

Maltreatment of opposition leaders

A repressive denial of space

THE government has again charged senior opposition leaders with arson attack and murder following Tuesday night's Bangla Motor tragedy that killed a policeman. Among some 40 people accused in the case, 18 are top opposition leaders including BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the party's standing committee member Mirza Abbas, Goyeshwar Chandra Roy as well as two Jamaat leaders. It's worthwhile to note that in the afternoon of that day, BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia had called upon her supporters and party activists from across the country to join what she termed 'Democracy March' and converge on Dhaka next Sunday.

The sweeping manner in which the opposition leaders were accused is questionable. How and when was the necessary investigation carried out before implicating them in the case? In fact, the way the issue has been handled by the police raises more questions it answers.

Filing of police case against opposition leaders hours after BNP chairperson's call for Dhaka march cannot be passed off purely as coincidental. It may be recalled that similar criminal charges of arson and murder were brought against top BNP-led 18 party leaders in November last year when buses were burnt down in Shahbagh and Malibagh amid opposition-enforced political programmes.

The government action goes down as being vengeful, aimed at foiling the December 29 opposition-called mass rally in Dhaka.

Such maltreatment of the senior opposition leaders for their alleged part in criminal acts is as outrageous as it is unacceptable.

Public university admission

Another victim of political unrest

NEARLY 50,000 young men and women are admitted to the country's public universities every year. This year however, the whole process has gone into tailspin with the seemingly endless political strife that has gripped the country. With *hartals* and blockades occupying most days of the month, neither university authorities nor students are completely sure when and how entrance exams will be held. And it isn't only the confusion revolving around examination dates; with prospective students unable to get to and from institutions to complete the whole process, many thousands will be left out of the admission procedure.

University authorities find themselves in a fix when coming up with fresh dates to avoid the political clampdown. Yet, with a fresh political agitation programme being called as soon as one has finished, the exercise has become futile. With examination dates facing constant delay, the academic calendar cannot be maintained. As most aspiring university students are hoping to attend multiple examinations in different institutions, the situation is even more impossible for them. Written tests are mostly followed by different dates for oral examinations – and this year it would seem, most students will be unable to attend both. Not knowing for certain whether the test will actually be held does little to help the hapless who are already counting the costs associated with lost months of academic study. We would urge the political parties to give some space for these examinations to be held, for the sake of hopeful entrants to higher education.

What people think

Friday: December 20, 2013

Do you think that the 5th January election would be another controversial election of the history?

Yes

88%

No

12%

Saturday: December 21, 2013

Do you agree with Gonojagoron Mancha's demand for suspension of diplomatic ties with Pakistan?

Yes

27%

No

73%

Sunday: December 22, 2013

Do you think the law enforcement agencies would be able to provide people with safety as the 10th parliamentary election approaches?

Yes

20%

No

80%

Monday: December 23, 2013

Do you think Jatiya Party leaders are making contradictory statements deliberately on their participation in general election to confuse people?

Yes

84%

No

16%

Tuesday: December 24, 2013

Do you think it was justified for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to blame the main opposition BNP's polls boycott for the 154 candidates' uncontested election to the 10th parliament?

Yes

21%

No

79%

Wednesday: December 25, 2013

Do you agree with BNP leader Nazrul Islam Khan that an amicable solution to the present political crisis is still possible through dialogue if the government is sincere about it?

Yes

74%

No

26%

Thursday: December 26, 2013

Do you agree with the call of Human Rights Watch to set up an effective mechanism to protect witnesses in the war crimes trials in Bangladesh?

Yes

75%

No

25%

Putting the constitution before the country



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

WHEN Haiti's President for Life Francois Duvalier called for an early election in 1961, it was two years before his term was up. His baffled countrymen didn't know what card the ruler had up his sleeve until the election results showed that he won with hundred percent of the votes. Rafael Trujillo, military strongman, seized power in the Dominican Republic in 1930s through a rigged election in which he gave himself more votes than there were voters. In less than a week, we're going to see a similarly grotesque election, nothing like which this country has seen before. Half the candidates have been elected already, before anybody has cast his vote.

The examples of the dictators are relevant. Duvalier, Trujillo and the likes of them did insane things to perpetuate power. They did more insane things once they thought power was perpetuated. Duvalier had ordered the deaths of all black dogs in the country after he, a practitioner of voodoo, was convinced his enemy Clement Barbot had transformed into a large black dog. Another President for Life, Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, was a renaming freak. He even changed the word 'bread' to 'Gurbansoltan,' which incidentally was his mother's name. One of Niyazov's fantasies was to see his mother eaten alive by poor people.

We're supposed to be different from a dictatorship because we're supposed to live in a democracy, election being its heart and soul. But our democratically elected leaders have this penchant for dragging this sacred institution from pillar to post. Now they're talking about holding the tenth parliamentary election as a rite of passage to the eleventh. They want to make a willful mistake as an opportunity to correct it next!

Like it or not, rulers reserve the right to be crazy when in power. Mobutu Sese Seko of the Democratic Republic of Congo forced the evening television news to begin with a scene of him descending from the clouds. Trujillo had appointed his three-year-old son as a colonel, crowned his daughter queen and honoured his nearly illiterate wife as a "writer and philosopher." He also went on to a campaign for his wife to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

These are a few examples of how delusions strike after

power goes to the head. Our government is wasting six billion taka of taxpayers' money on a futile election. It's common knowledge that this election is going nowhere. In fact, everybody, including some key ruling party leaders, admits that it's an election as much as margarine is butter.

Going back to Niyazov, he outlawed beards on men and makeup on television anchors, and prohibited chewing tobacco on Turkmenistan soil. But one of the most outlandish expressions of his madness was when he suggested that his countrymen should chew on bones instead of tobacco because it would strengthen their teeth.

In so much as a ruler's wish is our command, it begs for an answer if this bare-bones election is going to strengthen anything in us. The government proposes to hold the same election twice as people wonder if that's something approved by the constitution. Cynics argue that this redundant election is a ruse to buy time. The government wants to test the endurance of the opposition by stretching it thin. It's still hoping to shake up the resistance either by creating rift within the opposition alliance or in the main opposition party itself.

What is lost in this opprobrium of opportunism is the sanctity of a prerogative that defines the dignity of people in a free country. Three million people didn't give their lives and two hundred thousand women didn't lose their honour so that this country could be held captive by the vagaries of depraved politicians. Thousands of words spoken to uphold the spirit of the liberation war sound hollow when people are deprived of its foremost felicity, which is their right to vote. One man, one vote is the ultimate credo of freedom, the blood, tears and sighs of people signified in the power of the ballot.

That's why the first thing dictators manipulate is polls. Then they hunt for their enemies, rename things, favour their families and, above all, impose eccentric whims on the people of their countries. Francisco Macias of Equatorial Guinea went a notch above the rest. He banned the use of lubricants in a power plant, saying that his magic powers could keep the place running.

Our government is doing exactly the same thing. It has already banned popular will from elections, which is meant to lubricate democracy. How does it plan to run this country? It needs some kind of magic to convince us that the manual is more important than the machine. History will ask one day how it was necessary to protect the constitution at the cost of the country.

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COMMENTARY

Please do not hold Jan 5 elections

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

structure of the constitution. ("Abadh, sushtha o nirapekkha nirbachan nishshandehey sangbidhaner akti basic structure"). Justice SK Sinha in the same judgment said, "The constitution abhors any system of governance other than a government which is elected by the people." Justice Abdul Wahab Miah, another judge of the same bench said, "Democracy and free and fair election is (sic) inextricably mixed. Like democracy, free and fair election is also a basic structure of the Constitution. Without free and fair election democracy can never be practiced in its true sense." He adds, "In the absence of free and fair election, Parliament cannot have real legitimacy and cannot be said to be sovereign as well, and in such a parliament people will have no representation".

In another paragraph Justice Miah says "... election as referred to in article 65(2) of the Constitution definitely refers to free, fair and peaceful elections; if candidates get themselves elected by use of muscle power and money, coercion, threat, intimidation and exerting undue influence on the government machinery, they cannot be called people's representatives and Parliament consisting of such members cannot be called Parliament in the true sense within the meaning of clause (1) of article 65 of the Constitution and such Parliament cannot materialise the aspirations and dreams of our forefathers and the martyrs who sacrificed their lives in the liberation struggle of 1971."

So the question that Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League must ask themselves is what sort of parliament and government will the 5th January election produce. How much of the people's mandate will it carry? How much confidence of the people will it enjoy? What will be its legitimacy? What representative character will it have? We believe, very little.

So what will Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League gain by all this? Again, we believe, very little.

Whatever AL and the PM may say, a parliament of 154 MPs uncontested, and the rest 146 barely contested, can and will never have the legitimacy that comes from a fully contested election. The ruling party can only persist in following through on this so-called election at the risk of losing its reputation and credibility as a party that counts on people's support for its existence.

The idea that this parliamentary election should go ahead and that the election to the 11th parliament can be held on an agreed formula very soon is wasteful and unproductive and it will prolong people's agony and destroy the economy, not to say lead to killing of more people.

An infinitely superior option for AL would be to go for a genuine and free and fair election. It will greatly enhance its prestige both at home and abroad. Therefore, we suggest the following steps as the best option before the country, before the two major political parties, to save democracy, prevent further bloodshed and prevent destruction of the economy.

1. The Election Commission and the ruling party should desist from holding the January 5th election. The fact that a majority of voters could not exercise their adult franchise in the 154 uncontested seats is enough to destroy all the credibility of the 10th Parliament. It should sufficiently weigh on the EC's conscience that what it is about to stage will be the biggest fraud played on the people of Bangladesh in the name of democracy.
2. Sheikh Hasina should reconvene the 9th parliament, which has not yet been dissolved, and work out a poll-time government formula acceptable to all. It does not have to replicate the former CTG concept and can reflect much of the PM's own ideas of an all party government. The only hurdle remaining is: Who will head it? We think the President can rescue the nation at this stage if requested by all sides. In such an all-party poll-time government headed by the President crucial portfolios such as home and establishment should remain with the President. The 9th parliament can fix 90 days time limit to hold the election and form a new government.
3. If the 9th Parliament should be reconvened the opposition should join it without any precondition and

must withdraw all its programmes and start a negotiating process leading to a free and fair election.

4. Jamaat's participation must be conditional in compliance with the High Court judgment.

Why should the PM take such steps? Because the ruling party has as much, if not more, to gain from it than the option of railroading a voter-less election. It is our considered view that the Awami League has done well on the economic front. It has also gained significantly from staging the war crimes trial, something that boosted the personal image of the AL leader. It still has tremendous grassroots-based organizational network that can be used to galvanize public support in its favour.

Why should the opposition accept the above steps? Because the opposition has lost significant public support through its 'killing and burning' of innocent people in the name of anti-government agitation. Its continued hartals and oborodhs are damaging the economy and taking the country towards ruination. BNP and its allies must realize that they are in fact destroying the country and that our economy is on the verge of collapse. They can only sustain their agitation at great cost to the people and the economy.

The ruling Awami League should calculate that the opposition has not been able to gather public support on any issue other than a poll-time government. Therefore, making concessions on it will throw wide open the election process in which AL has a chance of winning, given vigorous, well planned and effective campaigning. By compromising on the poll-time government-which retains much of the PM's own formula and only compromises on the President heading it- the PM and her party can gain incalculable goodwill that can be turned into votes if campaigned well.

Awami League needs to regain its confidence that it is still a formidable party and has the strength to win a free and fair election. Whatever it may say, the public impression is that it has lost that confidence. It cannot escape its leaders' notice that today the party appears more and more dependent on police, BGB and the security forces in doing its work rather than on its workers. This cannot be good for AL in the mid and long run.

BNP for its part must review its relationship with Jamaat. This big party, having formed government twice, looks more and more to be in the pocket of Jamaat. BNP leaders, especially Khaleda Zia, appear to be fundamentally indifferent to the issue of the war crimes trial. There appears to be a lack of understanding about the genocide committed by the Pakistanis in 1971 and Jamaat's role in it.

BNP, for its own future should either de-link itself from Jamaat, or insist Jamaat, as a party, should de-link itself with the leaders who are now accused of crimes against humanity. All Jamaat members below the age of fifty were either born after Bangladesh came into being or were too young to have played any role then. Why should they carry the burden of genocide committed by those leaders? The impression that such an admission will destroy their politics is an idea imposed by these old 'genocide-accused' leaders on the younger generation. As a political option in a democracy, Jamaat can always exist-like the RSS and VHP in India- as long as it denounces the role of old Jamaat in our Liberation War and in having committed genocide. It is for Jamaat to decide its future role in Bangladesh, but BNP must realise that the people of Bangladesh want and are determined to try the war criminals and impart justice to them for their crimes against unarmed Bangladeshi men, women and children.

As for the present, a political compromise is the wisest option for the country, its democracy and its economy. As a ruling party we want to tell Awami League that "you have no right to deprive us of our right to vote"; to the opposition we say, "You have no right to kill us, burn us, destroy our personal and public property and you have no right to destroy our future and that of the younger generation by destroying our economy".

To ourselves we say, "We cannot sit on the sidelines as our political leaders play with our future and take the country toward definite ruination. Please use your democratic "Rights" to let your concerns be heard and taken into

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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AL leading country towards disaster

Awami League should know that people will not accept one-party election. There is every possibility that Awami League will be forced to step down. I do not understand why Sheikh Hasina is so adamant about holding the election without the main opposition, which will eventually bring disaster to the country as well as to AL. If AL makes some compromises and can manage BNP to participate in the election, there is still a possibility that people might vote for AL. People are angry with the killing and burning of so many innocent people but they will not accept one-party election either.

People want peace so that they can work hard and decide their own destiny. I would request both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to compromise and find a solution.

Ismat Jahan
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Don't make cricket a victim of politics

Previously when there was intensive political turmoil and violence in Bangladesh, sports, particularly cricket, was not a victim. This vindicated our love and passion for the great game. But recently the West Indies U-19 team left the series midway due to cocktail blasts beside the hotel the team was staying. This incident has put at risk our chance to host the Asia Cup and most importantly the T20 World Cup, as India has already showed interest to host T20 World Cup. And the Indian media's attitude suggests they want to take advantage of this situation in Bangladesh to compel ICC to shift the World Cup venue to India. Unfortunately, our politicians have not kept any scope for us to oppose the move. It is the duty of both parties to save our country from sheer embarrassment. We do not want our country to become another Pakistan, but sadly, our politicians fail to realise that.

Tauhidul Islam
A Level candidate
Uttara, Dhaka

Risks of touch-screen technology

Digital technologies have made people's life easy. But some of them are emerging as a threat to people's security. Apple is reportedly going to introduce touch ID application which will identify subscriber's fingerprint to unlock phone. Each person's fingerprint is unique and fingerprints do not change with time. There is no other identification sign more reliable than fingerprints. But digital critics are much concerned about the use of fingerprint on touch phone to unlock because this unique identification mark may be hacked by criminals via Internet to get access to individual bank accounts, health documents, etc., plus government's confidential documents.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University

Comments on news report, "March to Dhaka," published on December 25, 2013

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But it must be a democracy as defined by her and this democracy must run under her guidance. Nobody else has the necessary competence to undertake the task as her counterpart is running the opposite variety of democracy.

Aasfisarwar

This government will not allow this Long March to succeed. They will use their brutal police, the loyal courts and friendly press to terrorise and mock the opposition so that they can not stand on the streets. Soon after the Long March is over, AL's second class leadership will provoke the opposition again. But I can guarantee you, the nation will find its own silver bullet!

Badrud Doza

The call of Khaleda Zia to 'March for Democracy' will shape the future events in Bangladesh. We hope that conflicting political parties will come to a consensus before it is too late to hold a free, fair and participatory election.

Mohammad Rahman

Sorry, I cannot join the March on December 29. If I get killed during the March, opposition will say government forces killed me and government will say the opposition killed me. I value my life because I have to work and earn to feed my family.

Talkfair

Definitely a good sign that Khaleda Zia has come out of harsh programmes like blockade which has been affecting the poor people most. "March for Democracy" is a non-violent peaceful political programme. I wish this programme success. The opposition must maintain peace and the government must co-operate. But, I suppose, to bring a lasting political peace and stability in the country, there is no alternative to a fair, inclusive national election.