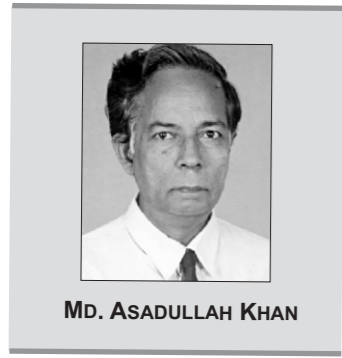


Governing in crisis proves the mettle of leadership



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH less than one-and-a-half months left for the transfer of power to the CTG, the entire nation is tensely waiting for a dialogue to be held, and a consensus arrived at, for holding a free, fair, peaceful and credible election. But with the PM having taken a hard stance by not yielding to the pressure created by the AL led opposition combine's 'illogical' demands of bringing reforms in the EC and CTG, ominous crises of mythic proportions have taken hold over the country breaking down hopes and aspirations of the people. Ironically, while the prime minister continues to blast the opposition parties for raising the reform proposals which they did not introduce during their tenure, the BNP Secretary General, and LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, at a press briefing, called upon the opposition to sit for a dialogue on the reform proposals.

With the PM and the LGRD minister, two bigwigs of the alliance government, talking on different wavelengths the prospect of a dialogue that will usher in a congenial atmosphere for holding the forthcoming election by healing the wounds in the party circles is eroding fast. What is apparent is that the ruling alliance is not acting on the basis of rational discussion and orderly action. The rule of reason, or a consensus, seems to be an illusion.

From the beginning of December last year all politics in the country has been concentrated on a single organisation and a single person, the EC and the CEC Justice MA Aziz. His move to prepare a fresh voter list flouting the EC rules and the opinion of two other commissioners, his rigid stand in going ahead with the task despite a High Court ruling and lastly ignoring the Supreme Court verdict that annulled the earlier

BITTER TRUTH

The ruling alliance's inability to offer anything more has limited its capacity to communicate with the voters. The PM's public meetings, arranged at state expenses mostly for election campaign and laying foundation stones for some dream projects at the fag end of the alliance rule, lack the fire and instant rapport. Possibly aware of the mounting anger directed at the alliance rule, the BNP chairperson makes an effort to appease the public saying: "What you have seen in our rule so far is just a trailer. The full film will follow once you give us power for another five years."

actions, created widespread resentment. Lastly, the flawed voter list prepared by the machinery he heads includes one crore thirty lakh fake voters. Going by his track record, should Justice Aziz continue in his job? The fresh build-up of tension that we now see in the country, and the warlike situation in the streets of Dhaka have a single point of origin: EC and CTG restructuring which the present government has been consistently refusing to carry out. It is not that this restructuring has to be done according to the AL led opposition alone. There are people endowed with the qualities of head and heart in the country who can administer such important jobs with integrity, efficiency and with no partisan bias. There is reason to put the present CEC in the dock. With the stakes getting higher, and the election around the corner, more tumult more conflict, more destruction and killings apprehended ahead. With the whole country becoming a theatre of violence, the man in charge of the machinery must answer questions about his capability, culpability and intent.

What we are seeing, is the evil interred in the bones of alliance government's politics coming to the surface due to the administration's action or inaction. Even as the whole country continues to simmer a dangerous game of scoring political points is on. The alliance leadership has thought it fit to endorse CEC Aziz in the fond hope that it will recover its lost ground. The alliance leadership has failed to gauge the furore over Justice Aziz as the CEC, and its possible repercussions on the country's politics.

Unhappily, events that we want to avoid happen with sickening regularity. Politics continues to defy prognosis. Months ago conventional wisdom held that politics in the country might return to its roots.

For the stalemate in the dialogue to be broken, and a climate conducive to holding of the talks created, BNP leaders must walk one step ahead of the AL opposition combine. Unhappily, it took months by all sections of people in the country, namely civil society members, business community leaders and even international bodies like NDI delegation and EEU community leaders for that wisdom to be assigned to dustbin.

With the violence in the country reaching its zenith, and the most decrepit, defunct and ineffective machinery of governance that the CTG will inherit, it would be difficult to conduct election in a peaceful manner without the mainstream opposition parties participating in it. However, the controversy over Justice KM Hasan as the next CTG chief would not have arisen at all if the present government would not have enhanced the retirement age of the High Court judges. Justice Hasan, who at one stage of his career was a secretary to the BNP's international wing, and who felt embarrassed to hear the appeal case of the Bangabandhu murder case in the Supreme Court, should, by the same reasoning, pull himself out from this short lasting but crucial job that matters much to the country. On the other hand, discarding even the views of the opposition parties, the media and the citizenry about the flawed voter list and partisan bias of the total setup of the EC and most pertinently the present CEC, the assessment made by the Washington based NDI delegation after holding talks with the opposition parties, civil society members and lastly the CEC, made it abundantly clear that Justice Aziz lacks the confidence of people and an election conducted by him will not earn the credibility of the nation.

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voters. The PM's public meetings, arranged at state expenses mostly for election campaign and laying foundation stones for some dream projects at the fag end of the alliance rule, lack the fire and instant rapport. Possibly aware of the mounting anger directed at the alliance rule, the BNP chairperson makes an effort to appease the public saying: "What you have seen in our rule so far is just a trailer. The full film will follow once you give us power for another five years." The "trailer" however has been characterised by brazen politics of populism in the garb of governance. Turning her remaining days of the tenure into a prolonged election campaign, all that the BNP-chairperson delivered was a rash of promises -- for all and sundry. Now she is looking forward to reaping an electoral bounty. Often wooing the sentiment of the people, the alliance chief warned people of a conspiracy being hatched by some insidious forces to decapitate the sovereign character of our republic, but she never made any serious effort to pin them down or to thwart such moves.

Happily, the BNP chairperson is about to complete her second five years as prime minister of the country, and during this period, it is her decision-making inadequacies that have come to define her record. Her handling of issues confronting the nation, and the party itself, at this critical juncture has robbed her of credibility to a considerable extent. Her recent speeches were unyielding and belligerent and exuded arrogance. The net result is that BNP today is in some disarray. There is a definite hiatus between the aspirations of the people and the objectives being followed by the party. The overall confusion is telling on the organisation.

Md Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics

Story of two good guys

ASIF SALEH

WHEN Saber Hossain Choudhury and Asaduzzaman Noor were getting beaten lying down the other day, that was symbolically a picture of today's Bangladesh -- the good guys taking it lying down. Some people have called it the end of civility, some people have called it the future, some people have called it just another day in Bangladesh politics. Whatever it is, everyone agrees that this is another slap at the meritorious and educated people who want to join politics to change it for the better.

Even the die-hard BNP supporter will have a tough time saying negative things about Asaduzzaman Noor and Saber Hossain Choudhury, who have been instrumental in bringing positive changes inside the Awami League. These articles are a tribute to these two people who stand out in today's Bangladesh politics that everyone likes to hate.

When I was a 16 year old news junkie in the late eighties, amid favourites like Jai Jai Din and Bichinta, an art magazine started to come out under the editorship of the late Shamsur Rahman. It was called Muldhara. Muldhara immediately got everyone's attention for its content and high quality. Who would be foolish enough to have a business of publishing art magazine in those days when it was not profitable at all?

That was when when I got introduced to the name Saber Hossain Choudhury -- the publisher of Muldhara. Saber is from a rich family. He could have just been another business man doing garments factory one after the other, but he opted for something different that contributed directly in making a difference in Bangladesh.

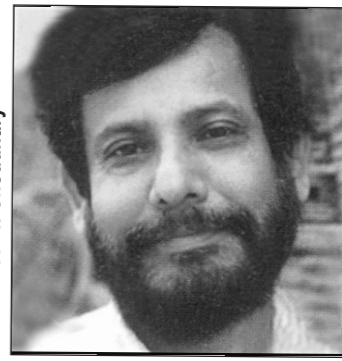
In a few years, he joined politics. SOAS-educated politician in Bangladesh? That's a first. But he soon proved his mettle. During the mid-nineties, Saber and Bangladesh cricket became synonymous. Everyone who is involved with Bangladesh cricket knows how Saber won over the international cricket world with his very impressive attitude. As BCCB chairman, he was instrumental in Bangladesh's getting official test status so quickly. The rest, like they say, is history. Cricket has become now a national passion for which Saber can take a lot of credit.

Fast forward 10 years. I have been invited to a special screening of BBC debate on Bangladesh in London. The debate was happening in Dhaka with participation both from London and Dhaka. Saber Hossain is representing the opposition while

The good guys are fighting between themselves and getting beaten by the bad guys day in, day out. Saber and Noor are the last hope for Bangladeshi politics. They both represent politics of a different kind, the kind that has the pragmatic and modern approach -- the kind we deserve in today's world. While Saber lies in hospital wondering whether he can save his eye and Noor nurses his injury wondering he was better off not joining politics, let us ask ourselves, the educated middle class, if we are mature enough to identify the good guys in Bangladeshi politics today and help them fight the battle for a better Bangladesh and better politics.



Saber Hossain Choudhury



Asaduzzaman Noor

Bangladeshi politics, we needed leadership that's not necessarily young but one which is modern in their outlook.

He then offered me to go to his constituency in Nilphamari with him to find about real people. "Come to Nilphamari with me tomorrow and see for yourself," he challenged. He visited his constituency Nilphamari at least once in two weeks, if not every week. He then blurted out his appointments for the following day in his constituency which included three hours of listening to people's issues, visiting an old school-teacher's family who passed away, going to a few local invitations and weddings, and addressing a meeting. Thanks to my mother's worry, I could not go with him to see his constituency the next day. I still regret that.

But what is more regrettable in today's Bangladesh is the lack of outrage among the educated class at the targeted and inhuman beating of Saber and Noor. A few months ago, noted journalist Muhammad Jahangir told me that today's Bangladesh is seeing a greater unity of bad guys, irrespective of parties, businesses, professions, or affiliation.

On the contrary, the good guys are fighting between themselves and getting beaten by the bad guys day in, day out. Saber and Noor are the last hope for Bangladeshi politics. They both represent politics of a different kind, the kind that has the pragmatic and modern approach -- the kind we deserve in today's world. They need all the support we can give to change the politics as we know it in today's Bangladesh.

While Saber lies in hospital wondering whether he can save his eye and Noor nurses his injury wondering he was better off not joining politics, let us ask ourselves, the educated middle class, if we are mature enough to identify the good guys in Bangladeshi politics today and help them fight the battle for a better Bangladesh and better politics.

Asif Saleh is an expatriate Bangladeshi living in London.

Sky rocketing prices Blame not the traders

NIZAM AHMAD

"Augmentation (in the quantity of money) has no other effect than to heighten the price of labour and commodities." - David Hume, 1742.

ANY Bangladeshi people because of the prevalent high consumer price are suspicious of dubious deals and manipulations by corrupt traders. Traders, we accuse, trade on miseries and reap abnormally high profits. The government, however, offers no administrative solutions other than their threat to penalise traders, the forcible seizure of goods, arbitrary arrests of traders, and commando-like raids on bazaars. To shoot and kill small cross-border traders is also common.

Prices, however, will not scale down unless a radical economic system remains unachieved. The biggest obstacle to that change is the government itself that remain adamantly reluctant to devolve power and lessen its authority over our economy. They hear not that 'best governance is least governance' political or economic.

Definitely, deeply linked to sky-high prices is the increased supply of money in the economy. In all economies, governments are the monopoly minter and the last word on national monetary affairs. Governments justify high spending to bring progress, development, and fulfil political obligations. Not all spending is from government revenue as taxes but by altering bank reserve fractions or by simply printing money, or by their borrowings, a government creates money to meet its expenditure or provide perceived monetary needs of an economy.

The US Dollar, since its nationalization in 1913, lost nearly 90 per cent of its value by Fed created credit. The Bangladeshi Taka is no better while the US succeeded in providing its people with quality living by expanding its money stock, the government of Bangladesh achieved almost nothing. The value of money diminishes with its expansion and gains as high living are temporary. People in the US or in Bangladesh have become poorer as their

A trader, by nature, will provide the best deal to a buyer as the trader gains most by satisfying the shopper. However, a trader will use fraudulent means when their Taka does not retain its value, when the economy is unfree, when rule of law is unenforceable, when customs and police are, unavoidably, corrupt, or when laws are unequal and when issues, as money, is beyond public enquiry but intolerably confined to the boardrooms and conference halls of the techno-elite.

previously held purchasing powers eroded many times over.

Murray Rothbard (1926-1995), the Austro-libertarian economist who taught economics at the US University of Nevada, remarked that, "the enormous expenditures of World War I forced all the warring governments to go off the gold standard, and unwillingness to return to a genuine gold standard eventually led to a radical shift to fiat paper money during the financial crisis of 1931-33." He adds, "an increasing number of economists have understandably become disillusioned by the inflationary record of fiat currencies. They have concluded that only radical measures can remedy the problem ... and that remedy is no less than the strict separation of money and its supply from the state."

Through thousands of years, money evolved and facilitated exchange of goods and services but was metal based, and not plainly paper [fiat] as today. Prices were stable and money mostly retained its value. The modern central bank under the Fiat Monetary System creates money at will, "out of thin air", as the Austrian free market economists describe it. The power to create money without a metal back up, as gold, has changed the original meaning of money from a medium of exchange, a store of value, to something as a "throw-away" commodity for a government to throw at whoever they please.

Money is a product and as any other product, its value diminishes when over produced. The central banks, in their bid to boost demand, supply more money than the economy actually requires and continues to do so. We stay concerned about the government's unconstitutional powers as those that affect human rights but we ignore the "money power" of the

government that also devastates lives. Fiat money and the accompanying inflation reduce purchasing power of the people, wipe out their savings, increase consumer prices, and encourage imprudent spending.

To stabilize market prices and to increase people's purchasing power Bangladesh must no longer wait to decriminalize parallel currencies that operate, informally, next to the official Taka. Often, there are gold hauls at airports to prove that there is a demand for gold that serve as a stable medium of exchange and a store of value that our "legal tenders" fail to do.

If traders can freely store gold, or use other fiat currencies of their choice and need, the market will tend to become predictable and stable, and encourage the central bank, in competition with other circulating currencies, to regulate the supply of its money vigilantly. The process will halt the loss in value and increase the demand for Taka. People, generally, do not want pocket full of money but a greater purchasing power of money. This is not a criminal desire nor is it harmful for an economy. Rather, money-related persecution, coercive actions, and domineering monetary and fiscal policies of our government cause high consumer prices and insolvency.

A trader, by nature, will provide the best deal to a buyer as the trader gains most by satisfying the shopper. However, a trader will use fraudulent means when their Taka does not retain its value, when the economy is unfree, when Rule of Law is unenforceable, when customs and police are, unavoidably, corrupt, or when laws are unequal and when issues, as money, is beyond public enquiry but intolerably confined to the boardrooms and

conference halls of the techno-elite.

Bangladesh government, aided by World Bank and Donor governments haphazardly undertake projects with huge capital outlays. The development process fabulously but illegally enriches many but harms many more. They financed the building of roads but without building, informing, or educating a sense of safe motor-ing or ensuring the provision of emergency and other services without which no road is worthy of use. Consequently, daily, the roads are brutal death traps. In the West, such road builders would be behind bars for their design lapses. Money in Bangladesh is badly utilized and spent recklessly by the government that heightens inflationary pressure and harm people in countless ways.

Government and Donors disregard market forces and want all borders sealed to prevent informal trade with neighbouring countries. Bangladesh people with their deep sea ports can reap rich economic benefits by simply servicing the import demands of surrounding economies. Foreign investments and remittances would stream in to exploit and develop this opportunity but government's narrow-minded economics, coupled with unhelpful national politics, brand all such possibilities as anti-state. Numerous government interventions, bureaucratic highhandedness, and inflexible thinking freeze enterprise, increase the cost of investment or prevents it altogether.

The mainstream economists from the times of Lord Keynes, and presently in the World Bank and IMF, or the domestic development experts, passionately believe in the power of governments to develop an economy. They therefore cite market failure but stay incurably blind to govern-

ment failures. They continue to shape government policies, assert, advocate, and advice growth strategies that require supply of cheap money that cause skyrocketing prices and a falling currency.

Our elite as the government, donor community, and politicians do not stop promising the delivery of everything from education, food, jobs, roads, or the pill. Governments are always less efficient and corrupt yet people subordinate themselves and surrender their freedom to the power and promise of a government and politicians. It is difficult to understand how the enlightened look towards a government, as people do to Divine Being, to fulfil human needs.

It is incorrect to believe that without the World Bank, the IMF, or Donor governments, Bangladesh will fall short of money or investments or remain underdeveloped. If a country's financial reliability and economic structure is firm, there can be no dearth of positive response from international markets to meet urgent demands as electricity. By radical overhaul and liberalization of Bangladesh's monetary and economic system, the country can have sound money without IMF advice or World Bank prescriptions to begin rapid economic development.

It is essential to liberalize the economy, minimize government intervention, and endure parallel currencies for prices to fall. This course is better than to heed IMF advice to raise taxes, and prices, to balance government's accounting that itself remains unaccountable and irresponsible. Bangladesh must break away from the Hobbesian streak of requiring a sovereign, a master, and an authority to sanction economic freedom and approve every economic activity of the people. The public is not ignorant of how an economy works, as they live in it, but are only considered such for the benefit of the entrenched vested groups. For sky-high prices, millions of traders or the concept of free market is not to blame but both are indeed the national scapegoat.

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Helping the poor earn their livelihood

MD ABDUL KADER AND HABIBUR RAHMAN SWAPAN

THE government failed to extirpate illegal possessors from public land. Yes government after government. Following a recent survey it came to light that about 50 lac acres of khas land and waterbodies are being occupied by the illegal possessors the government value of which is about 70,000 crore taka. However, following non-government estimates the amount of khas resources comes to about 55 lac acres valued at about 1,25,000 crore taka.

Not only the khas resources but vested non-citizen properties as well as Waqf estates are also being occupied by illegal possessors at places. Last year the Prime Minister ordered the administration to free the public resources from illegal possessions. It has not been known how far the Prime Minister's order has been implemented. In general if we look around we find abundant khas land and khas water bodies, vested non-citizen properties, even Waqf estates are under illegal possession as before.

The properties of the minorities are also being illegally occupied. The local influential goons are taking unauthorized possession of the land belonging to the tribals of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as of Santals, Garos, Khasias and Monipuris elsewhere.

Quite a considerable amount of properties belonging to Hindus and Biharis are found illegally held. The Santal community in the northern part of the country and other tribals elsewhere as well have lost their properties in the name of repaying their debt. Thousands of acres of khas land are occupied by making fake documents and tampering the deeds and at the same time thousands of cases are lodged. Sometimes, the claimants of such khas resources win by one sided decree. Sometimes due to negligence on the part of government in terms of encountering the claims the occupiers score victory.

Such means of grabbing khas land is continuing for decades. Reminders have been made several times to extirpate the illegal land grabbers and keep the public resources in safe governmental custody. But, perhaps due to some visible and invisible constraints and reservations recovery of the khas resources is not taking place.

To get rid of different complexities regarding land, the government increased its revenue manpower in all Upazilas and one more magistrate designated as Assistant Commissioner (Land) has also been assigned. Besides, Additional District Commissioner (Revenue) in District Commissioner's Office is playing another important role. Recently, the government has upgraded the post of 'Tahshildar' (revenue collector) to Assistant Commissioner (Land).

But even after such enormous efforts recovery of the public resources from illegal occupiers remain in vain. Why? The government tool seems ineffective to extirpate the illegal possessors and this should be noticed. Who are the illegal occupiers? They should be identified. In recent survey it is seen that most public resources are being illegally occupied by politicians' goons and many of them are also the people's representatives.

There are committees for distributing khas resources at both Upazila and district level. Members of Parliament are Advisers of district level committees while the DCs are Chairmen and Upazila Nirbahi Officers are Chairmen of Upazila committees. These

committees comprise of police officials, UP Chairmen, other government officials and the social workers. The social workers who are involved in such committees mainly come from the ruling parties.

Many departments including Land Reform Commission and Land Revenue Board share responsibility of this work. Apparently more than adequate arrangement. But the confusion and complexity is yet to be removed. Where is the problem? As per updated information, the Ministry for Land is in the most rear position in implementing the Annual Development Programme (ADP) in 2005-2006 and its total size of implemented ADP is 34 per cent only.

The Diara survey of Diluvium land is not taking place for long. The affected people from river erosion failed to possess the land (Char land) after accretion. The Settlement department also failed to complete the land record in spite of long period of effort.

The repression and torture by land grabbers in Dhaka and its surrounding areas is also getting worse. The people having 3-4 kathas of land surrounding so called projects of such land grabbers get panicky. The land grabbers aided by musclemen or brokers of the area compel the holders to write down deeds in favour of them. Then, whatever public resources come in course of their pursuit the land grabbers technically co-opt those. For attaining such goals they use the greedy officials. Sometimes, the illegal land occupiers also pursue the high officials or bureaucrats. Some areas between Taigaon Industrial Area and Gulshan were known as public khas resources and Bhawal Estate but at present different real estates or housing estates have appeared thereupon. Vast area of Zoar Sahara was called Bhawal Estate but now it had different nomenclature. Even in middleclass residential area like Mohammadpur a land grabber can keep on grabbing and making money tactfully taking shelter under the ruling party umbrella. Eviction of slums for grabbing land has become very common. In rural areas some khas lands and unused land by the railway track are only places to the landless poor for taking shelter. But there also the trick of land grabbers is noticed. They are effort feel to take the position of it at any cost. The administration remains reluctant in many cases although news of repression and torture of the landless people most often appear in the print media.

There exist some rules and regulations for distributing the khas land but that are not followed properly. In spite of the political commitment for khas land distribution made by the different political parties in their election manifesto its materialisation is very little in reality. Vote is easily collected from the poor by making such commitments. But how much do the members of parliament speak on behalf of the poor sitting in the House?

Over this long three and half decades since liberation we have failed to take any sincere initiative for the poor. If a landless person gets a piece of land to cultivate it would cause a radical psychological change within him or her. He or she could hope for a livelihood utilising his or her capability. It is obvious that in the upcoming election the political parties would make some kind of commitment again to the poor landless people with the same purpose of securing vote. But this time let it be genuine to an extent. And finally we would expect from the different political parties that they would certainly not nominate any land grabbers.

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