

AL cadres on the rampage

Is it the way to politically deal with opponents?

THE AL cadres in their so-called effort to thwart a political programme of the opposition were seen to be indulging in violence, particularly in the capital. We found the ruling party cadres force the gates of the Supreme Court and attack the lawyers supporting the opposition. It was a disgraceful spectacle, made even more so when the police did nothing to prevent the storming of the premise of the highest judiciary or save the several women lawyers from the wrath of the AL cadres.

In fact the entire city was virtually in the grip of the AL cadres who were armed with sticks and staves moving freely under the nose of the police. And we wonder whether the belligerence displayed by them had not a little to do with the call by the state minister for law for them to come on the streets to thwart BNP's march for democracy, armed with sticks.

It is surprising too to see the ruling party cadres made to act as auxiliary of the law enforcing agencies. Reportedly, they were deployed on eight entry points into the capital, to prevent, according to one AL leader, even a fly from entering Dhaka city. And when party cadres are directed to maintain law and order it is a recipe for violence.

The line between AL cadres and the police force, which is a legally constituted body of the state, got blurred. The police is obliged to be evenhanded in its functioning but were found wanting on this score.

Congrats to achievers

Record success rate amid daunting odds

AS we continue to reel in the midst of appalling happenings caused by our volatile politics, it's our children who have displayed a remarkable achievement through their brilliant results in this year's Junior School Certificate exams. Not only that the pass rate has hit an all time record at 89.71 per cent but also the number GPA-5 holders is the highest thus far. The 91 per cent pass rate in Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) exams deserves a credit too.

Two features in particular in this year's JSC exams need mentioning. First, incorporation of an optional subject for the first time, and the second being students' overall better performance in English and mathematics compared to last year. However, it's the adaptability and preparation in the face of frequent changes in exam schedules that have caught our admiring attention.

Our kids with their outstanding abilities have only proved the age old proverb 'where there is a will there is a way'. Apart from the students we also congratulate the teachers, their parents and their guardians on their collective success.

Our dented image

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

IF you type the name of our country in the search boxes of the various International media websites then you get to see all news related to violent politics, deaths, destructions and disasters with only the lone exception of some of our recent Cricketing achievements.

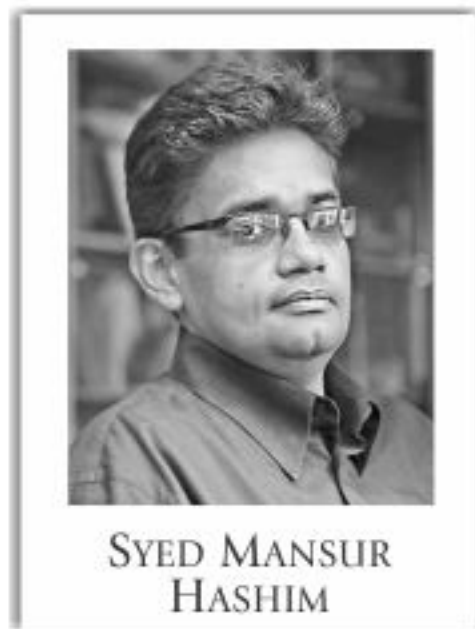
The current perception of Bangladesh ranging from Asia, Europe to America is largely that of an impulsive state. Since perception grows out of facts, and the facts are menacing so there is a lot to worry about. During the first half of 2013 the damaged image of our apparel industry was due to the perception of us being a non-compliant state. Now it's largely our countrywide political violence that is mainly shaping the global image of the country. Worldwide media reports focus on the upcoming JS polls to the 10th parliament to be held on January 5, 2014. This election is likely to be added to the long list of one-sided elections held in Bangladesh many times before. Yet again we are about to begin a year with gloomy portrayal of a farcical election. With US poll observers pulling out; they had hinted that the polls will turn out to be unacceptable.

According to a report in daily Petrothom Alo, violence caused by political agitations had claimed the lives of some 492 people in 2013 and, 120 of them died in the last 30 days after the election schedule was announced. And the rising number and horrible nature of deaths have occupied many of the reports worldwide. However, by violating the concept of election in the light of constitution the PM is repeatedly failing to read the writings on the wall. Instead of an image recovery the January 5 election is also likely to portray Bangladesh as a country where nominees become uncontested representatives. As 154 candidates have been elected uncontested the remaining outcome is easily predictable.

Both the opposition and the ruling party leaders are repeatedly turning a blind eye to the tarnished exposure Bangladesh has been drawing for the past year or so. If, however, they fail to strike an agreement regarding a credible election, they should at least agree not to damage the country's image globally. With the country under a virtual siege and arrests of over 700 opposition activists the Gulf times, Indian express, Hindu, Business Standard, Economic Times of India and Al-Jazeera were not only prompt but, clearly drawing a picture emerging out of facts that conveyed a message to the international community. The message is: Bangladesh is heading towards a violent and uncertain new year.

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst , The Daily Star.

LPG supply takes a hit



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE continuing political turmoil is beginning to be felt in the supply chain of all products. The disruption of transportation due to the blockade of Dhaka by the opposition alliance is taking its toll on consumers of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) in a big way. With consumers in many districts directly dependent on their LPG cylinders for cooking purposes, effects of such disruption cannot be overlooked or understated in any manner. According to a statement by an official of Petregaz Elpiji Ltd. that was published in a newspaper recently "the distribution process of LPG cylinder has been disrupted due to the transport disruption and vandalism in the last three months...the cost of transportation increased by five to six times during the impasse. Distributors and dealers are unable to send LPG cylinders to our plants due to transportation disruption. It creates a long queue. After filling LPG cylinders, they cannot take those to destinations on time due to blockade and hartals."

Undoubtedly, hartals and blockades have taken a toll on the supply and distribution of LPG that operates on the chain between plants, nationwide distributors and consumers. However, is that the only reason? Is it also not a fact that the government has failed to stick to its own roadmap for increasing the production of LPG? We have a tendency of always looking at the obvious to explain away the troubles that are now manifesting in the energy sector. LPG is no exception. With the realisation that Bangladesh is not "floating on gas", as had once been the mantra propagated by successive governments. Given this new realisation, the present government planned for the establishment of LPG (bottling) plants. Here again, we are in a fix on how those plants will operate. With the current thinking that the plants will use imported LPG as opposed to piped natural gas (which is in dire straits presently), presents a whole set of other problems. Handling of LPG means the establishment of a lot of infrastructure starting from upgrading the present port facilities to the setting up of the "fabled" deep sea port.

In an informative article by Md. Muqtadir Ali, (former Chairman, Petrobangla) published recently, "The total production of LPG bottling companies is 8.5 million cylinders per annum equivalent to 100,000 MT/annum. For LPG demand projection in the domestic sector of the country, following assumptions are made: each household of 5.47 member size to use 1.5 cylinder (12.5kg) equivalents to 19kg/month average. Only urban area users were assumed to be the main user of LPG in the initial years." According to a report published in The Financial Express on December 30, the growth rate of LPG market in Bangladesh was double digit in the last five years.

Notwithstanding the discrepancy of figures, certain basic assumptions hold true. Before LPG lands in the specialized vessels, it must be unloaded, imported and stored.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

Seldom have we witnessed such a brazen use of state power to quash dissent as we did on 29 December. In doing so, the means and method that the government has used have reduced it to the level of the perpetrators of violence that we had to endure, in the past one month in particular. It was a brazen use of the coercive arms of the state to suppress by blatant force the voice of dissent

The entire capital appeared to be under blockade. And there were fewer vehicles on the roads than even on days of opposition-called hartal. The Capital was sanitized so as not to allow even "a fly to enter the city." The law enforcers were augmented by AL cadres. And all this was done to prevent BNP from holding its so called march for democracy. Even the roadside tea stalls were not allowed to run. So much for a government that constantly sheds tears for the poor street and vendors who suffer due to opposition-called strikes

Does it behoove a democratic government to resort to what the opposition does to cut off the capital? And it did



No dissent can be suppressed by force. It would be well for the government to remember what one US Senator had said, "Dissent is an act of faith". I like to add, suppression of it is an act of profanity.

exactly that. The only difference being that the opposition uses violence while the government used the law enforcing agencies to prevent movement of vehicles on roads and river routes, even to the extent of taking away the oars of boatmen so that they could not row their boats, lest their boats were used by the opposition supporters to come to the Capital. And all this in the name of democracy

All in the name of security of the people the travelers were left stranded midstream and on the outskirts of Dhaka, who had no other alternative to shank it, some of them were women and children. And this pain and discomfort perpetrated by a government that sheds tear at the plight of the people put under duress by opposition programmes. Furthermore, people were made to undergo body search, all in the name of upholding democracy.

And in contrast to all the unspeakable distress the public had to go through due to the virtual oborodh enforced by the government, all in the name of public security, what did we see? While nowhere could one see BNP cadres in the capital, one saw a good part of the city under virtual siege of the cadres of the ruling party, brandishing sticks and staves --- all in the name of democracy, and under the very nose of the police who are so very concerned about the safety of the citizens.

The violence of the AL cadres was concentrated on three points in the capital where some dissenting voices in sup-

Second phase involves actual bottling and then comes distribution. Malaysia and Australia remains one of the principal sources for LPG import into the country. Again, prior to any import of LPG, setting up of suitable facilities must be completed. Establishing jetty facilities, storage and bottling plants will require land -- which is going to be extremely difficult at Mongla since land is scarce there. Furthermore, even if land were made available- either at Mongla or Chittagong, experts estimate that to construct a terminal for LPG (with capacity to handle 150,000 metric tonnes per annum) will require a minimum of 18 months from planning to execution. There is hardly any point in going into what the latter steps of the LPG supply chain will require where we have failed to take steps to address the first stage of LPG import.

The much discussed topic of reducing costs of LPG (either by reducing duties and taxes of LPG and bottle import or by applying subsidy on cooking LP gas) for ensuring justice to the majority of the countrymen (only 6 per cent of the population has been enjoying pipe gas for cooking in the country at highly subsidised prices) never became a priority for policymakers. Rather policymakers

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have been encouraging to expand pipe gas network for domestic consumption mainly for populist votes knowing well that the gas reserves are depleting fast. Also by doing so, a very small section of the urban (mainly major cities) population receive cheap pipe gas at their kitchen and the vast majority of the country pays several times more for the same cooking gas (LPG) and are deprived systematically. And now with the prolonged blockade and hartals, that LPG became scarcer, i.e. costlier.

Needless to say, such is the state of affairs in policymaking in the country. Putting the horse before the cart and making wild promises has been the rule of the game from Day 1 when it came to addressing energy needs. While experts continue to debate about how much gas we have and how the next big discovery is just round the corner, demand continues to grow for LPG. While plans look beautiful on paper, execution has been less than satisfactory due to constant dithering at the upper echelons of the ministry of energy and Petrobangla. Such indecision and conflict of interest has done little to ensure our energy needs.

The writer is Assistant Editor , The Daily Star.

Brazen stifling of dissent

port of the opposition programme were heard -- the Press Club, the Dhaka University campus, and the Supreme Court premise.

It is true that the premise of the Press Club was used to chant anti-government slogans. But it is not the first time that this has been used to vent political anger at the government. And even if we accept that the most virulent criticisms were hurled at the government from there that was done from within the premise of the Club and there was no chance of disturbance of peace. If there was breach of peace it was done by the stick wielding cadres of the ruling party who brick batted the Club. Should anti-government slogans deserve hostile action from the government goons, and that too under the nose of the police?

It was distressing to see pro-BNP teachers being roughed up within the DU campus. Their fault was that they brought out a pro-BNP procession and wanted to join the party programme. It is not the first time that dissent has been expressed inside Dhaka University. Teachers were manhandled in the highest seat of learning where the culture of tolerance is supposed to be inculcated; and all this in the name of democracy.

The Supreme Court premise did not escape the wrath of the AL cadres either, who managed to turn it into a battlefield. True that some pro-BNP lawyers chanted anti-government slogans, but they were kept confined within the premise of the Court by the police. And at one point water cannon was used to disperse them from near the gate. It is not the first time that the premise was used to vent anti government feelings, even to the extent of vandalising the chamber of the Chief Justice. What did we see on 29 December? We saw the main gate that was chain-wrapped and locked and which pro-BNP layers could not force, opened miraculously, and the huge contingent of police force suddenly vanished along with their riot control equipment. The scene that followed has been seen by most people. Even women lawyers were not spared.

What we saw on 29 December and the two days preceding it have been unabashed display of arrogance and power of a government that has lost its equilibrium and one that is hell bent on suppressing all forms of dissent from any quarter. No dissent can be suppressed by force. It would be well for the government to remember what one US Senator had said, "Dissent is an act of faith". I like to add, suppression of it is an act of profanity.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Publishing wealth information

This refers to your news analysis, "8 info voters' right to know," published on December 24, 2013. What happened to the AL's promise in its last manifesto that they would make an annual declaration of wealth of all its ministers and MPs, including the PM? Persuading the EC not to publish their wealth statements, despite the High Court ruling is contempt of court. But disclosing their wealth statements through print media was the right move at the right time.

Engr. Shaheedul Islam
On e-mail

Way to bring peace in Bangladesh

We have lost the great leader of peace. May his soul rest in peace. He worked hard to remove the discrimination between the black and white people and was successful to bring them together. We do not have racism in Bangladesh but we have economic discrimination. The number of poor people is huge in Bangladesh. The government as well as people should work together to remove this huge gap. At the same time, political violence must end. That is how we can live in peace. Let's honour Madiba by bringing peace in Bangladesh.

Shafkat Rahman
BIAM Laboratory School
Dhaka

India-USA relations

Recently the relation between India and USA has witnessed bitterness following the harassment of Indian diplomat. Devyani, a senior diplomat of India, was harassed on allegation of visa fraud and underpaying her housemaid. USA police breached internationally established rules in the way they arrested and behaved with her. We think this incident will have a long-lasting negative impact on the bilateral relation between the two countries.

Md Zonae Emran
Janata Bank Ltd

University admissions uncertain

I am a university admission seeker. Rajshahi University and Jahangirnagar University have postponed their admission schedule due to political situation in the country. Students and their guardians have become worried because they do not know when this situation will change for the better. We have no clue about when we will be finally able to sit for the admission tests in the universities. I request the two major political parties of the country to spare the education sector of their politics. It will be harmful both for the country and the students.

Selim Reza
An admission seeker

Comments on post editorial, "The art of compromise," published on December 26, 2013

Khan

This is not simply a confrontation between the two parties. This is a confrontation between the ruling party with all the state forces with them and the opposition. The responsibility of the ruling party is 100 times more than the opposition. However, a neutral caretaker government is a very logical demand of the opposition; and the ruling party's not accepting it proves there is something fishy.

xPatriot

Both BNP and AL are equally responsible for what's going on in the country today. Just because you are not in power does not automatically make you a little less responsible for your actions.

A freedom fighter

Good analysis.

Dev Saha

A zero-sum game indeed! Staying in power and getting into power has become a bloody sport in every five years.

"Law against errant MPs" (December 28, 2013)

Nds

Why could not AL manage time to enact the proposed law to make the errant MPs accountable during their tenure of long five years? How could they promise to do it next time with the existing errant MPs who they have nominated for the next parliament? AL is gradually preparing itself to outshine all in respect of chicanery and fraud and abusing shamelessly the spirit of Liberation War as their tool to hoodwink the people.

Jafar Iqbal

Not even cows or goats believe in politicians' promises in this country.

Nazmul Haq

Surely they can fulfil their promises without provision of adequate resources as their lawmakers and ministers have become very wealthy, apparently without enough or adequate investments.

Mortuza Huq

Who trusts Awami League?

Touchstone

If the corrupt ministers and MPs are not barred from participating in the next election, how can we trust the AL to take action in the future?