

Let wise counsel prevail

Seek peaceful resolution of political deadlock

WE fully share the concern of, and endorse the call to the political parties by, several eminent citizens of the country under the banner Bangladesh Rukhe Darao to desist from violence or repression as means of resolving the ongoing political impasse. In fact they have echoed our call that we have been making in this column consistently.

We would like to believe that the two parties are not oblivious of the deleterious consequences of their respective stand regarding the underlying issue that prevails upon the country's politics.

The opposition's political programmes have become incrementally violent that has not only caused serious damage to the economy it has regrettably also resulted in deaths of a large number of innocent citizens. We fail to understand why the opposition has neither urged its activists publicly to desist from violence nor has it apologized for the loss of lives and private and public property.

By the same token, the arrest and remand of senior BNP leaders by the government has been extremely hamhanded and uncalled for, which has put cold water on the prospect of dialogue between the two parties. It has inflamed the situation further. And some mischief mongers are exploiting the current flux to perpetrate violence on the minorities.

We renew our call to the two parties to shun their rigid stance not because of external pressure, not because of any partisan consideration but because the people of Bangladesh have had enough of violence and turmoil.

Garment sector reform

Partnering is the way to go

IT is heartening to note that the Responsible and Accountable Garment Sector (RAGS) Challenge Fund of the UK government has yielded multiple benefits. The composite project has demonstrated how an increase of Taka 491 to the worker's monthly salary has boosted daily efficiency and productivity by 18.28 percent and 17.07 respectively. Of course, salary increase went hand in hand with better working conditions to produce the result.

The success of RAGS was ensured through working with high profile buyers such as Arcadia, Marks & Spencer, Mothercare, New Look, Sainsbury's and Tesco. Non-government organisations were associated as well.

With ActionAid, RAGS has reached over 208,000 workers imparting basic training on labour laws as well as how to approach owners to negotiate better working conditions.

Capturing the essence of the shining path example, Bangladesh Bank governor highlighted 'human rights, worker-friendly environments, capacity building of workers and supply chain interventions which will adhere to global standards and create a win-win situation for both employees, workers and factory owners.'

Although the project is approaching an end, it leaves ample scope to continue the activities under the four projects -- led by ActionAid, Impact Foundation, Tesco and People Tree Foundation -- through new funding and new partnerships as underscored by experts.

The message is loud and clear for all the stakeholders. Combined efforts are needed to exploit the full potential of Bangladesh garment sector as the world leader.

Silence, rhetoric and loyalty

MAJORITY of us commoners ponder whether there are any sane and thoughtful individuals in the major political parties who comprehend the gravity of the current situation and the impending doom they themselves are inviting With overt involvement of US and India already in the news, it should be obvious to many leaders that the situation is not looking good. Then why don't they act or voice their concern to their party high-ups?

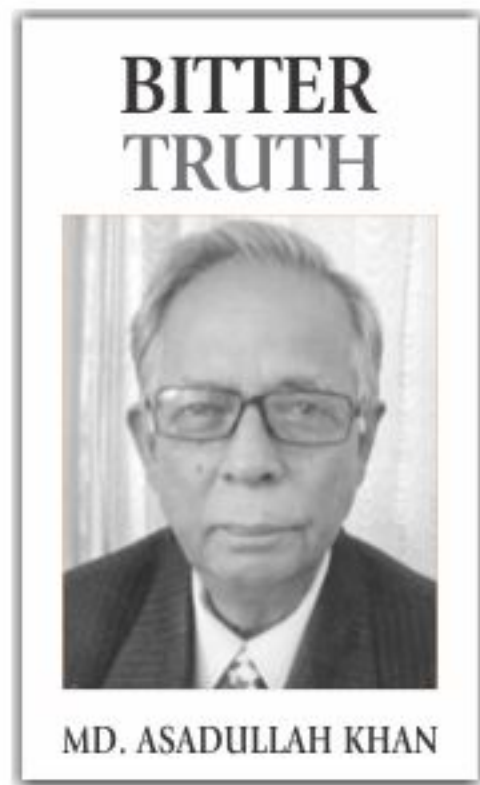
The two major political parties have instilled a culture of loyalty in order to consolidate their hegemony through repression of voices from within. The overwhelming political dominance of the two parties, concomitant with their polarity and divergent ideologies means that, for a politician, exit from the party is not an option. Given the pecuniary benefit (legal and beyond) of being a party leader and the significant cost of exit, most dissenting politicians will remain silent or delude themselves to believe in the party position. Thus, loyalty based on fear and excommunication results in a situation where voice is replaced by clichéd rhetoric and exit is replaced by silent consent or self-delusion.

This is exacerbated when senior party leaders take hardline rhetoric as sign of commitment and loyalty to the party. With such high value placed on loyalty, these hardliners move up the ladder, increasing polarity between parties and dominating the political landscape. This is a vicious circle and can explain why our major political leaders seems to have taken a flight from reality; why, in the face of such turmoil, we see complete disregard for lives of common people; why, at a time when compromise and consensus needs to be build, we see spewing of vitriolic speeches and irresponsible actions. It also explains why since 1990s our two parties have drifted apart and have become more violent, with so little trust and cooperation.

We are caught up in a spiraling political bubble which can burst any moment. We need democracy within our major parties. The senior party leaders need to hear the voice of dissent from within before they open up to the people. My message to those dissenting voice within, place the country before your party loyalty for once; and to the senior leaders, soothing as it may be to hear how great you have been may be it will not hurt if, for a change, you listen to these people

The writer is MPhil. Student at University of Cambridge, King's College.

Country in leadership crisis



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

BITTER TRUTH

WITH 84-hour shutdown enforced by the main opposition party BNP in the country from November 10 and political infighting and violence mounting up in all parts of the country that, in the meantime, have taken a toll of about 21 innocent lives on the streets other than jeopardising trade and business activities, transportation and normalcy in citizens' lives.

With both the ruling party and the opposition engaged in confrontational politics that shows no signs of abating, the rule of reason and consensus seems to be an illusion.

According to the public, arrests of top leaders of the main opposition party BNP would in no way heal the wounds but would rather escalate the crisis. Presumably, the force of events, mostly disastrous, taking shape at a break-neck speed has led the government to make up policy by the hour, day and week. Anxiously speaking: the crises are perilous. In such a context, people are prompted to say what chaos and sufferings during and aftermath of the Liberation War could not destroy, path to democracy did.

TV pictures of the incidence of violence and sporadic bomb attacks on innocent people not only on the streets of Dhaka city but in all parts of country during the hartal days, most spectacularly, pickets vandalising cars, uprooting railway lines, throwing cocktails at passenger buses, burning passengers alive inside the buses and cars makes a poignant show. Shops with shutters down, vehicular traffic off the roads, police beating the picketers and rival party cadres engaged in clashes on the streets throughout hartal hours in no way boost the image of the country, already ravaged by many other crises like climate-induced disasters, endemic corruption and slow pace of development activities. Bangladeshis living outside the country are wondering how and when peace and stability will be restored in the country.

The country has begun to look dangerously volatile, with donor agencies making no fresh grants, investment climate shrinking, services falling apart, unscrupulous and fake business groups swindling bank money in collusion with bank officials, crimes and drugs creating their elaborate and permanent reality and lastly, most vicious of all, academic institutions have become totally non-functional. In a word, a sinking feeling has gripped the whole nation.

In short: Bangladesh is suffering from a leadership crisis.

But leadership in such a paramount crisis is a superhuman quality that must be called into play. It is unquestionably true that almost all crises are consequences of the blunders committed earlier. Outraged by the bitter memory of Magura by-election, people and most political parties have been raising their voices for a caretaker government in the forthcoming parliamentary election that

must be free, fair and neutral.

Historical records are galore where great leaders imbued with statesmanship and pragmatism played very crucial role to set the records straight and saved their country from ignominy. Looking back to America in the past century, we can see that Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman, past presidents of America, owe their reputation to crisis leadership. Churchill, the wartime prime minister of Britain, would not have become that great unless he acted as events of the World War II demanded of him. By the same analogy many leaders have been destroyed by crises, despite other accomplishments. L.B. Johnson was devoured by Vietnam War, Carter by Iranian hostage crisis, Nixon by Watergate scandal, Hitler for unleashing the Holocaust and Stalin and Khrushchev for perpetrating an oppressive socialist regime.

In the current scenario what are our leaders doing while standing in the midst of a political impasse?

With the prime minister making it plain at the Khatib conference in Dhaka recently that her heart bleeds at the death and suffering of the innocent people and she does not crave for the job of the prime minister at the cost of the lives of these people, there is a flickering ray of hope on the horizon that a consensus could be arrived at through a meaningful dialogue. People are inclined to believe that she means it and every action from the ruling and opposition party stalwarts from now on must be backed by rational considerations, welfare of the masses and a look to the future. Precisely known to all, every crisis is automatically and too often exploited by other interest seekers and pseudo-politicians for their own gains and purposes. So there is reason to be cautious. There comes the necessity of grasping the future implications of present events, and forestall any likely catastrophe. But the overriding fear is that "Rare is the politician who means what he/she says and says what he/she means."

Most disappointingly, recent events and utterances by the party leaders have symbolised a situation that hardly shows any respect for democracy. The fact that our political leaders must not fail to take note that after so much developmental fiasco that went on for the last decade, this time voters might be judging the leaders and parties now in the election game from the track records they left behind. People are thinking that the moral values and ethical standard of the party leaders have been greatly corroded by a trail of scams and self-enrichment. This election might be an opportunity for the electorate to rid the society in particular and the country at large of the opportunists in public life.

Musing over the worsening scenario developing with each passing day in the country, one is prompted to think that the power of reason, sensibility and taking a realistic appraisal of the situation palls before the power of events. People's expectation runs high urging the country's leaders to face historic responsibilities and remake their relationship that holds the country unified in the face of disastrous extremist movement, religion-based politics and anti-liberation forces that loom ominously. And that needs leaders imbued with pragmatism, statesmanship and vision.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.
E-mail: sonia_afroz_khan@yahoo.com

India's historical hijacker



SHASHI THAROOR

AS the political temperature heats up in India, with five state assembly elections this month and a general election due to be held by April, one might expect Indian leaders to be dueling over visions of the future. Instead, they have been engaged for weeks in an unseemly brawl about the past.

The main opposition leader, Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has moved aggressively to lay claim to the legacy of one of India's most respected founders, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Like Modi, Patel was from Gujarat, where Modi is now chief minister. He was a determined nationalist, a key leader of the independence struggle, and a lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi.

As independent India's first deputy prime minister and home minister, Patel is credited with the integration of roughly 600 princely states, sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by force. A firm, tough, and effective administrator, Patel, who died in 1950 at the age of 75, is revered as the "Iron Man" of India.

In the normal course of events, Patel's illustrious life might have been left to the history books. But Modi, seeking to wrap himself in a more distinguished lineage than the BJP can claim, has called on farmers across India to donate iron from their plows to construct a giant 550-foot statue of the Iron Man in Gujarat. When finished, it will be by far the world's largest statue, dwarfing New York City's Statue of Liberty and Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer. But it will be a monument less to the modest Gandhian it ostensibly honours than to its builder's overweening ambitions.

Modi's identification with Patel is an effort at character-building by association. His own image has been tarnished by his inaction (or worse) during the massacre of more than a thousand Gujarati Muslims in a pogrom on his watch in 2002. Modi would rather be perceived as embodying Patel's decisiveness than as the destructive bigot his enemies decry.

To hear Modi tell it, India would have been better off with Patel -- who forged national unity, defended the country's Hindus during the horrors of Partition, and stood firm on issues like Kashmir -- instead of the allegedly pussyfooting Jawaharlal Nehru, as its first prime minister. The implication is clear -- a vote for Modi is a vote for a latter-day Patel.

That message resonates with many Gujaratis, who are proud to be reminded of a nationally admired native son, and with much of India's urban middle class, whose members yearn for a strong leader to cut through the confusion and indecision of a sprawling country's messy democracy.

But the ruling Congress Party is not about to relinquish one of its greatest leaders. Congress politicians have reacted with robust indignation to Modi's attempt to appropriate Patel's legacy. Both men were faced with a serious breakdown of law and order in their respective domains, involving violence and rioting against Muslims. But Patel's conduct during the violence that accompanied Partition stands in stark contrast to Modi's behaviour in office.

In Delhi in 1947, Patel immediately and effectively moved to protect Muslims, moving 10,000 in the most vulnerable areas to the security of Delhi's historic Red Fort. Because he feared that communal passions might have infected the local security forces, he moved army troops from Madras and Pune to Delhi to ensure calm. He attended prayers at the famous Nizamuddin Dargah to convey to Muslims that they and their faith were unquestionably part of India. He even went to the border town of Amritsar and pleaded with Hindu and Sikh mobs to stop victimising Muslim refugees fleeing to the new Islamic state of Pakistan.

In each case, Patel succeeded. Tens of thousands of people are alive today because of his interventions.

The contrast with what happened in Gujarat in 2002 is painful. Whether or not Modi bears direct responsibility for the pogrom, he certainly cannot claim to have acted as Patel did. He took no direct and immediate action, as the state's chief executive, to protect Muslims. Nor did he publicly condemn the attacks, let alone visit a masjid or a Muslim neighbourhood as a sign of reassurance. On the contrary, many believe that he provided protection and comfort to the rioters.

There is a particular irony to a self-proclaimed "Hindu nationalist" like Modi, whose speeches reveal a thinly veiled contempt for Muslims, laying claim to the legacy of a Gandhian leader who would never have qualified his Indian nationalism with a religious label. Patel would have been outraged not only by Modi's conduct in office, but by the kind of remarks that Modi has repeatedly made against minorities.

History has often been contested terrain in India. The Gujarat riots in 2002 were, after all, directly linked to the destruction in 1992 of the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque, which was allegedly built on the site of an ancient Hindu temple.

Modi is of course well aware that the past retains a powerful hold over India's present. How Indian voters judge his attempt to reinvent himself as a latter-day Patel could have a major impact on the country's future. But one thing is certain: they will render their verdict long before his enormous avatar is placed on its pedestal.

Shashi Tharoor is India's Minister of State for Human Resource Development. His most recent book is Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2013. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Need for an Irish consulate in Dhaka

A good number of Bangladeshis are now living in the Republic of Ireland, mostly engaged in small business or higher studies. Some have already acquired Irish nationality through prolonged stay there. The family members of these Bangladeshis have to visit Ireland occasionally to meet their next of kins, but as Ireland does not have a resident mission in Bangladesh, Bangladeshis, willing to visit Ireland have to travel all the way to New Delhi for procurement of Irish visa from Irish embassy there. This involves procurement of Indian visa and the hassle and extra expenditure for journey and stay in Indian capital. Please note that no postal or courier service is available for sending passport to any other country from Bangladesh.

I would request the government of Bangladesh to immediately urge the Irish authorities to open a consular office in Dhaka to mitigate the suffering of intending visitors from Bangladesh to Ireland. As an interim measure, they may be requested to at least arrange for a passport collection and delivery centre here, so that Bangladeshis are not required to visit Delhi at great trouble and expense to get Irish visa.

Afroz Chowdhury
Baridhara, Dhaka

Can Bangladesh afford democracy?

Even after 42 years of achieving independence, I feel that Bangladesh is still struggling to lay the foundation stone of democracy. Theoretically we know much about democracy but practically it is absent in Bangladesh! My question is, can Bangladesh afford to take so much economic stress for democracy tests? Common people are already facing economic hardship and are fearful of the future.

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

What I didn't say

The Reading Circle (TRC) met on 9th November 2013 at Neo Mendes' Omni Bookshop to celebrate Alice Munro's receiving the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature. As a member of TRC, I too was asked to say a few words on that occasion. While appreciating the fact that the event was covered by your newspaper, I would like to mention that most of the quotations at the event that were attributed to me were not mine at all. But what I found particularly embarrassing was regarding the following sentence: 'Amenah added that her (Alice Munro's) writing was certainly of a high standard.'

I don't have the temerity to judge the writing of a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and didn't. Amenah Ispahani
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "PM alone knows about next step," published on November 14, 2013

Shahin Huq

The truth is: all laws of our country are meaningless now. What PM Sheikh Hasina says is law. How preposterous is it that they remain ministers even after tendering their resignation letters! The whole country is totally in the dark about what is going to happen.

Spiderman

If only one person knows the next step of a nation then it's not democracy. It's a total autocratic rule.

Saleh Tanveer

Her whims have become the law of the land!

MH Khan

This is the core problem of both AL and BNP. They are run by dictators. There is no democracy in the operation/management of these two political parties. But they act like custodians of democracy.

"Power plant won't harm Sundarbans" (November 14, 2013)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

We need more power plants but not at the expense of Sundarbans. Why don't they relocate this project to some other place where it will be less harmful to environment?

Alekanda

If PM Hasina has a magic wand, she will be able to avoid the environmental disasters in Rampal project. Please, PM, don't try to fool us, we have common sense and we know the facts.

SM

Did she ever visit any coal-fired power plants? How about spending 48 hours at an Indian coal-fired power plant to check it out? She is ruining the future of Bangladesh by allowing Indian control in our power generation. The rental power schemes are at least run by Bangladeshis and not unaccountable like Indian firms.