

Politics is heating up: What next?

SYED NOOR HOSSAIN

TWO things have happened in the last few days. First, the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, made an ominous prediction that the ruling coalition would be toppled next year by popular movement. The second and a weightier one was the press interview given by the former President and BNP stalwart Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury outlining the failures of the present government on two major counts -- violence and corruption (The Daily Star, 15 November 2003). The former Prime Minister was a miserable failure just as the present one on these two vital areas. So most people would not take her seriously, at least for the time being. While the poor people are getting poorer, we see the mushrooming of an increased number of wealthy politicians and bureaucrats, most of whom have become rich by the grace of our despicable and corrupt political culture which drives good people out of circulation. The policy has always been the winner-grabs-it-all.

One example of decadence of the present BNP rule is mirrored through the demolition of the road dividers on the Dhaka-Tongi highway and demolition and re-building of other road dividers all round the city for the perceived beautification of our dear capital. This shows the extent of indiscretion and disregard for public money spent on useless projects. We have seen in the last two and a half decades how road dividers had been demolished and re-built time and again on the whims of the party in power. This is seemingly an easy way of putting money into the pockets of the contractors who in turn provide handsome rewards to the ruling party hoodlums and sycophants. While most of the roads in Dhaka city are in deplorable condition and heaps of garbage not cleared even from the proximity of the residences of many ambassadors, the perfectly built dividers on the airport road were removed by planting trees. This is extremely dangerous for the drivers and passengers alike.

Our media is not silent about the failures of the successive governments. But every government that comes to power gives a damn to the fair criticism. Sometimes honest comments by editors are taken as partisan and investigative journalists fall victim to the arrogance of the ruling party which does not spare the means to cause even physical harm. That should not happen in a democracy which is supposed to tolerate differing opinions. The fact that a government is elected by the people does not give it the power or authority to do things against the interest of those who put the party in power.

The question is why should every

be difficult for the bureaucrats to engage in corruption. In the first place what we need to see is the transparency of funds of the political parties. The important thing here is to know who donate to the political parties. There should be no secrecy about it. It is perfectly all right for some one to support one political party or the other. But anyone who donates to a political party must be identifiable. This would allow the public to see if money is coming from unlikely source like mastans or government officials who have the easy means to collect bribes or funds for political parties due to the nature of their jobs. It is the common perception that major politi-

and was introduced in our politics by a corrupt dictator who overthrew the recent President we had. Thirdly, the parliamentary laws must be reformed to ensure regular attendance of the parliament by elected representatives. The Speaker should appear any leave of absence only for a particular number of days. Unauthorised absence must be penalised by deduction of pay. Additionally, a lawmaker must lose his/her seat if he/she is continuously absent for more than a certain number of days. Reduce the Lifespan of the Parliament to Three Years: I have been watching the working of our Parliament since our independence. I have come to the

wise, the opposition would be in good earnest to show their programme to win the hearts and minds of the voters. Therefore, the country as a whole will gain and we, the helpless citizens, will be spared of the traumatic agitations and the businessmen can have a sigh relief for sparing them of ruinous hartals and destruction of valuable national property. Strictly Impose the Rule of Law: If anything, our country needs to see the operation of the rule of law. We have the laws but their application is selective, depending on who you are. Essentially, the political leaders should keep their hands off and not interfere in the operation of the law by the

Follow Hands-off Policy: It is the common knowledge now that the chela-chamundas working in the Prime Minister's Office tend to think they know all and utilise their clout to disrupt implementation of the right policies. This must stop and the secretaries of the government must be allowed to take the decisions without interference. The rewards and punishments should be handed down according to their performance and nothing else. Bureaucrats Must Serve the Same Ministry During Their Career: Here is a point of departure from what happens now. The present system of the government service, barring the army and the foreign office, is chaotic. The officers move from one ministry to another without having the opportunity of thorough specialisation in a particular field. Therefore, all future recruitments should be ministry-specific, that is to say, an officer who decides to join the Ministry of Finance will serve there, including the field offices, until the retirement. This will allow them specialisation and not render them as jack-of-all-trades. The Ministry of Establishment should be abolished and each Ministry should decide its own policies and promotions. Finally, Let Us Pray for a Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir Mohammad: Our pray to the God Almighty should be to get a national leader who would do everything for the sake of nation building and not for enriching the members of his/her family. We need a visionary, dedicated and competent leader like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew or Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, who made their nations great and retired gracefully. Is that too much to expect?

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There is nothing wrong with the ordinary people. They are hard working and ready to respond to the genuine calls for doing what is good for the nation. Essentially our politics is mastan based and none of the two major political parties could unfortunately get rid of this perennial problem. So long as the political parties remain dependent on them, the two evils of the society -- violence and corruption -- can never be eliminated.

government that comes to power behave in the same way. The answer is, the two major political parties do not seem to have any outstanding and dedicated leader who can guide the nation with a vision. I believe there is nothing wrong with the ordinary Bengali people. They are hard working and are ready to respond to the genuine calls for doing what is good for the nation. Essentially our politics is mastan based and none of the two major political parties could unfortunately get rid of this perennial problem. The nature of politics is such that the leading political parties nurture and rely on the mastans. So long as the political parties remain dependent on them, the two evils of the society -- violence and corruption, of which Professor Chowdhury and we all are concerned -- can never be eliminated.

As a member of the civil society, let me put forward some of my thoughts on what is to be done in the future. Let me sum up as follows:

Stop Corruption in Politics by Transparency: I always believed that if our ministers and political leaders were honest and competent it would

cal parties rely on such illegal means to generate funds. Consequently, they remain hostage to the mastan-dominated society and can do nothing to remove either violence or corruption.

Build an Honest and Responsible Parliament: A Parliament should be like a boxing ring where the politicians should fight out their differences, well I mean not physically like the boxers but relying on law, substance of the matter and parliamentary decency. As an ordinary citizen I at times witnessed parliamentary debates which were of such low calibre that it was difficult for me to imagine that I was listening to our elected representatives. Many of the elected members seem incapable or unwilling or both of dealing with the national issues rationally and intelligently. Their debates never rose beyond blaming each other for something wrong in the country.

Secondly, the members of the parliament must resist the temptation to increase their own perks and benefits. Immediately, they should abolish the duty-free import of cars for them. This is unparalleled anywhere in the world

conclusion that we are not yet mature and ready for a five-yearly parliament. A most developed and sophisticated society like Sweden had a three-yearly parliament until recently. They have now graduated to a four-yearly tenure of the parliament.

The reason I am saying this is that our elected government never seemed to have taken the electorate seriously in the first two to three years and did irrational things as I mentioned at the outset. Psychologically they think that the next election is too far to do good work now and engage in doing mundane things that benefit individuals and not the nation. Secondly, the opposition, wary of a wait for long five years, feels suffocated without any tangible programme and go for nationally harmful action like hartals and agitations. This usually starts happening towards the end of the third year of the government in power.

Thirdly, a parliament of shorter duration would work positively in two ways -- (a) the ruling party would try to do good work in the belief that the election would come soon, and (b) like-

administrators and the judicial apparatus. The government officials and the judiciary must be allowed to work without fear or favour. The separation of judiciary is of immediate necessity. Introduce the Merit Based System in Bureaucracy: The country today is watching in great despair and helplessness the utter incompetence of bureaucracy coupled with rampant corruption. Two vital things are missing: (a) First of all, a bureaucrat today is not judged or rewarded by his merits and performance but by the standard as to what extent he can satisfy the illegal abhors of the ruling party. (b) Secondly, by the same token he is encouraged to become corrupt, both financially and intellectually, by the demands of the ruling party. Prime Minister's Secretariat Must



ABOUT CITIES

Philadelphia and Dhaka



KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

I never realized I had to check my emotions watching an architectural documentary. I silently chastised the film-maker, Nathaniel Kahn, for making me a bit beside myself when I should have been sharp as a razor as an architectural critic watching a documentary on the architect Louis Kahn, who not so incidentally happens to be Nathaniel's father. In a predictable but interesting way, Nathaniel and I have become friends over the skyline of a city that we both share in some indescribable manner (I am talking about Dhaka). So he asked me to introduce his already award-winning film "My Architect: A Son's Journey" at the 29th Hawaii International Film Festival in Honolulu since he could not be there.

The film screened at noon, and for some unknown reason I was anxious since the morning. It is still an inexplicable thing for me requiring a sympathetic understanding, this life of a passionate architect that intersected two faraway cities, Philadelphia and Dhaka. I said my conventional part in introducing the film, how Louis Kahn was next to Frank Lloyd Wright the greatest American architect, who at the most sterile moment of modern architecture brought back themes of history, myth, and memory, and the banished notions of marvel and wonder into architecture all over again, and inspired generations of architects into considering architecture as a kind of spiritual mission. I knew a few things about Louis Kahn, his incredible passion, his masterful presence in Dhaka. I came to know most of his colleagues and members of his family. I studied in the shadow of his space, I wrote about his work... but even then I was not prepared for the deeply moving quality of the film.

Nathaniel's film is clearly genre-bending as it interweaves three poignant themes in a beautifully crafted cinematic work. Louis Kahn died tragically in 1974 in the restroom of New York's train station after returning from India, and his body lay unclaimed for three days in a New York city morgue. The passport on his body

did not have an address. Kahn had crossed it out. Why did he do it? Was he trying to imply something? It's truly a mysterious ending of a life given to acknowledged work of timeless and monumental character. The film begins from there, from that haunting death.

The other two themes are more interwoven: the work of the architect and the people around him. The film is not truly about architecture, although architecture becomes a protagonist in a story, a moving story of a son's quest to find out who his celebrated father was. The film is about Kahn as an architect and the complexity of a life that included three families, of which only one was "official" in the conventional sense. Since his father died when he was only eleven, for Nathaniel the film was a journey and a catharsis, a journey to find out who his father really was, and a catharsis in order to come to terms with a man who led an extraordinary, and in some sense, unconventional social life, and was not present for him as a regular father would be. How best to know such a man, such a father? Since Kahn was supremely an artist, Nathaniel thought best to travel to see his creative work and meet the people involved around them. As Anne Tyng, one of the women whom Kahn was intimate with, says to Nathaniel, pointing to one of Kahn's buildings, "He lives in his buildings, in these spaces."

The evening of the screening, I sent an e-mail to Nathaniel: "After the film, when I was mobbed by a group of people thinking that I was part of the film, or even I was the film-maker (I was just basking in my five minutes of glory merely by introducing the film)... I told them clearly that I am going to take Nathaniel Kahn to task for making me emotional watching an architectural documentary. I cannot remember the number of times I sneaked out my handkerchief in the darkness of the theatre to quickly mask the vulnerability of the critical architectural historian. The people I was talking to couldn't care less about my state, they were visibly moved people, they were as far as I could guess members of the general audience. They were all saying how spiritual the story was, how spiritual even watching the film was... they didn't get either a documentary or really architecture. They got a story, a moving story. And I can tell you, Nathaniel, that you moved people as only a master story teller can. And this is a true story."

"Anyway, one should see this film in the evening so that you could come home, have dinner and promptly go to bed, and wake up in the morning

pretending that nothing had happened. The film today ended at 2:15 or so, and I didn't know what to do afterwards. I genuinely felt listless. I told a friend that perhaps I should do something materialistic like go shopping to normalise myself, I didn't though. I had a long ruminative lunch, and later in the evening went to see 'Lost in Translation'.

But that's another story." Yes, what does one do with a spiritually moving film about an architect in the foci of capitalist production? In an environment of mercantile and con-

Philadelphia. The climax of the film is really Shamsul Wares, an architect and professor of architecture, who gives an emotional soliloquy on the project (as I try to ponder the distinction between what is sentimental and what is emotional), and how Dhaka might have received more from Kahn than Nathaniel did. Nathaniel wanted his film to end with Dhaka, not so much because the greatest work of Kahn is in Dhaka, but his journey to find the elusive, mysterious architect father of his comes to an end on the lawn of South Plaza. Nathaniel is very clear: he



Father and son: Louis Kahn and Nathaniel

sumptuous excess? No wonder -- something Nathaniel would also agree -- Kahn had an uneasy relationship with his homeland, even with his own city.

The last fifteen minutes of the two-hour long film is about Dhaka, Buriganga river, madness on the streets of old Dhaka, crowds brimming on the South Plaza, and then looming through a misty winter morning, the phantom presence of Sangsad Bhaban. In that short span, Nathaniel has done a beautiful portrayal of Dhaka, and of the place of Kahn's work in the city, and how the project was really designed from the depth of the soul, as Hasina Choudhury reminded me after watching the film at one of the many sold-out screenings in

found his father in Dhaka. What does that mean? To me, that's no longer an architectural question in its timid and conventional sense; it is what architecture meant for Kahn, part of existence, pulsating with the essence of life, in this case, the collective life that defines a city. Kahn believed in two things about a city: one, that nature and urban life may not be incompatible, and, two, a city is a place where a child walking on the street decides what she wants to do with her life. Sher-e-Bangla Nagar still promises Dhaka could be that city.

(The following web site has information on the film: www.myarchitectfilm.com)

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Serendipitous growth of the US economy

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THE US economy is up on the rise again. This is very good news. In my last piece on US Growth, published in this newspaper on August 7 2003, I had titled it "Show me the growth?" questioning the anemic nature of global growth, particularly the US. Lo and behold, I got my come-uppance, with a staggering figure of 7.2 per cent annualised quarterly growth of the US economy, ending September '03. Is this a serendipitous flicker of good fortune or the show of sheer might and sustainability by the indomitable US? My guess is that it is the former, but I do hope, it is the latter.

The US third quarter growth numbers surprised the optimist, let alone the skeptics. To put this in perspective, it was the highest rate of quarterly growth that the US has seen in two decades. The economy was evidently firing on all cylinders, the consumers went rampant on a buying binge with their wallets replenished by tax credits and cash in hand from lower tax bands. This time they went beyond the perishable to the durables, fridge-freezer, dishwasher, cars et al, not to mention few house purchases too. All these activities brought inventory levels of durable goods down to its recent lows. What also provided a fillip to the growth is a rise in business investment, for the first time since the bubble burst. The overcapacity created by the roaring nineties had so far ensured that no fresh business investment was needed to cater for the current demand. Existing capacity could take care of it. Which is why new corporate investment was scarce, and provided no boost to the flagging economy. However this seemed to have turned around in the third quarter when investment in equipment and software rose by 15.4 per cent, the strongest rate since the first quarter of 2000. This is really the silver lining to an otherwise cloudy picture.

So far the engine of US growth was the consumer, who had demonstrated an intermittent show of purchasing power, but demonstrated greater strength at the back of tax break in the third quarter. On the other hand revival of business investment that was till now lack-

ing, has a tone of permanence and a long term perspective to it. Corporates invest when they see light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore the sudden spurt of activities from the corporate sector bodes well as they evidently see a brighter future.

In addition to business investment, employment is the other area where things are brightening up too. New positive trends are developing in job generation. Employment is no longer growing in the traditional fashion with established companies, instead small and medium sized entities are mushrooming, picking up all the outsourcing contract that the

which make one wary of the future. The budget deficit is precariously high at 5 per cent of GDP and most of it is funded by the reserve money from Asia; principally with Japan and China. What if these Asian giants decide to hold back their investment in US Treasuries (US Government debt obligations) and diversify elsewhere? One scenario is that this could precipitate higher US interest rate to get money flowing back into the Treasury market. The concomitant result could be a cascading effect on consumer confidence, which so far has been the cornerstone of US economic resilience. The other imbalance is the current account deficit, which is equally high at 5

very low domestic interest rate has led to a rapid growth in money, which needed a home for investment. For long, mutual funds had sat on the side line in cash, but with 9-11 shock and war risk premium in the distant past, money has again started to flow back in the equity market. Especially, as alternative investment return looks dire. This is causing equity valuation to veer up from fundamentals to new heights.

Notwithstanding, it is commendable to see the US economy responding so favourably after having in the last three years suffered the largest bout of wealth destruction in global history. It shows resilience and indomitable strength of the US economic engine. And if this growth sustains than it would be the shortest recession in the past 50 years.

What happens to US economy is also relevant to Bangladesh, especially for the garment sector, it being the largest exporter group in the country. The US market is responsible for at least 40 per cent of total export, mainly consisting of garments. Interestingly, the garment sector despite anemic growth in Europe and intermittent growth in the US (its two main export markets), has been able to keep up the momentum. First quarter of this fiscal year the garment sector saw a rise in export of 12.6 per cent. One explanation maybe, that Bangladesh clothing products are at the low to lower middle end of the spectrum. This ensures that despite economic slowdown in the export markets, demand falls to contract as it caters to minimum needs of the western consumer. Paradoxically the demand should rise as more enter this basic need band from the higher consumer group than people falling off the band.

The US is a formidable economic engine, which matters immeasurably to rest of the world. There is no other economic power that can match its strength. Much as we would like it to keep on chugging, the drivers of growth are yet to see a clear path ahead.

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big companies are doling out fast to reduce cost. This is very encouraging, confirming the big push in business process outsourcing that is shaping the employment landscape of the future.

The million-dollar question on everyone's lips is, will it last? The prediction for the fourth and final quarter of 2003 has already been marked up to just above 4 per cent, inevitably down from the dizzying heights of the previous quarter. But what about 2004 and beyond?

My guess is the US Federal Reserve and the US Treasury have almost run out of options to pump prime the economy. So far the tax breaks and historically low interest rates have managed to shore up the economy, by leading consumer to borrow at enticingly attractive rates and spend irresponsibly. Also the largesse offered through tax breaks, when the budget deficit is already at a high level, appears nothing less than desperate measures.

There are numerous fault lines

OUR TAKE

Law and disorder in the south-west

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE law and order situation in Bagerhat district reached a new low this week with the somewhat startling news that seventeen Union Parishad chairmen in the district have submitted a petition to the local police and civil administration authorities seeking their protection.

In their petition to the Bagerhat police superintendent, the seventeen UP chairmen claim that their lives are in such jeopardy that they have been forced to hide out in rented houses in the town of Bagerhat.

And these seventeen are apparently just the tip of the iceberg. Reportedly most of the seventy-five UP chairmen in the district have stopped going to office out of fear for their lives.

The reason given for this extraordinary state of events is that the UP chairmen feel that they are powerless to stand up to local gangsters and that they have received no protection from the police due to alleged collusion between the criminals and the law enforcers.

Now, it is important to bear in mind that these seventeen UP chairmen hiding out in Bagerhat town are influential and powerful leaders of the community at the local level. The question must be asked that if powerful local leaders are so fearful of hoodlums and bandits that they feel the need to take this kind of action, what recourse is there for the rest of us?

This kind of rampant criminality is nothing new. Nor is the collusion between criminals and the police that allows outlaws to operate with impunity.

We have written extensively within these pages about the law and order situation in Dhaka. Some Khilgaon police personnel are presently under investigation for extortion, and accounts of custodial torture and corruption at the Khilgaon thana as well as other police stations in the city have dominated the news and shocked the local population.

On Sunday came the news of Khulna police releasing three top listed criminals on Friday night two hours after they were arrested. This took place during the course of a massive anti-crime drive in the south-west and comes on the heels of news of a fresh crime spree hitting the region.

There is no great mystery behind the continuing decline in the law and order situation in the country. The reason that crime flourishes unchecked is that criminals enjoy political patronage.

It is an open secret that we will never be able to bring crime under control unless political patronage is withdrawn, and that crime could very easily be bought under control if the government were to crack down on politicians who protect and benefit from their criminal associates.

Of course the majority of our politicians do not patronise and protect criminals, and that politicians who do so are decidedly in the minority. So what prevents the majority from stepping up and taking action against those who are holding the nation's security hostage?

The reason is that the senior leadership of the ruling alliance perhaps has not yet given any green signal for the authorities to go after politicians whose patronage makes crime possible. Criminals will continue to operate with impunity until the senior leadership decides to make ending the collusion between politicians and gangsters a top priority.

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