

Targeting of minorities

Govt must act to stop the perpetrators

THE news of Jamaat-Shibir targeting Hindus in some parts of the country is very disquieting indeed. While we condemn this act, we are rather surprised at the failure of the law enforcing agencies to stop Jamaat's violence. The party has created panic in the minds of the minorities by threatening them with dire consequences and, in many instances, torching their houses and business establishments. Their acts have reached a level of criminality, particularly after the execution of Quader Mollah, which must be stopped immediately.

It is not difficult to comprehend that whenever the opportunity arises in murky situations the members of the minority community are preyed on by Jamaat-Shibir elements. They aim to create communal situation deliberately by attacking Hindu households, they being soft and vulnerable targets. In this context, the law and order forces should have acted with greater vigil in advance to pre-empt such eventualities. And when these incidents occur they should apprehend the perpetrators and have them face law.

Jamaat's violence has reached a level that can no longer be seen as mere reaction to the hanging of one of their party leaders. And what does Jamaat want to achieve? Whatever that may be, it can come only at the expense of the country's stability and security. And this is what should be comprehended by all, cutting across party lines.

EU absence from Savar

We expect greater sensitivity on these historic occasions

EU countries have been tested and trusted friends of Bangladesh, and we have been greatly appreciative of all their efforts. It is perhaps for this very reason that we were shocked when EU as a body decided to stay away from the Victory Day programme at the Savar Memorial. We expect our close friends to share our sense of pride with us at the millions of lives laid down in our struggle for Independence. This is exactly where we find the EU decision was so very disappointing.

The excuse given, that they had an urgent report to write for Brussels, is something, we believe, our efficient EU diplomats could have easily worked around. Our Victory Day observance and the Wreath laying ceremony at Savar Memorial is a fixed calendar event and therefore attendance in it should not have been subjected to last minute collective cancellation. However, we note with satisfaction that they attended the President's reception in the evening.

It is said that diplomacy is as much about clear cut positioning as it is about symbols and nuanced messages. The symbolic value of Victory Day to our people seems to have been totally lost on our EU friends. The nuanced message that their collective absence may send to those who do not share our sense of pride of this day -- like those who opposed our Liberation War -- did not seem to have been seriously considered. Yes, even last year many EU ambassadors absented themselves on security grounds but it was not a collective decision, which makes yesterday's absence unprecedented and hence unwarranted and unfortunate.

Given our long standing friendship with the EU, we would hope that greater sensitivity is shown in the future in participating in our National events, especially those with immense historical and emotional significance.

Education: Victim of politics

“EDUCATION is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”-- Nelson Mandela. Certainly, it is the basic pillar which helps a nation to flourish. Unfortunately, political instability has shut down educational institutions and shaken the whole nation. In the long run, we are the victims and the nation is the sufferer.

It is surprising that the government is failing to ensure proper security to the students whereas our constitution gives such a right to all (Article 32). In spite of this, many schools are continuing their classes and academic activities during strike and blockade. Therefore, students are forced to go to school to attend classes and sit for their exams by taking risks. As a consequence, students are attacked and sometimes even killed by political activists. In Lalmonirhat, twenty students and two female teachers along with the headmaster of the school were beaten up by the political cadres for keeping the school open during a hartal in March 2013 (New Age, March 29, 2013). In such circumstances, it is not surprising that an increasing number of students are losing interest and courage to go to school, which is creating pressure on them.

Significantly, many colleges and universities remain closed for a long time. A few private universities have cancelled their semester while some have extended the duration of the semester. This situation will ultimately affect the practical life of the students as they cannot expand their skills and efficiency level. This will thus affect the development process of the country.

Political instability and violent protests are increasing day by day. A UNDP report published in 2005 showed that both major political parties have been equally active in using violence as a means of political protest. Consequently, pass rate of this year has gone down from 76.5% (2012) to 71.3%, whereas the combined pass rate also fell by 4.37 percentage points.

The political parties must sit for dialogue to come up with a consensus among all, and they should make a long-term strategic commitment to change the political situation. Political parties must always remember that “education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army” (Edward Everett).

The demeaning of politics



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

POLITICS has been variously defined by erudite men. Some have called it the art of the wise and the possible. However, as of now, harried Bangladeshis are seeing more dirt from indecent political exchanges in a distressingly combative scenario wherein possibility of accommodation and compromise appear painfully distant. Politicians have been reviled in the strongest terms by the suffering public.

Curiously enough, though politicians throughout the world do not figure high in popularity ratings, the reality is that we cannot do without politicians in managing affairs of the State. That is all the more reason why our politicians need to heed people's sentiment and take due cognisance of the reality. Pragmatic citizens would not expect our politicians to take a view of longer range than the period of responsibility entrusted to the Parliament. At the minimum, they are expected to be able to effectively respond to the pressures of the day.

Many of our politicians do not appear to realise the great honour that society bestows on them by electing them to the legislature. Quite instantly the elected lawmaker has the exalted prefix of 'Honourable' in his introduction; and since Parliament is considered the epicenter of all important transactions relating to public affairs, the legislator's job is solemn and onerous. He requires intellectual capability and more importantly the capacity to take a balanced view of things, to act independently and to have character.

It is indeed interesting to note that till now there has been no discussion of setting positive qualifications for aspirants to a parliamentary career. One may find that the first qualification regarding citizenship of the country is usually an accident of birth and the second qualification about minimum age is inevitably the result of the inexorable passage of time.

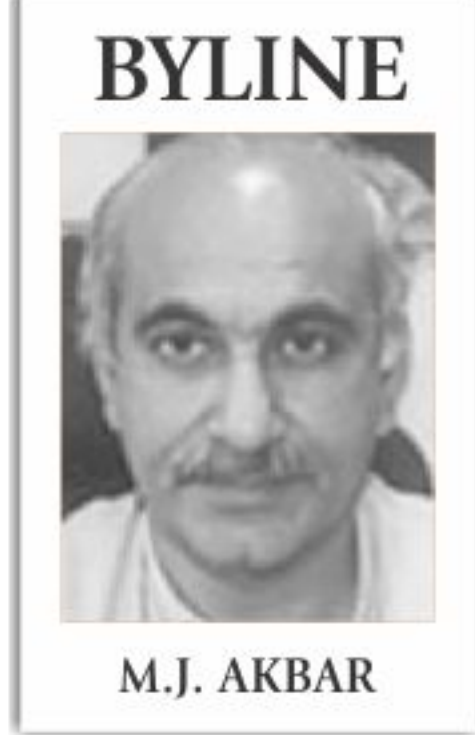
The point to draw attention to is that for the job of legislating and also governing a democracy no training or qualification is necessary. To curious observers it might appear anomalous that we should insist upon high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it, except that they are elected. To others it may sound incredible that to steer the lives and destinies of more than 150 million people, one is not required to have any education or expertise at all!

It is not for this writer to question the wisdom of our Constitution framers insofar as it relates to setting positive qualifications for prospective lawmakers. What, however, engages all discerning citizens is the proactive attitude, or the lack of it, of all politicians including lawmakers. This assumes heightened significance in view of the present political stalemate. Are politicians and lawmakers demeaning politics?

Nobody would question the politician's prerogative to rule. The historical fact is that people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. It is, therefore, sad to witness the continued demeaning of politics and politicians in our midst.

The question is, has politics become dirty because we see many of our politicians occupied solely in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice? Are our politicians served by deception and craftiness instead of vision and imagination? Has the near breakdown of politics been caused by the fragility of our institutions? Such worries should bother a concerned citizenry.

Post-poll lessons for the winners and whiners



M.J. AKBAR

IN the great toss-up between perception and evidence, the former generally wins. Conventional wisdom, for instance, suggests that unity within a party brings victory. Reality: It is the scent of victory that encourages unity. When crowds recede in an election campaign, leaders squabble and search for alibis. Tensions become septic after results. Witness the blistering attack on Digvijay Singh by a former Congress spokesman. As for alibis, top marks to the Rajasthan Congress leader who blamed the Election Commission for encouraging voters to turn up. If only they had not voted, Congress would still be in power. Quite right.

Politics is better understood with a scan below the surface. Tilt the perspective on what seems an obvious fact, and the picture changes to startling effect. The Aam Aadmi Party has made a dream debut in Delhi, winning 28 seats. But think back to the start of the campaign. Kejriwal made much play of an opinion poll, done by his associate Yogendra Yadav, which prophesied that his party would win a very comfortable majority, up to 47 seats. Kejriwal offered tantalising details of a swearing-in ceremony in the open. His message was unambiguous -- he was in the game for governance, not maverick thrills, and he was taken seriously by voters.

Did Kejriwal invent that opinion poll? No. Kejriwal is an honourable man. Yadav, if anything, is even more honourable, with proven credentials in the opinion poll business. Yadav did not make up that claim. By that measure, Kejriwal's support declined by nearly 20 seats between the opinion poll and polling day. The struggling BJP picked up momentum, reaching first place but not entering comfort zone. Has Kejriwal, therefore, lost an election that he could have won comfortably? This question seems to have evaporated in post-results hyperbole.

Both BJP and Kejriwal are already putting together a narrative for the re-match, but a reluctance to rule will hurt Kejriwal more, precisely because he represents greater hope. He cannot argue, convincingly, that he did not have support in the assembly. Congress has offered unconditional backing, and BJP is in no position to sabotage him. But as chief minister, he will need to deliver on free electricity, cheaper water, affordable housing and better security, which is easier promised than achieved.

The significant national story from Delhi is the continu-

Have not the bigwigs of both Awami League and BNP pressed their partisan advantage to a bitter end, never understood and respected the political opponent, and hardly ever stressed the importance of unity between all citizens? Did not they realise that, since the spirit of moderation did not prevail, our society has degenerated into divisions and hatred has replaced goodwill?

Politics brought to the fore a lot of dirt because our democratic experience did not depend upon habits of consent and compromise that are attributes of a mature political society. We did not seek to establish and sustain a lawful government under the rule of abiding law and with freedom of opposition and dissent.

It is time, therefore, to ensure that arbitrary power cannot once again wear the garb of constitutionalism. The elected representatives who betrayed the people's trust need to be kept away from public affairs. The question is, how do we restore politics to its artful best and to the bonafide politicians?

Our first task is to have leadership at all levels by doing away with the concentration of all power and decision-making authority in one individual. Simultaneously, we have to let all groups function harmoniously so that the synergistic effect of such harmonious cooperation can be felt everywhere. At the national level, we need to establish Government of Bangladesh Limited -- limited not in responsibility but limited by the rule of law and the discipline of the constitution.

Politics in Bangladesh has to ensure that the lawmakers, dressed in brief authority, are not supreme. The supremacy of the constitution and the eternal human freedoms has to get precedence. We have to remember that the people are supreme and they have given the constitution unto themselves.

We can no longer vote ignorant professional politicians to power. The survival of politicians must not depend upon the continuation of the forces of ignorance. Politicians having a vested interest in illiteracy must be rejected. Perhaps the time has come when citizens must wrest the initiative from professional politicians and insist upon persons of knowledge, vision and character being chosen as candidates for various elected bodies, including the parliament.

At present, we have to admit that citizens are caught in a vicious circle. Persons of talent and integrity will not enter public life because of the filth and stench; and yet public life cannot be cleansed unless persons of talent and integrity enter it.

When we restrict politics to politicians and their antics, and intermittent interventions by the military, we exclude the above-mentioned subjects from purview. Politics in such a situation becomes a spectator sport. Quite naturally, in such a scenario, the people have neither a role in selecting the players nor any part in the game itself. Therefore, the people also share the strengths and weaknesses of the players.

Politics should touch our daily lives. For residents of urban centres, the issues of law and order, shortage of water and electricity, lack of a public transportation system, and unemployment should be the focal points of our politics. Issues which concern citizens' lives are political issues.

The colonial masters introduced the concepts of modern governance: a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary; and, of course, modern universities and colleges for social science, medicine and engineering. If we succeed in rejuvenating all those we will have excelled in the art of politics.

The writer is a columnist of the *The Daily Star*.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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ICT Act against freedom of expression

Internet is the greatest communication tool of all. But now it will become a cause of fear. The government has made a new ICT Act which will be a threat to freedom of expression. According to the new Act, the government may arrest anyone without showing a warrant. Even they may increase the punishment from 7 years to 14 years. There is no scope to get bail. I think it will hamper the freedom of expression of internet users.

Our constitution has a law about freedom of thought, conscience and speech. According to this law, people have the right to express their opinions freely. Under this new Act, it will not be possible for internet users to express their opinions freely. When writing any comment, article, or posting anything on social networks like Facebook, Tweeter, Skype, Blog, etc., the internet users will remain in fear. I think this new Act is contradictory to the constitution.

Md. Maskurul Alam
Department of Statistics
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PM failed the people

PM Sheikh Hasina has failed to run the country. Her government could not provide security to people and stop killing of innocent citizens. I hope one day she will face the court for remaining in power illegally and forcefully when people of Bangladesh didn't want her and she will have to answer to people for her failure to run the country. She never thinks about people's welfare but loves to remain in power. People of Bangladesh have never seen such a shameless and power-hungry lady before.

An angry citizen
On e-mail

Comments on post editorial, "Ha! Ha! We fooled the UN," published on December 13, 2013

Nrb

True fools are the citizens who continue to allow these people to hold the country hostage. Unless we revolt and throw them out, we and our children will continue to suffer.

Nds

Since long Mr. Anam has been hammering through his columns for holding dialogue. Now he has realised that dialogue has no chance to bring any result. His policy of maintaining a very calculated balance in apportioning blame in perfectly equal measure to both the rival groups can't be an intelligent, rational and viable guide for the people to decide in whose favour they should take their stand.

Arosh

One needs common sense in order to understand Mr. Anam's message.

"War crimes, Kerry & history" (December 12, 2013)

SM

Was Nuremberg trial procedure different from Bangladeshi trial? Also saying Bangladesh Parliamentary election may derail - did he mean the violence will increase and it may impact the election? There is no international standard of spying... SBA got it wrong. Ask RAW/ISI/KGB/MOSSAD -- no one follows any standard. I think Bangladesh is in a much better situation to explain to these western countries the reasons of these trials and should have been ready for a diplomatic defence.

Saint

We, the people of Bangladesh are responsible for the interference of other countries in our internal issue because we elect dumb and greedy political leaders to lead our nation.

Javed Helali

Mr Ahsan, you have got it all wrong. Although, I do not agree with many of Kerry's policies, I do not think he was saying anything in support of Jamaat and BNP. But what Kerry is saying here is a very simple observation on the possible consequences of Mollah's hanging in the present situation.

A freedom fighter

A great piece indeed exposing the American hypocrisy. What international standard was followed to execute unarmed Bin Laden?

Ben 10

US had suffered severely in the last decade for not listening to logic and standards. So much so that today it's making negotiations with the same Taliban who they fought for 14 years. Not just US, but UK, Australia, EU and rights bodies have objections because of the process of justice.

Vikram Khan

Thanks for this correct analysis and to place the political crisis in Bangladesh in its historical context. The UN does not give a penny to Bangladesh; it is all about the (hidden) agenda of international stakeholders in the region.

Aasfisarwar

US is not a perfect nation nor their own citizens are enjoying equal privilege. Nonetheless, when it comes to citizen rights, the difference between US and Bangladesh is day and night.

Numan Abdullah

Everyone demands what serves their interests; democracy, human rights are just illusions that shadow them.