

Lessons of the verdict

They made politics and violence synonymous

THE verdict on the August 21 grenade attack case reveals some very dark features of politics in Bangladesh. It is indeed frightening to think that politics would degenerate to such a level where the psyche of the ruling party would be pervaded by such pathological animosity towards the opposition, so as to instigate it to eliminate the entire leadership of the opposition party, especially its leader Sheikh Hasina. Politics and violence became fungible and a natural complement of each other, and political opposition came to be considered as enemy by the ruling party.

To say that the DGFI and NSI were grossly misused would be an understatement. It is unthinkable that state security agencies would be used to plan and carryout the attacks, as the conviction and the sentence passed on both the then DGFI and NSI chiefs suggests. And that is exactly what the government of the day chose to do to subdue the opposition.

The principal function of these two agencies is to keep the country and the public safe from hostile intelligence, we witnessed on 21st August, 2004, most painfully, that they were used to attack the representatives of the public. What governments, which chooses to indulge in such depraved practice, fail to realise is that whatever temporary benefits they might gain from it, the ethos on which these agencies work and thrive is irreversibly destroyed when they are involved in politics on behalf of the ruling party. Thus, its moral fabric is destroyed and the security of the nation is put in serious jeopardy. A glaring example of this was the August 17th, 2005 simultaneous country-wide bomb blasts, which was possible because the intelligence agencies were busy suppressing the opposition.

August 21 is a black letter day in our politics, and we hope this verdict would act as cleansing tonic to rid our politics of violence. In this regard we strongly suggest that all political parties take note of the comment of the learned judge, that, "In a democratic state, whichever party comes to power, it has to try its best to establish democracy by applying a liberal policy towards the opposition party."

Why were ferry services suspended for 12 hours?

Irresponsible action should have its consequences

THIS sort of highly irresponsible behaviour can be expected only from callous and careless government functionaries. Without any prior notice, ferry services on the Paturia-Daulatdia route were inexplicably suspended for a period of 12 hours on October 10 at midnight. Thousands of people suffered throughout the night and hundreds of goods-laden vehicles remained stuck at Paturia and Daulatdia ferry terminals. We are informed by an official of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) that the route was apparently shut down for security reasons, and that this had been done on the instructions of Manikganj police.

Ironically, the Manikganj police, when contacted, refuted this claim. So not only were thousands left in the lurch without any facilities to rest or refresh themselves, we are now witnessing a game of denial being exercised by law enforcers and the BIWTC. Obviously, the order must have come from somewhere and this incident simply goes to show just how little authorities care about people's convenience in this country! Security reasons or otherwise, authorities have to make arrangements for passengers and travellers should such an incident occur where communication needs to be halted. We have no idea what the stranded people went through or what quantity of perishable goods were damaged due to the disruption. It is however a serious matter that needs to be investigated and those responsible must suffer the consequences of their action.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Good service makes a difference

It's hard to deny the fact that the number of hospitals has increased in our country over the years, but it's also true that it isn't nearly sufficient for the entire population.

Most private hospitals are situated in Dhaka, making them inconvenient for people who live outside the city. What's more is that the costly private hospitals are beyond reach for the poorer section of society.

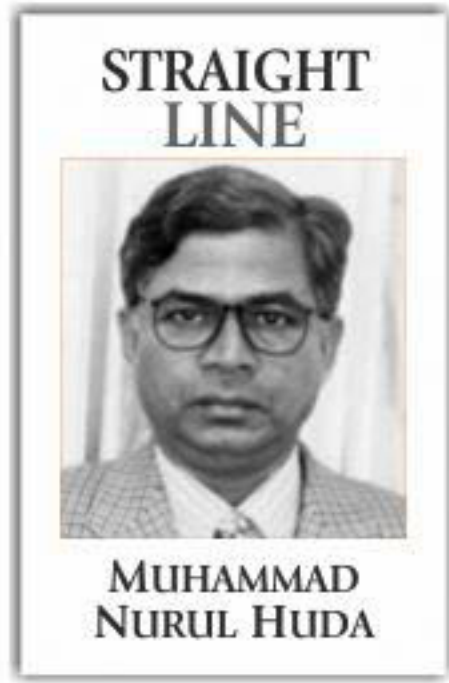
Yet, people would prefer to be treated in a private hospital rather than a public one, provided they have enough money, and despite the fact that public hospitals are supposed to have more doctors and charge a meagre amount. It is only because private hospitals provide better service.

Bangladesh is on its way to becoming a middle-income country, but the existing health infrastructure in the country is hardly satisfactory.

The government should invest heavily in public hospitals in order to improve their capacity to treat more people, facilitate better training for medical officers including doctors and nurses, increase their numbers and, of course, improve the quality of service.

Md Mahedi Hasan, East West University

The president's worries and our politics



THE president of Bangladesh, while addressing the 51st convocation of Dhaka University, has implored to leave politics to politicians. He says that "Only the politicians who do politics since the early years of their life will do politics" and adds that "It is not right to try to be a politician overnight without an early orientation." The president laments that "There has been no qualitative change in politics, as professionals are making direct entry into politics."

The president's apparently sarcastic comments about professionals joining politics in an "unseemly" manner cannot escape the attention of discerning citizens and thus it might be appropriate to understand and appreciate the distinctive imperatives of a politician's call. Surely, politics is a noble profession of high order that caters to public service and our president has rightly pointed to the necessity of training and experience in the formative years of one's life in order to become a useful and mature politician. The question is: What kind of credentials and training should a budding or an aspirant politician have, at least in the sub-continental parlance?

On the above subject, it might be interesting to note the observation of distinguished Indian lawyer-cum-diplomat and academic Nanabhoy Palkhivala. While delivering a convocation address at the University of Madras on September 28, 1979, he observed: "When, at this convocation, you see degrees conferred upon engineers, doctors, surgeons, lawyers and other professionals, you cannot fail to be struck by the grim irony of the situation where the one job for which you need no training or qualification whatsoever is the job of legislating for and governing the largest democracy on earth. You need years of training to attend to a boiler or to mind a machine, to supervise a shop floor or to build a bridge, to argue a case

in law court or to operate upon a human body. But to steer the lives and destinies of more than 650 million of your fellowmen, you are not required to have any education or equipment at all!"

It may also be pertinent to recollect what former Indian President Dr Rajendra Prasad said in the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949. While formally adopting the constitution, Dr Prasad observed: "I would have liked to have some qualifications laid down for members of the legislatures. It is anomalous that we should insist upon high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it except that they are elected. A law-giver requires intellectual equipment but, even more than that, the capacity to take a balanced view of things, to act independently and above all to be true to the fundamental values in life—in one word, to have character."

In our situation, the qualifications for a person who seeks to stand for election to parliament are: a) he or she must be a citizen of Bangladesh and b) he or she must be at least 25 years old, amongst others. The first qualification is usually an accident of birth, and the second is inevitably the result of the inexorable passage of time. We have mostly prescribed only disqualifications. It is time to advocate some positive qualifications for aspirants to a political career for ushering in the qualitative change as desired by our honourable president.

Incidentally, we also need to know how willing our political parties are to maintain audited accounts of all its receipts and expenditures. "The greatest source of corruption in public life is the total immunity of political parties from accountability while the small baker, butcher and grocer are expected to keep accounts. It is but fair and equitable that political parties should be disciplined by the same requirements of the law which apply to citizens at large." For ensuring quality in politics, this definitely is not a tall order.

Insofar as restricting or discouraging professionals from embarking on a political career, it might be advisable to examine if doing so would not be

incompatible with the provision of Article 40 of our constitution that says: "Subject to any restrictions imposed by law, every citizen possessing such qualifications, if any as may be prescribed by law in relation to his profession, occupation, trade or business shall have the right to enter upon any lawful profession or occupation, and to conduct any lawful trade or business."

On the issue of businessmen's preponderance in politics, I am of the view that this development should not be looked upon with disfavour if indeed we agree that creation of wealth is a virtue. Surely, an entrepreneur is, by habit and experience, an innovative person whose wisdom and foresight our society stands to benefit from. Gone are the days of a historically necessary anti-establishment when politics was the predominant preserve of lawyers and trade union leaders. The emerging imperatives of balanced economic development require the active participation of enlightened captains of industry and commerce in politics. What we need to do is to take adequate measures to prevent conflict of interest in such a scenario by means of appropriate legal interventions as has been done in other countries.

I understand that the honourable president's worry relates to ensuring quality in politics and if indeed the entries of professionals have made a corrosive impact on the tone and tenor of politics. In retrospect, one would find that the military interventions in 1958 during the Pakistan period and in 1975 in Bangladesh were largely responsible for requisitioning the services of the so-called professionals in active politics. As to who is responsible in what dimension for this state, it would not be possible to indicate such without the benefit of an in-depth dispassionate study. Some would say that the bureaucrats conspired to discredit the politicians while others would blame the politicians for not adequately matching the service calibre and not providing purposeful leadership in managing the affairs of the state. Consequently, the bureaucracy continued operating only to guarantee societal inertia.

Politics must not belittle greatness and corrupt goodness. The politician should not be the sordid amalgam of lack of intellect with lack of character and lack of knowledge. Our democracy needs to have an aristocracy of talent, knowledge and character. This aristocracy has to take to public life.

Standards of ethics and decency in public life are less easy to enforce by law than by public opinion. Obedience to the values which is enforced not by the machinery of criminal justice but by the national ethos is the ultimate guarantee of a clean public life. For the rebirth of morality in our politics, the period of gestation will prove lengthy and the delivery promises painful but one cannot dedicate life to a greater cause.

Our politicians must not have any pretensions to infallibility and should not appear to be under a promise never to become wiser. The compulsions of the party system could be understood and the grievous toll it takes upon a member's independence, individual judgment and freedom of action could be appreciated. The system, however, brings about coherence and unity of purpose in the actual working of democracy.

While man is a political animal and politics is all-pervasive, it is queer that politicians do not figure high in popularity ratings throughout the world. Perhaps it is a natural weakness to revile that which we cannot do without. We, however, need to bear in mind that in the hands of a committed politician, the affairs of the state would represent the application of reason to noble and purposeful ends. Alternately, politics can be debased to low ends; it can be a mean pursuit, instead of a high adventure. It can be used merely as a means of livelihood instead of being pursued in the grand manner so as to afford opportunities for a full and fulfilling life.

We must learn to subordinate ourselves to a caring and enlightened political leadership because in doing so we will be ensuring "...effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels."

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP.

State polls may set the scene for India's national elections

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE announcement of poll schedules for legislative assemblies in the five states of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Telangana has plunged India headlong into the season of polls, the biggest festival of democracy. The impact of the results of the elections in these states spread across northwestern, central, northeastern and southern parts of India will be felt across India as they will take place four to five months before the much bigger battle: parliamentary polls in 2019.

Although it may not be totally accurate to say that people vote in the same manner in state and national elections, it is by and largely agreed that the geographical spread of the five states will give a fair idea as to which direction the wind will be blowing. That is mainly because the fight in the key battleground states—Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan—would be a straight face-off between ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and main opposition Congress Party in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Regional parties in these three states are marginal players. The five states together have 83 seats out of a total of 543 in the Lok Sabha.

The stakes are equally high for both the BJP and the Congress in the five states and there are important lessons for both sides in terms of shaping and reshaping their strategies and building up momentum for the national elections. The coming state polls will also provide an opportunity for the political parties to ascertain the planks that will get traction with the voters. The BJP has till date woven its campaign narrative around nationalism issues like National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify "illegal immigrants from Bangladesh", "urban Maoists" and economic development. The Congress, on the other hand, sought to pin down the BJP-led government on alleged graft in the purchase of Rafale fighter jets from France, the state of farmers, unemployment and rising prices of petrol and diesel.

If the saffron party can overcome anti-incumbency and retain power in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where it has been ruling for the last 15 years having won elections three consecutive times, as also Rajasthan, which is known for not returning a party to power for more than one five-year tenure at a stretch, it will be a big morale-booster and optics for the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the 2019 general elections.

A victory for the Congress, which hopes to ride on anti-incumbency, in at least two of the five states—and that indeed is a very challenging task for the party given its current predicament—could generate confidence in its capability for a comeback path not only as what Sonia Gandhi had termed the "natural party for governance" but also as the anchor of a national-level alliance of key regional parties to take on the BJP, something which has been elusive so far. A Congress victory will help create a constellation of regional parties opposed to the BJP and strengthen its bargaining power when it comes to sharing of parliamentary seats to be contested with the smaller



PHOTO: AFP
The five upcoming state polls will test PM Narendra Modi's popularity ahead of his reelection bid in 2019.

outfits. Also, it will push up the rating of Congress President Rahul Gandhi as a potentially strong challenger to Modi.

As usual, the BJP is betting big on the charisma of Modi to see it through in the five states, particularly in Rajasthan where all accounts point to an extremely tough task for the party to retain power. The Congress fancies its best chance in Rajasthan where the party has so far been able to put up an impressive show of unity among its two key veteran leaders Ashok Gehlot, a former chief minister of the state, and young Sachin Pilot, despite known personal rivalry between them. Gehlot and Pilot have been campaigning in Rajasthan together. However, such a show of unity is missing in the Congress in adjacent Madhya Pradesh where factional feud has hamstrung the party since long.

What has added to the Congress' anxieties are its efforts for an alliance with Dalit leader Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) for the assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, which have come unstuck on the issue of seat-sharing. Mayawati has rejected any tie-up with the Congress in the three states although it is a force only in a few pockets of Dalits there. Following in the footsteps of BSP, Samajwadi Party (SP) led by Akhilesh Yadav also spurned the alliance with the Congress in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The strongholds of the BSP and the SP are, of course, Uttar Pradesh. Still, the BSP and the SP's rejecting the alliance with the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan is being viewed as bad optics not only for the coming assembly polls but also for next year's national elections. A division of anti-BJP votes is generally seen as helpful to the BJP.

However, the Congress maintains that both the BSP

and the SP will come around to align with it in the general elections. Interestingly, Mayawati has kept that option open by praising Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in the same breath as she rejected the alliance with the Congress for the assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Mayawati is waiting to see the results of the coming assembly elections in the five states to find out where the Congress stands in order to finalise her future strategy for her main bastion Uttar Pradesh which sends the largest number (80) of members to parliament.

Mizoram too will see a triangular contest between the Congress, the BJP and the key state party Mizo National Front. Mizoram is the only one of the seven northeastern states where the Congress is in power. The party has been ruling the state for the last decade having won the state assembly poll on two successive occasions.

In Telangana, the Congress was voted out of power by local party Telangana Rashtra Samithi headed by K Chandrasekhar Rao in the first assembly elections held in Telangana in 2013 since the creation of the state after bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh state. This time, the Congress has aligned with the Telugu Desam Party and Left parties in Telangana.

The dynamics of politics in India varies from state to state and with national politics. As things stand now, the fate of a national-level overarching unity among anti-BJP parties will depend a lot on the coming polls in the five states which are the final round of major electoral contest before the mother of all battles in 2019.

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