

## Politics gets the better of economics

*The way we handled Tata's proposal does not send the best of signals*

THE suspension of Tata's \$3 billion investment proposal for steel, energy and fertiliser sectors of Bangladesh comes as a rude shock. It has been on the table for months together and hardly merited such inauspicious putting on hold for political reasons in the host country. The reason given by the giant industrial conglomerate is not of their own making; it is of Bangladeshi origin: our government's inability to take a decision on the proposal before the forthcoming general election.

This is no reflection, we would like to deduce, on the merit or otherwise of Tata's proposal but rather the timing it has been foot-dragged to, by the procrastination and indecisiveness of our government of the day.

After long-winded negotiations through a roller coaster ride Tata had lately sent in a revised proposal. Has the latest submission from the giant industrial house received due consideration of the government? If so, what stopped them from responding to it one way or the other? If it was not in the best interest of Bangladesh could that not have been conveyed to them so as to solicit further modification if it was deemed entirely unavoidable?

We have withheld our decision for political reasons but Tata, it is worthwhile to note, did not link it to political consideration or to any preference for a particular party government. It is in the fitness of things that multi-billion dollar investment proposals with long term gestation are seen purely as momentous economic engagement having nothing to do with the changing of guards or vagaries of politics in a country. That is primarily because such deals are struck with the state, not the government.

If this is how a country treats a big investment proposal what kind of signal are we putting across to the world by way of cosyng up to internationally reputed investors? The BOI chief Mahmudur Rahman has rightly lamented that on the one hand there is insistence on procuring investment from abroad but on the other when it starts rolling in we turn our back on political grounds.

There is a clearly belated talk about associating the opposition with the process. May we ask, why this was not done from the beginning? If the government is sincere about giving the opposition a role, then let there be a policy that while considering investment proposal worth above one billion US dollars, the opposition must as a rule be associated with the negotiation process? That would make sense. As it stands now, it looks like a stance taken on purely political considerations.

## Dubious banking transactions

*BB should expedite probe*

AS early as in June, a CID-led team had forwarded dossiers on 12 companies allegedly involved in drug smuggling based on intelligence information provided by UK for verification by Bangladesh Bank. The central bank's probe is awaited.

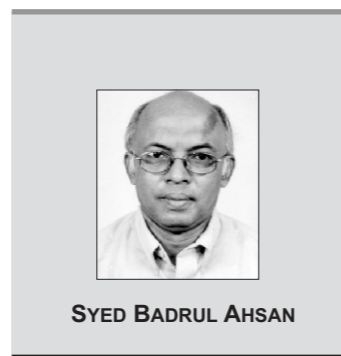
By all accounts, there are reasons to believe that Bangladesh is slowly and surely turning into a haven for drug smugglers. Dealing in drug is big business and it is a money-spinner with disastrous effects on entire society. It not only disturbs the equilibrium of the society but also plays havoc with the lives of the people of a poor country like Bangladesh. It has often ruined families and gave cause for miseries for an entire generation. It is, therefore, imperative that we put a halt to all illegal transactions that help drug smuggling.

We find the reason put forward by the central bank of the country that it is difficult to verify such volumes of data given its existing manpower strength and the routine load of transactions it handles everyday, rather untenable. This is a task of vital importance and time is of critical essence here. We, therefore, strongly feel that should manpower be a real problem then additional hands need to be hired or commissioned for this purpose alone.

Since the names of companies are already known with all other preliminary information being available, the task of verification as requested should be not too difficult to perform on the part of Bangladesh Bank.

The entire nation is already burdened with too much misery caused by various forms of social evil due to lack of foresight on the part of the administration over a period of time. We surely do not need yet one more to be added to the list, one that is likely to cause irreparable damage to the very fabric of our society. Once again we urge Bangladesh Bank to act and act swiftly.

# A brief history of Bangladesh's presidency



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HERE is a kind of thrill in knowing that we have, once more, just one president in the country. Having two presidents is not all that bad, but then, that sort of situation suggests that a country is either roughly segmented into geographical or rebel-held factions or has had elections where two candidates have both laid claim to the office of head of state. Mercifully, though, neither of these conditions has developed in Bangladesh.

We would like to think that the manner in which Jamiruddin Sircar officiated as acting president was a strange dream at best and a comedy at worst. We are still intrigued, though, with this pretty irritating question of why Iajuddin Ahmed did not travel from the airport to the Combined Military Hospital as the nation's president. After all, the presidential standard was on the vehicle bearing Jamiruddin Sircar to and from the airport. It was a spectacle that left us surprised, even a mite irritated.

When you consider the history of the presidency in Bangladesh, though, you are quite likely to be amused at the various ways in which it has risen in fortune or fallen upon bad days. It would appear, given our study of all the national history that has been forged in these three decades and a half, that the office of president has constantly been in the line of fire or has been a source of attraction for ambitious men, maybe even women.

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## GROUND REALITIES

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was not for him to come to terms with, or vice versa. Having spear-headed the national movement for autonomy and then for political sovereignty, he chose to assume office as prime minister of Bangladesh under a Westminster-style of government. That was quite all right, except that a pretty large number of people in the country had expected the Father of the Nation to adopt a political position that would leave him as a symbolic national figure, more in line with Mahatma Gandhi than with Mohammad Ali Jinnah (whose powers as governor general of Pakistan were awesome, much to the resentment of Liaquat Ali Khan).

Bangabandhu's move toward assuming a prime ministerial role meant elbowing Tajuddin Ahmed, the wartime prime minister in the Mujibnagar government, aside and into the job of finance minister. And into the presidency stepped the respectable Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury. Overall, it was a splendid arrangement. Here was Mujib, the man of history, busy charting the course the country was taking; and there was Justice Chowdhury, the man of law, upholding the image of Bangladesh as a decent, law-abiding and politically astute nation.

But it was an arrangement that was not to last, to our regret. By December 1973, President Chowdhury was to relinquish office and move out of the country, as its roving ambassador. Something went out of the old idealism as Mohammadullah, a veteran Awami Leaguer who had been deputy speaker and then speaker of the

Jatiyo Sangsad, stepped into the office left vacant by Abu Sayeed Chowdhury's departure.

Mohammadullah was a good, perhaps even an accomplished politician. But his brief tenure as president of Bangladesh was unremarkable. He remained in the shadow of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, like so many other men, and then found himself with little choice but to leave Bangabhaban once the Fourth Amendment to the constitution informed us all that the presidency was now to be the pivot around which our history would move. Mohammadullah could not be left in charge of that pivot. And so Bangabandhu transformed himself into Bangladesh's president for the second time. That first time, of course, was for him largely inconsequential since he had spent his presidency battling his Pakistani accusers before a military tribunal in distant Lyallpur. More to the point, he was quite unaware of the reality of his Bengalis waging a war for freedom with him as their iconic president.

The powers that the Mujib era gave the presidency were to be its defining characteristic in subsequent years. Every scheming politician and every shrewd military officer seemed to think, at some point or other, that presidential office was what suited his genius.

It was such a line of reasoning that prompted Bangabandhu's commerce minister Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed into leading the first military coup in the country and catapulting himself into the presidency. It was a morally ugly presi-

dency at work between August 15 and November 6, 1975. More significantly, it was government by murder. But things surely took a civilized turn with Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem, chief justice of the Supreme Court, taking charge, courtesy of Major General Khaled Musharraf, of Bangabhaban.

It was not exactly an edifying period for Bengalis, but it was in large measure an opportunity for them to return to being part of the civilized world. The assassination of Musharraf on November 7 was a bad jolt, but somehow the nation was relieved that the new men storming to power on the strength of the so-called Sipahi-Janata revolution kept Sayem on. President Sayem developed and maintained the position that the country would go for fresh general elections in 1977. But he had not known that with all the soldiers before and around him calling the shots, his position was becoming increasingly untenable.

General Ziaur Rahman, unhappy with being a mere deputy chief martial law administrator, one fine morning turned up with the other two DCMLAs at Bangabhaban and demanded that President Sayem go and let him handle the presidency. Sayem's initial, meek protests soon petered out and Zia, not much to the nation's surprise, became president and chief martial law administrator.

He relished the job, to a point where he thought that seeking a proper mandate to hold on to the presidency by calling an election in

June 1978 was in order. He was still chief of staff of the army, still chief martial law administrator. But he spotted nothing wrong in waging an electoral campaign against his challenger, General MAG Osmany, the man under whose command he had served (and had also been disciplined) in the War of Liberation. Zia won, predictably, with the entire government machinery working for him.

The Zia presidency was a ruthless exercise in power, owing naturally to the background of the man holding the job. The difficulty with politics shaping itself in the shadow of powerful men is that when these men leave the scene, their places are taken by others who may not quite measure up to the legacy, however sweet or sordid it might be. Justice Sattar, a respected but timorous man, beat Kamal Hossain in the November 15, 1981 elections but then failed to beat back General Hussein Muhammad Ershad's developing assaults on politics.

It was thus that on March 24, 1982 Bangladesh slid down a path that was as morally despicable as it was politically disturbing. Ershad's nine years (or nearly) as president were a boom time for corruption, in almost every patch of the social and political landscape. He jailed politicians, then freed them and let them into his regime. Ataur Rahman Khan and Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury were happy turning their backs on their illustrious past because Ershad needed them as his prime ministers. They only ruined their own reputations. Good men like Korban Ali and Abdul Halim Chowdhury are forgotten today, because they saw nothing wrong in jettisoning principles and joining Ershad. The presidency in Ershad's hands was an instrument of corruption. Worse, it was symbolic of the degree of humiliation that could be visited on a high institution of the state once that institution fell into the wrong hands.

The powerful presidency which Bangabandhu left as his legacy in

1975 assumed even greater clout in the Zia and Ershad years before returning to the symbolism it was designed to be in 1972.

Presidential dignity was restored in the years of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. President Badruddoza Chowdhury could have added newer layers to such dignity had he not left office in a hurry, almost in a state of fear. There is nothing in the constitution to suggest that a head of state can be impeached for the sin of not visiting the grave of an earlier, obviously dead president. But Chowdhury moved on – and out. The presidency is once more a diminished institution today.

In some strange ways, the presidency has in turn seen the reputations of some of its occupants sliced away. Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, having left Bangabhaban in 1973, came back in early August 1975 to join Bangabandhu's government as minister without portfolio. Days later, the usurper Moshtaque made him foreign minister. Mohammadullah, having ceased to be president in early 1975, quickly became a minister. In 1982, President Sattar made him vice president. Barely twenty-four hours later, Ershad staged his coup d'etat and sent everyone packing.

Time was when Justice Nurul Islam and Moudud Ahmed came close to being presidents of Bangladesh. Both men served General Ershad as vice presidents. Before his sudden death a couple of weeks ago, Colonel Akbar Hossain, in serious vein or otherwise, thought he could be president. Some years ago, Abdus Samad Azad told yours truly, with that mischievous twinkle in the eye, that he ought to have been president of the republic. It was a time when the government he served was beginning to lose patience with Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

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# CEC carrying on: Political crisis looming large

**However, for a fair and free election, removal or resignation of the CEC and ECs is essential. Without acceptability of the voters' list the election will lose its credibility. Thus it is unavoidable for the government to concentrate on replacing the CEC and ECs and hold dialogue with the opposition on electoral reforms and caretaker government's effectiveness. Much time has been lost. Only a quick decision may do some good at this belated hour.**

### ABMS ZAHUR

Justice is supposed to be an honourable man with high sense of dignity. But whosoever has chosen the present Chief Election Commissioner has certainly not done justice to the nation. If the choosers concerned thought that a CEC could do some miracle in a national election for their benefit they should be highly disappointed.

Holding a statutory position, how could a CEC betray his lack of understanding of the importance and sensitivity of a fairly accurate voters' list in holding a national election? His coming in conflict with the then Election Commissioners on taking decision about preparing fresh voters' list unilaterally, appointing 150 election enumerators from BNP cadre,

increasing the number of Election Commissioners to four only to make the existing two commissioners non-functional, showing little or no respect for the decisions and directives of the High Court and Supreme Court and trying tirelessly to convince others about his understanding of completing a voters' list quickly and accurately without visiting the voters' residences have made him a dangerous element doing irreparable damage to the common people's wish for establishing democracy in Bangladesh.

By spending around Tk. 600 million in a unique attempt at preparing fresh voters' list (mainly to include fake voters' like stranded Pakistanis, Rohingas, etc. and omit genuine voters) as well as appointment of 150 enumerators from BNP

cadres have resulted in drawing conclusion that the CEC is working under the strong influence of PMO. Thus it has become impossible for the common people (particularly the conscious citizens) to accept the voters' list to be prepared by the CEC and his associate ECs and participate in elections conducted by them.

The alliance government's attitude to bypass the recommendations of the 14-party alliance in regard to reform of election commission and the caretaker government may ultimately result in serious disturbance in having a national election acceptable either to the nation or to the donors. Though we hear now some positive statements about the need for preparing voters'

list on the basis of visiting door-to-door, we cannot accept any voters' list under the guidance of the present CEC and his two associate ECs. They must be replaced by new ones. Any dilly dallying (the present government is wont to) in taking firm decision will certainly result in confusion and chaotic situation.

Not much time is left to take a decision about CEC's resignation. Within four months' time the government will have to hand over power to the caretaker government. As the situation stands, the prospective CEC and the ECs will have to be acceptable to all political parties. For the paucity of time, government may form a parliamentary committee for selection of ECs.

Though a bit time consuming the government may consider for CEC's and ECs removal through the supreme judicial council [Art. 96(3) of the constitution]. Under the circumstances, the president and the prime minister may also prevail upon the CEC and the ECs to resign as quickly as possible, precisely for the sake of strengthening democratic practice in the country.

We are apprehensive of looming

danger for democratic values and practices; even its secular image has been tarnished through mishandling of politics by some political leaders with little or no political acumen. Apparently some have started dreaming of establishing an Islamic state because they could convince the poor gullible illiterate rural Muslims of the greatness of their philosophy.

In the name of Islam they rather started repression of the innocent people. Even a part of BNP (mainly some immature and inexperienced members) perhaps consider that the antics of these Islamic fundamentalists will ultimately help them to increase their popularity. The fundamentalists know fully well that the tacit support from BNP will improve their grip on the politics at no cost of theirs but that of the BNP.

Needless to say that the present incompetent CEC has successfully brought the nation for a show it witnessed in 1996. Once again we are reminded of the observation of the famous British historian, Trevor-Roper: "The only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn." Let us see whether we see a bigger

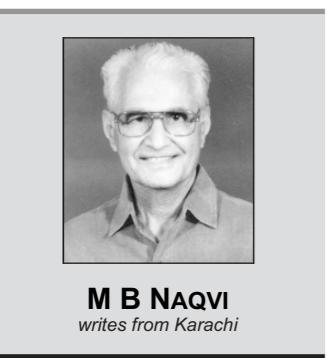
farce than 1996 in our quest for a free and fair election.

We may not overlook the importance of capacity and time available for the commission. It is indeed difficult to understand as to how the voters' list of more than 90 million can be reviewed with only 83 registration officers and 6273 assistant registration officers within the short time available. The new election commission secretary, it is expected, may be able to prepare a voters' list accurately on the basis of visiting door-to-door.

However, for a fair and free election, removal or resignation of the CEC and ECs is essential. Without acceptability of the voters' list the election will lose its credibility. Thus it is unavoidable for the government to concentrate on replacing the CEC and ECs and hold dialogue with the opposition on electoral reforms and caretaker government's effectiveness. Much time has been lost. Only a quick decision may do some good at this belated hour.

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# ISI out of control



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

THESE were two or three incidents that were quite unrelated to each other. They were symptomatic. In the first, a posse of ISI officials picked up a retired brigadier, his daughter-in-law and his grandsons from their Islamabad home and took them to some place and beat them up. Another was far more serious and portentous. Headlines spoke of a big military operation in Dera Bugti in which the real target was Sardar Muhammad Akhar Khan Bugti. Twentyfive persons died. In yet another incident 23 Bugti tribesmen have been killed. The real target apparently remained the Bugti chief who happily has survived both attempts, though still somewhere in hiding. The question

## PLAIN WORDS

**This incident was indeed a small one, if also symbolic. Far more serious is a large number of "disappearances" of Pakistan citizens, not to speak of unexplained killing or harassment of journalists. In all these cases people were picked up by the intelligence services and have not been heard of since. No one knows how they are being treated or where they are being kept, with no contact with their families and relatives.**

is: are there any similarities or common elements in these incidents?

Insofar as the first one is concerned, it merely shows that how hollow and petty the senior officers of the ISI are. Apparently, a few boys came to blows on the playing field in Islamabad. The one who seems to have received more beating was the son of a senior officer in the secret service, who (the father) sent a squad of ISI personnel under a major who did what has been reported. It just shows the way ISI operates right in the heart of the capital, picking up a retired and decorated brigadier for a trivial reason and beating him and his progeny. The illegality and the high-handedness, not to mention the petty arrogance of the

senior officers of the service, have been disclosed.

If a secret service could do this to a retired army officer in Islamabad, how have they been behaving in other parts of the country where less privileged people live? It shows that the intelligence services are now becoming far too lawless. A lot of people complain that these secret agencies are becoming a state within the state. It would seem that they are justified. It underlines the feeling that the country lacks rule of law altogether where some people with authority think themselves to be above the law. This needs to be checked. There must be some accountability for secret services.

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serious is a large number of "disappearances" of Pakistan citizens, not to speak of unexplained killing or harassment of journalists. In all these cases people were picked up by the intelligence services and have not been heard of since. No one knows how they are being treated or where they are being kept, with no contact with their families and relatives. It is commonly believed that intelligence agencies are doing this as a matter of policy. Which may be the reason why they think of themselves as being the real ruling authority with no check on them and thus they behaved the way they did in Islamabad or elsewhere.

Who is responsible? Every country has intelligence agencies. Their secret services do not

behave like this. What is so peculiar about Pakistani agencies? Peculiarities of Pakistan politics are responsible for it. How does this happen? There is nothing obscure about it. What the country has is a facade of democracy, not the real thing.

Intelligence agencies behave arrogantly simply because they have unchecked power and unaudited money at their disposal for dubious purposes. They are not answerable to any elected authority. The regime is using them as the main political instrument. That is the reason. Since the government does not draw its strength from the people and the source of its power is the army, therefore, the ultimate responsibility is that of the Pakistan army as an institution. It can't be true that its intelligence services are manipulating the army or the country. Somebody has to be held responsible. The tail does not wag the dog.

This consistent pattern of "disappearances" has reduced Pakistan to a Banana Republic. In the Banana Republics of Latin America, dictatorships were working in close cooperation with the US. Indeed the US was playing one

against the other all the time and selling arms to combatants in various nationalistic wars. It does look as if Pakistan has also acquired some of the characteristics of the politics of those Banana Republics.

As for the specific incident of the attack on the Bugtis, it was a shameful act, targeting an individual who has not been adjudged guilty of some heinous crime. It becomes a murder attempt. It could not have been done by any military unit on its own; here the responsibility will have to travel upward. A state cannot behave like a murderer. Nor does a responsible state mount military operations against its own people. We know what happened in East Pakistan in 1971. It is playing with fire.

True, Balochistan may be geographically big but its population is only a 5 per cent. True also, Balochistan is not East Pakistan. But Balochistan has as developed a nationalism such as East Pakistanis did not have. Who is Bugti? He is not a mere individual. He is now a symbol of Baloch nationalism and represents its honour. This is a war between Islamabad and Balochistan

Liberation Army. No matter which side kills how many, it will still be Pakistanis being killed. This is madness and the healing touch of statesmanship is needed.

The Pakistan government cannot behave like Herr Olmert or Sharon have been toward the Palestinians. Military operations within the country simply show political bankruptcy and foolishness. As it happens, the military leadership has unwittingly started two or three insurgencies that are going on in the country. BLA's war on Islamabad's alleged exploitation of Balochistan resources is one.

The Pakistan army, 80,000 of them, are supposed to be engaged in flushing out foreign militants, supposedly linked to al-Qaeda. Then Pakistan has been fighting and negotiating with the Taliban. In addition there are the political connections: those who created the Taliban and are its progenitors are governing the Frontier and Balochistan provinces. Insofar as the various Agencies of FATA are concerned, the country should be told as to who precisely is being punished. Who are the criminals targeting the Army and the various paramilitaries? Are there militants other than al-Qaeda and Taliban?

The word "miscraents" have been used. Sometimes Taliban have executed robbers and criminals. What kind of criminals were they?

There is another dimension that has grown and grown. It is the sectarian polarisation. The Shia-Sunni tension and clashes in the Frontier areas and in the rest of the country have grown into a serious political threat to Pakistan. Now a new one has been added: It is between the Barelvis and Deobandis. The question is: how long can the army alone handle NWFP's FATA and Balochistan?

All said and done, the army is an instrument for defending a place or attacking others. Peacemaking is not done by the armies; it is done by politicians. Are there any politicians in this country who are trying to make peace? While we are on the subject, it is necessary to ask what is the precise nature of relationship today between Islamabad and the Taliban. Are they trying to make up or are they at war with each other? Have Taliban finally gone out of control and severed contact with the Islamabad? Or is a rapprochement being negotiated?

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