

Ekushey, the eternal beacon

Measuring up to aspirations of the day

AYING down lives to establish an innate and sacrosanct right to a people's mother tongue is a rarity in history. We are successors to this exemplary badge of honour. Such a passionate saga of sacrifice was to soon transcend into worldwide embrace through the Unesco's declaration of Amar Ekushey as the International Mother Language Day.

In the essence though, the Language Martyrs' Day heralded a whole series of events ranging from establishing Bangla as a state language, upholding all the associated cultural rights and asserting a self-identity against stunning odds of forced impositions by the then Pakistani establishment. There followed other developments such as the education movement, 1962; the Six-Point movement for political and economic autonomy, 1966; the mass upheaval against autocratic Ayub regime, 1969; the massive 1970 election win; and denial of power to Bangabandhu leaving the people indignant over what was a predictable betrayal. Befell the genocidal crackdown culminating in the Liberation War and consequent auspicious birth of Bangladesh. A common thread running through all these events, we pay homage to our first martyrs.

Ekushey is, thus, a repository of all our inspirations and a standard-bearer of unity and secular, pluralistic ethos.

As we celebrate the day as the International Mother Language Day, the dignity of the mother tongues is emblazoned in the hearts and minds of peoples everywhere. Along with demanding respect for every language the Unesco declaration is imbued with the objective of providing strong underpinnings to protection of minority languages from extinction. Let all countries with ethnic groups bear this in mind.

Double digit growth for poultry sector

Political stability and policy support key

IT is really promising that the poultry industry of Bangladesh will grow by an average of 16 per cent a year for the next five years. Poultry entrepreneurs have expressed this optimism in the opening day of 9th International Poultry Show and Seminar organised by World's Poultry Association-Bangladesh Branch (WPSA-BB).

According to poultry owners, higher investment and increased consumption of protein will lead this growth. Total investment in this sector is expected to be double at Tk 50,000 crore by 2020. This will enhance the sector's total employment, including indirect employment, up to one crore. The current per capita protein consumption in Bangladesh is 3.74 kg which is much below the global average of 18-20 kg. With rising incomes and steady population growth, it is expected to reach 8.42 kg by 2020.

Despite this immense opportunity, there are also some hurdles before the poultry sector to overcome of which political instability is the major one. As the ongoing violence has disrupted the industry's tight supply chain, the industry is incurring loss worth around Tk 18.28 crore a day on average.

There are also issues of non-availability of low-cost loans, inadequate government support and weak marketing infrastructure which hinder expected growth. The government should take all supportive measures to ensure the sustenance and growth of this vital source of animal protein. Political parties should work together to create an ambience of growth where the nation will prosper both in physique and mind.

COMMENTS

"Talks with Khaleda to encourage militancy" (February 16, 2015)

Robert

Do what is needed to stop death, injury of innocent people and property.

Barkat

History will one day judge you for missing the opportunity to create peace and save the nation from failing. You both have ruled Bangladesh for at least two decades. Nation expects much more wisdom, courage, vision and hope from you.

"When would enough be enough?" (February 16, 2015)

Denim

The 20-party and 14-party alliances are equally matched and these blockades and hartals may go on for a long time turning the situation into a grave one, with public security at stake.

Shalauddin Ahmed

Any talk with the murderers and terrorists will legitimize their terrorist activities. There is no point of talking at this time. They want fresh election. How is that possible? Election took place as per democratic process. It is time the government, civil society as well as international community condemned these activities and gave BNP-Jamaat an ultimatum.

"People are burnt, killed in the name of movement" (February 15, 2015)

Institutional resilience is the key

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

WHILE solutions to the present political stalemate do not appear to be in sight and the public continue to suffer due to obstinacy of the political actors, is it worth pondering over measures that could be undertaken without recourse to political dialogue, with a view to tiding over the present situation? The reference, quite clearly, is aimed at strengthening of the institutions that ensure the conducting of fair election. There are surely no two opinions that valid fears and apprehensions about the conducting of credible election under a party government lie at the bottom of the present confrontational scenario.

In 1995 when, owing to the badly bungled Magura bye-election, the necessity of a non-partisan caretaker government was an acceptable proposition, the government of the day went headlong into a farcical election under its partisan watch and finally relinquished power when the situation went beyond its control. The stubbornness to cling to political power anyhow buckled under popular pressure.

From the reports appearing in the media at that time it was abundantly clear that the Magura election had become a political caricature. An upright chief election commissioner (CEC) could have declared postponement and asked the contesting parties to behave. The law enforcing agencies including the armed forces could have been mobilised to ensure fair election. However, the then CEC showed no signs of firmness, leading some to call it 'timidity', others to call it 'indecisiveness,' and some others

termed it as 'misplaced legal formalism.'

Another palpable example of the defiance of the democratic norm in a most blatant manner was set when, in 2006, deliberate efforts were made to install a pliant and partisan caretaker government. In fact, the armed forces-backed caretaker government in January 2007 was quite clearly the result of the refusal of a major political party to play the political game fairly.

Coming to specifics, could Dr. Iajuddin, the former president of the republic in late 2006, convince the nation that his controversial assumption of the office of chief adviser was necessitated by the compelling circumstances as claimed? Or was it by deliberate design? It did not take a discerning observer to entertain serious reservations about the neutrality and non-partisan character of Dr. Iajuddin.

Former president Dr. Iajuddin assumed the charge of the office of the chief adviser without adequately exhausting the available constitutional options. His subsequent actions, still fresh in public memory, had actually validated his detractors' accusations of partiality; and that of carrying out the wishes and directions of his patrons and mentor.

If we care to retrace our steps we will remember that the last minute stalling of the issuance of rule in writ petitions that challenged the legality of president's untenable assumption of the office of chief adviser was given sanction by the highest judiciary.

To recall, the nation, in its desperate hours, expected the president of the republic to be legally and constitutionally upright and hoped that the head of the state would deliberate on matters of national interest with due diligence and solemnity. Unfortunately, he failed to protect the integrity of the constitutional arrangement of neutral and non-partisan caretaker government and ensured its irreparable denigration in public estimation. His actions led us to an ungovernable state.

The crux of the matter lies in the trust factor. Therefore, the cynics cannot be faulted when they say that the caretaker system is, in fact, a scathing indictment on the unreliability of our political class. The situation appears ludicrous because five years tenure can be run on a democratic system characterised by the primacy of politicians but elections have to be managed by a clearly non-democratic arrangement.

The question is, how have we created the apparent trust deficit? Is it the result of cumulative deficiencies of the regulatory institutions that we have willy-nilly allowed to grow at our own peril? A circumspect view would be that many institutions have not displayed the courage, fairness and firmness expected of them in ensuring propriety in conducting elections.

As per constitutional provision and administrative directives, the Election Commission (EC), a constitutional body, enjoys complete command and control over the executive branch, including the armed forces in so far as it relates to the conduct of election.

Therefore, the Commission can effectively energise field level executive magistracy and law enforcement functionaries. On ground, it is the magistracy and police who deal with the specifics of election management like selection of polling agents, safety and security of ballot boxes and polling centres, and ensuring peaceful environment.

The point to note is that the EC has to be really empowered so that nobody takes it lightly and the field executives do their duties conscientiously and remain answerable. If 34 years of rule by a particular political party was not able to influence the bureaucracy in favour of the incumbent in the neighbouring Indian state of Paschimbanga then why should our public servants fail? When our public servants have served reasonably creditably during caretaker dispensation they can also perform similarly under a party government.

The above may appear wishful think-

ing in the backdrop of our confrontational political culture, sharp polarisation along political lines and politicisation of public service including institutional cracks, but we have not reached a precipice. Surely, we can salvage our nation's honour by institutional strengthening.

It is pertinent to note that the Paschimbanga scenario does not need the umbrella of a caretaker government to oversee elections because their institutions have not been interfered with and made weak like ours. There, State Assembly elections were held on six different dates and the EC's authority was seen to be manifestly upright. This was possible because the regulatory authorities have not been politicised there, and the distinction between private desire and public propriety has not been blurred. Constitutional positions retain their halo and service ethos remains unblemished.

The executives, in their role as appointed representatives of the republic can, under the bold stewardship of the EC, put a halt to electoral malpractices and hold wayward politicians at bay, being supported by a caring and proactive judiciary. They have to take pride in their role as impartial public servants. In the ultimate analysis, our guardians will hopefully appreciate that an upright executive and the judiciary befitting the correct ethos of public service will act as guarantors of democracy.

In a situation where unfortunately neither the people nor the country is figuring as the first priority, our altruistic virtues would be open to question. Therefore, while the opposition needs to be persuaded to wait for some time for appropriate measures towards institutional firmness, the government of the day has to be encouraged to take steps that would assure the former about a reasonably inclusive fair election.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

State of emergency complicates peace process in Myanmar

NEHGIPAO KIPGEN

PRESIDENT Thein Sein, who is a former military leader himself, declared a three-month state of emergency in the Kokang self-administered zone in the northern part of Shan state, which shares border with China's Yunnan province.

The emergency rule, which was read out in national television on February 17, came after days of clashes between the Myanmar army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).

The fighting started on February 9 in Laukkai township when MNDAA fighters who were trying to retake the Kokang self-administered zone attacked the Myanmar army outposts near the towns of Mawthike and Tashwehtan.

The Myanmar army resorted to airstrikes in retaliatory attacks. According to the government, more than 50 of its troops and 26 Kokang fighters have been killed, forcing thousands of civilians to flee, either to other areas in Myanmar or over the border into China.

The MNDAA, under the leadership of Phon Kya Shin, enjoyed ceasefire with the government from 1989 to 2009. The ceasefire ended when the MNDAA rejected the Myanmar government's proposal to become border guard forces under the command of the Myanmar army.

In late August 2009, the Myanmar army, with the help of some Kokang army leaders including its Deputy Chairman Bai Suoqian who were loyal to the military government, captured and occupied Laukkai.

The state of emergency means that the

unrestricted authority in the Kokang region—Kongkyan and Laukkai townships. The region is mostly populated by the Kokang people, a Han Chinese ethnic group.

The imposition of military administration is a clause in the 2008 constitution which gives both executive and judicial powers to the military.

In an interesting development, Thein Sein on February 17 vowed "not to lose an inch of Myanmar's territory" and said the military was "protecting sovereignty and ensuring territorial integrity."

The intense fighting between the

While the Thein Sein government has agreed in principle to the formation of a federal union, which is aimed at granting autonomy to ethnic minorities, the declaration of emergency rule and the continued armed confrontations could hinder the peace process.

Myanmar army and the MNDAA comes at a time when the country is preparing to sign a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that would pave the way for political dialogue with the ultimate goal of building a federal union for peace and national reconciliation.

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in November 2014, which killed 23 cadets, the latest development in Kokang region is a testament of how complex and delicate the issue of ethnic minorities in Myanmar is.

Despite the continued armed confrontations, both ethnic armed groups and the government have not abandoned the negotiations over the NCA, which have been drafted by the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) and the Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC). Without a doubt, the attack on KIA

training base and the latest incident in Kokang region is a manifestation of decades-old ethno-political problems since the country's independence in 1948. Nonetheless, the peace process needs to be encouraged and supported.

To achieve the goal, there need to be both short-term and long-term strategies of approaches.

The short-term strategy should focus on critical issues hindering the signing of NCA, such as ending armed conflicts in Kachin and Shan states and building mutual trust between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar government, especially the military.

The long-term strategy should focus on issues pertaining to the creation of a federal union and a federal army, and post-ceasefire period of political dialogue process. The post-dialogue will have to deal with several other issues, including militarisation and demilitarisation, self-reliance and sustainability, reconstructing the economy and the involvement of citizens at the grass-root level in various aspects of the country's development.

The signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement and holding of a political dialogue, like the one similar to the 1947 Panglong conference, should be a priority, which many had anticipated to happen on the country's union day on February 12.

History has proven that resorting to military means is not a solution to Myanmar's problems, and it will not be in the future as well.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Repeated appearances at talk shows

The live talk shows which are aired every night on various TV channels now appear to have become like TV serials. The actors, as I would like to call them, have now become so much exposed to the audience that it is very easy to guess who are going to speak against or in favour of a political party. They appear every night in one TV channel or the other, and some are seen appearing consecutively on two or three channels in one night. Do these repeated appearances expose the dearth of intellectuals in Bangladesh? Or is it that the TV channels are myopic? In my personal opinion, the talk shows on present political situation sometimes do breed hatred.

Ziauddin Ahmed

On e-mail

Walk in their shoes

It's the Israeli occupation that's at the root of the Middle East problem. Put yourself in the Palestinians' situation for a moment. Walk in their shoes with me. For more than 40 years you've been occupied by a foreign power with the most powerful military in the region. They seize your country, move in hundreds of thousands of heavily armed settlers, and pen you up either in squalid refugee camps or poverty-stricken cities and villages separated by road-blocks and patrolled by their military with tanks and machine guns. When they want more of your land, they just take it and there's nothing you can do about it. If you build a new house where they don't

like it, they'll just bulldoze it with barely enough warning for you to get out before it comes tumbling down. If they want to cut off your meager drinking water supply so they have more water for their lawns and swimming pools, they can do it. If you demonstrate against these injustices, even doing as little as throwing rocks, you may get shot and maimed or killed. If you get sick and need to go to the hospital, that's too bad. Pregnant and about to deliver? That's tough. In fact, they may tear down your clinic or use your hospital for target practice. Got kids who need an education? Forget about it. Even if they let the school open, you couldn't afford it anyway, since you have no money, no job and very little food.

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