

Khaleda's abandoning blockade welcome

Govt should be serious about dialogue

WE welcome the opposition BNP back into political activities through Monday's massive rally at Suhrawardy Udyan. Also, it is only fair to say that the government did not create any hindrance in the way of holding the opposition programme. All this appears to augur well for the future course of politics.

Now the natural expectation of the public is that both sides should take fresh initiatives to prepare the grounds for talks. Obviously, here the onus lies more on the government than on the opposition.

We reiterate that the just held election, though it may have met a constitutional obligation, has not fulfilled the primary conditions of a duly elected government that reflects popular will to claim people's mandate. The result of the election, therefore, is basically not sustainable.

At this point, we consider it a positive gesture from the BNP that it has shunned the path of violent agitation like oborodh and hartal. Reassuringly, we also noted that Jammatt was not taken on board at the Suhrawardy Uddyan rally. If this reflects any new attitude on BNP's part, then may we expect that BNP would also take part in a dialogue with the government without the Jamaat-e-Islami?

Towards restoring the political environment for talks, it is high time the government met the opposition halfway with a conciliatory approach, now that the BNP itself has demonstrated such intents. As a first step to this end, we would urge the government to take steps to release the imprisoned BNP leaders and create congenial environment for talks.

Shipments show healthy traffic

Performance commendable

THE year 2013 will go down in the history of Bangladesh as a tumultuous time politically. The countrywide blockade kept the capital city in isolation from the rest of the country and put serious strain on communications and trade. In spite of that, the port city of Chittagong, principal entrepot for the bulk of imports and exports managed to increase, rather than decrease shipments to the tune of nearly 6 per cent. Credit must be given where it is due and the authorities must be commended for keeping operations flowing despite efforts made by some quarters to make the port ineffective.

This is the first time that an exception was witnessed during a tough opposition movement. That the port did not sit idle during the 50 odd days of hartals and blockades is indeed a healthy sign. We would strongly urge political parties of all hues and colours to keep business and trade above politics in national interest. Holding the economy hostage for political leverage is an archaic tool that has gone out of vogue in most parts of the world. It is high time that contingency plans be put in place so that the next round of violence, should it hit on a national scale is not allowed to disrupt movement of goods to and from the Chittagong port.

Bangladesh's India-Pakistan problem

ALAMGIR KHAN

BEFORE Bangladesh had a strong national cricket team, our cricket fans were broadly divided into two camps -- India and Pakistan. That has changed now, but only in cricket, nowhere else. In political discourse, some of us are pro-India (meaning anti-Pakistan) and some pro-Pakistan (meaning anti-India), leaving a small space for Bangladesh in between. Ahmed Sofa once lamented in one of his writings that there are pro-India and pro-Pakistan but not many pro-Bangladesh people amongst us.

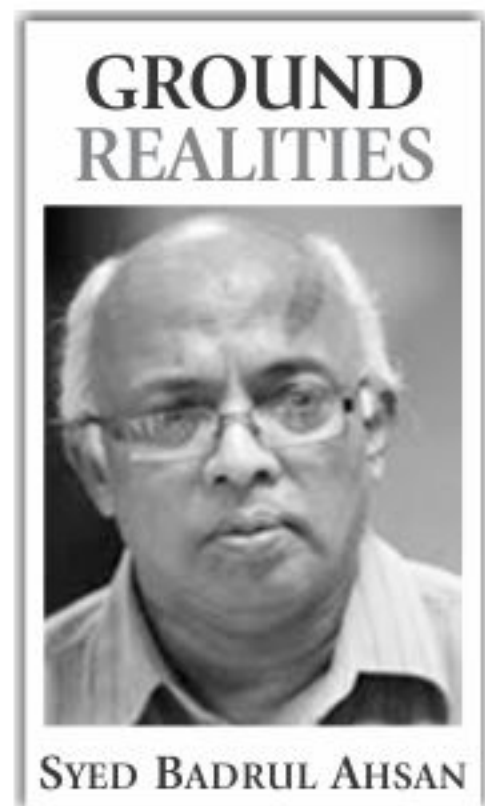
Our political discourse often moves around in terms of either India or Pakistan. The roles of these two countries have again come into prominence during the recent current political crisis in Bangladesh. From their birth, India and Pakistan have been a problem for each other. They have not learned how to live in peace and harmony even after several wars. Since Bangladesh was born, they both eyed this country as a playground in their duel for political dominance. India and Pakistan are, therefore, two problems for Bangladesh. The way forward is the way we solved the India-Pakistan complex in cricket: making our politics, economy, governance and everything else more democratic, patriotic, ethical and stronger than those in those two squabbling countries. We must shed all remnants of the India-Pakistan complex and be able to think and act only in terms of Bangladesh.

In this period of globalisation, no country including Bangladesh can live in isolation; it is natural that other countries will take interest in our affairs as we do about others.' Neighbouring countries will do more. But we cannot leave our matters for them to solve. If we leave our problems festering in open air for long, crows and vultures will keep flying in to feed on them. Crows and vultures do not do any harm, rather help by cleaning the environment. But it is totally for our interest that we should not create the excuse for their coming by recklessly polluting our land.

This time, Taranco flew like a robin into Bangladesh. Moon called from far away in the sky. Mozena rushed from door to door. The Pakistan National Assembly adopted a resolution criticising the execution of a war criminal in our country. Sujatha flew in from India. Salman Khurshid hinted at the united approach of India and the US regarding us. Here, in Bangladesh, some have begun to see ghosts of India and Pakistan almost everywhere. Some will try to catch fish in the muddied waters of our politics.

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The communal mind



GROUND REALITIES

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

for us to correct circumstances through driving it out of our lives. We did that, through creating Bangladesh. And we are happy we did.

But, again, how many among us can honestly place our hands on their hearts and tell ourselves that we have cleansed ourselves of communalism? If I do not remember the name of a Muslim acquaintance, I try to recollect it through describing his appearance and his mannerisms to someone else who might be knowing him. But when that acquaintance is not a Muslim, watch what happens: you forget the name and you tell that other person that the man with the forgotten name is a Hindu or a Christian or a Buddhist. So there you are.

It is amazing remembering the way how so many of our respected, sometimes revered public figures have, at some queer moments in their lives, succumbed to bouts of communalism, if not downright religious hate. Moulana Bhashani began propagating a Muslim Bangla soon after liberation; and then he did worse. Addressing a public rally, he wondered loudly if the food crisis the nation was confronted with in the early 1970s had something to do with the fact that the minister for food happened to be Phani Bhusan Majumdar, a Hindu. And, yes, there is the story of General M.A.G. Osmany inquiring of senior officers of the Rakkhi Bahini soon after Bangabandhu's assassination how many Hindus were there in the force.

These days, you will bump into a whole lot of people who are deeply worried about Narendra Modi becoming India's next prime minister. They think, perhaps rightly, that he has the taint of communalism about him. But these very same people lose no time letting you know of the democratic rights parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefajat-e-Islam should be permitted to enjoy. There are elements who cheerfully draw your attention to the 'fact' that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is a liberal political organisation. Ask them about the impunity with which the founder of the party did away with secularism in the constitution. Don't expect an answer.

That the seeds of communalism, planted in our hearts and minds so assiduously by the All-India Muslim League, keep sprouting into dangerous plants needing to be cut down comes through another dimension. And that is the propensity of foreign diplomats, especially those from western nations, to describe Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim state. Whoever gave them that idea? If anything, their understanding of history is poor and paltry. This

Elections in Bangladesh

SALMAN HAIDAR

THE recent elections in Bangladesh have been a muddled affair and are widely considered to have done little to resolve the problems afflicting that country. A boycott by the opposition that reduced voter turnout to around 39% according to official figures, much less according to other sources, damaged the legitimacy of the process. Violence on the streets before and during the polling damaged it further, so that the ruling Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina has achieved a pyrrhic victory in returning to power with an enlarged parliamentary mandate.

Many observers of these events felt that postponement of the polls could have been a better option, for the confrontations on the streets did not augur well and it may have been better to let things settle down first. However, the government felt it had no other alternative but to press on because the constitution requires that elections be held at the appointed time. Nor was it able to hand over to a neutral caretaker administration to conduct the polls, as has been done in the past to considerable acclaim, because that option had been precluded by a recently enacted constitutional provision.

The opposition accused the government of ramming through these amendments in order to change the rules in its favour. The constitutional straitjacket required that elections be held despite mounting strife and disturbance, and it was no great surprise that the poll process failed to bring calm or to initiate the public conciliation that might

At this juncture when Bangladesh is going through a particularly testing period, it is important for India to maintain judicious detachment from internal political developments in this neighbour while projecting its basic interest in friendship and good relations.

International opinion has been censorious of the Bangladesh authorities. Unusually strong criticism of the elections was voiced by a US spokesperson and there was a chorus from many others in the West to censure and disapprove. A demand for a re-poll was raised in some quarters and many of Bangladesh's international partners, including some of the most significant ones, refrained from endorsing the electoral result. The big exception was India whose prime minister sent a message of congratulations to his counterpart in Dhaka, thereby signifying that there would be no interruption in business as usual between the two countries.

As may be expected, much has been said about these events and many attempts made to understand the turmoil in Bangladesh. The personal antipathy between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her rival Khaleda Zia is well known and for years there has been no letup in their intense political rivalry. Each heads a well-established political party with considerable grassroots support and seems to enjoy unchallenged authority within the party she leads. The Jatiyo party headed by former President Ershad comes a long way behind but having participated in the election it now has a small presence in the new Parliament. It has made common cause with the ruling party, enough to give the faint appearance of a coalition though without the real substance of one. However, Sheikh Hasina has shown evidence of wishing to broad base her government to the extent possible, so Gen. Ershad's supporting her government is sought to be presented as a step in the right direction. She has even made a

nation was founded on the principle of secular democracy. But, then again, you will come across whole swathes of Bengalis cheered by this 'encouraging statement' from the west. Washington has said we are moderate Muslims and that is all that matters. We are happy. How naïve and low in self-esteem can people be?

Hordes of Bengalis are around us, reminding us every minute of the living day why democracy must be our underpinning as a society. They are quite right to do so. But how do you have democracy, in that purposeful sense of the meaning, when you are unwilling to free the state of the communal fetters it was trapped in by military ruler H.M. Ershad in the 1980s? Faith or belief is a matter for the individual. The moment you turn the state into a Muslim or Hindu or Christian entity, you humiliate citizens and subject politics to indignities. Be assured, though, that these hordes, driven by a bizarre desire to inject communalism into the democratic discourse, are a big group.

And how do we know that? These days, we get to see a retired civil servant, now serving a rightwing political party, arguing loudly for democracy on television. A few years ago, this civil servant was heard ruing Pakistan's military defeat in 1971 because, in his opinion, it left the Muslims of Bangladesh and Pakistan weakened and, conversely, led to the rise of Hindu power in the subcontinent. There is another individual, again part of politics these days, whose fraternisation with the Pakistan occupation army in 1971 has not been forgotten by his erstwhile colleagues. He it was who gathered information on which Bengali academics and their families, persecuted by the army, were hiding in which village or town and submitting that information to Pakistan's soldiers.

No, communalism has not died in this country. When you yet have Hindu men forced out of their hearths and homes, when there are yet rapacious fanatics waiting to destroy the modesty of Hindu women, when it is Hindu property which is yet the object of covetousness on the part of many Muslims, you cannot say that this is a truly secular Bengali republic. Add to that the indifference of the police and the local administration in coming to the aid of the persecuted Hindus? Do not forget the brazen behaviour of the police in declining to come to the aid of the nation's Buddhists when their homes and temples were razed to the ground by Muslim bigots in Ramu. Civilised, educated, liberal Muslims have wept in silence at the humiliation of their Hindu and Buddhist neighbours.

And we have been shamed before the world, repeatedly. Go around the world. Sing paeans to your country in the councils of the world. Declaim on the proud cultural heritage you are heir to. But when someone asks you why the number of Hindus has been declining in your country, you do not answer -- because you have no answer.

In 1947, East Bengal had a Hindu population of 35% of the whole. By 1971, it had come down to 29%. Today, in a putatively secular, democratic Bangladesh, the figure has come down to less than 9%. Try explaining how that has come to be.

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gesture towards Khaleda Zia seeking to bridge the gap but the chasm between the two leaders remains wide.

It is not the two regular parties alone that loom large in the political landscape, for the rampant Jamaat-i-Islami cannot be ignored, and though as ever it kept aloof from the polls it made sure that its presence should be felt. The Jamaat includes fundamentalist elements that have never attracted much voter support but have shown readiness and capacity to promote their views on the streets. Much of the violence that marred the recent election is attributed to the street power of the Jamaat. In the political churning within Bangladesh, there has been some comment to the effect that it was a tactical error for Khaleda's BNP to refuse to take part in the elections. It is pointed out that the incumbent party has almost invariably been thrown out by the electorate and there was no particular reason for the pattern not to be repeated this time too, at the expense of the Awami League. However, the opportunity, if it existed, was not taken and the underlying uncertainties about the political direction to be followed have not been set at rest.

There is considerably more at stake, however, than the rights and wrongs of the recent election. Deeper questions about the nature and the values of the polity itself are part of the current shakeup, issues that have never been finally resolved and remain divisive after all the years since Bangladesh took birth. During the turmoil of liberation political elements tied to the old order were responsible for dreadful crimes in their quest to hold back liberation, and were never adequately called to account even after the new state had emerged. There was nothing in Bangladesh equivalent to the Nurnberg trials after World War II that tried to rid Europe of its war criminals, no attempt to exorcise the criminal elements that had wreaked so much havoc. The assassination of Sheikh Mujib in the early days of the new country made matters worse and

retarded the cleansing process.

It is only recently that Sheikh Hasina's government has re-activated the legal procedures to indict those accused of war crimes and brought a sense of purpose to the effort. Many have been indicted and one of the most prominent of those involved has been tried and executed. Many more face similar charges and are being tried, and though the legal process has its critics there is no faltering by the authorities. It could be that the political restructuring required, including the re-polling demanded by many at home and abroad, may not be possible until the judicial process is complete.

India cannot observe these events in such a close neighbour with indifference. Nor can it afford to get too deeply entangled. Sheikh Hasina is a proven friend but India has always been ready to work closely with the leadership Bangladesh has chosen for itself, be it the BNP or the rival Awami League. Moreover, despite its preference for democratically elected governments, India has maintained good working relations with unelected regimes that have taken power in Dhaka from time to time. At this juncture when Bangladesh is going through a particularly testing period, it is important for India to maintain judicious detachment from internal political developments in this neighbour while projecting its basic interest in friendship and good relations.

The writer is India's former Foreign Secretary.
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Advantages of cellulosic biofuel

Biofuels can be an effective environment-friendly and low-cost source of energy capable of replacing conventional fossil fuels mainly gasoline up to some extent. In advanced countries, plants have been set up to produce biofuels. In the United States, about 14% of oil requirements are supplemented by biofuels. But currently biofuels are being produced from food sources like corn, sugar canes, etc., posing a threat to food security.

Cellulosic biofuels are produced from non-food sources like grasses, agricultural wastes, non-edible plant parts etc. This biomass can be used to produce ethanol, the main element of biofuel through fermentation. Cellulosic biofuel is capable of reducing 85% greenhouse gases (GHG) compared to refined gasoline.

Our country is an agricultural one and we have great scope for producing cellulosic biofuels using agricultural wastes, grasses and other non-edible plant parts. Both public and private sectors should undertake initiative to set up plants for producing cellulosic biofuels with a view to reducing oil use and global warming.

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US push for fresh poll

I am surprised to see the news that USA is demanding fresh election in Bangladesh by May/June 2014! It seems they are meddling in our internal affairs.

After almost one year of violence that claimed the lives of more than one hundred people, caused injuries to thousands, damaged a large quantity of public property, the election was held. Now US is brokering for fresh polls so quickly! The issues of election-time government, war crimes trials, etc have not yet been solved. And the perpetrators of the attacks on minorities should be brought to book. Only then the question of fresh election will come.

A citizen
On e-mail

Religious harmony imperative

The acts of violence carried out against religious and ethnic minorities are appalling. This type of incidents will continue to happen unless steps are taken to ensure security of minority communities. Over the time, attempts by religious groups seeking to dominate one another has resulted in the displacement of different faiths. We should have tolerance and above all respect for each others' religious beliefs.

Anika Tasneem
East West University

Comments on news analysis, "A let-down for journalism," published on January 19, 2014

Kalu_Mia
Probe into the case in-depth, rather than rejecting it by terming it a "Jamaat-Shibir" propaganda. Days are not very far when our popular newspapers may face the same fate.

Lunik
I agree with this article. Sonar Bangladesh, an internet blog was closed down only to reappear as Bangladesh tomorrow/today blog with most of their Islamist bloggers who are now spreading conspiracy theories of all sorts in their usual indefatigable manner. However disgusting their ill-informed and malicious posts might be, in a free democratic society these websites should never be closed down. Censorship of any kind is a surefire democracy killer!

Barkat
When a nation's top leaders lie and make fabricated stories, it is not surprising if journalists make some fabricated stories also.

Kumrul Hasan
It was neither false news nor true news. Actually, it was no news at all. It was all about conspiracy.

Molla A. Latif
Why not condemn such journalism?

Truthprevails53
Jamaat has tried everything under the sun to portray AL as evil. In the process Jamaat is digging its own grave. Nothing good can be achieved using falsehood.

Dev Saha
No wonder why certain countries would stay away while others have moved forward. A lie gives only a short term advantage!