

An ominous start

ENAM AHMED CHAUDHURY

It is a little more than a month after a so-called new government assumed power on the basis of general elections, which by no standard can be called democratic or acceptable. Immediately after the farcical elections

abducted (and perhaps eliminated) through extrajudicial means. In just a period of one month following the so-called elections a reign of terror has been let loose, and the main opposition party BNP is not being permitted to hold peaceful black-flag demonstrations, human chains, and even public gatherings. There is no democracy or

acceptable election. On February 4, the Commonwealth once again called upon the political parties in Bangladesh to hold a purposeful dialogue towards future elections. The Commonwealth secretariat spokesperson Richard Uku said: "The Commonwealth remains ready to support a purposeful dialogue for future elections that totally reflect the will of the people and respect the principle of democratic constitutionalism." The last two significant words may be noted with a sense of urgency and importance.

However, whatever the "new government" has started doing has been clearly evident from the ugly incidents at Rajshahi University. There, the Chatra League, the students' wing that supports the ruling Awami League, accompanied by the state police force, attacked an unarmed peaceful demonstration of common non-political students demanding cancellation of some arbitrary decision of the university authorities on issues purely academic in nature. Within the university campus, they opened fire and injured more than a hundred male and female students and eight journalists.

Newspaper photographs clearly showed how gun-toting Chatra League activists, in the presence of police and university authorities, were attacking the group of peaceful demonstrators. The university was closed sine-die; the occupants were forced to leave their dormitories, even though the university authorities reportedly declared that the students' demands were acceptable. Newspaper reports and published photos indicated that during Sunday's attack, RU unit Chatra League's organising secretaries Shamsuzzaman Emon and Faisal Ahmed Runu along with Ferdous Nasim Ahmed Setu and Mahbubur Rahman Polash and other office bearers Mustakim Billah, Sudipta Salam were actually attacking while

some of them were brandishing guns at the students. But none of them, and no Chatra League activist, has been named accused in any of the cases filed so far by the authorities, both police and the university.

A probe body was formed, but before any enquiry, regrettably, the education minister, obviously being politically motivated, held the Chatra Shibir responsible for the incident. As a matter of fact, it was not the Shibir, but the leaders of the left leaning students' organisations Bangladesh Chatra Union, Shomajtantrik Chatra Front, Chatra Federation and Biplobi Chatra Moitree. It appears that the gun-wielders have been given complete immunity, and from now on the Chatra League will continue their activities without any respect for law and rules and that, too, with the support and favour of the Awami League government.

Many other incidents also ominously indicate that the government is going to further politicise the administration and impose party rule completely. An order has been passed asking all the ministries and departments to implement the directives in the AL party manifesto. This is a most dangerous decision, as it violates all planning strategy and mechanisms. There is a Planning Commission and five-year development plans in force. What will happen to the practices set up by the government itself in the NEC decisions? What will happen to the mechanism seeking external assistance for many of our projects? There will be no coordination, and the ministries and government departments and agencies will have to follow the AL party directives. The finance minister himself, only about two days ago, expressed his disappointment at the failure of the government's development initiatives, including implementation of PPP projects. If the recently issued government

directive is followed, then the whole planning and implementation mechanism will be in disarray, and without any co-ordination, chaotic condition will prevail.

In almost every field, a tendency seems to have developed for violating norms and practice and disregarding rules and law by people in power. We have seen the minister of social welfare openly smoking with a sense of 'visible satisfaction' at a gathering of

Mohsin Miah, a labourer, died in police custody at Shibpur and relatives alleged that he was tortured to death. A minister phoned High Court judges making 'tadbir' in a Jamuna bank loan case. The ACC chief inaugurated two bridges and enjoyed hospitality of a controversial political leader. Contrary to the education minister's directive, students are being kept lined up for hours to accord reception to visiting dignitaries of the ruling party. AL leaders vandalised government offices to secure undue privileges. The list can almost be endless. These are very ominous signs, and they will keep on happening unless there is a system of check and balance in the governmental machinery. That can only be secured by a democratically elected government which will be responsible to the electorate.

The Awami League leaders earlier said that they had been trying to hold a general election only for maintaining a constitutional obligation. If that was the case, and since that obligation has been met, the party in power should now take immediate steps to initiate discussions and dialogue so that a system is found under which a free, fair and impartial election can take place and a truly democratically elected government installed.

The writer is advisor to the BNP's chairperson and former international civil servant.



The Daily Star, in an editorial article, questioned if it signified an "engineered election, bull-dozed victory and emergence of one person state?" And it truly went on record by ringing what it termed as the 'first warning bell.'

The recent happenings clearly indicate that the government is not at all interested in setting up "rule of law." Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of BNP and the chief of the 19-party alliance, in her press briefing on February 4, gave a district-wise breakup of 300 opposition political leaders and workers who have been either killed or

rule of law in Bangladesh now and this state of affairs cannot be permitted to continue for long. "The illegal government has resorted to the path of political repression, killing, abduction and arrest," she asserted. She also urged the rights bodies, including the United Nations, to intervene to stop such enforced disappearances and killings.

As a matter of fact, many rights bodies have been pointing that out, and many countries and organisations have reiterated their suggestions for an immediate participatory and democrat-

the trials of political killings, terrorist activities and corruption. Activities of the judiciary cannot be impeded and its independence cannot be curbed.

Good governance and the rule of law shall have to be ensured.

I believe that if the government and the opposition parties can reach a consensus on the aforesaid issues through dialogue and discussion then democracy will have a firm footing in Bangladesh.

I further propose that if the political parties do not sit now for resolving the political crisis, then a forum of civil society should be formed for creating public opinion and reaching a consensus which will lead to the resolution of the aforesaid issues.

Without casting aspersion on any political party all mainstream constitutional experts, lawyers, intellectuals, statutory NGO's (except those receiving foreign donation) may form an all-party citizens' forum and discuss the issues among themselves.

This will be time consuming and also difficult. However, if the forum can ultimately reach an agreement and frame a national charter, it can be placed before the political parties. We may expect that the political parties will gladly accept the proposals enunciated in the charter and the election of parliament will be held with the participation of all political parties. But how soon? That will depend upon the acceptance of the package programme and reaching of a consensus.

The combined efforts of all our political parties should be the fulfillment of our dream of transforming our country into a middle income one through building a secular, tolerant and democratic society imbued with spirit of the Liberation War, and also removing the curse of poverty.

The writer is Presidium Member, Bangladesh Awami League.

Proposal for resolving political impasse

NOOH-UL-ALAM LENIN

THE election for the 10th Parliament was held on January 5, and the new cabinet took oath on January 12. Democracy International, a research organisation of the USA, carried out a survey and concluded that Awami League was the most popular political party of Bangladesh (42% people's support), yet the recent election has been questioned by some quarters because of the boycott by one of the major political parties and its allies. The most important issue was that constitutional obligation and continuity of the political process had to be maintained by holding this election.

Secondly, the nefarious design of foiling the election and establishing rule of a third force by extra-constitutional means was resisted. Now the people have, to some extent, got relief from the inferno of bloodshed, terrorism and communal frenzy. Normalcy has been restored in economic and social activities. People do not want to go back to the suicidal path of acrimonious polities. They are determined to stop the repetition of those incidents at any cost, and move ahead.

If the BNP-Jamaat alliance has learnt a lesson from this, it will be good for the country as well as themselves. The 10th Parliament is a reality, whether one likes it or not. In the eyes of the law and the constitution this parliament is legal, and so is the government, and they must be allowed to work. Otherwise the country will again be pushed back to violence. Nevertheless, there is no scope to think that the prevailing political crisis is over, inspite of the legality of the 10th Parliament.

Unless a solution acceptable to all is found and implemented, there cannot be permanent peace and stability and the pace of development will not continue.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deeply

and sincerely believes this, and that is why she has given a proposal for a dialogue on the election of the 11th Parliament, contingent upon the following terms:

(a) As a terrorist, war criminal and militant organisation Jamaat must be ostracised by BNP;

(b) Killing, terrorism, blockade, *hartial* and communal atrocities have to be stopped. If these two conditions are fulfilled, there will be proper environment for negotiations.

If there is the consensus on the basic issue through meaningful discussion, then the election for the 11th Parliament may be held early. The prime minister has kept the door open. Now it is to be seen if all concerned, including the main opposition political parties, are ready to shoulder the responsibility of overcoming the crisis. The president, in his first address to the 10th Parliament, called for holding of dialogue. The president's call has created a positive environment, and accepts that there is a political crisis in the country which needs to be immediately solved through negotiation. Except the suggestion for a dialogue the president has not imposed any formula for solution. The prime minister has not withdrawn her proposal.

A number of newspapers, including a leading one, and some of the civil society have asked for a specific agenda for dialogue and discussion. The prime minister has clarified the position of the Awami League.

In these circumstances, as a citizen of the country, I would place the following package programme before the government, BNP and other well-wishers of the country, with a view to finding a permanent solution to the political and allied socio-economic problems of the country :-

1. Ways and means will have to be found within the framework of the present constitution for forming an election conducting government. Under no circumstances will the concept of unelected or so-

called caretaker government be acceptable.

A powerful Election Commission will have to be established. An agreement must be reached regarding the outlines, power and jurisdiction of the interim government. There has to be a system where people will cast their votes according to their choice without fear or coercion, and there will not be any scope to change the result of the election.

2. Jamaat-e-Islam will have to be banned, as was done in case of JMB and Harkatul Jihad, because of their terrorist, militant and anti-liberation activities.

3. Use of religion in politics will have to be strictly prohibited. Every political party will be promise-bound to ensure and guarantee protection of life and property of the minority as provided in the constitution.

4. No political party will boycott sessions of the parliament.

5. No one should be harassed politically, like depriving him of his freedom of expression and movement, and he will not be incarcerated without specific charge of any heinous crime, corruption and anti-social activities against him.

6. There will not be any *hartial* or blockade till 2021. Lawful trade unions of the working class will enjoy the right of observing shutdown, of course subject to the relevant rules and regulations.

There should not be any kind of obstruction or interference in peaceful programmes of a political party, such as holding meetings, processions, street marches or fasting.

If any political party organises any *hartial* or blockade and causes damage to the lives and properties of the people and state, that delinquent party will have to pay compensation. A law should be passed in the parliament to this effect, obviously with the consent of all political parties, and all will be promise-bound to abide by it.

7. There shall not be any political interference in the war crimes trials, and also in

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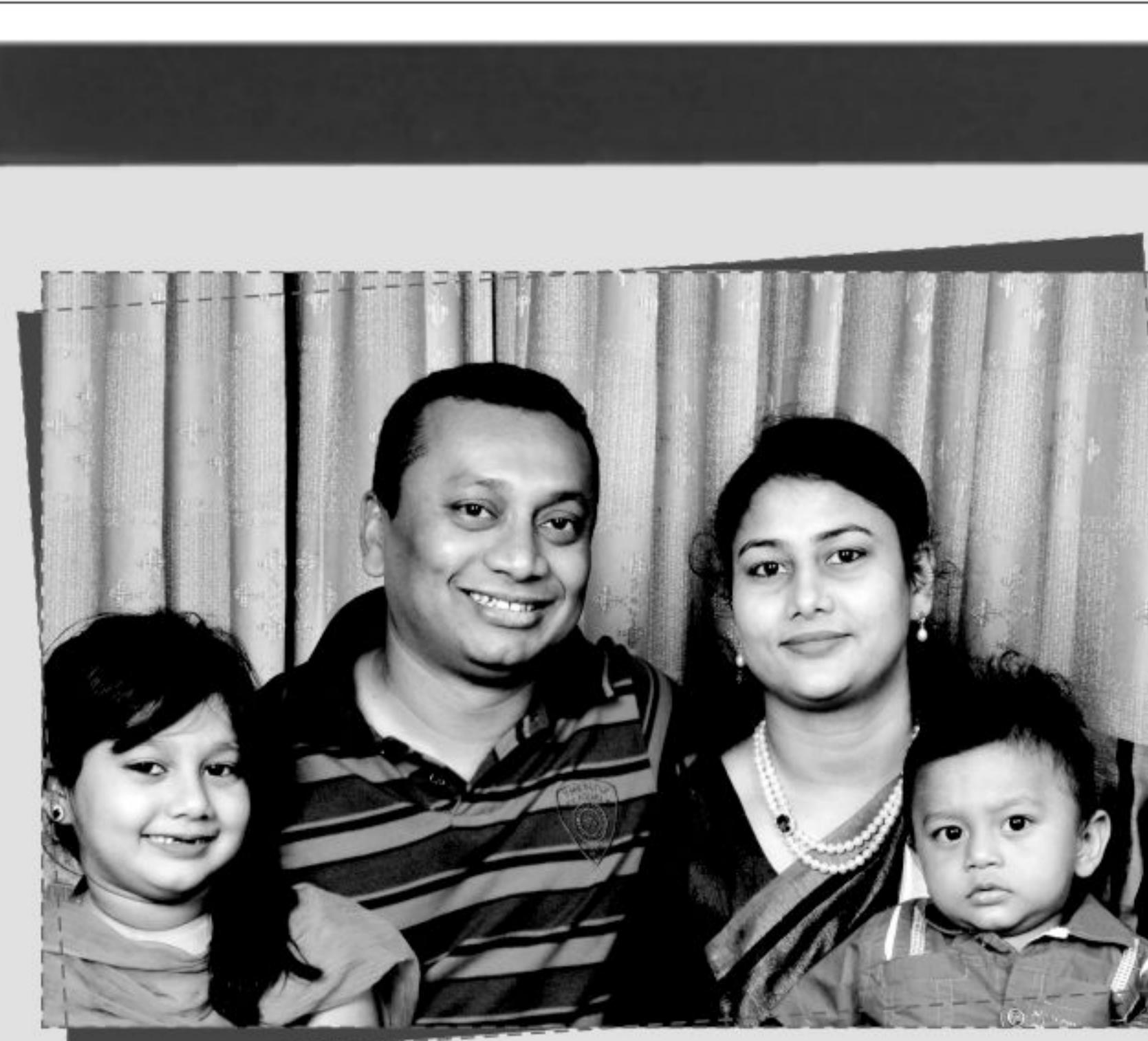
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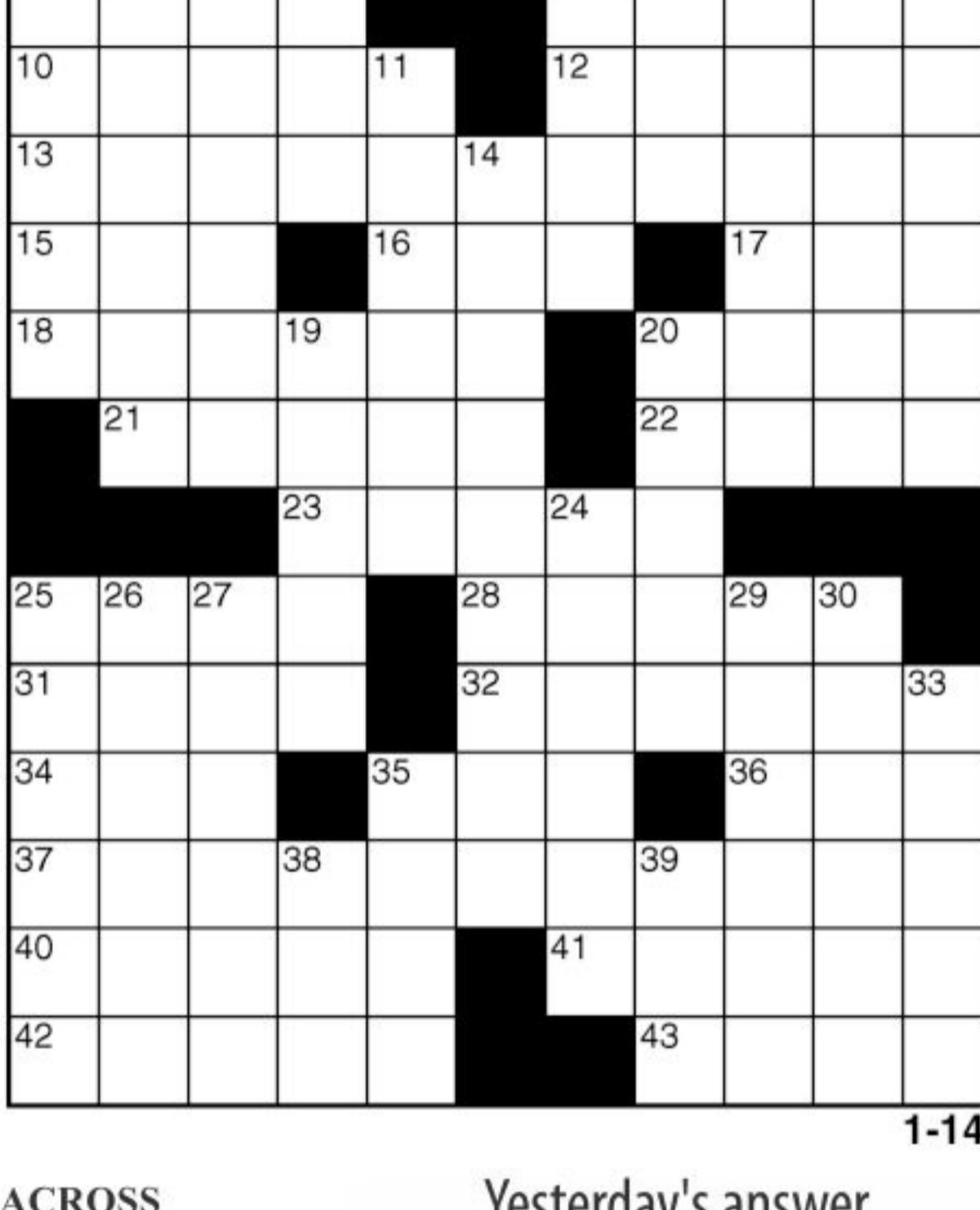
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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph



Yesterday's answer



A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

CRYPTOQUOTE

ZTDFK DF BH QBJT PKETF FPEF KMKTQ YEQ DI FPK
NKIF YEQ DH FPK QKET
- TEUVP ZEUYB KLKTIBH

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

EACH AGE HAS DEEMED THE NEW-BORN YEAR THE FITTEST TIME FOR FESTAL CHEER.

-Walter Scott