses it with Nalanda.

The Sangh Parivar now dishonestly claims the legacy of Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first minister. It presents Nehru, a Western-educated Fabian-socialist liberal, as a villain, and glorifies Patel as a pro-Hindutva leader -- like Mr Modi, who is building a 182-metre-tall Patel statue.

Nehru and Patel indeed differed in political approach and ideological orientation. Patel wanted to join a revivalist campaign for rebuilding the Somnath temple. Nehru opposed this. Patel favoured strong-arm methods against dissidents. Nehru was generally moderate and respected democratic norms. Patel was all for private industry, Nehru favoured regulating it.

Nehru would probably have preferred negotiated integration of 550 princely states into India, rather than Patel's coercive approach. Eventually, Nehru acquiesced in Patel's methods.

Matters are somewhat complex here. The Congress line was that Paramountcy (of British rule over the princes) lapsed with independence. The choice to accede either to India or Pakistan couldn't be left to the princes; the people must decide.

However, the Congress government didn't oppose the offer of that very choice by the departing British. Instead, it adopted double standards. It secured Jammu and

Kashmir's accession by coercive means, as many historians have documented. Maharaja Hari Singh, faced with a "tribal invasion" from Pakistan, had no choice.

New Delhi gleefully cited his concurrence. But it proceeded to integrate Hyderabad and Junagadh into India against their rulers' wishes. The Hyderabad "police action" was an army operation, resulting in the killing of 27,000-40,000 Muslims in Hindu-led pogroms, according to the Sunderlal commission appointed by the Congress.

These are far from glorious chapters in Independent India's early history. Patel played a major role in these, but Nehru went along with him. Patel represented the Congress's Right wing. Nehru was certainly in its Left wing despite moderating his mid-1930s radicalism.

These reflected differences within the Freedom Movement, itself comprising diverse currents. The Sangh Parivar, consisting of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, was not part of the Movement, but collaborated with the British against it.

The RSS exhorted its members to join the British Indian army to get arms training. Even its khaki-shorts uniform was modelled on the colonial police's attire.

The Parivar is thus sickeningly hypocritical to claim Patel's mantle. It was Patel who banned the RSS after Gandhi's assassination by Nathuram Godse. Godse was closely connected with the RSS.

The Mahasabha collected funds for Godse's defence. This infuriated Patel, who drew the logical inference, "namely, that the HM is in it" (complicit in Gandhi's assassination).

As Patel's biographer and Gandhiji's grandson Rajmohan says, the Sardar "would have been very disappointed, very pained and saddened" at the butchery of Muslims under Modi's watch in 2002.

The Mahasabha toadied up to the British. But some of its members were admirers of European fascism too. HM leader B.S. Moonje even paid a visit to Mussolini in 1931. Moonje helped mould the RSS along fascist lines as part of its plan to "militarise the Hindus" and create a Hindu Rashtra.

Patel lifted the ban on the RSS in 1949, but only on the condition that it adopt a constitution which keeps it away from politics. The Sangh has comprehensively betrayed that pledge. It became the progenitor, ideological mentor, political master and organisational gatekeeper of the Jana Sangh, and later of the BJP, formed in 1980.

The RSS has adopted an overtly political posture and profile in recent years -- first by appointing all of the BJP's organisational secretaries, and then by expelling L.K. Advani from all party positions after his speech praising Jinnah.

More recently, it nominated Modi as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. The RSS has thus become defiant about assuming an explicitly political role. An ideologue writes in its mouthpiece Organiser, "no power in the country can stop an individual or group from entering politics."

Equally, the BJP has proved incapable of cutting its umbilical chord with the RSS and adopting moderation. Its dependence on the RSS is likely to grow as it runs an aggressive election campaign running up to 2014.

It will rely on the RSS for intensive door-to-door canvassing -- and for communally polarising the situation, as it recently did in Muzaffarnagar.

There lies the relevance of the 14-party October 30 convention against communalism in Delhi. Its call to "secular and democratic forces" to mobilise people to rebuff communalists and "defend our composite culture and strengthen the unity of the people" must be heeded.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. E-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Justice, finally

It gave me immense pleasure to read about Ashraf and Mueen's verdicts. Alas, it took us more than four decades to try those criminals. Question now remains what took our nation so long to bring these criminals to justice? The Nuremberg trials did not take decades to take place nor did the other war crimes' trials all over the world.

Shiblee Ahmed
California, USA

Why grand rallies?

Time has changed. But our political parties have remained the same as they were before. The concept of arranging grand rallies came into being as there were no modes of proper communication to



address a bigger audience. Secondly, they arranged rallies to show the strength of the party. What I believe is, AL and BNP do not need showdown, as we all know about their public supports. So to save time, money, hazards of bringing in people from all over the country, and get rid of traffic congestion, they should address the public through electronic media.

Kabir Hossain Taposh
Banani Dhaka

Getting Indian visa

It is not possible to get an appointment for Indian visa now. It may be mentioned that the same thing happened about a year ago and after the Indian government's intervention, the problem was resolved. But now after filling out the form online when you press the "submit" button, it immediately shows: "No appointment dates are available." This is just impossible. There must be appointment dates, maybe one, two or even three months later. There must be something wrong; some dishonest people must be behind this. I would request the honourable High Commissioner of India to kindly look into the matter and take urgent measures to punish the culprits involved and resolve the matter as soon as possible.

Kazi Rahman
One-e-mail

Comments on news report, "Govt goes tough on opposition," published on November 9, 2013

Ash C.

Just a mindless act without least consideration to the consequences! But will it work?

Mohammed Ismail

This is not the solution to present political crisis. It will increase violence; already another 12-hour hartal is added.

Jafar Iqbal

Khaleda Zia should be arrested also as she is the prime leader and responsible for all the crimes the party is committing.

MH Khan

Belated action. They should have been stopped long ago.

Vikram Khan

How can AL be so blind that they do not see the trap set up by BNP?

Disqus_

BNP is a violent political party. I think they support terrorism.

Bachch Malek

We urgently need a tough law against criminal activities like burning, killing, damaging public properties, etc.

God propose man dispose

Time is up for Awami League. They are now playing their last card. Only one thing can save them: the support of USA and India. India is trying their best to save Awami League but in the long run they will face more problems.

Aasfi Sarwar

So what next?

"Polls campaign in disguise"
(November 9, 2013)

Tandua ketra

One expert has seen nothing illegal in the conduct. Will others agree? TDS should make an effort to determine that.

SM

Using government funds for election campaign and personal enrichment are very normal for Bangladeshi politicians.

Spiderman

She knows how to misuse power and is a master manipulator in achieving her aim and objectives. Ethics of democracy and respect for law is least important to her. For the sake of Bangladesh and fairness in democracy, it is very legitimate to demand a CTG before election.

Is investment trapped?

FAARIA TASIN

A key component that propels the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate in the country is the proportion of investment. For the last seven years, we have seen that investment has been hovering within a narrow band of 25 percent of GDP. If we look middle-income countries, we will see that their investment-GDP ratio is within 35 to 40 percent.

It is natural to be worried about the investment rate in general; however, the recent turmoil in the country has embedded a greater sense of fear and skepticism regarding the investment climate than ever before.

Earlier this year, the monetary policy announced that it will opt for contraction of broad money growth rate from 17.7 percent to 17.2 percent. It received criticism from those who believed that this was the wrong step to take and increasing broad money growth rate would help lower interest rates and stimulate the murky investment climate.

Would that have been the right step? Let us take a look. We know that the lion's share of investment comes from the private sector (around 80 percent on average), so observing the private sector credit growth rate is extremely important.

Since mid last year, the private sector credit growth has been plummeting; it fell from 19.9 percent in August 2012 to 11.3 percent in August 2013 (Bangladesh Bank). This implies that the private sector has not been taking as many loans as it usually does. This can be attributed to the increase in political turmoil running up to elections as well as a lack in energy and infrastructure.

It can be argued that private sector credits growths were higher in previous election years, however, in the past, the length of political turbulence could be predicted as elections were held on time. Since the end of the previous BNP regime and takeover by the caretaker government, there has been perplexity about how long the political chaos will last. Unlike the previous time, this time the investors cannot predict how long the slump in economic activity will persist and thereby cannot calculate the depth of their risks.

As investment falls, there remains a significant amount of idle money lying in banks; interest rates can be expected to fall further in the next few months. Sadly, not many can take advantage of this due to the increase in political chaos. Investment must be set free from this trap for the country to attain a decent economic growth rate.

The writer is the head of research at The Daily Star and can be reached at faaria.ts@gmail.com