DHAKA MONDAY JUNE 19, 2006

White elephants within the govt

They are a shame to the country

S the tenure of the present government is coming to a close, scandalous prodigality on the part of some ministers is coming to light. A couple of prominent Bangla national dailies in the last few days carried lead items on how ministers are splurging.

As minister for commerce Altaf Hossain Chowdhury had seven personal staff, but now as minister without portfolio (means without work), he has acquired nine of them. Whereas as a sinecure holder he should have had skeleton staff, if any; he has in fact got two more to the total. The reason ostensibly being that he was merely filling out his ministerial quota of nine -- work or no work. That's not all; he wrote to the cabinet division for salary of one of his staff to be given with a retrospective effect in violation of the general financial rules of the government.

Another minister, that of jute and textiles, has been reportedly using nine transports from a corporation under his ministry with costs of fuel, repair and maintenance charges and salaries and allowances of the drivers being paid out of the corporation budget. As a minister he has his own paraphernalia all right. Result: while the corporation's work is badly suffering, its losses are mounting in every sense of the term. Even if we don't go into the alleged rip off in jute purchase, the misuse of nine transports by the minister is too glaring to be ignored, especially in view of the furore earlier created on the subject and the government promising appropriate action. The public outcry was given a short shrift, once the dusts settled.

The monthly expenditure for a minister, all entitlements taken together and their average worked out stands at around Tk 1,50,000/= to the exclusion of the expenditure on nine personal staff, his TA/DA and free telephone use at home and office. The monthly fuel allowance itself is Tk 34,800/=, leave aside the corruption premium and what have you!

The pertinent question is: what is this poor cash-starved country receiving in return for the public money

Endangered professionals

State must afford them protection

HE nature of death of the head of the forensic department of Dhaka Medical College demonstrates the degree of threat that professionals in our country are exposed to. Because, what appeared to be a mere death by accident now seems to have more mystery to it than what seemed to be at first. Reports related to the death of the professor suggest the tremendous pressure that he had been subjected to because of the very nature of his job, which compels us to surmise that his death may not have been an accident after all. According to several persons he had confided in before his death, the professor was pressurised by very influential quarters to give doctored autopsy reports, and had incurred their wrath when his reports were not to its liking. He was harried also because of DNA tests he was to carry out on a retired senior police officer and his very fecund wife.

The point we are trying to make here are the hazards of professions that deal with criminals and felons. It is for the state to ensure protection of people like the late professor because in a way they and the police are interlinked since their expert findings and opinions are very crucial | dia Shining" campaign in 2004, to to the dispensation of justice; and protecting them is in a the sordid reality of sleaze that way protecting justice. And these should come automatically without having to be asked for, particularly when they are dealing with sensitive criminal cases where their opinion and findings help bring a genuine criminal to justice and by the same token spare an innocent man from the gallows.

We are glad that the driver of the killer jeep has been arrested. There must be a thorough investigation into the death of the professor because we feel that there may be more to it than meets the eye. Otherwise one would have expected the owner of a costly car that is involved in the death of a man to have contacted the police voluntarily. This is only natural for any law abiding citizen, but which he has not done till now.

It is not a secret that our professionals -- doctors, engineers journalists -- work under very trying circumstances. And some of these put their life on the line in trying to perform their job honestly. They should not be left unprotected.

The nation held hostage to its political aberration



M ABDUL HAFIZ

T produces a heady brew when the power and pelf go together and the wielders of power are invariably addicted to its intoxication. They seldom find it easy to call it a day and often resort to tricks and deceits for reentering the 'paradise' likely to be lost. We are familiar with the game right from the Pakistani days and privy to its ugly face both during Ershad regime and Begum Zia's 'democratic' dispensation of 1991-96. More often than not they had to be hounded out. The four-party alliance led by BNP, now approaching the end of its current tenure after its terrible record of misrule, corruption and rise of militancy is no exception.

Esconsed comfortably in their ministerial berths and other positions of privileges as well as enamoured with the perks and advantages accompanying those positions, if they are tempted to retain their grip on the levers of power also in the next general election -there cannot be any dispute over it.

PERSPECTIVES

A credible general election leading to the peaceful transition of power is the cry of the hour. The government must establish its bonafide as one for ensuring it. No 'hide and seek', trickery or deficit will take us far. No repressive measures, application of force or puerile comments in the parliament will resolve the problem. Neither will an election disregarding opposition views will have legitimacy either at home or abroad. At another end of the spectrum is an Awami League with much of its setbacks emanating from its poor leadership, lack of an election strategy and its apathy to introspect over its past mistakes. Only a responsible and disciplined approach to the political issues and action programme on them will pay the party its dividend.

But there are disputes over the manner they want to accomplish it through an 'election engineering' in the words of opposition leaders. To eliminate the chances of any foul-play or manipulation in the election the AL-led 14-party already proffered a proposal for electoral reforms which now dominate the country's political dis-

Many like me gave no credence to the proposals and thought it to be one of those platitudes of the grumbling opposition which lost more elections than it could win in the past. Initially the people seemed generally dismissive of it. But once the electoral process for election 2007 took off with the preparation of a voter list, it was a total shock. The manner in which a controversial Electoral Commission produced a 'fake' and 'weired' voter list by disregarding the court ruling, squandering public money to the tune of 60 crore taka and appointing BNP and

Jamaat cadres for the job not only shook the public confidence, it robbed the Commission of its moral authority to continue in the same office. The people were left in no doubt that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), a nondescript maverick of arcane conduct, is indeed planted by the establishment in a nationally vital office with a mission.

Then there are other sensitive issues of importance connected to the electoral reform proposals. Without those issues addressed the opposition is unwilling to participate in the election to avoid what it calls a 'trap'. Can there be any credible election without AL, the country's largest single party, taking part in it? At least the donor countries including the US, EU and UK want to see the election participated by all major parties. Yet with the ball in their court the establishment, which is also at the giving end, is mysteriously nonchalant

towards a collision course. With only four months now left for the alliance to hand over power to caretaker government the establishment is trying to traverse a beaten track of brow beating the public to submission. In spite of occasional lip service to settle the differences on reform proposals through a dialogue the alliance leaders' body language do not suggest that they would yield to any of the reform proposals put forward by the opposition. Instead they are in a mood to bulldoze the election on their terms.

We saw during the week what could be its consequence: an ordinary political difference snowballing into a major conflict. With a win-win prospect on both sides it can be a costly conflict -- one that the nation can hardly endure. The conflict has already escalated beyond proportion and the government is playing dangerous game by getting its opponents

nilly getting involved in it thus completing in more than one way the circle of public alienation. It unavoidably sparked the people's wrath and aroused still latent phenomenon of people's power. The establishment's calculation is bound to go haywire if the confron-

tation prolongs.

All who assembled, for example, in Kanchpur, were certainly not the enlisted members of the AL. But once they saw the political activists voicing some of their demands beaten up by police they spontaneously joined their ranks and fought the police. The dissatisfactions have been brewing up on several fronts i.e. price hike, inflation, corruption, the lack of public utility services and so on. It would be foolhardy to add to the list an avoidable confrontation leading to deepening political crisis which would only exacerbate the overall delicate situation facing the

leading to the peaceful transition of power is the cry of the hour. The government must establish its bonafide as one for ensuring it. No 'hide and seek', trickery or deficit will take us far. No repressive measures, application of force or puerile comments in the parliament will resolve the problem. Neither will an election disregarding opposition views will have legitimacy either at home or abroad.

At another end of the spectrum is an Awami League with much of its setbacks emanating from its poor leadership, lack of an election strategy and its apathy to introspect over its past mistakes. As a result, the party is slurred with the ignominy of defeats in spite of its enviable score of popular votes in the election. Notwithstanding the success of Dhaka siege, the road ahead for the AL is slippery indeed with powerful opponents arrayed against it. Only a responsible and disciplined approach to the political issues and action programme on them will pay the party its dividend.

In spite of ascendancy in its street power the Awami League must still consider a peaceful dialogue with the BNP to iron out its differences with the latter. Likewise, the BNP will find it more cost effective to give dialogue a chance in spite of its formidable muscle power. The miracle is what must be awaited till the last in any political deadlock.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

From Sangh Parivar to Sleaze Parivar

BJP plumbs the lower depths



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

O sordid is the Bharativa Janata Party's crisis that even insiders describe its recent progress as a journey from "India Shining" to "India Snorting" - i.e. from the extravagant claim about India's growing mass prosperity made in the disastrous "Inpermeates the "party with a differ-

That aptly characterises the BJP's state after the liquor-andnarcotics-overdose scam that apparently killed Vivek Moitra, a long-standing apparatchik and secretary of Pramod Mahajan, and brought serious charges under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act against Mahajan's son Rahul.

Coming just four weeks after the murder of Pramod Mahajan, the BIP's foremost second-generation leader, by his brother, the episode gravely undermines the party's credibility. The BJP cannot pretend, as Sushma Swaraj contentiously did, that the champagne-

national power, it now resembles the Jana Sangh of the 1960s, which was strong mainly in Central and Western India. The only difference is, the BJP now has some influence in once-peripheral states like Karnataka and Assam, and has strengthened its base among Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand's Adivasis. However, in the Hindi heartland, the BJP is marginal. plus-cocaine-overdose mishap Mahajan's lavish lifestyle or pen-

Rahul Mahajan was being projected as his father's political successor and a BJP youth leader. Moitra, a BJP member for 15 years, served former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Gopinath Munde, and then his brother-inlaw-mentor Pramod, as secretary.

Moitra, like Sudhanshu Mittal --

designed Pramod Mahajan's fanciful 2004 "India Shining" campaign. This cabal controlled the huge financial network that Mahajan erected right under Atal Behari Vajpayee's nose, apparently with his approval.

Mahajan, contrary to claims, didn't "modernise" the BJP. He gave it a sleazy, semi-criminal, semicorporate character.

The BJP-RSS cannot credibly distance themselves from Pramod Mahajan after projecting him as a hero and victim. Mahajan was the principal patron of Rajnath Singh and instrumental in making him party president in January -- with the RSS's blessings.

The RSS didn't approve of

was a "family matter" unlinked to chant for holding party conventions in seven-star hotels. But it was never averse to receiving large sums of money from Mahajan, including generous grants for ideological training.

For all its claims to austerity, the RSS has been fully drawn into the web of personal corruption that engulfs the sangh parivar. Many of its leaders -- not least BJP general described as a low-level tentivallah secretary Sanjay Joshi -- have been implicated in steamy scandals Intimate contact with the nittygritty of power politics has proved corrosive for the sangh.

Once-rare skirmishes between different parivar organisations and within them have turned into bitter full-scale warfare, often conducted through television channels. Over the past two years, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Bajrang Dal and the BJP have been frequently at each other's throats.

Within the BJP, leaders viciously compete in hatching conspiracies against one another that would put the mafia to shame. Chief Ministerships are secured through blackmail and bribery, with haftas being paid to top party managers.

Ideological disarray is rampant witness Advani's bizarre "linnahthe-secularist" remarks, which soon led to his dismissal as party

What does this mean for the BJP's future? Its crisis is capped by an increasingly bankrupt leadership. Electorally,

the party is shrinking. Unlike in the 1990s, when it ruled in close to half of India's major states, and came to

However, the BJP has emphatically not stopped being communal. It still remains obsessed with a majoritarian and exclusivist vision of politics in which the Hindus enjoy primacy.

component of its original orienta- governments to reduce state levies tion -- opposition to foreign capital, emphasis on swadeshi, and commitment to small traders, not industrialists. The BJP now champions corporate-led globalisation and sees itself as a representative of Big Business.

In its primordial instincts, the party remains deeply Islamophobic and hawkish. An instance is Vinay Katiyar's recent shocking offer of rewards to anyone who kills a terrorist in Kashmir. This was no different from Uttar Pradesh minister Haji Yaqoob Qureshi's offer to anyone who kills the Danish cartoonists who insulted Prophet Mohammed. It must be condemned equally

The RSS isn't happy with the BJP, but it can't dump it. It openly attacks it. RSS organ Organiser has attacked the BJP for its lack of "intellectual honesty" over the recent increase in petroleum prod-

The editorial says: "...instead of protesting on the streets by stopping the wheels and adding to public misery... [the] party can What has changed is a second walk the talk by asking its state on fuel..." It squarely blames the BJP for the "political farce" in evi-

dence in India. The sangh parivar's crisis is allpervasive and grave, and compounded by a lack of political strategy. The BJP has failed to reconcile its elitist social and economic orientation with the compulsion of practical politics, including the need to support the aspirations of the lower strata of

It dare not oppose the 27 percent quota for OBCs in Central universities, but its heart is with the antiquota protestors. It would like more "free-market" policies, but it's not prepared for their consequences, including the suicide of

100,000 farmers over a decade. It leads the parliamentary Opposition, but has no logical basis for its adversarial stance, which is inconsistent, shrill and irresponsible.

What does this mean for the BJP's future? Its crisis is capped by an increasingly bankrupt leadership. Electorally, the party is shrinking. Unlike in the 1990s, when it ruled in close to half of India's major states, and came to national power, it now resembles the Jana Sangh of the 1960s, which was strong mainly in Central and Western India.

The only difference is, the BJP now has some influence in onceperipheral states like Karnataka and Assam, and has strengthened its base among Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand's Adivasis.

However, in the Hindi heartland, the BJP is marginal. In Uttar Pradesh, it faces the prospect of a total rout. In Bihar, it plays second fiddle to the Janata Dal (United). Worse, it is riven by splits in all the six states where it rules. The loss of OBC firebrand Uma Bharati and veteran tribal leader Babulal Marandi is likely to cost it dearly in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand.

Today, the BJP behaves as if consumed by a death-wish. Its leaders are their own worst enemies. The party has no positive contribution to make to Indian society or politics. One should shed no tears over its grim, deepening

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

OPINION

The budget is generally considered unrealistic and overambitious because of the government's failure to consider

its repeated lack of success in reaching projected targets in revenue earning and the gradual reduction in mobilisa-

tion of foreign assistance. We had anticipated that the finance minister would present a people-oriented budget

An oversized, unrealistic and politically expedient budget

ABMS ZAHUR

RESENTATION of the budget is a major for a government. The budget is government's past and proposed financial dealings. It is a plan which indicates how the government intends to carry into effect its political, social and economic aims. The essence of a budget lies in its role as a programme of governmental activities. In many respects, however, the twelfth budget of Saifur Rahman is unique. The peculiarities as may be identified readily are -- (a) it has to be implemented by three governments, namely the alliance government (July-September, 2006), caretaker government (October-December, 2006) and the next government (January-June, 2007). Thus, its implementation stands on uncertain ground and the question of accountability is unclear; (b) great opportunity has been offered to start a 'spoils system' within the next four months. Indeed a great service to the alliance government! (in fact unproductive expenditure tion strategy got scuttled in the the block allocation of 12 per cent through more than 10 per cent

of the total budgetary allocation is apparent to be grabbed. With regard to fiscal measures the government is depending on direct tax like income tax and Vat: (d) open indication to go for heavy bank borrowing to cover up huge (hopefully not suppliers' credit) deficit; (e) the claim that the budget is pro- poor is hardly true. Though the concept of PRSP is based on creation of employment opportunities for the poor the budget proposals do not indicate any thing about employment generation; (f) for the comfort of the rich concession has been allowed for buying cars, houses, apartments and landed property. Is it not a hidden attempt to give them the opportunity to whiten their black money? (g) no clear indication as to how to utilise the allocation for agricultural research without adequate institutional preparations, and (h) highly inadequate allocation for the gas and energy sector and (i) on the other hand, an increase in

because of the election year. In reality he has been able to please the rich, through encouraging investment of black money in unproductive sector like housing and purchase of land, the party and its associates. increase of allocation for defence.

The finance minister claims that the budget aims "at increasing public welfare by poverty reduction through human development, development of agriculture and industrial growth, expansion of trade and commerce." Let us see how far his claims are tenable. With regard to increasing public welfare it may be stated that reduction of tariff on certain food items may have marginal effect on the market at best (In fact, without any attempt at controlling the well-organised trade syndicates, reducing some duties may not have any positive effect at all.) In fact, inflation may further rise due to fuel price hike. According to some economists, poverty reduc-

very first year of its implementa-

tion, and the finance minister has made no attempt to assess the outcome of fiscal year 2006 based on policy matrix in the PRS document. There is no explanation as to how the incremental growth has benefitted the poor. The budget does not recognise the poor state of policy implementation/management except some initiatives in the tax administra-We fail to see any mention of

ACC or any other initiative to check wastage, leakage and outright theft of public resources.

The fiscal measures in general indicated a desire to liberalise the trade regime further and to make available inputs at globally acceptable price. As per Centre for Policy Dialogue analysis, "The macro-economic framework has

not been applied to explain the future fiscal and monetary stance of the government in achieving the growth target, fiscal and external balance and assumed inflation rate." With regard to new target of revenue earnings it appears to be almost unachievable. The government will have to collect 17.1 per cent more revenue in F/Y '07 and the National Board of Revenue will have to record a 19.15 per cent A few words about the growth of

Bangladesh economy in F/Y '06. The preliminary estimate of 6.71 per cent growth has been estimated on the basis of six to seven months' data when the economy was going through a momentum of high credit expansion, export, import, industrial production and high inflation. It may be pointed out in this regard that the government took a number of measures such as increasing the lending rate controlling import. This resulted in slowing down of the economy during the last quarter of F/Y '06. Thus, the initial growth estimate will have to be revised downward when data for the full F/Y become available Though the proposed budget

indicates a high allocation for the education sector it has miserably failed to design a proper institutional mechanism to ensure quality education. With regard to allocation for the agriculture sector the budget will not fulfil farmers' aspirations due to lack of proper guidelines, specific plans and provision for monitoring the subsidy. Though fisheries, poultry and livestock have contributed

significantly to the growth the diture. poultry owners have received only 20 per cent subsidy in rural electricity and the fish farmers were disappointed due to price hike of

Though the businessmen in general are rather happy about the budget the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry is deeply disappointed because of the provision for investment of black money in the purchase of land, apartments and cars. This means whitening of black money will be allowed for non-productive investment. It pointed out (a) lack of indication of widening of the tax net which is considered essential for higher tax-GDP ratio, (b) lack of support to industrial sector by fiscal monetary and infrastructural policies, (c) overlooking the need for lower interest rate structure, (d) nonwithdrawal of restriction on overseas visits of company directors, (e) inadequate attention to generation of electricity and (f) lack of proper attention to the need for reducing current revenue expenThe budget is generally consid-

ered unrealistic and overambitious because of the government's failure to consider its repeated lack of success in reaching projected targets in revenue earning and the gradual reduction in mobilisation of foreign assistance. We had anticipated that the finance minister would present a people-oriented budget because of the election year. In reality he has been able to please (a) the rich, through encouraging investment of black money in unproductive sector like housing and purchase of land, (b) the party and its associates. In fact he knows very well that the present government is responsible only for one third period of the budget. So why to worry about the possibility of failure or success of the budget. Thus, his party may like to thank him for showing realistic attitude i.e. serving mainly the interest of

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary