

## No land use policy yet!

### A five-point formula advocated

It is a shame three and a half decades since national independence that we are yet to have a policy for harnessing the most vital of our national resources – the land.

We have a genius for ignoring the fundamentals and basics of having a policy tool firmly in hand duly bearing the stamp of political commitment from both sides of the aisle for an effective use of our scarce natural endowment. Consumed by the fires of political confrontation and partisan patronisation, loss of government land to private and official grabbers, misgovernance all around, successive governments lost any rational sense of prioritisation. Which is why we are in such dire straits with our land now.

We have it on the authority of the minister for agriculture MK Anwar that at the current rate of decrease of farmland (one percent a year), theoretically speaking, there will be no cultivable land left in Bangladesh in 50 years' time.

Urbanisation, habitation, industrialisation and parcelling out of land through fragmentation of inheritance topped off by the compulsion to feed two million more mouths every year are rendering land scarcer and its management more daunting by the day.

The diminishing size of the traditionally cultivable land is an irreversible reality. Taking this as the basic premise we have attempted to draw up a blueprint based on the recommendations of the Bangladesh Rice Foundation (BRF) and our own findings over time.

The first element in the stratagem will have to be an expeditious recovery of all khas lands expropriated by various quarters from time to time. Going by the enormity of land in wrong hands, there is a huge potential for replenishment. Second, non-farm and less productive land will have to be earmarked in each mouza and village for essential development projects so that they do not eat up cultivable spaces. Then reclamation of land from flood-prone, drought-vulnerable and salinity-stricken areas needs to be undertaken in a massive scale.

As an integral part of the land use strategy we also must have a policy for an extensive wetland and haor management endeavour. Nothing like involving the locals in the conservation of wetlands. As a matter of fact, in the whole range of land use activity being visualised, people's participation will be crucial.

One very important complement of the land use policy ought to be agricultural research geared to raise productivity. But government expenditure on farm research has steadily declined from 0.3 percent of agriculture's contribution to GDP in 1999-2000 to 0.2 percent in 2002-03. In our context, research allocation has to be 2 percent of the farm sector's contribution to GDP. Are we alive to the research deficit?

## Done us proud

### A delectable discovery

ANOTHER piece of successful excavation work at a village in Narsingdi and we have been put firmly on the global map of early human settlements. Similar archeological discoveries indicating pit dwelling were earlier made in some pockets of the Indian sub-continent and the Swat valley in Pakistan which dated 5000 years ago. Although this particular archeological site is said to be 4000-year old, it is in the same region which obviously makes it significant.

A few samples of the arte-facts have been forwarded to the Institute of Archeology in London to determine the age of the finds through carbon-14 dating which could prove to be still more revealing. We keep our fingers crossed.

Let's congratulate Prof Rahman and his team on this phenomenal success. We also wish to felicitate GrameenPhone for sponsoring this important initiative hoping that some other enterprises will come forward.

Excavation works are long-drawn processes and their final outcome can only be confirmed through a painstaking process of trial and error. Such archeological finds also often require comparative studies and consultation between scholars and experts on the subject overseas and within the country.

The government needs not only make adequate funds available to the team, with a good deal of UNESCO assistance possibly thrown in, but also ensure security to it in carrying out its mission. The monsoon season will soon be here and one of the immediate concerns would be to safeguard and secure the site against heavy downpours and groundwater discharges. This is an investment which we should all endorse and be fully supportive of.

# The Palestinians at the crossroads



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE Hamas victory in January 26 Palestinian election monitored by foreign observers and considered more impressive display of electoral democracy than any other in the region has stunned everyone including the Hamas itself. Although pre-election opinion polls had indicated that the Hamas would give a close fight, most analysts predicted a narrow Fatah victory. Now Hamas' convincing tally of 76 against Fatah's 36, pushing the latter that dominated Palestinian politics for last 45 years to a position of poor second, came as a major shock to the international community. Particularly the US and Israel are now non-plussed as to how to deal with a party they had condemned as terrorist outfit.

The Fatah owes its defeat to many factors, prominent being its exhaustion, a lacklustre leadership after Arafat, its abysmal corruption and Mahmoud Abbas' apparent inability to infuse life in now dead roadmap for peace leading to Palestinian statehood. During the last year the situation obtaining with regard to Palestinians got worse from day to day. The scourge of occupation made normal life and commerce

impossible. The West Bank settlements were enlarging continuously. The 'security' wall which consumes about ten percent of West Bank territory was nearing completion. No important prisoner including Marwan Barghout, a likely challenger to Mahmoud Abbas was released. Many of the votes cast in favour of Hamas had therefore nothing to do with peace, religion or fundamentalism – as thought but with protests against prevailing maladies. Israel's western patrons however

biggest donor to the Palestinian Authority (PA) to firmly oppose the creation of a government by the Hamas which, according to him was a terrorist organisation. Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief told a press conference in Gaza that it would be very difficult for the help and money that go to the PA to continue to flow if the Hamas was in the future government. After their meeting in London on January 30, the Middle East Quartet – the US, UN, EU and Russia responded

setback.' In the words of FBI Director, Robert-Mueller, 'Hamas has a choice to make.' Others insisted that the significance of election couldn't be known until Hamas decides whether or not to abandon its foremost objective, the liquidation of Israel. It was a line echoed everywhere from the British foreign office to New York Times' editorial pages.

Yet in a significant sense the election result is the best one that could have been hoped for. Because this surprise win by the Hamas is an

relevance in a historical context. Israel and its patrons also did not want to talk to the PLO by bringing the same set complaints against it. Throughout 1970s and 1980s the Israeli government declared that it would never negotiate with PLO, because they were terrorists. It charged that the PLO had a charter calling for the destruction of Israel. Arafat, it charged, was a monster, a second Hitler and so on. Therefore it said that there would be no talk, no negotiation with the PLO.

Now came Mahmoud Abbas with whom Sharon was asked by the US to negotiate peace by reviving the roadmap for peace. Sharon already saw through a stalwart like Arafat who fell flat on the ground before his crookery. Even if he was asked to negotiate now with a 'moderate' – an euphemism for 'compliant' – Sharon had no intention of doing so. Because such negotiations would inevitably have led to a situation that would have compelled him to give up almost all of the West Bank. Why should he negotiate when he can annex most of it unilaterally with the blessings of his allies! With that intention he in a dramatic way left his Likud party and formed the 'Kadima' which will be the catalyst of his dream.

The rejection of the Hamas by the world at large is very welcome to Sharon's Kadima party which openly calls for the unilateral annexation of territory. It will help also the Likud and Labour hawks whose mantra is 'we have no partner for peace – so, to hell with the Hamas do with its heavy responsibility of fulfilling the Palestinians' aspiration, their freedom from occupation and statehood?'

The freedom and sovereign statehood are seldom given on the platter. Even if it is to be negotiated it has to be done from a position of strength. It will be litmus test for the Hamas to be steadfast or not before all the world's pressure to disarm themselves and accord a stamp of recognition to an adversary, out and out atrocious resorting to state terrorism.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

### PERSPECTIVES

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availed in it an opportunity to scuttle the possibility of a peace settlement and subsequent establishment of Palestinian state. Led, of course, by the US and Britain the post-poll refrains are familiar – that of virulent rejection: No talk with Hamas until it recognises the Israel's right to exist.

Let's begin with Israel's reaction. Rennan Gissin, the spokesman for Israel's prime minister reacted to the Hamas success by saying that 'Israel will not deal with any government that includes Hamas'. The day after the election results were out Israel's interim prime minister, after three hours of emergency meeting, said that Israel wouldn't negotiate with a Palestinian government that has any relation with Hamas. Israel's foreign minister Livni appealed to the EU, the

positively to Israel's call and issued a statement demanding that Hamas renounces violence and accepts Israel's right to exist. They threatened that EU aid to PA would not be released in the event of the latter's non-compliance.

Even if the Hamas leaders held their composure and were conciliatory in expressing their desire to include in their government the Fatah leaders not tainted with corruption and willingness to engage Israel in peace negotiation the barrage of condemnation of the election result continued unabated. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi moaned that the Hamas' trouncing of Fatah was a 'very, very bad result.' In New York the Anti-Defamation League pronounced the result 'a tremendous

unambiguous reality check into the nature of Palestinian society and its psyche. And if there is one thing that the West is in dire need of, it is more of realism, not delusion about the Palestinians. This realism alone can induce them to understand why a people behave in a certain way. For years whether through the perpetuation of atrocities or a show of neglect and contempt the message to the Palestinians was clear: Israel understands only the language of force. So the Palestinians have put in power a party which speaks that language.

Almost an orchestrated refrain of rejection both by Israel and its allies has brought to the fore a very basic question: if they indeed want a negotiated solution of Palestinian imbroglio. The question assumes greater

In the end, after much bloodshed, Israel and PLO recognised each other and the Oslo agreement was signed. It is true that PLO also, like Hamas, refused to recognise Israel and its Fatah faction did have an armed wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade having record of dare-devil actions against Israel. Israel's allies carefully clipped the wings of PLO before its forlorn leader in far-off Tunisia was pitchedforked to the spotlight of White House to participate in now dead Oslo process. Arafat, once disarmed by the peacebrokers, helplessly watched the erosion of Oslo process till it was finally buried. Arafat's rise and fall till his incarceration in PLO's Ramallah HQ went perfectly according to the game plan scripted by Israel and her patrons.

# BNP-AL and contestable markets



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE significance of 15th anniversary celebration of The Daily Star, amidst all the pomp and grandeur, was not simply a "show and tell" success story. In an acrimonious political milieu between BNP and AL and a growing irksome hostility of BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami Party (BANJIP: BA=Bangladesh, N=nationalist, JI=Jamaat-e-Islami, P=Party) functionaries towards the print media, a cozy intermingling must bear some therapeutic relief for all concerned. Editorials and commentaries, often critical of political leaders and policies, are always intended for a reawakening and reorientation of politicians when they wander away from the path of public service to the path of self aggrandizement. Notice that no hyphen was used between BNP and Jamaat. Why waste a hyphen when the two parties are blending as one.

After my articles about BNP and AL were published in January, I received several inquiries about my ideological orientation and political aspirations. My commentaries are intended to have an impact on political discourse and the endemic economic illiteracies of our politicians. In the process, I criticize party leaders and their policies as they relate to politics and economics while fearing or favouring no one. I have

absolutely no political affiliation, although some readers thought it otherwise.

Don't forget that editorials and columns also reflect the views of many politicians who are often in servitude and dare not to speak out against their leaders. For example, Jamaat is taking away MP seats and cabinet positions from diehard BNP politicians. The PM is maneuvering Jamaat to strengthen her grip on both parties so as to perpetuate political power within family which I call family-litisation of country's govern-

ment. Teachers and educated extended family figures also have a significant impact on political orientation. From age 4 up until 18, children in the US spend about 25 percent of their time in academic pursuits. Post-secondary education has significant impact on political awareness and orientation. In fact, this is the stage when students in Bangladesh are drawn into politics (mostly those who are not succeeding) through the lures of various incentives and promises by professional student

pledges, debates, and commercials sometimes influence voters. Political campaigns can shift certain political behaviours based on the candidates involved, which have different degrees of influences on voters and would be politicians. The ruling BANJIP appears too dogged to adhere to any constructive comments and criticisms regardless of where they stem from. To govern a country the PM must not always depend on advisers briefings about events and issues. To get a real feel of the country's pulse, the day must start

single seller of a product who maximizes profit by producing less and charging higher prices compared to many competitive firms producing the same product. Keep in mind that monopoly and competition are mutually exclusive. In the US, mergers within industries such as banking, telecommunications, and airlines have created a stir among consumers who accuse that economic freedom and efficiency are being compromised (by withering competition) in favour of corporate profits. Princeton University economics

dynamic leadership must exist. Columnists thus focus on wrongdoings of politicians and if possible, modify their behaviour and in the process wish for the opposition party to get some steam to become competitive and marshal a threat to depose the ruling party. Columnists and media's role will reverse if the ruling party reverses its status from ruler to loser after the election.

Whichever party rules the country is not of any personal interest to me. As Prime Minister, Hasina gave an impression that her party comes ahead of the country while Khaleda showed that her family and friends get precedence over that of the country. This is the reason why the country has dipped in international image (corruption, alliance with religious extremists, terrorism, politicisation, marginalizing the oppositions, and media bashing.) Some of the same have started during Hasina's reign but Khaleda, instead of curbing them, let loose family, friends and party cronies with full vigour which brought the country to the disrepute of the most corrupt country.

If re-elected, Khaleda and Nizami will claim BANJIP has the verdict to do more of the same. If BANJIP loses, BNP may dislodge from Jamaat, and Khaleda may become a transformed leader next time around which we hope to happen if Hasina wins this time. Unfortunately, when the people of a country, under the reign of 'most corrupt' administration say "they are the happiest in the world" how can you dispute what Khaleda-Nizami regime claims?

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### NO NONSENSE

Whichever party rules the country is not of any personal interest to me. But whoever wins must be fit to rule. As Prime Minister, Hasina gave an impression that her party comes ahead of the country while Khaleda showed that her family and friends get precedence over that of the country. This is the reason why the country has dipped in international image (corruption, alliance with religious extremists, terrorism, politicisation, marginalizing the oppositions, and media bashing.)

nance. BNP politicians all prattle about these but no one has the pluck to speak out. So they tacitly cheer for editors and columnists for doing the job on their behalf.

There has long been a widespread notion that political orientation is genetic. But no academically defensible theories would propound this view today. However, political literature advances three main sources of influence that moulds political upbringing and orientation of an individual with long-term effects. The primary influence stems from family. Children will often espouse their parents' ideological values. Family's imprints on young minds have the strongest and most lasting influences. Experiences from developing countries show that corrupt parents often produce corrupt children if they join politics and govern-

agents of various political parties. Peers also influence political behaviour. Friends often have the benefit of being part of the same generation, which collectively develops a unique set of political and societal issues. There are two core short-term factors which also effect political behaviour of leaders and voters. Their influence often relies on the individuals' specific political ideology formed by the long term factors explicated above. The broadcast media, newspapers, and columnists often offer commentaries on issues which can cause ideological shifts but not transformation. The analyses of events and issues verbally or visually can also affect individual political orientation. Election-issues such as campaign

with a sumptuous breakfast and a scan through the newspapers, particularly those critical of the administration.

Our politicians are always subject to incessant public ridicule and gossip both inside and outside the country for being undereducated or ill-educated. Then there is the mismatch between the ignorant and the knowledgeable, where the former pretend to be jack of all trades and create problems for the latter because the ignorant are generally the majority.

My columns are intended for political parties which harbour wheeler-dealer type political elements and are guided by the well known Contestable Markets Theory (CMT).

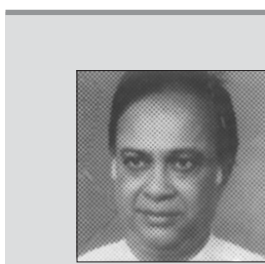
This theory is about competitive versus monopoly behaviour of firms and businesses. A monopolist is a

professor William Baumal, author of CMT, argues that mergers and monopolization of firms may not be a serious problem. The theory upholds that even if there is one seller of a product, that seller may be self-motivated to act as if there were many more. The threat of potential entry of new firms (assuming entry is not cost prohibitive) may induce the single seller to keep the industry operating at or close to competitive prices and output thus benefiting the consumers while discouraging new entrants.

I argue that CMT may also produce an analogous outcome if pursued in politics. The fear of being unseated from power may force the BANJIP to govern with transparency, accountability and rule of law. To create that fear a strong and worthy opposition party under able and

## COMMONWEALTH DAY

# Still a common bond fraternity



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

CRITICS often tend to describe the Commonwealth as a group of nations that relishes nostalgia without having much to do with the affairs of the present day world as much as they are critical of the non-aligned movement (NAM), seeing it as irrelevant in the contemporary global scenario. Arguably, the Commonwealth certainly does enjoy the old links of shared heritage and also the language and in a way it may appear as a group that rejoices in nurturing the past. Likewise, the NAM, too, may seem as having lost much of its significance in the changing world affairs which is no longer characterised as the superpower bloc politics turning the globe into a uni-polar entity. But judging by the realities that underline the existence of both the group-

ings, it would seem clear that both are very much significant and neither the Commonwealth nor the NAM are on the decline or on the brink of extinction. In fact, both are flourishing regardless of the fact that several quarters look askance at their functioning and relevance.

However, the Commonwealth and the NAM are two different groupings in a way with largely opposite ideas and objectives – albeit commonality in certain matters of their imaginations. Both speak of their avowed desire to work towards creating a happy and healthy society on a global scale and pledge to work in concert with others in accomplishing this broad goal. But the Commonwealth is a less political body in comparison to the NAM which was undeniably born out of political exigencies caused by the superpower rivalry with their respective allies when bulk of the world nations felt the need to follow a balanced and independent line, which they are still seeking to pursue even though the cold war era has ceased to exist. Not surprisingly, the NAM has heavy political overtones and it is expected from such a group. By contrast, the Commonwealth is not so heavily dominated by politics although matters having political connotation are not out of its purview. The NAM is multi-national and more varied cutting across many barriers and still deals with many sensitive

## MATTERS AROUND US

A Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh (CSB), an apolitical organisation with eminent persons from different professions regardless of their political affiliations, exists in our country to promote the ideas of the Commonwealth in a humble and limited way.

issues while the Commonwealth has relatively less scope for acrimony since it seeks to bind the countries once linked with the British empire and where the English plays a vital role as a common language of communication. The Commonwealth with its secretariat in London is a structured organisation with multi-faceted developmental and welfare-oriented programmes which once again are simply not expected from the NAM.

True, the Commonwealth basks in the commonality of the past even though such a past is not always very refreshing because the experiences of the old era are mingled with matters and moments of both pleasant and unpleasant memories. Nevertheless, like most of the by-gone times, the Commonwealth has sought to preserve and nourish the good sides ignoring the opposite ones, which in turn help develop fellowship and cordiality among the nations with erstwhile British links. As such, it is no

wonder that many call the Commonwealth as a "club" that discusses the good old days in the light of some common heritage and linkages. Undoubtedly, this impression is true to an extent, but what is more correct is that the 54-member grouping spread over almost all the continents also strives to deliver some concrete results for its members in the economic and social fields. Importantly, it has also a role in the area of politics since it cares for democracy and human rights and seldom hesitates to abandon a member on charge of getting off the track of these noble principles.

Representative pattern of government remains an agreed form of governance for its members and admirably there has been no slackening of this aspiration. The United Kingdom, the seat of old democracy and more particularly the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, serves as a beacon

light of inspiration for the nature of rule. Needless to say that the British Queen is the head of Commonwealth and this position serves as a source to strengthening this organisation which has vast and tiny, rich and poor and other disparate nations in its fold. All are bound by a feeling of fellowship and commonality that serves the purpose of common benefits.

Since its inception, the Commonwealth has gone into innovative programmes in phases and now it has to be acknowledged that the organization's projects cover variety of activities aimed at collective benefits and these range from strengthening of the democratic institutions to eradication of illiteracy. Sports, health and sharing of scientific knowledge are not excluded. Commonwealth scholarships over the years have helped many in the pursuit of higher education. In the economic and social side, the plight of the less fortunate member states is not always forgotten as

there are also thoughts to help them out of their congenital woes as far as possible.

While the leaders meet at regular intervals under the aegis of the Commonwealth heads of government conference (CHOGM), the forum has evolved system and practices of meeting at various levels – government and even non-government. The primary objective is to develop close interactions in the multi-faceted fields. While the parliamentarians meet under the CPA and discuss common issues of interests, sportsmen and women also meet under organised programmes for maintaining close relations. Different professional groups are also brought under the common interests.

In the area of media and journalism, at least three forums now exist like the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) of the owners and editors, Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) for the working journalists and Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) for

the broadcasting media. Other forums exist for various professional groups and all these help forge close links among the member nations. The Secretary General is the chief executive and the position is filled up through democratic practice of voting by member states. The first to hold this position was Sir Arnold Smith of Canada, followed by Sir Sridath Ramphal of Guyana, Chief Emeke Anyaoku of Nigeria and the present incumbent Don Mckinnon of New Zealand. Bangladesh adorned different positions in the secretariat. However, it made an unsuccessful bid for the Secretary General last time. The defeat notwithstanding, this reflected its immense interest in the activities of the Commonwealth. The president of the CJA is currently from Bangladesh as Hasan Shahriar was elected as chief of its world chapter in the last conference for a three-year term becoming the first Asian for the position. Dhaka hosted the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) meeting in late 2003. Bangladesh shooters had the rare glory of clinching gold medals in the Commonwealth sports meet.

Commonwealth is a common name in this country. The ongoing Commonwealth Games in Sydney promises another interesting event. A Commonwealth Society of Bangladesh (CSB), an apolitical

organisation with eminent persons from different professions regardless of their political affiliations, exists in our country to promote the ideas of the Commonwealth in a humble and limited way. It's founder-president was former speaker of the parliament late Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury. The society has its limitations, but strives to contribute to the causes of friendship and fraternity in one hand and promotion of democratic and human values on the other.

Commonwealth has a unique charm in its unity in diversity. It will be height of folly to expect that everything is fine in the grouping, but it has to be admitted that the Commonwealth helps maintain cohesion and spirit of fraternity on the basis of certain noble principles among two billion people under its fold. This in itself by all account is not a mean achievement. It has also strong principled positions on many issues including democracy and human rights. However, commonwealth programmes can still be more innovative an cover other areas as well especially keeping in mind the interest of the smaller members and disadvantaged groups of the society.

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