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NEW AGE Editorial

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Editorial

Govt needs to give second thought to political tactics

AS REGARDS treating opposition political camps, the Awami League-led governing coalition clearly appears to have adopted a political tactic which is unambiguously undemocratic, which, again, would expose the country to the course of confrontational politics to the benefit neither of the opposing camps. But the country, its people, its economy, et cetera would be the prime casualty.

That the ruling coalition has adopted the tactic of politically silencing the opposition has been proved in a series of recent government actions, such as arresting scores of BNP leaders and activists during general strike the party had observed in protest against price hike of the essential commodities, etc on June 27 and implicating them in different types of criminal cases, obstructing the party from forming human chains on July 7 demanding the release of the arrested leader and workers, and finally standing in the way of staging a 'mass hunger strike', scheduled for July 25, by way of not permitting the opposition to do that at the Paltan Maidan. Notably, a state minister heads the National Sports Council in which is vested the authority of granting the required permission for using the maidan.

While there is controversy in society over the rationale of observing general strike as a means of registering protest against government misdeeds, the party called the strike for the first time in 17 months of the Awami League rule. Then it came up with the programme of forming human chains by the roadsides, which is by nature a peaceful programme frequently observed by many social, political and cultural organisations across the world. Even the partners of the ruling coalition have observed such a programme only the other day. But when it came to the opposition, the government irrationally used the police to make sure that BNP leaders and activists could form any human chain in the capital or elsewhere of the country.

Then, the party announced a mass hunger strike, the most peaceful gathering to symbolically protest against government undemocratic actions at the historic Paltan Maidan. But the government refused to grant the permission. The message is clear: The government is not ready to allow the BNP to carry out any political activity. Not a good sign, indeed, as far as required governmental tolerance to the opposing views in a multi-party democracy is concerned. A few months ago, the government brutally attacked a procession of the national committee for protecting natural resources, a civil society group comprising well-meaning people, fighting against government policies detrimental to the national interests, for several years now.

When opposition parties or oppositional social groups are not allowed by a government to register protest against

knowledge that the dissenting parties or groups adopt violent means to do so. The Awami League, while in the opposition, has done it many times in the past. There is no reason to believe the opposition forces of the day would act differently in the days to come. Hence is the apprehension of confrontational politics, while what the country needs most is the politics of consensus for the sake of peace and stability – two major prerequisite for economic development and democratisation of the state.

But the government has visibly opted for the course of confrontation. History says repression of the political opposition or those holding dissenting views has never ever helped the incumbents to sustain popular support. The fate of the ruling Awami League has no reason to be different. The leaders of the ruling coalition should therefore give a second thought on the repressive course that it has already taken in politics. They need to do it not only for the sake of national economy and democratic polity but also for its own partisan political interests – the sooner the better.

Adieu, sultan of spin

IT IS indeed befitting that Muttiah Muralitharan, the undisputed sultan of spin, bowed out of Test cricket on a winning note – that too against India, a side ranked number one in the International Cricket Council ranking. It is also befitting that Muralitharan pulled the curtain down on his Test career with his 800th scalp, by far the highest by any bowler, present or past; he is also the highest wicket taker in one-day international with a kitty of 515. These records along with some others, e.g. most five-wicket hauls in a Test innings, most 10-wicket hauls in a Test, most man-of-the-series awards in Tests, are likely to stay for a while. The second and third highest wicket takers in the all-time list – Shane Warne of Australia (708 in 145) and Anil Kumble (619 in 132) – have both retired, so have the others in the top ten. Even if they had not, it would have been extremely difficult for them to surpass the mark Muralitharan has set. A look at the Sri Lankan bowling maestro's average would say why: he gave away only 22.72 runs per wicket and 2.47 runs per wicket.

Muralitharan belongs to that generation of players who simply revolutionised spin bowling. Often regarded as the second fiddle to fast bowlers, spin bowlers had always been known for endurance rather than aggression until Muralitharan, Warne and Kumble burst into the scene. The three simply changed the dynamics of Test cricket. Each of them was aggressive but Muralitharan may have been the most aggressive among the three. Most importantly, while Warne and Kumble were leg-break bowlers, Muralitharan was an off-spinner, previously known as the more innocuous of the two. The craftsman from Kandy drastically changed the perception about off-spin bowling, with his vicious turns and deceptive doosra (one that spins away from the right-handed batsman).

Success for Muralitharan came at a price; controversy over his bowling action dogged him through his entire career. While the ICC cleared his action, his detractors were not placated. The low point in the controversy over his bowling action came when Australian umpire Darrel Hair reported him for chucking, a decision that caught the cricketing world by storm and, unfortunately, stirred innuendos about racism. Yet, Muralitharan persevered and prevailed. He showed the dogged determination that defines a great player. The other mark of a great player is that he or

one knows when to call it quits. The bowling figures in the last Test prove beyond any doubt that had he wanted he could have gone on for a few more matches; he decided not to and he just did not want to block the place 'of another young player.'

50 years of IRRI and threat of Golden Rice

*While in almost every respect we see that the present government does not like to follow what has been done or initiated during the previous elected government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, in case of introducing genetically modified seeds, there seems to be no problem in carrying on the unfinished task of the former agriculture minister MK Anwar, who said in a BBC interview that the government 'does not object to GM technology, which may prove beneficial', writes **Farida Akhter***

WHILE farmers' organisations across Asia are clamouring that 50 years of the International Rice Research Institute is enough, as it has contributed more to the destruction of our rice diversity than to increase it, it is intriguing that the institute's golden jubilee was celebrated in Bangladesh with much fanfare. None other than the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, inaugurated the event to mark the occasion on July 14. Some 500 scientists, policymakers and government dignitaries attended the event, organised by the agriculture ministry and the institute itself. In her speech, Hasina praised the agriculturists for developing salinity-, drought- and submergence-tolerant rice, which is claimed to be combating natural calamities and changed climate conditions, and sustaining food security in the country.

However, concerns have been raised that this could be an entry point for genetically engineered rice varieties in Bangladesh with full support from the government, ignoring the critics not only in Bangladesh but also around the world. So far, there has been no evidence-based research that such stress-resistant varieties can really help meet the stress conditions and solve the hunger problem. Unfortunately, the prime minister, the agriculture minister and relevant policymakers seem to be fed only with the claim that hi-tech solutions are the 'only solution' to meet climate change situations, although there are many scientists Bangladesh and, of course, the farmers who have more concrete evidences of using local varieties of rice which can meet stress conditions. Evidently, their voices are not being heard.

The IRRI director general, Dr Robert S Zeigler, who was present on the occasion, highlighted the importance of breeding new varieties with appropriate new traits to 'feed the increasing population of Bangladesh.' Again this is a common jargonistic claim without any evidence. He said Bangladeshi scientists had developed a few stress-tolerant hybrids and varieties BR 40, 41, 47, 51 and 52; BINA 8 and 9 using genes shared by the IRRI. He assured that IRRI will continue to strengthen the cooperation with the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute for developing appropriate varieties the country will need. But where did IRRI get the genetic materials from? He forgot to mention that these were actually collected from farmers of Asia, including Bangladesh.

The International Rice Research Institute was set up in 1960, entrusted by the United Nations to safeguard the diversity of the world's rice germplasm at its International Rice Gene bank and mandated to support the development of rice research within national agricultural research systems. It is the self-proclaimed 'home of Green Revolution in Asia', the central institution through which the Green Revolution model for rice expanded throughout Asia in the 1970s. Bangladesh inherited this model from the earlier government of Pakistan, when Field Marshal Md Ayub Khan introduced the so-called 'modern agriculture' or green revolution with prescription from the World Bank in 1965.

What are we celebrating about IRRI in Bangladesh in 2010? IRRI has contributed to the increased use of chemical fertiliser, pesticide, use of groundwater and various mechanised tools for threshing, husking, etc displacing the poor farmers and women in particular from farm work. Since its inception IRRI has collected (or pirated!) thousands of traditional rice varieties from our countries but it has been able to offer only 52 varieties and is thereby responsible for narrowing the genetic diversity of rice. Because of government and donor support for the cultivation of IRRI varieties, most of the land has been brought under cultivation of these varieties. The 'miracle' rice IR8 and other HYV varieties often known as modern varieties were promoted to solve the so-called 'hunger problem' in the poorer Asian countries. Unfortunately, it failed because of its nature of monoculture farming with extensive use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers, etc. The boro rice production has contributed to the destruction of the production of other major food crops such as lentil, pulses, oil seeds, vegetables, etc. The modern variety has also started to show declining productivity and increasing use of inputs to maintain the yields. According to World Bank studies (Pagiola, Stefano, Environmental and Natural Resource Degradation in Intensive Agriculture in Bangladesh, ESD, The World Bank, 1995): 'The results of long term trials by the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) also indicate that intensive rice cultivation can result in declining yields, even under good management and with full recommended doses of all nutrients being applied'. BRRI, the affiliate institution of IRRI has failed to provide support to farmers at the time of their need; rather, they have been providing the access to the collected germplasm of rice to the multinational corporations without any permission from the farmers, the genuine owners of the germplasm. In order to get a local seed variety from BRRI, a farmer or even any legal research institution has to go through a lengthy process of making memorandum of understanding, but surprisingly the multinational corporations can get it very easily.

This is a common complaint in many countries of Asia. IRRI has actually opened up to the corporations since 2000 through the formation of public-private partnership with Syngenta and several national research centres to develop and commercialise a genetically engineered rice with a high vitamin A content, known as Golden Rice. We already know that the Golden Rice Network is coordinated by IRRI's Gerard Barry, who was formerly an employee of Monsanto. Now with IRRI's 50 years celebration, Bangladesh gets the bad news from its director general that it will 'bring Golden Rice into Bangladesh.' What a golden opportunity to announce that! In an exclusive interview with Prothom Alo, Ziegler said promoting the Golden Rice developed in the US to the farmers of Bangladesh is its biggest plan (Prothom

NO, July 10).

Undoubtedly, Golden Rice is genetically modified and must go through the process of regulatory mechanism guided by the Cartagena Protocol on Bio-safety which Bangladesh has ratified. The National Bio-safety Framework in Bangladesh was developed in 2006 following an extensive assessment of biotechnology and bio-safety but the last draft of the framework in 2007 (i.e. during the unconstitutional caretaker government) was not at all satisfactory to the environmental activists in Bangladesh. Now it is called the Bio-safety Rules 2010 which are also not very satisfactory to protect our diversity and the environment. It is strange that Ziegler announces introduction of Golden Rice without any reference to the bio-safety regulations in the country.

While in almost every respect we see that the present government does not like to follow what has been done or initiated during the previous elected government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, in case of introducing genetically modified seeds, there seems to be no problem in carrying on the unfinished task of the former agriculture minister MK Anwar, who said in a BBC interview that the government 'does not object to GM technology, which may prove beneficial.' He acknowledged that GM foods are controversial worldwide but said nonetheless that his government would not take any stand against the technology. He told BBC on January 18, 'We will introduce GM rice in Bangladesh after proper testing and going through national and international rules and regulations.' Research into the crop at that time was being carried out at the rice research institute. UBINIG, Nayakrishi Andolon and many other environmentalists have protested against the government decision.

It seems that Syngenta and IRRI continued their trials and instead of proving that Golden Rice is indeed going to solve problems and will not cause hazards to our local varieties, they are still making claims that are yet to be proved. In many Asian countries it has been rejected by farmers' organisations on the ground that it is an 'inappropriate and ineffective solution'. It is known that there are ample sources of vitamin A in fruits and vegetables, which are plentiful and can be made available in our country. Solving the problem of night-blindness or vitamin A deficiency is not a technological issue, it is more related to poverty and balanced food intake. The company patented Golden Rice or the so-called vitamin A rice is not at all going to solve the problem, rather it will make the country more vulnerable in terms of dependency on the company.

According to international organisation Friends of Earth, scientific data shows that even if golden rice is 'successfully' introduced, it will likely do little to ameliorate vitamin A deficiency because it produces so little beta carotene – just 1.6 micrograms per gram rice ($\mu\text{g/g}$) at present, with a goal of $2\mu\text{g/g}$. If scientists reach this goal, a woman would need to eat 16 pounds of cooked rice every day in order to get sufficient vitamin A, if golden rice were her only source of nutrient. A child would need 12 pounds. More realistically, three servings of $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of cooked golden rice per day would provide only 10 per cent of her daily vitamin A requirement and less than 6 per cent if she were breastfeeding. Yet even these modest contributions are uncertain. In order to absorb beta carotene, the human body requires adequate amounts of zinc, protein and fats, elements often lacking in the diets of poor people. Those with diarrhoea – common in developing countries – are also unable to obtain vitamin A from golden rice.

Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity, a supplementary agreement to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which entered into force in 2003. This international treaty is responsible for governing the movements of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology from one country to another. The objective of this protocol is to contribute to ensuring an adequate level of protection in the field of the safe transfer, handling and use of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology that may have adverse effects on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health, and specifically focusing on transboundary movements.

Hopefully, such precautionary measures will be taken before introducing genetically engineered or modified rice in Bangladesh. In fact, the government needs to first look at the options that are available within the country, without going into the controversy of introducing genetically engineered rice in a country of rich rice diversity.

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