

Rab under new leadership

Taken aback by DG's comment on past record

THE country is still reeling from the Narayanganj seven-murder case which brought to sharp focus the alleged complicity of the country's elite force in abductions and murders, sending shockwaves across the nation. Although Rab initially denied any involvement, it later admitted it, subsequently sacking and arresting three of its officials; the investigations and trials are now underway.

Against this backdrop, we are shocked and surprised that the new director general has chosen to wash his hands off the Rab's questionable past records, stating that the misconduct of Rab members were "isolated incidents" that the Rab will not "own". He is welcome to make a new beginning, but that doesn't preclude him from bringing under scrutiny past allegations of transgressions and punish those found guilty of excesses. We believe that such a powerful institution has to answer for any and all infringements that its members may have committed.

While we admit that Rab has played an important role in curbing militancy, we remain concerned about the widespread civil and human rights violations committed by the agency with impunity, as highlighted by various human rights organisations. As Rab is empowered and equipped with sophisticated technologies under the new leadership of Benazir Ahmed, it becomes even more imperative that its members as well as the organisation at large acts in a responsible manner. There is no denying that we need to end the culture of impunity in our country, and that must begin with holding law enforcement members as well as agencies accountable for their violations.

Political-drugs smuggling nexus

Alarming rise in supply

WHAT has become transparent is the phenomenal rise in the cross-border trade of illicit drugs. With yaba pills flooding the market from Myanmar posting a more than sevenfold increase to nearly 6 million pills in the last four years, we have witnessed a major rise in usage. From what was discussed at a meeting of Department of Narcotics (DNC) on January 5, the increased availability of such harmful drugs as yaba and phensedyl is fuelling an unprecedented rise in addiction. The crux of the problem in combating the narcotics war is being compounded by the alleged involvement of politically connected people having a hand in the running of drug cartels.

Despite increased patrols by border personnel on both Myanmar and Indian borders, the fight against drugs is not going well. As reported by the World Health Organisation back in 2007, nearly 5 million people in the country were addicted to drugs. It is not only a matter of stopping the drugs from filtering into the country; it has also a lot to do with treating those who are already addicted. There too, Bangladesh lags behind having a mere 117 beds in rehabilitation centres countrywide. In a nation of more than 160 million people, that figure merely goes to illustrate precisely how high on the priority list this major public health issue is for policymakers. Again, merely equipping the DNC with manpower and equipment will not curb this menace. It requires political will at the top to empower the DNC to go after the drug lords who have till now acted with impunity.

QUICK COMMENT

MAKE OTHER CHANNELS NAVIGABLE

Leave Sundarbans alone

DR. ABDULLAH HARUN CHOWDHURY

THAT the government has reopened the Shela river route for vessel movement is totally unacceptable. It is also frustrating to note that, before doing so, the authorities did not take any safeguarding measures to prevent such accidents in the future. The recent oil tanker accident proved how fragile our whole system is.

The shipping ministry said that vessels would ply the Shela river in a "controlled" way. We wonder how the government will control the vessel movements, given its weak management system. Besides, the oil tanker that sank in the Shela river was like that of a cargo vessel which carries sand, even though the structure of an oil tanker is supposed to be different with appropriate safety apparatus. As both vessels look the same, it is not possible to identify one from the other to effectively ban the movement of oil carrying vessels through the river.

Although the Mongla-Ghashiakhali channel is being posited as the only alternative to the Shela route, there are also other possibilities that the government can explore. It would be far better, for instance, if we used the Pashur channel from Chittagong. In the past, there was also another channel that went through Rupsha-Atharobidi-Madhumoti. If we reopen this now abandoned channel, small cargos and trawlers can ply the route.

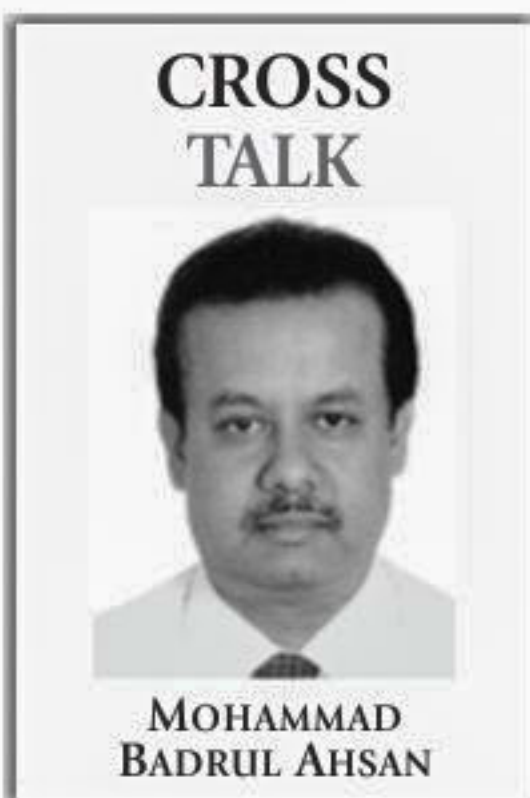
If the government is willing, it can complete the dredging work of the Mongla-Khashiakhali channel, which is only 21/22 km long, in just, say, twenty days, if 10 to 15 dredgers are used together for the dredging purpose. During emergencies, for instance, after SIDR and Aila hit our coastal regions, the government cancelled the government officials' leave so that they could work continuously to handle the crisis. The communications ministry did the same in the previous years prior to the Eid festivals, in order to repair the dilapidated roads to ensure that home-bound passengers could travel safely. So if the government is sincere, the dredging work can be completed in a short time. All that is needed is good intention.

Perhaps, a world heritage site like the Sundarbans means nothing to our government officials. How can you make them understand its importance, if they do not want to understand? How can you wake up someone who is pretending to be asleep?

The environmentalists and experts can play a strong role in finding a long-lasting solution. Lastly, the government officials concerned must be committed towards solving this problem. Most importantly, there must be coordination among the government ministries concerned.

The commentator is Professor, Dept. of Environmental Science, Khulna University.

Good news, bad news and January 5



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

office in Naya Paltan. The same old story unfolded one year later, albeit on a different day in a different location.

If every action has an equal and opposite reaction, that law of motion is perverted in our politics where reaction is met with reaction. That's why nothing new happened this January 5 either in the way the government opposed the opposition or the opposition challenged the government. Between upside down and downside up, the momentum remained virtually unchanged.

Readers often demand that their columnists shouldn't only write about problems but also give some solutions. While identifying the problem is half the solution, complete solutions are impossible when problems are rooted in intentions. You can't wake a person who's pretending to be dozing off.

Problems arise due to two different reasons. One is when people make mistakes and complicate solutions with further mistakes. Another is when people create problems in a calculated manner so that mistakes are mistaken to perpetuate a vicious circle of scurrilous solutions. In the first instance, problems exist because nobody knows how to find the way. In the latter case, problems are products of willful neglect when everybody is determined to lose the way.

The deadlock in our politics emanates from the latter instinct. It's stuck in the groove of an unfortunate fallacy where politicians believe opposition is dead if opponents are locked up and the key thrown away. The colonial British did the same thing. So did the callous Pakistanis. The missing link in our independence chain is that we've got rid of foreign rulers but clung to their art of ruling.

That's why this country is now divided into different domains. And it's divided not because we cannot be united, but because our rulers see it to their advantage to keep us divided. It's the age-old maxim of "divide and rule" used by rulers starting from Philip II of

Macedon down to modern-day potentates. Behind the shibboleths of highfalutin idealism is the naked lust for power, operating through force fields of lies and excuses.

Those force fields were apparent last Monday, when the police action contradicted the prime minister's assurance that the opposition leader was never detained. Those force fields were also apparent when government ministers mocked a two-time (arguably three-time) prime minister of the country as if they were in a comedy competition belting out their best punch lines. One day, historians will find it amusing that a watershed of our democracy was watered down by glib-tongued and slapstick politicians.

If anything, the inanity of politics was obvious in that showdown. If it showed how little opposition leaders did in the face of ruling party's resistance, it also showed how far the ruling party stooped down to put up that resistance. Never before in the history of this country have politicians insulted our intelligence so much that we were asked not to believe what we saw with our own eyes.

Late US vice-president Spiro Agnew is credited for saying that humans are born to make mistakes but politics is the art of blaming it on someone else. Our politicians have raised that game. They have been hiding the truth for so long that now they believe they can also hide everything else. Whatever happened on both sides of the political divide last Monday were rooted in that delusion. The ruling party leaders lied, and the police showed their might.

The whole thing looked not like a blame game but like an endgame as if each side was fighting for its existence.

It may be good news and bad news at the same time. Good news because political forces are seeking some kind of culmination in a decisive battle. Bad news because this nation has to brace itself for darker days until the blood of innocents will relieve it of the remaining spasms of organised hatred. As it's said, the darkest hour is always just before the dawn.

Politics is how the Manifest Destiny of a nation works through its choice of governments, and let's be frank this nation has miserably failed on that count. So the solution, dear readers, has to wait until time and destiny favourably converge for this nation. Why then should the columnists bother writing about the problems? It's for the same reason tourists consult maps before they arrive at their destinations.

The writer is Editor, First News and an opinion writer for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

Our politicians have raised that game. They have been hiding the truth for so long that now they believe they can also hide everything else. Whatever happened on both sides of the political divide last Monday were rooted in that delusion. The ruling party leaders lied, the opposition leaders tried, and the police showed their might.

COMMENTARY

'Internment' of BNP chief, a dangerous precedent

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)
 MAHFUZ ANAM

The other shock that dealt a serious blow to our democratic culture -- again started by the AL -- was boycott of the parliament, which started with a few days and ended up with several months of absence. This was followed by another shock from the en masse resignation of AL MPs that made the parliament devoid of the opposition. This, at the very start, killed the possible growth of the "check and balance" role of the Jatiya Sangsad.

The precedent set by the AL as the "opposition", set the tone for the BNP's role when it was voted out of power, and for all subsequent "oppositions" that were to follow. With each successive change of power -- which remained confined between AL and BNP -- the intensity of animosity increased as the years went by. As a result, our parliament not only never reached its potential of being the centre of "democratic governance", but became the stage for abuse and insults; and in the make belief narratives regurgitated at the behest of the leaders -- shriller the voice and nastier the language, the better.

With the parliament being continuously abandoned by the opposition, its effectiveness dwindled, and there remained none to effectively hold the government accountable. Thus over time, the executive branch which is very powerful according to our constitution, became even more powerful, and the practice of "check and balance" -- which lies at the very heart of good governance -- was totally lost. Lord Acton was once again proved right -- "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," a reality that we all live with today.

To all these destructive precedents, the BNP added a lethal one -- the assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina, and the killing of AL leader Ivy Rahman and 24 party activists. Just as the event was tragic, so also was incomprehensible Khaleda Zia government's callous, incompetent, and insincere investigation. This made for a credible circumstantial case that her government had been in the know, and some very powerful members of her party had been responsible for it. The truth will, hopefully, be determined by the court in the future. But the promptness with which Khaleda Zia's government destroyed some evidence, the half-heartedness with which it investigated the case, and the eagerness with which it branded the savagery to be the result of internecine rivalry within the AL, left an indelible impression in the public mind that even if the BNP or Khaleda Zia did not do it, they would not have been too unhappy if Sheikh Hasina actually had fallen a victim to it.

This changed our post-autocracy politics as never before. Sheikh Hasina, already convinced of Gen Ziaur Rahman's role in the loathsome events of 1975, now looked at Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman, not as political opponents but as her potential killers. This closed for the foreseeable future all possibilities of even a minimum collaboration between our two biggest political parties.

It is against this background that yet another unfortunate precedent is being set -- that of the treatment of the leader of the biggest opposition party. The forcible confinement of Khaleda Zia in her office, denying her the

fundamental rights to free movement, free assembly, and peaceful protest without giving any legal reason are opening up the possibilities of all sorts of harassment of political opponents. Repression and harassment of opposition leaders are nothing new in our part of the world. But to our great relief, as our democratic experiment lengthened after the restoration of democracy in 1991 -- except for the brief interlude of military-backed caretaker government -- political leaders of standing, especially our two top leaders, were not deliberately harassed, "confined" or repressed as the BNP chief has been subjected to in the last few days.

What are of equal concern are the nonchalance of the government in giving any reason as to why the BNP leader is being subjected to these harassment and maltreatment, and the absence of any formal explanation about the events of the last few days. The prime minister says the BNP chief is "free to go home", but she is "staging a drama" for nothing -- effectively accusing her of fibbing it all. The information minister said, "We have made sure that she cannot indulge in provocative statements." He also said, "She should be ready to respond to charges of murder." The state minister for home said, "We have heard what the information minister said, but we have not finalised any action in this matter. However, if she wants to go home, the government will provide her security to do so." The health minister said, "Since BNP has failed to protect their leader, it is now Sheikh Hasina's duty to provide Khaleda Zia with protection. It is our duty now to protect her." Whatever else the above confusing comments might imply, it surely cannot mean that the BNP chief is free. So no matter in whatever form, she actually is in confinement.

The AL leaders might say in comparison to what the BNP did to Sheikh Hasina, and the killing of 24 of their activists, they have done very little. Obviously the harassment meted out to Khaleda Zia cannot be compared with the brutality and viciousness of what the AL and its leader was made to suffer. But the truth of the matter is, a state and a nation cannot grow in the shadow of revenge and counter revenge. The retaliation must stop at some point. Paraphrasing what Mahatma Gandhi said, our politics of "eye for an eye" will make us all blind.

I can almost visualise some AL leaders mockingly questioning why am I pleading so much for the BNP chief's rights. And saying, this reveals where my real sympathy lies, and shows my real colour, and so on. My humble response would be that I am doing so for the future of the country, and for our younger generation whose potential is well established.

This politics of "winner takes all" cannot bring peace and stability we need for our growth. It has to be understood that stability is the mainstay of growth, which we will not have unless some sort of arrangement for cooperation can be worked out.

We conclude with the question, what will be the effect of the precedents being set? We are already facing the severe consequences of past political murders; unconstitutional power grabs; reckless, unthinking and convenient tailoring of the constitution by brute majority; lack of space for dissent; and now the near obliteration of any opposition.

We can ignore Newton's law that "every action has an equal and opposite reaction", but only at our own peril.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Government versus people

By announcing January 5 as 'Victory of Democracy Day', the Awami League-led government has made a cruel joke with the people because people think otherwise; they look upon it as death of democracy day. Their voting right was snatched as if they do not count.

So, when political parties arranged programmes protesting it, people supported them. They are not happy with the unjust actions of the government. The government is not giving space to other parties to hold their scheduled programmes while Chhatra League is allowed to do anything it wishes, and that too with the help of the law enforcing agencies.

But it is a grave mistake of the government; in the long run they may have to regret their actions.

Nur Jahan
 Chittagong

IS - a global threat

This is in reference to the letter published in TDS-30th December, 2014 on IS captioned, "A menace to humanity". We agree with all the views aired in the letter. I would like to further add to the subject.

Creation of ISIL or Islamic State - the recent scourge and brainchild of various countries and their agencies - has backfired tremendously. Many internal and external factors have worked in tandem in favour of the IS. Strangely, they are winning battles after battles. The IS terrorists are destroying lives and reputations of Muslims all over the world.

The Arab Spring has brought no benefit to the lives of Arabs or to the countries involved. Libya is still passing through nightmares. The country is getting fragmented. Tunisia and Egypt are also in shambles. Western style democracy or imposed democracy has proved to be ineffective in North Africa, Middle East and West Asia. Countries like Iraq, Libya were not faring badly before forced change of government. The governments were modern and secular. The social indicators were high. Same is the state of affairs in Syria. The alternative to the Assad government is a Muslim Brotherhood type of government in Syria, in which case the problems will only multiply. The western powers and their allies, involved in the 'Sunni-Shia' game in the region ought to realise their blunders in this dubious game. The continuous interventions of western powers and their allies in the affairs of the Middle East, North Africa, Western Asia etc. and irrational support for Israel, condoning all its heinous activities, have radicalised segments of Sunni Muslims and also Shias. The IS is capitalising on this discontent.

Dr. SN Mamoon
 Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Polls managed systematically," published on Jan. 4, 2015

Molla A. Latif

Whatever and however it was, January 5 election has saved the country from a precarious situation.

"Booming freelancing industry" (Jan. 4, 2015)

The Outsider

Whether or not the industry booms, does it make any difference to the government in Bangladesh in terms of taking any positive step to help this industry? It is a fact that whatever the people of Bangladesh achieve is solely to their own credit. There are many issues such as internet speed and cost, payment etc. where government should help. However, the government is little interested in these issues. So, we do not expect anything from it and we believe the freelancers are able to do better with their own effort and dedication. Wish them all the best!

"Waiting for democracy" (Jan. 4, 2015)

SM

The political parties do not own the constitution; let the people decide what they want.

"Time for India to play its part" (Jan. 4, 2015)

PlainSpeaker

You wrote: "The government formed by the Awami League (AL) under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina following the largely boycotted and violence marred parliamentary elections on January 5 was immediately recognised by India".

How on earth could an honest friend of Bangladesh immediately recognise a government formed by a farcical election that was "largely boycotted" by the people of Bangladesh and was "violence marred"?

SM

Exactly!