

Opposition persecution should stop

No more hartals, blockades, please!

OUT of seven BNP leaders picked up earlier, three have been detained while four let off. With this, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call to the opposition leader for talks in the sequel to the controversial 10th JS election carries but little conviction.

Against this backdrop, we think the argument is reinforced for the government to release imprisoned BNP leaders, withdraw cases filed against them, or enlarge them on bail, open the central and other offices of BNP and let the opposition leader function freely out of her confinement. These are imperatives the ruling party must address, particularly after the election, to create opportunities for engagement with the opposition. The ruling party has everything to gain from these measures rather than lose. For, these steps will bear testimony to the PM's sincerity to end the political crisis and defuse tension.

At the same time, the opposition leader should withdraw her blockade and hartal programmes now that an election, howsoever tainted, has been held and the scene set for a fresh beginning in approach to the stand-off.

Needless to say, the opposition's violent programmes have kept public life paralysed, causing enormous damage to the economy, spilling blood of scores of innocent people caught in the crossfire of vengeful politics. And it is not only for the sake of constructive engagement with the government, but also for their own sake that such mindless acts of violence and destruction have to be stopped forthwith.

Companies forced to downsize

Political strife hurting economy

IT was bound to happen sooner or later. When productive activities go into limbo, the first cut in costs comes from a reduced workforce. The beginning of these "cuts" are now manifesting themselves all across the private sector, and the trend will most certainly intensify should the political climate remain as it is. Contrary to popular opinion, the cutback will affect not only "blue collar" jobs but "white collar" ones too. Strikes and blockades have effectively curtailed both exports and imports and sapped the energy out of companies involved in the supply chain across various sectors.

As redundancies begin to take hold in the employment sector, unemployment is set to rise. Things do not get much more damaging than that for any economy. The pains associated with unemployment, at whatever level of the workforce need no explanation. For the management of a company or industry, having to let go of people is a difficult choice. These measures are being initiated in an effort to reduce the financial burden of forced non-productivity. With 75 days of strikes and blockades over the last three months, the economy is facing the full blunt of the political stalemate. This paper has reiterated over and over again, on the dire need for political dialogue between the government and major opposition parties. Without dialogue there can be no settlement and the conse-

'Tricky situation' ahead for PM Hasina

NIRMALA GANAPATHY

LAST July, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina looked relaxed as she stood in her kitchen cooking chicken pulao for her son Sajeeb Wajed Joy on his 42nd birthday.

"A special treat for everyone. The prime minister cooking chicken pulao for me!" wrote her son, who also posted a picture of her smiling on Facebook.

In the past two months, however, the 66-year-old politician has had very little to smile about.

Over 200 people have been killed in unrest since she refused to stand aside and let a caretaker government oversee the country's election -- an opposition demand -- that took place on Sunday.

Voter turnout was poor amid an election boycott by her fiercest rival Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition party.

While victory for Hasina's Awami League was assured given that 153 of the 300 parliamentary seats went uncontested, it was an unconvincing one for a politician who, in 2008, had been returned to power on the back of a popular wave and a promise of change.

"It's a tricky situation... but she has been through many political ups and down," said Veena Sikri, a former Indian ambassador to Bangladesh.

Hasina, the grand lady of Bangladeshi politics, has forged her reputation as a tough politician with consummate survival skills. All this has helped her weather many crises to become prime minister twice.

The fiery orator first came to power in 1996 after she led mass protests against Zia's re-election. But she lost to Zia, two years her senior, in 2001 after her government was mired in corruption allegations.

In 2007, she was arrested for corruption and charged with murder by a military-backed caretaker government at the time.

But a landslide victory by the Awami League-led Grand Alliance in the 2008 election returned her to power.

But power has come at great personal cost to Hasina, who faces constant threats to her life. Her son and daughter live abroad with their families.

Born on September 28, 1947, she was the eldest child of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She grew up in the village of Tungipara and was a student leader at Dhaka University. Her husband, nuclear scientist M.A. Wajed Miah, died in 2009.

In 1975, just four years after Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan, gunmen assassinated her father, president of Bangladesh at the time, her mother, three brothers and 13 other members of her family. Hasina and her sisters survived because they were in Germany.

While many observers agree that Bangladesh has done well economically and improved in areas like education and health, corruption still plagues Hasina's government.

The political crisis is threatening to hurt the economy.

"This is the biggest crisis she has faced in her life," said Syed Badrul Ahsan, executive editor of The Daily Star, an English-language newspaper in Bangladesh. "But she is a survivor."

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When a party loses its marbles . . .

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

the politics of the future would come forth with such a poor sense of history. Or it could be that it is all a plan of subverting our national history yet one more time.

You could argue that there is really nothing to write about Tarique Rahman. All

these years after Hawa Bhaban, after the *khamba* business, after the manner in which things were pushed to a necessary promulgation of emergency in January 2007, there ought to be little interest in talking about an individual whose reputation remains in question. And yet there is a huge need to take such people to task every time they seek to tamper with history or with tradition. So when Khaleda Zia's heir-apparent tells you that the 1972 constitution went against the sentiments of the Bengali nation, you know that mischief is at work again.

And, indeed, mischief has been peddled around aplenty in these past many months. When you hear a former diplomat who today is a front-ranking politician in the BNP informing Tarique Rahman of the use the party is making of certain journalists in propagating its politics, you realise what we are all up against. Here's an image of how mischief can cause real tragedy: citizens have been burned to death by opposition arsonists, trees have been cut down by elements determined to bring down a legally constituted government, railway tracks have been uprooted in demonstrations of unabashed terrorism and roads have been dug by fanatical brigands whose earlier generation happily helped the Pakistan army in the genocide of Bengalis.

Not a word of regret has been heard from those whose politics has caused all this mayhem. The politics, of course, has been of a rather circumscribed sort. It has all been about blockades and general strikes. Now a third dimension has come to it, through the video-ed message of Tarique Rahman: the BNP will not talk to the government because

What, then, will work for a party which now is in obvious need of clarity and a sense of purpose? It must rethink its hartal-blockade strategy, for that strategy has taken it nowhere. Agitation on the streets is fine, up to a point. Beyond that, a party must convince a nation that it has or can have a road map to the future.

bogey. The Hasina government has offered the country for 'sale' to a neighbouring country; Bangladesh is not Sikkim -- these are the 'truths' for the party once more. Politics is simple: if you cannot run your rival out of town through violent agitation on the streets, paint her in the colours of treason. But even that does not seem to be working.

What then, will work for a party which now is in obvious need of clarity and a sense of purpose? It must rethink its *hartal-blockade* strategy, for that strategy has taken it nowhere. Agitation on the streets is fine, up to a point. Beyond that, a party must convince a nation that it has or can have a road map to the future. If it means to measure up to politics in Bangladesh, it ought to free itself of the Jamaat and distance itself from the war criminals it has so long given shelter to. It must sit back and ask itself why Bangladesh's Hindus live in ceaseless fear, why schools are burnt down even as happy children go home with their new books in hand, why poor bus drivers are reduced to cinders through petrol bombs being flung at them.

Parties become irrelevant when they run out of ideas. They become a menace when they fall foul of reality.

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The return of the Ugly American

AWAKENING INDIA



SHASHI THAROOR

era of steadily improving ties between the two countries come to an end?

Judging from Indian leaders' statements, it would certainly seem so. India's mild-mannered Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that Khobragade's treatment was "deplorable." National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon called her arrest "despicable" and "barbaric," and Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid refused to take a conciliatory phone call from US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Emotions have run high in India's Parliament and on television talk shows as well. Writing to her diplomatic colleagues after her arrest, Khobragade, who has denied the charges against her, noted that she "broke down many times" owing to "the indignities of repeated handcuffing, stripping, and cavity searches, swabbing," and to being held "with common criminals and drug addicts." A former Indian foreign minister, Yashwant Sinha, has publicly called for retaliation against gay American diplomats in India, whose sexual orientation and domestic arrangements are now illegal after a recent Supreme Court ruling. The government has not taken him seriously, but his suggestion indicates how inflamed passions have become.

Some retaliation has occurred. The initial American rationale (that foreign consuls in the US enjoy a lower level of immunity than other diplomats) led India's government to re-examine privileges enjoyed by US consular officials that are unavailable to their Indian counterparts in the US. These privileges -- including full-fledged diplomatic ID cards, access to the restricted customs areas of airports, tax-free shipments of items for personal consumption, and no questions asked about the terms of their employment of local domestic staff -- were swiftly withdrawn. The cardinal principle of diplomatic relations is reciprocity, and India realised that it had been naive in extending courtesies to the US that it was not receiving in return.

Likewise, the police have removed bollards and barriers that the US Embassy had unilaterally placed on the street in front of its complex in New Delhi, creating an obstacle to free circulation on a public road that India had tolerated in a spirit of friendship. (The government has, however, reiterated its commitment to the US Embassy's security, even reinforcing the police presence outside.)

Tempers remain inflamed, with US Ambassador Nancy Powell, in a New Year's message to Indians, ruefully acknowledging that ties have been "jolted by very different

reactions to issues involving one of your consular officers and her domestic worker." Kerry has also expressed "regret" over the incident. But the US has shown no signs of moving to drop the charges to defuse the crisis.

Indians remain bewildered that the US State Department would so willfully jeopardise a relationship that American officials had been describing as "strategic" over a practice routinely followed by foreign diplomats for decades. Most developing-country diplomats take domestic staff with them on overseas assignments, paying them a good salary by their national standards, plus a cost differential for working aboard. In Khobragade's case, perquisites included a fully furnished room in a pricey Manhattan apartment, a television set, a mobile phone, medical insurance, and tickets home.

The cash part of the salary may be low by US standards -- Khobragade herself, as a mid-ranking Indian diplomat, earns less than what the US considers a fair wage -- but, with the other benefits, the compensation is attractive for a domestic helper. More to the point, Khobragade did not find her maid in the US labour market and "exploit" her; she brought her from India to help her in her representational duties, on an official passport, with a US visa given for that purpose. In almost no other country are local labour laws applied in such a manner to a foreign diplomat's personal staff.

Privately, US diplomats express frustration at their helplessness in the face of theatrical grandstanding by the ambitious federal prosecutor, Preet Bharara, an Indian-American who has launched a series of high-profile cases against Indians in America. For once, however, the zealous Bharara seems to have slipped up, because Khobragade was arrested at a time when she enjoyed full diplomatic (not just consular) immunity as an adviser to India's United Nations mission during the General Assembly. The State Department's handling of the matter -- which included approval of Khobragade's arrest -- has been, to say the least, inept.

Worse, just before the arrest, the maid's family was spirited out of India on US visas for victims of human trafficking. The implication

that an Indian diplomat in a wage dispute with her maid is guilty of human trafficking understandably riles Indian diplomats as much as the treatment of Khobragade after she was detained. The American habit of imposing its worldview self-righteously on others is deeply unwelcome. To most Indians, common courtesy cannot be repackaged as moral virtue.

Indian-American relations had been strengthening, owing to both sides' shared commitment to democracy, common concerns about China, and increasing trade and investment. The Khobragade affair suggests, however, that all of this is not enough: sustaining a strategic partnership requires, above all, mutual respect.

India had handled American diplomats with a generosity of spirit that it felt the bilateral relationship deserved. Now, with the same spirit shown to be lacking from the other side, the friendship has suffered. Until the US displays appropriate deference to the sensitivities, pride, and honour of other peoples and cultures, it will continue to be resented around the world.

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The writer 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*. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Some suggestions

to new govt.

It doesn't matter to me who comes to power as long as they work for our country and people. In addition to their own agenda, I would like to make some suggestions for their next tenure:

1. Rehabilitate beggars and declare begging illegal.

2. Keep cities, especially Dhaka clean, by improving waste management system.

3. Build more parking spaces such as multi-storyed parking.

4. Ensure smooth traffic flow and better traffic management.

5. Ensure freedom and security of people, especially women and children.

Aminur Rahim

New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

Shameless flattery

A remark by economist Dr. Abul Barakat of Dhaka University, who is also chairman of Janata Bank Limited, that Hasina is Bangladesh's biggest economist, has drawn my attention. He was addressing a function organised by Gopalganj Zilla Samity at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre, Dhaka recently.

When all people including businessmen, service holders and day labourers are passing through a critical time during the Awami League regime headed by Sheikh Hasina, and when democracy in Bangladesh is at stake, such flattery by Barakat shocked us.

Md. Tofazzel Hossain

Kushtia

Speaking with humility

Khaleda Zia has every reason to be furious, but then again, she must not forget to speak in a decent manner and with humility, for she is not just another Bangladeshi but the leader of the main opposition political party. If she speaks in the same tone as others, then how can we say that things are going to change? The same blame-game and venting of anger on each other will continue.

Aneel Hasan

Banani, Dhaka

Comments on news report,

"Turnout low in deadliest polls," published on January 06, 2014

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

A complete mockery of democracy was made on January 5!

Aasif Sarwar

Return to basket case and return to Bakshali are now completed. At the end the will of the people will prevail.

Jafar Iqbal

Now what? 160 million people of Bangladesh will remain blind and deaf like sheep to let evil politicians stay in the country?

Akhtar Jawed

So, both Pakistan and Bangladesh are banana republics.

Snr Citizen

Seeing the ferocity of the attack, I think the man on the ground could not survive! This is what we get to uphold democracy. The picture is very gory that creates a very disturbing impression on young minds. They have asked questions such as "why are they killing him?" Do I have an answer? All of it is the gift from our politicians.

"From London, Tarique calls for resistance"

(January 05, 2014)

Sara

Wise, altruistic words were undermined by coming from the mouth of a speaker who carries a dark past which prevents him from returning to the country...

Roni Rahman

Great to see his evolution into a mature politician! An accurate reading of the minds of the majority of the people. Great to see him step up and call for action to save the nation from dictatorship and servitude to foreign nations. He has not called to ask for vote, rather for establishing the democratic system in which people can have their choices exercised -- the main spirit of our Independence War.

SM