

Making economic growth more pro-poor in Bangladesh

SALMAN ZAIDI, RINKU MURGAI

This is the third article in a trilogy on (i) growth and poverty reduction in Bangladesh, (ii) accelerating economic growth, and (iii) making growth more pro-poor.

If Bangladesh wants to reach its goal of halving the roughly 63 million people living below the poverty line by 2015, accelerating economic growth -- to at least a sustained 6 percent per annum -- will be essential.

raise their incomes, and providing complementary public infrastructure and other support needed to help raise returns to these assets.

Main sources of income and assets of the poor

Survey data from the 2000 Household Income and Expenditure Survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reveals that households in Bangladesh pursue a broad range of activities to earn their livelihoods.

One of the marked differences distinguishing the poor from the rich is their high reliance on income from daily wage labour (Figure 1). Analysis of wage data shows that local labour markets offer significant premiums to education.

Investing in human capital

Since poor Bangladeshis' chief asset is their labour, the need to invest soundly in building human capital is clear. Basic education is critical to ensure that everyone can participate in and benefit from growth.

While allocating public resources to priority sectors such as child nutrition, education and health is important, how these resources are used is

also of crucial importance. Better targeting of nutrition interventions and emphasis on fostering behavioral change through communication will be necessary -- indeed critical -- to shrink the incidence of malnutrition among children.

Promoting growth in the agriculture sector

Eighty-five percent of Bangladesh's poor live in rural areas where agriculture is the predominant activity, so accelerating growth in agriculture through raising productivity of existing crops and diversification will be crucial.

Promoting growth in the non-farm sector

For wage workers in Bangladesh, non-farm employment offers significant premiums relative to agricultural daily work, so this sector is clearly of great importance for poverty reduction.

law has already been noted in the previous article in this series. The importance of local public infrastructure is also noteworthy in this context, as it is critical to the development of a modern agricultural and non-farm sector.

Promoting social assets and inclusion

In preparing its Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), Bangladesh has an unprecedented opportunity to devise a long-term comprehensive strategy for poverty reduction.

Decentralisation and participation, by enabling people to voice their demands for intervention and hence shape the development process, are particularly important in Bangladesh where there is considerable heterogeneity amongst the poor.

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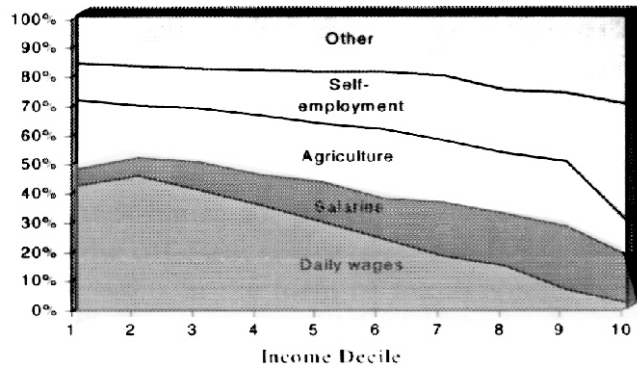


Figure 1: High Dependence of the Poor on Daily Wage Income

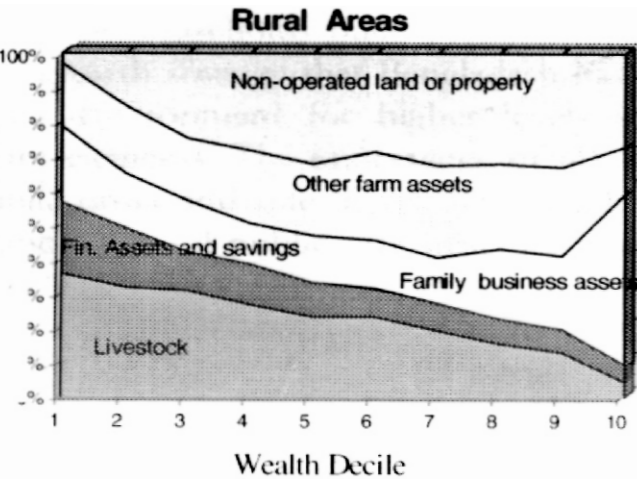


Figure 2: Composition of Assets: Importance of livestock & financial assets for the Poor

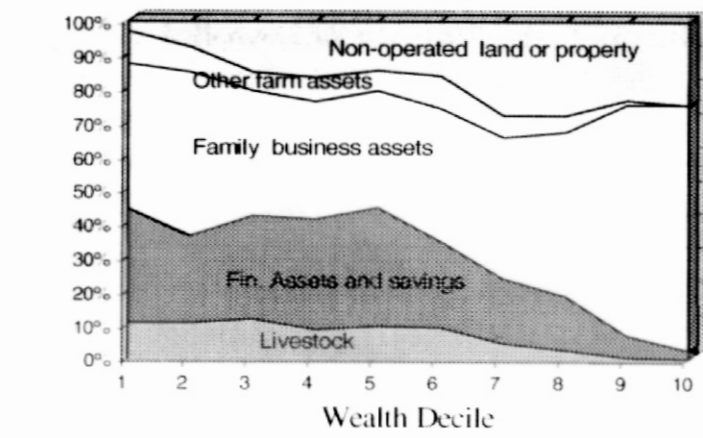
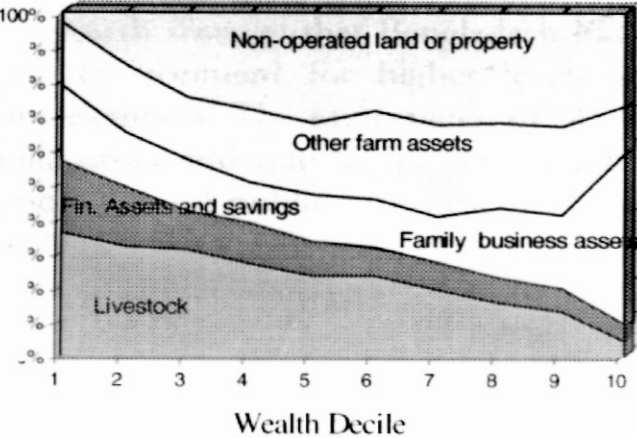


Table 1. International Comparisons of Selected Infrastructure Indicators

Table with 7 columns: Indicator, Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Vietnam. Rows include GNP per capita, Commercial energy use per capita, Electricity consumption per capita, Paved roads, Telephone mainlines.

Source: World Bank, 2001a.

Democratic norms, not sedition charges, may help build image

KHAIRUL MAJID MAHMUD CHANDAN

TODAY like many other concerned citizens of the country, I am disturbed and frustrated with the current political scenario. The usual lack of tolerance, understanding, mutual respect and the rivalry amongst the politicians and political parties have reached an absolutely unacceptable level and does not fall in any category of political or democratic norms whatsoever.

tion of judiciary from the executive branch to establish rule of law, we are busy scraping law to bring down the portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the government entities, erasing his message of historic 7th March from the Cantonment Bijoy Keton Museum or passing a bill in the Parliament to remove his name from the National Agricultural Award etc.

armed forces into controversy. The army must be kept above all controversy. Our army means a lot to us and we are proud of them. They have proved their worth in times of frequent natural disasters in the country and earned lot of name and fame by serving under the banner of United Nations in many peace keeping missions around the world.

shall be taken except in accordance with law" (Article 31). Sooner or later, somebody in the government has to take the responsibility of answering a lot of questions regarding these custodial deaths.

The broadly accepted notion is that, basically army is trained to defend the country from external aggression, fight the enemy and protect the sovereignty. They are trained to carry out orders to perform a specific task or achieve a given target. Once the order is passed on, they would go hard at it and by any means achieving their goal becomes the highest priority.

Our Press performed to the best of their abilities by repeated warnings to the government pointing out the undue harassment, torture and deaths in custody as clear indication of human rights violation. Similar voice was echoed by the leaders of the civil society, intellectuals, eminent lawyers and politicians along with the human rights organisations and the concern of the democratic platforms and governments abroad were also noted.

was not arrested in the first place and let go to perform Omrah, while number of illegal arms and ammunitions were recovered from the house in his absence earlier? How about earlier arrest of former state minister Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir (released on bail) and Bahauddin Nasim, APS to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina arrested (prior to joint drive) for carrying excessive foreign exchange while travelling but later charged with involvement in the motorcade attack of Begum Khaleda Zia, rotting in the jail without a bail? Needless to say the routine search of the houses of AL's top leaders and thrust of arresting journalists being charged with sedition and undermining their character and morale.

To justify the arrests of the opposition activists, BNP Secretary General and LGRD minister Mr.

some reports and articles published in some foreign newsmagazines portraying Bangladesh to be vulnerable to fundamentalism. It seems that the four-party alliance has been obsessed with their preconceived idea of blaming a particular political party and its leader for anything and everything that's being going wrong since their assumption of power. It is just like the obsession and preconceived idea of the foreign press projecting growing fundamentalism in Bangladesh and a neighbour beating around the bush to pursue some interest to their own benefit.

Although we are a moderate, liberal democratic country and our culture, values and commitment to secularism always supercedes fundamentalism, at the same time being a Muslim majority nation, we should not totally neglect the concern and brush it off, of course without mixing Islamic sariah with

parliament, none of which have been entertained. Lately, the main opposition brought few issues of national interest and concern like deaths in custody, arrest of sitting lawmakers, price hike of daily essentials and so forth to the Business Advisory Committee to be included in the agenda for discussion in the Parliament. The request was turned down. In fact, Parliamentary Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Mr. Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury cited that there was no such precedence in any parliamentary democracy of the world that the Parliament was run by the suggestion of the opposition. For the information of veteran parliamentarian, neither there is a precedence that the issues of national interest or concerns are avoided or not discussed in the parliament nor there is a precedence of barring the opposition to voice and raise the legitimate issues that deserve a valid debate. The participation of the opposition in debate and discussion makes a parliament effective in a parliamentary democracy. It is only the positive intention not the precedence that matters, and is of utmost importance at this time to make our parliament democratically functional.

cies that are being pursued by the four-party alliance. It was again reflected in the indication by the Honorable Prime Minister while spontaneously ordering investigation by judicial inquiry commission and simultaneously pointing her finger at a particular political party for the Mymensingh bomb blast, the heinous act of terror that shocked the country once again after Udichi, Ramna Batamul and Paltan. Such a prejudiced statement was only the re-endorsement of the attitude and policies being pursued by the government and should not be confused in the name of fighting crime and improve law and order situation.

Enough is enough, it is time to get along and move ahead. We must come to terms with expected political norms and proven democratic practices in establishing democratic rule. To remind, in the political history of our country, pursuing ambitious and aggressive policies of arrest, torture and oppression to undermine the legitimate opposition by any government repeatedly proved to be disastrous and unsuccessful. Not to mention the fact, the people of Bangladesh never failed to rise on the right occasion for the right cause.

It would only be unjust to question the intention of Sheikh Hasina, leader of the oldest and largest political party, erstwhile head of the government and the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament. Nor it would be just to undermine the good intentions of the Prime Minister but the preconceived attitude, oppressive approach and the wrong poli-

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goal. Their training is not designed to control law and order of the country. Nevertheless, since they were brought in aid of the failed civil administration to help improve the law and order situation they would definitely go by their own rules and practices to achieve their goal and subsequently the margin of error should be taken into consideration. But in the Operation Clean Heart, the rate of heart attacks and deaths in custody seem way too high than usual and exceeded the expected margin of error.

I was of the opinion that the joint forces operation was not politically motivated which was feared by Sheikh Hasina but as the joint forces almost completed two and half months of their drive, one is being burdened with too many questions. Just to mention a few, it is evident that the joint forces could not recover stack of illegal arms from the Awami League's research wing in Dhanmondi but what objectionable documents detrimental to national interest were found which triggered them to seal the centre is yet not disclosed by the government. What prompted them to arrest and detain former minister and AL leader Sheikh Selim MP and former deputy minister and MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary to the leader of the opposition, and later shown arrested by implicating him in the case of attacking the motorcade of the then leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia? It is hard to believe that they were hiding along the road side and led a guerrilla attack in Keraniganj, Madaripur and Savar and repeatedly failed in their attempts to kill Begum Khaleda Zia while they were at the helm of affairs! What about repeated arrest of social activist Shahriar Kabir, why the objectionable materials contained in the video cassettes were not shown on the national television; or historian professor Muntasir Mamoon arrested quickly after the Mymensingh bomb blasts for "anti state activities" which surprised most of his colleagues in the Dhaka University? What instigated the arrest of former state minister Talukdar Khaleque MP, former whip Shuja, and latest of all former minister and AL presidium member Tofael Ahmed disregarding the High Court order? Not to mention AL leader Mukul Bose and many other district and Thana level leaders arrested recently. Why was independent MP Hemayetullah Auranga tied hands behind after arrest and charged of possessing illegal arms while it was contradicted by his family members in the media by confirming the possession of licence? It is not the person, it is the chair that matters and regardless of one's records and cases, nobody is guilty until and unless proven guilty in the court of law. Why commissioner Deepjol

Mannan Bhuiyan said that, so far the joint forces arrested more BNP activists and workers than that of AL's. One wouldn't doubt the authenticity of his statement. It is relevant considering the ruthless campaign of terror and repression unleashed by the activists and workers of four-party alliance against the leaders, activists and workers of Awami League all over the country right after the last general election. The repeated attack by pro-alliance cadres in broad day light firing shots and throwing bombs on the motorcade of Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid and confining the entourage in Barisal Circuit House and forcing them to take refuge in Tofael Ahmed's house in Bhola was only the reaffirmation of the situation. The monster they created went so much out of control that only the Operation Clean Heart could cage them and force them into hiding and contain the situation at least for the time being. Not to mention the nominations for the post of commissioner to the listed criminals and persons with multiple criminal records and cases by the ruling alliance in the last Dhaka City Corporation election disregarding the repeated caution by the press and much concern of the city dwellers which waited only to be proved with the killing of city commissioners by feuding factions after the election. Later government went to the extent of providing them protection with the tax payers' money whereas the much needed protection was withdrawn from the house of the Leader of the Opposition and curtailed from her daily entourage and claimed unnecessary by the government.

fundamentalism. It doesn't hurt to be careful and cautious. We can take it to be a wake up call for our benefit and in reality if there is any, there is nothing to panic about our image and hide it rather accept the reality and face it politically. The transformation of fundamentalism does not only come with tall men with beards and turbans, it can be compared with a single cancerous cell in a human body that grows and spreads fast and if not diagnosed and treated at an early stage, the chance of saving the patient becomes limited as the disease is deadly.

Why has the government become so determined and desperate to link all these unsubstantiated foreign press reports, observations and concerns of foreign governments and platforms to a particular political party and a person? How could Sheikh Hasina all on a sudden become so successful in influencing foreign press to go by her views, or become a successful lobbyist in passing the resolution in EU parliament and pursue Mark Boucher of US state department? Why the government of late became so conscious about the image of the country? Is it the image of the country or of the government itself that it is worried about? Don't the foreign journalists and media have access to our daily news through internet? Aren't the foreign governments being updated regarding the developments that take place here through their respective embassies? Was it Sheikh Hasina or the member of the four-party alliance Islami Oikyo Jote on record, who inspired the foreign journalists and media by making statements portraying allegiance to fundamentalism? It is their basic right to express their views and there is nothing wrong with it, nor it is wrong if Sheikh Hasina pointed out the fact, motive and trend of a political party or cited instances of HR violation and victimisation of the opposition leaders, activists and workers in Brussels or elsewhere in the world that definitely doesn't portray the people or the country as fundamentalist.

Since the summoning of the first session of this parliament, AL lawmakers brought more or less two hundred notices to discuss in the

Isn't it about time that our politicians stop and think what in the world have they been doing wrong for the last thirty-one years? Isn't it time to realise and correct ourselves before it is too late? When we should be concentrating on good governance and being thinking of poverty alleviation, population control, building shelters for the homeless, creating jobs for the unemployed, encouraging foreign investment, setting our short and long-term goals for economic emancipation and much needed separa-

After thirty-one years of independence, we must evaluate our achievements in terms of economic developments and improvements and practicing democratic norms and establishing democratic rule in real sense compared to other new democracies of the world. In fact we have developed to the extent where our government seems, by exhausting all options, faced with the hard reality and compulsion of exporting gas, which could severely harm and weaken the energy security of the country as opined in many roundtables, and negative recommendation by the majority in the technical committee. We have improved to the level where our representatives go to beg from the donors in G-8 summit, while we have been regarded as the most corrupt nation for two consecutive years by Transparency International. And as far as democracy is concerned, just having two national elections under the supervision of caretaker governments does not fulfil conditions of democracy where our politicians and lawmakers have regrettably failed to establish functional democracy in the parliament.

The Leader of the Opposition in parliament was not against military deployment but had reservations fearing the interference, intervention and politicisation that might hinder the intended purpose and put