

## Beirut: Illusion of a silver Porsche

I wonder where he is now? In a Lebanon under ferocious attack, where even US citizens are stranded, and the wealthiest Beirutis are taking to the mountains, what hope for poor Bengalis with nowhere to go.

NAEEM MOHAEMEN

[Excerpt from the forthcoming essay "Invisible Migrants", to be published in *Men of the Global South*, Zed Books, Adam Jones ed.]

I have a ritual when I arrive in the hotel in a new city. After a quick shower, I immediately go looking for a spot to get Internet access. In Beirut for an art festival, I discovered that the best location to receive wireless internet signals was the hallway outside my hotel room. Sitting on the stairs to check email every morning, I soon became a familiar sight to the maids cleaning the hotel. On the third day, an Asian maid finally worked up the courage to ask me in English: "Are you Indian?"

Forsaking my usual sarcastic response, I simply replied, "No, I'm Bangladeshi." Her face immediately lit up. "I'm from Bangladesh too!" Switching from halting English to rapid-fire Bengali, she started asking me which district I was from, where my home village was, when I had arrived, what I was doing there, and more. Farzana\* was from Comilla.

She was one of two Bangladeshi employees in the hotel. The other was Anis, a downstairs guard I had noticed earlier.

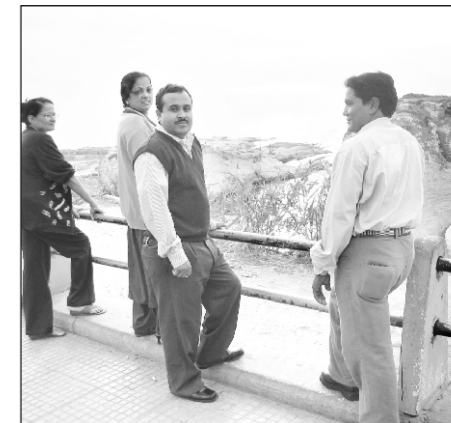
Farzana said something which made me realize why she was so excited: "Allah, you know, I have been in Beirut for seven years, been at this hotel for five years. You are the first Bangladeshi guest I have seen. We see Indians all the time, but Bangladeshis, never!"

During the two weeks that followed, Farzana and I fell into a routine of morning conversations. From these alaps I learnt that Bangladeshis were relatively new arrivals here, but had already become one of the big groups of migrant workers, after Ethiopians and Filipinos. Sri Lankan maids were of course the Lebanese archetype (their horrific conditions are documented in Carole Mansour's recent film *Maid* in Lebanon); but Bangladeshis were starting to replace them in some jobs.

Although the community was recent, almost everyone had been here for at least seven years. Seven years is roughly the amount of time that new visas had been

blocked under the previous Syrian regime, so that was the marker for migration. Although the Bangladeshis had established a strong community, they mixed freely with other migrant groups. A day after I visited the Sabra-Shatila Palestinian refugee camps, I learnt from Farzana that it was also the site for the very popular Sunday "Bangla market." That was when roving Bengali sellers would set up temporary shops next to the camps and sell Bengali food, trinkets, music and films. "Not just Bangladeshi," she said proudly, "but others also buy our items!"

After the festival ended, Farzana invited me to have lunch at her home. There, I met several other members of her community, mostly working as maids and building guards. The man who interested me most was Hamid, a garrulous nightguard who became my guide through Beirut. To start things off, I asked Hamid why he had two massive posters of assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. This seemed an odd juxtaposition with progressive Lebanese who mourned Hariri's death but maintained a healthy skepticism about his ties with big business. But Hamid very enthusiastically told me that Hariri was the man who could claim credit for rebuilding war-torn Beirut. "If only Bangladesh could have a Hariri," he added wistfully. Though some Lebanese artists had



warned me that there was a lot of racism in Lebanon, Hamid and his friends seemed to have absolutely no complaints. Rather, he kept insisting that the Lebanese treated them "fairly," and certainly better than other Arab countries.

The only time Hamid became tentative was when he started talking about his family. Like many other migrants, he had managed to return home only once during his twelve years. During that trip, he married, and brought his wife back to Beirut. Soon afterwards, his wife gave birth to their first son, Rubayat. But the pressures of providing for both wife and son were too much, and he was forced to send them back to Bangladesh.

When I asked how he was coping without his new family, Hamid gave a slightly embarrassed smile. Then he stood up straight and said: "This is what's written in our fate. Allah gives some a lot, so he has to give others little. This is the path written for us, so we just have to manage."

As if to change the topic, he started showing me pictures of his son. In one photo, Rubayat was standing in front of a silver Porsche. "I asked them to do that on the computer," he explained, pointing to the car. Looking again at the sports car, I wondered if it was meant to give the family back home an illusion of wealth, or whether it was simply

there as a nice backdrop. Hamid started handing the photo over to me, and I protested that I couldn't take his copy. "No, no, take it, I have many more copies"; then, with a quiet insistence: "Please. I want you to take it."

I wonder where he is now? In a Lebanon under ferocious attack, where even US citizens are stranded, and the wealthiest Beirutis are taking to the mountains, what hope for poor Bengalis with nowhere to go.

Naeem Mohaemen is director of Visible, a collective that works on art interventions related to post 9/11 security panic.

\*All names have been changed for privacy reasons

## Fools rush in

In any case, public consensus will be required on the level of the toll for the new highway. It only means that the estimated cost of the project, among others, will have to be carefully determined on a competitive basis. We hope that the government will soon indicate the steps that will be taken, and whether the issues mentioned above have been taken into consideration in the feasibility study, before proceeding with construction of a second Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Otherwise, approving such a large project in only one session of the Cabinet may be misinterpreted by some quarters as pre-election propaganda.

M SYEDUZZAMAN

It was announced in the news media a few days back that the government has approved construction of a second highway linking Dhaka and Chittagong. The project is estimated to cost about \$900 million, will be a toll road, and is to be built by a Malaysian firm on a Build, Own, Operate, and Transfer (BOOT) basis.

This is no doubt a bold decision, taken in just one meeting of the Cabinet. This is only the beginning. A lot of work remains to be done before giving green signal to the construction work. From the newspaper reports (The Daily Star, July 4) it appears that a proposal from a Malaysian company was scrutinized by the Communication Ministry, sent to the PICOM (Private Infrastructure Committee) in the office of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, and then placed before the Cabinet. Since no particular company has been selected, and it is mentioned that the government will go for international bidding, it can be taken as approval "in principle." Since the proposal from the Malaysian firm was an unsolicited one, it is expected that guidelines developed by IIFC (Infrastructure Investment Facilitation Centre) will also be followed to select the final party/consortium transparently.

A large number of issues have to be settled before processing the proposal further. The views of all sections of society and support of all stakeholders in all aspects will strengthen the basis of this important project. Some issues are pointed out here for consideration, so that the concerned authorities, whichever political party is in power, may avoid possible pitfalls and use national resources prudently. At \$900 million, the proposed project will be the largest in Bangladesh in monetary terms, costing almost \$150 million more than the Jamuna Bridge.

The experience of the Jamuna Bridge will be extremely useful here. Before undertaking construction, the project was in public domain for a decade or so, and perhaps even longer, if we remember that the proposal was first broached with the Japanese government during the then Prime Minister's visit to Japan in 1974. A formal feasibility study was initiated in 1985 (first by the UNDP with funds from the Saudi government), various aspects of the bridge were widely discussed among all groups of stakeholders, experts and donors. Only after a consensus was reached, it was decided to go

ahead with international bidding. If we recall, the following major issues were debated before undertaking construction of the Jamuna Bridge:

(a) Alignment: Apart from the views of experts on river training, hydrology, engineering etc., local public opinion was sought on both sides of the river before the final alignment was decided.

(b) Capacity: Should the bridge be 4-lane, 6-lane or 8-lane?

(c) Additional facility: Should we have a railway track also on the bridge? If so, should it be broad/narrow or dual gauge? Should we have a second electric interconnector along the bridge in addition to the existing E-W interconnector? Should we not have a gas pipeline along the embankment for the bridge?

Reaching a consensus on all these issues was not easy, and was certainly time consuming. But the government did not rush through, and finally, the donors who provided the financing, had also to be taken on board.

We should follow a similar process in case of the proposed second Dhaka-Chittagong highway so that we can look forward to a cost-effective modern infrastructure project to strengthen the life-line of the economy in the coming decades.

We should also keep in mind that for the past one year and a half a large investment proposal of the Tata Group has been in the public domain. Government appointed a member of experts and committees to examine various aspects of the proposal. Policy makers, economists, civil society spokespersons and experts have given their views in the matter. But government is yet to take any decision. A well-considered approach and exercise is, therefore, highly recommended for the proposed second Dhaka-Chittagong highway in national interest, instead of rushing through with a decision. After all, the people of the country have to pay back the investment.

First of all, we have to establish the need of the project based on projection of growth of future traffic. If it has been done, and if a feasibility report has been prepared, let us make the data public for consultation with various business chambers, and experts of the country. Projection of traffic growth will indicate when the existing highway will reach its full capacity, and what is the earliest date on which the second highway has to be commissioned. Before undertaking construction of such an expensive project, our engineers and experts will have to explore all possibilities of maximizing traffic handling

capacity of the existing highway and railways with additional work and expenditure.

A major initiative has been taken to restructure Bangladesh Railway (BR). At a recently held day-long seminar organized jointly by the World Bank and BR on the future of Bangladesh Railways, the country Director, World Bank made the following statement:

"ADB, JBIC and WB are joining hands to support the Government's reform/restructuring program for BR. A multi-year, multi-donor program of up to \$700-800 million is possible. The program is designed to include both policy reform and investment."

It is understood that some of the railway projects under consideration between Dhaka-Chittagong are: (a) a Chord line project between Laksam-Dhaka which will shorten the distance between Chittagong and Dhaka by 80 km; (b) Double tracking the missing portions between Dhaka-Chittagong, with the possible provision of a dual-gauging of the new track. Four-laning of the existing Dhaka-Chittagong highway is already under implementation. This will add considerable new capacity. So new facilities need to be considered carefully, based on detailed investigation.

Second, the rationale for a new alignment for the second highway through Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Chandpur and Mirersarai has to be established, instead of improving the capacity of the existing one as mentioned above, or even a project parallel to the existing one, or even an elevated highway. If an elevated highway is a possible alternative, should it be over the alignment of the existing highway or over the Dhaka-Chittagong railway track? Is it conceivable that if there is an elevated highway, one could be for use of passenger traffic and another for goods?

Let us take into account these possibilities which will save land, and the programs and initiatives for expanding the capacity of the exiting highway and of the railways, as mentioned above, workout the costs and benefits of all these alternative possibilities, and opt for the least cost solution before proceeding with the project. The construction of the new highway along the proposed new alignment will require large quantum of valuable agricultural land. This will adversely impact the target of self-sufficiency in food production, and may bring in many other environmental disaster. Expert review of the environmental impacts of the proposed alignment is absolutely essential.

Another alternative to take care of the growth in traffic in future, may be to build a fleet of bay crossing water transport vehicles in the private sector. It will also force us to undertake regular servicing of the river routes, traffic can go all the way to the north and southwest parts of the country, and development of important inland river ports can have multiplier effects on the economy. From the point of view of environmental impacts, this alternative could be the most attractive. It may be mentioned that an IWT container terminal is under construction at Khanpur (Narayanganj), to facilitate movement of containers between Chittagong-Narayanganj and Mongla-Narayanganj by water transport barges. This should be in operation by end of 2007.

We have to bring all those issues into the public domain, so that the business community, engineers, transport experts, economists, policy makers, and the political leaders can take a full view of things. It will be useful to organize a series of dialogues, workshops, seminars and technical sessions among the stakeholders mentioned above, before coming to a decision which will reflect the consensus of all sections of the society. There are other considerations. Will an alignment through Narayanganj/Munshiganj be convenient for connecting the Jamuna Bridge access road for traffic destined for the northern and south-western parts of the country? Are there projects in hand to expand the capacity of the Chittagong port? Has the much talked about Myanmar-Teknaf-Chittagong linkage been kept in view?

One final, but very important issue, needs to be seriously examined. The proposed second highway will be a "toll-road" and built on a BOOT basis -- as newspaper reports indicate. In that case, will the existing highway continue to remain toll-free? If so, there may not be much incentive for many users to opt for the new toll-road. So, a solution has to be worked out, may be imposing some toll and then gradually increasing it on the existing highway, to bring the charges at par with that of the proposed new highway over a period -- say 10 years. In any case, public consensus will be required on the level of the toll for the new highway. It only means that the estimated cost of the project, among others, will have to be carefully determined on a competitive basis. We hope that the government will soon indicate the steps that will be taken, and whether the issues mentioned above have been taken into consideration in the feasibility study, before proceeding with construction of a second Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Otherwise, approving such a large project in only one session of the Cabinet may be misinterpreted by some quarters as pre-election propaganda.

The experience of BNP government formed after February 1996 election and recent experiences in Thailand and Ukraine show that the results of elections boycotted by a major opposition party, or rigged ones, do not help in forming stable and lasting governments.

On the other hand, the immediate past AL and present BNP government's cases demonstrate that no amount of scheming and street agitation can dislodge a government if it is formed on the basis of a credible election.

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## Free elections can end corruption

Agencies, such as an effective Anti-Corruption Commission, may act as deterrents, but for rooting out corruption there is no alternative to electing a government with an ideological commitment. It would be possible to pull out the country from the quagmire of corruption only when the "ideology" of service to the people replaces expediency and profit motive as the driving force of the political party vested with the responsibility of its governance.

GHULAM RAHMAN

DURING the Pakistan days, before 1971, and even during the British period, sporadic false voting was not unknown. However, these irregularities were of marginal significance and hardly influenced election outcome. In the post independent Bangladesh, usurper military rulers, with the connivance of a section of bureaucrats, in their search for legitimacy and for transforming themselves into "civilian rulers," devised and perfected "electoral engineering."

They formed hodge-podge political parties, drawing self-seeking leaders and activists of all hues, and promoted cronyism, leading to the rise of a class of loan defaulters and tycoons, and, thus, they laid the foundation of politico-business corruption nexus. Elections under them were exercises in foregone conclusion. Irrespective of people's participation, they were assured of a massive mandate.

General Ershad, in the face of unprecedented agitations for people's democratic rights, relinquished power in 1990 to a caretaker government which was formed on the basis of consensus of opposition political parties with the mandate to conduct a free and fair election.

The BNP formed the government in 1991, but it could not keep its hands off from large-scale electoral irregularities in the March 1994 Magura by-election. The democratically elected BNP government, like its autocratic predecessor, lost trust. This sparked nation-wide political unrest and the demand for incorporation of a provision for a neutral caretaker government in the constitution for holding free and fair election and for orderly and peaceful transfer of power.

In February 1996 BNP organised a fraudulent election in a voter-less poll amid non-participation of AL. The new government that it formed lasted only long enough to enact an amendment to the constitution providing for a CTG for holding election at the expiry/termination of tenure of each elected government.

The experience of BNP government formed after February 1996 election and recent experiences in Thailand and Ukraine show that the results of elections boycotted by a major opposition party, or rigged ones, do not help in forming stable and lasting governments.

On the other hand, the immediate past AL and present BNP government's cases demonstrate that no amount of scheming and street agitation can dislodge a government if it is formed on the basis of a credible election.

In 1991 and 2001, BNP formed the government, winning in largely fair and free elections. Ironically, once saddled in power, both times, it embarked on elec-

tion engineering for perpetuating its rule. Its intransigence regarding CTG and holding of a voter-less election, boycotted by AL, paved the way for its exit from power in 1996. Again, after coming to power in 2001, it has been plotting a scheme for returning to power in 2007 through an engineered fraudulent election.

-- First, the retirement age of Supreme Court Judges was raised from 65 to 67 years, which was widely perceived as a clever move to allow a BNP loyalist former Chief Justice to become CTG chief during 2007 election.

-- Second, a President was removed from office when he tried to uphold the neutral image of his high office and another apparently escaped removal in the face of hue and cry of the media and the opposition.

-- Third, an Election Commission was constituted with persons whose neutrality is doubtful. The CEC Justice MA Aziz and the other members are overtly partisan. The AL and other opposition parties say that no credible election is possible under their supervision.

-- Fourth, the government politicised the entire administration, appointing party loyalists to every key position. Recently, two senior-most Secretaries, considered to be somewhat neutral, were first retired and then appointed as ambassadors, apparently to remove them from the line of promotion for becoming Cabinet and Principal Secretary during the next CTG.

In a round-table organised by the daily Prothom Alo, Shushashoner Jonney Nagarik (Shujan) and The Daily Star held on July 1, civil society members and legal experts emphasised the separation of the EC Secretariat from the PMO, state funding for election, introduction of voter ID card, transparent ballot box and electronic voting system to ensure free and fair election. A neutral Election Commission, a flawless voter list and transparent electoral procedures are sine qua non for ensuring fairness in election.

Impartiality of the administration under the president, and a CTG admired and trusted by all political parties, would make the election results unquestionable. However, while these measures are necessary for holding a credible election they are not sufficient to free electioneering from the evil influence of big money, hoodlums, and goons.

Bangladesh constitution provided that its: "Parliament shall consist of three hundred members to be elected in accordance with law from single territorial constituencies by direct election." The provision of "single territorial constituencies" has made the use of money, and concomitant muscle power the deciding factors for a winning strategy in electoral contests.

seats. BNP-led alliance, with 5 percent more votes, captured more than two-thirds of the seats, which clearly shows what a difference money and concomitant muscle power can make in elections under the present electoral system.

Since single seat constituencies do not ensure equal representation of the voters, in many countries proportional representation or a mix of the two is followed. In nation-wide voting for proportional representation, candidates will lose enthusiasm in investing money as victory would be much less certain. Further, as the MPs would not represent any particular area exclusively, the position from a social and administrative perspective would be far less alluring.

However, voter participation may be lukewarm in nation-wide electoral process. A compromise may be found in "multiple seat" constituencies of not less than three seats, each coinciding with administrative district/districts. For instance, 13 seats of Dhaka district may form one constituency and three hill districts -- Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban -- together would form another constituency of 3 seats only. A political party would field a maximum of 13 candidates in Dhaka and 3 in Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban constituency.

If Party X gets 54 per cent votes in Dhaka the first 7 candidates of its list of 13 would be declared elected. Party Y receiving 33 percent votes will get 4 seats. An independent candidate receiving approximately 7 per cent votes would also be a winner. In these "multiple seat" constituencies, the election is more likely to be fought and won on the basis of a party's ideology, program and track record rather than how much money and how many hoodlums a candidate employs in campaigning.

Resource poor political ideologues, currently marginalised in the race for party nominations, would possibly regain lost ground from business tycoons. However, in the changed political scenario, smaller parties may emerge big power brokers if no single party wins a majority.

In developed countries, local governments play a dominant role in the administration and delivery of essential public services. The role of legislators in those countries is primarily limited to enactment of laws. Bangladesh constitution also vested in its parliament only "the legislative powers of the Republic."

Further, it provided that local governments would have various executive functions. The BNP before 2001 election pledged reintroduction of upazilla system it abolished in its previous term. However, once in power, apprehending conflicts between its MPs and local upazilla chairmen, it preferred not to implement the

law that the previous AL government had enacted in 1998 providing for 3-tier local government system including upa-zilla. If MPs are elected from "multiple seat" constituencies, the scope of their meddling in local government affairs would cease and law making would become their principal preoccupation.

The parliament should have members drawn from various segments of the society, and professional groups and interests, with deep-rooted commitment for national development and welfare of the masses. Therefore, to facilitate broad-spectrum participation, laws should be enacted to finance election costs from the exchequer, as well as for campaign fund raising from the public. Political parties and candidates may be allowed to receive campaign contributions.

However, there should be an upper limit to the amount a party or a politician may accept as contribution from any company or individual. These contributions may also be made tax deductible. Procedures for maintaining proper accounts, auditing of campaign funds and return of the unspent balance to the exchequer when a politician retires or dies, or when a political party winds up, should also be there in the law.

Replacing "single seat" constituencies with "multiple seat" ones would free the electoral system from the evil influences of money, hoodlums and goons as well the local government affairs from the clutches of MPs. Enactment of laws for campaign fund raising would facilitate participation of political ideologues committed to people's welfare and brighten their chances of becoming MPs rather than the business tycoons driven by profit motive for personal aggrandisement.

Weaning of political corruption would make combating it in various government departments and agencies basically a matter of reforming certain rules and procedures and making prudent use of information and communication technology (ITC). In every society 1-2 per cent of the population is incorruptible under any circumstance and another 1-2 who are corrupt in all circumstances and the rest generally bend one way or the other in consonance with winds flowing from high places of governmental authority. As a government becomes more corrupt, its functionaries join the bandwagon in greater numbers. The opposite occurs when an honest administration takes its place.

Agencies, such as an effective Anti-Corruption Commission, may act as deterrents, but for rooting out corruption there is no alternative to electing a government with an ideological commitment. It would be possible to pull out the country from the quagmire of corruption only when the "ideology" of service to the people replaces expediency and profit motive as the driving force of the political party vested with the responsibility of its governance.

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