

## Speaker's sweeping rejection of notices

People's expectations belied

It is rather disquieting that the Speaker thought it fit to reject the very large number of notices from the opposition MPs for discussion on extremely important issues relating to the public interest. As many as 169 motions, during the current session of the Parliament, have been disallowed by the Speaker on the grounds that many of those had been covered under points of order at various times, while on some of those the government was taking action, while some others were outdated.

We believe that the Parliament is the place where the people's perspective on burning issues finds expression through their chosen representatives and where all the members are given equal opportunity to ventilate their points of view, which in fact are the points of view of the people. Unfortunately, there is no reflection of that spontaneous discussion that one expects to see on the floor of the House on issues of immediate and urgent nature that impacts the life of the people.

As a citizen, and certainly as a voter, we have legitimate expectations about what the Parliament should do in terms of authentic discussions on issues that relate to genuine public concern. Issues raised under points of order are generally done in a superficial and perfunctory manner, with the attending air of casualness in the whole affair. But most issues demand and need thorough deliberations.

To the Speaker we ask, you are the guardian of the Parliament and by implication the guardian of the people's rights. Is rejecting all notices given by the opposition, especially those dealing with such burning issues as electoral reform, corruption, price rise, shortage of power, etc a good way of playing the "guardian's role"? Not only on Sunday, we have painfully observed that notices submitted by the opposition have been regularly rejected in the past, raising serious public concern as to the usefulness of the exercise if public concerns are not reflected in parliamentary debates.

We need hardly remind the Speaker that it is he who should encourage discussion on vital issues, instead of disallowing those. If people's views were not allowed to be expressed in the house of the people then where would they be?

## Traffic congestion and rallies

A rational approach warranted

In recent times, the city dwellers have been experiencing unprecedented traffic jams causing immense suffering to them. The month of Ramadan apart, with the national election closing in on us, we are bound to see a rapid increase in rallies and processions by both the opposition alliance and ruling coalition hugely exacerbating traffic jam on the main thoroughfares.

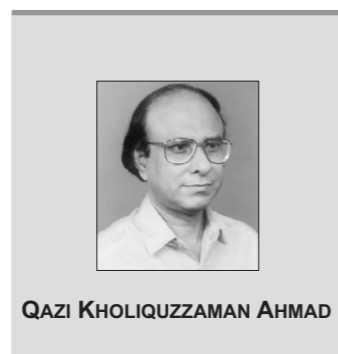
We strongly feel that the situation can only worsen without any intervention. Effective and innovative ways must be found to mitigate the suffering of the people. It is evident that mere regulatory measures by the administration alone cannot achieve any tangible success in arresting the deteriorating state of traffic. If we are to curb the city's traffic jam to a rational level, besides undertaking long-term measures, there will have to be coordinated efforts undertaken by the political parties and the various concerned agencies of the government right now.

The entire political leadership and the political parties need once for all to agree that no rallies and marches be staged in a way that blocked the entire streets. Processions should be taken out alongside shoulders of the streets rather than occupying the whole road spaces. Rallies and processions better not be a whole day affair; there should be fixed hours for them. What is equally, if not more important is that these should be held on designated locations with adequate notice given to the media. Nowhere in the world traffic is allowed to be disrupted for hours together with such frequency as is done in Bangladesh.

Public rallies are for mobilising public opinion or securing people's support for a cause. That being the case, it defies understanding as to how public support can be obtained by increasing public inconvenience!

Our suggestion is representatives from political parties, civil society, government agencies and the DCC put their heads together to devise ways and means to avoid life-disrupting traffic congestion on account of political and other programmes.

## A window of opportunity



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

I welcome the development that the general secretaries of BNP and Awami League are at last meeting on behalf of their respective parties and alliances to discuss the reform proposals of the opposition parties led by Awami League.

One hopes that they will find solutions, which will ensure free and fair parliamentary elections to be held in January 2007. We are particularly happy because, on May 13 in a seminar in Dhaka, I, on behalf of the Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) and the Bangladesh Young Economists Association (BYEA), called for negotiations to be conducted by the two general secretaries on behalf of their respective parties and alliances, given that there was a logjam after several rounds of exchange of letters (See Shaping the Future of Bangladesh, a publication of BEA and BYEA).

## BEHIND THE FACADE

The caretaker government will, in addition to the usual full platter of responsibilities, be saddled with two particularly burning issues which may make its short duration rather trying. One is the accentuating inflation, particularly the high and increasing prices of basic consumer necessities. The second burning issue is the electricity crisis. As a result of non-availability of electricity, irrigation suffers much, impacting on agricultural production and industrial production has been affected, often severely, throughout the country. People are, therefore, coming out in protest in many places around the country.

We know there are hard days ahead for the two negotiators but we feel strongly that a way forward must be found. This is not a question of compromise to be made by one side or the other. The question is about ensuring that the next parliamentary elections are free and fair and held on time. This the politicians owe to the people of the country and to themselves to ensure.

The country is now at cross-roads and it is crucial that the forthcoming elections are properly held and acceptable to all concerned to enable the country to begin in earnest to solve the many problems it faces and carry forward a process of sustainable development. This development path is absolutely necessary to shape the future of the country such that by 2021 or 2025 the

country may be characterized by economic vibrancy, tolerable levels of income and human poverty, high levels of equity, participatory democracy, and a fair measure of environmental security.

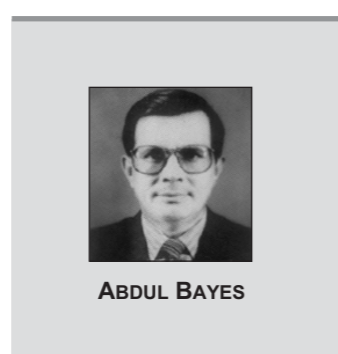
I was asked by a journalist what if the negotiations expected to start between the two general secretaries fail. I told him and let me repeat that here: in the prevailing political atmosphere, the question asked is surely legitimate, but let us not speculate on the negative side as long as there is an opportunity to think positively and look at the brighter side.

It is in this spirit, which may smack of naivete under the prevailing circumstance but certainly embodies patriotic fervour, I would like to wish Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Mr. Abdul

Jalil well and fervently hope that they succeed in negotiating necessary reforms and a caretaker government will be installed in due time, and the elections will then be properly held within the next 90 days.

Of course, the main responsibility of the caretaker government relates to the holding of the forthcoming elections. But, everything else must also move. Therefore, the caretaker government will also need to ensure that the wheel of the economy keeps moving, educational and other key public institutions keep functioning properly, the social and political forces are geared towards free and fair elections, and international and regional relations are friendly and dignified. When installed, it will have to quickly prioritize its tasks.

## Living without land but with a ladder



ABDUL BAYES

UNDENIABLY, perhaps, land is an important asset that affects rural livelihood systems. In fact, the argument for redistributive land reforms follows from the fact that inequitable distribution of land leads to inequitable access to other assets required for eking out a living.

While a redistributive land reform has been, perhaps, shelved for the distant future (for political or economic reasons), we shall attempt to show that in the absence of land and ladder to reach the poor through such redistributive mechanisms, we could have alternative ways to help them.

In the following paragraphs we shall show how the growth and composition of income of the rural poor changed over time, and what kind of policy changes should be on board. Admittedly, the discussion would center on the functionally landless households since they comprise a sizeable portion of the total landless households in rural areas.

The total household income of a functionally landless household was estimated to be \$819 in 2003-04, and after allowing for change in household size, the

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

Remittance income was once the monopoly of the rich households as they had the money and resources to send members abroad. The functionally landless group, quite obviously, lagged way behind, as they had neither the financial nor the human capital to seize upon the opportunities. But, of late, the situation seems to have turned for them. Remittance income now constitutes about 13 percent of their household income, compared to only 3 percent in earlier periods. The growth rate of income from this source has been rising astoundingly at 12 percent per annum. In fact, as a source of income for functionally landless households in recent years, remittance puts them almost at par with land owning households.

per capita income comes to \$166. This compares with \$111 in 1987-88 and depicts a growth rate of 2.5 percent per annum over time. We observe that, in absolute terms and like land-owning households, there has not been any change in income derived from agriculture. But, relatively, the share of income from agriculture now constitutes a little over one-third, compared to about half in earlier periods.

Noticeably, income from rice farming for functionally landless households, roughly 7 percent of the total income, has been growing at 2.3 percent per annum over the entire period under study. This contrasts with land-owning households which witnessed negative growth rate of income from rice farming. The development on this count seems to reinforce our earlier observations on labour use and changes in tenancy markets. It is not surprising that functionally landless households are entering the tenancy market, increasing operated parcels, and receiving more income from rice farming.

The most important agricul-

tural source of income for the poor in rural areas appears to be non-rice crop activities. Income from this account rose about three fold, depicting a growth rate as high as about 7 percent, and the share almost doubled over time. Similar pattern prevailed with regard to non-crop agriculture. But, as some of those activities, like livestock and poultry raising, require home-stead land and capital, the share of income from this remained more or less at the same level.

The idea that the poor households in rural areas mostly depend on wage labour in agriculture does not seem to hold true any more. The share of wage income in the total household income depicted a drastic decline -- from about 28 percent to about 13 percent -- in 1999-2000, and to 12 percent in 2003-04. The income from this source dropped at 3 percent per annum over time. This could be called a significant development since labouring on others' land is not only humiliating but also prone to severe risks because of the unpredictability of nature, and the whims of the landlords.

The prominent source of income of the poor is non-agricultural activities. About two-thirds of the income of these households now comes from non-agricultural pursuits, and has grown at 4.1 percent per annum between 1987-88 and 2003-04. In 1999-2000, the share was as high as 68 percent, but has fallen to about 66 percent in recent years. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large portion of the "missing" labour in agriculture has been absorbed in the non-agricultural sector.

Among non-agricultural sources, trade and business hold the key to the household kitty. In fact, trade and business now account for more than one-fifth of the total household income -- and is surging ahead at about 5 percent per annum -- for the functionally landless groups. Their presence is also more pervasive than the land owning groups who are generally known to be blessed with capital for carrying out business. We presume that, since this group is the "target group" of the micro-finance institutions spread over every nook and corner of the

country, the required capital to do business was supplied by NGOs. But the share of these activities declined from 1999-2000. Do we have to assume that the business environment for the poor has deteriorated in recent times?

Another interesting development should not miss our investigative lenses. Remittance income was once the monopoly of the rich households as they had the money and resources to send members abroad. The functionally landless group, quite obviously, lagged way behind, as they had neither the financial nor the human capital to seize upon the opportunities.

But, of late, the situation seems to have turned for them. Remittance income now constitutes about 13 percent of their household income, compared to only 3 percent in earlier periods. The growth rate of income from this source has been rising astoundingly at 12 percent per annum. In fact, as a source of income for functionally landless households in recent years, remittance puts them almost at par with land owning households.

Moreover, because of tripping of certain plants perhaps due to

lack of proper maintenance and the old plants often going out of order due to lack of balancing and modernization, the generation of electricity has in recent months been lower than the usual, sometimes substantially lower.

As a result, the crisis has accentuated. Load-shedding, even in Dhaka, 6 or 10 times a day (24 hours), usually each for one hour, has now become normal. In rural areas and district and upazila towns, the situation is much worse. As a result of non-availability of electricity, irrigation suffers much, impacting on agricultural production and industrial production has been affected, often severely, throughout the country.

People are, therefore, coming out in protest in many places around the country. In recent days, the protest has been very loud as people brought out huge processions in various areas of Dhaka. This crisis seems intractable right now. But, it needs to be addressed to improve the electricity generation and distribution in order to protect the country's economy from collapsing and society from revolting.

Dr. Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad is President, Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA).

percent and about 71 percent, respectively, of land-owning and all household income. In other words, the income disparity seems to have dwindled over time.

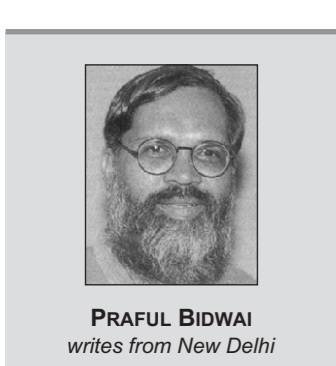
The field level information point to the following policy implications. Although land is an important asset for rural livelihood, in the absence of land we can provide some non-land opportunities for the landless households. First, the tenancy market could be an important source of operated land for those who do not own land. Second, functionally landless households seem to be opting for non-rice crops, and necessary arrangements for good quality seeds, and training on the optimal use of inputs, could also help them.

Third, necessary capital to carry out petty trade and business could help them increase their income from this source. Fourth, provisions for education for these households would help them with human capital formation and, thus, in eking out a respectable share of income from services and remittances.

By and large, the state has a part to play in increasing their access to education, capital, and a good environment for carrying out activities. Let us provide them with a ladder, if not with land.

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## Congress attempts course correction



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

HAS the Congress party emerged stronger or weaker from its Chief Ministers' conclave at Nainital? And is it better prepared for the Assembly elections due in 2007 in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Gujarat, and Jammu & Kashmir?

The honest answer is, the Congress did some uncharacteristic introspection and attempted course correction; this has made it more united, coherent, and confident. But it must do much more if it wants to perform well in next year's elections.

Nainital saw the Congress attempt a measure of co-ordination between its organisational wing and its 14 state gov-

Even in Mumbai, the presumption is that a "foreign agency" (read, Pakistani) was involved because RDX was used -- a material which governments alone possess. This presumption is utterly, dangerously, false. RDX is regularly smuggled through Bangladesh, Burma, Pakistan, and across the two seaboards. Outlook magazine's latest cover story shows that RDX is easily available near the West Bengal border for Rs 80 per gram. Two reporters bought 250 grams of it, without any special introduction, password, or determination of its intended use.

ernments. It also tried to reconcile internal differences on some policy issues.

On organisational matters, party president Sonia Gandhi emphatically and categorically ruled out the appointment of a deputy prime minister. She expressed complete confidence in Dr Manmohan Singh.

She was clearly keen to scotch rumours that Mr Pranab Mukherjee was being considered for the deputy PM post. The rumours' source was none other than Mr Mukherjee himself, who has become super-ambitious even though he has emerged as the Cabinet's number two.

Ms Gandhi's statement was only appropriate given the division of labour between her and Dr Singh. Although there's a

widespread impression that Ms Gandhi stands on Dr Singh's left on policy issues and is more averse to neo-liberal economics and a pro-United States foreign policy, she has decided to be discreet on these differences.

She trusts Dr Singh as a loyal died-in-the-wool bureaucrat who knows how to "work the system," but who is also aware of his limitations as a political leader.

She obviously doesn't share that level of comfort with Mr Mukherjee: he's far more than Machiavellian and cynical than the average Congressman. He's also pro-US and hawkish towards Pakistan.

Ms Gandhi's clarification on the deputy PM issue is an internal matter of the Congress. Of greater public interest was her

questioning of policies: on Special Economic Zones; and pursuit of counter-terrorism at the expense of innocent people. Ms Gandhi initiated a discussion on these, although Dr Singh carried it further on the second.

Ms Gandhi acknowledged India's acute agrarian crisis. She underscored farmers' suicides -- 100,000 over a decade, a number unprecedented anywhere -- as "a challenge to our collective conscience [which] beckon us to immediate action."

The party adopted a paper which recommends a "farmer-friendly" agricultural policy as opposed to the National Democratic Alliance's "corporate-friendly" policy. Even as this was said, 11 farmers killed themselves in Maharashtra's

Vidarbha region. Since Dr Singh's July visit there, a frightening 298 farmers have committed suicide.

The Congress must go further than implement changes likely to be recommended by National Commission on Farmers, including lowering the farm credit interest rate from 7 to 4 percent and promoting crop insurance.

What's essential is land reform, higher public investment, and emphases on dryland-centred low-energy-input farming, and on hardy natural seeds rather than manufactured or genetically manipulated ones like BT cotton.

Implementing this alone can save the Congress from being branded "anti-farmer."

The Congress has wisely decided to go slow on SEZs. Ms Gandhi said: "Prime agriculture land should not be diverted to non-agricultural uses. Farmers must get proper compensation [and] become stakeholders in [SEZs] projects."

Commerce Minister Kamal Nath wrote to the states saying that SEZs should have no more than one-tenth of their area on farmland (although he exempted

single-cropped land from this). Agricultural Minister Sharad Pawar wants farmers to be given 12.5 percent of the land developed by SEZ promoters.

SEZs have become synonymous with a massive land grab and generated huge protests. These threaten to become a mass movement. The UPA must reverse the sanction granted to 181 SEZs.

What the Congress does on the issue of terrorism will have an even greater impact on India. Its leadership has done well to admit that innocent people, especially innocent Muslims, are often harassed for their suspected involvement in terrorist violence -- without evidence.

This admission comes within barely two weeks of Dr Singh's urgent call for "a proactive policy to ensure that a few individual acts do not result in tarnishing the image of an entire community, and remove any feelings of persecution and alienation from the minds of the minorities."

At Nainital, Dr Singh was blunter. He bemoaned the fact that our "law enforcing mechanism... lines up the entire population in a locality for question-

ing." He traced the "communal sensitivities" of the police to the "erroneous linkage -- made by the West -- of treating actions of a few as typical of the community as a whole."

Dr Singh called for more minority representation in police and intelligence agencies: "We can at least try and re-deploy capable officers of minority communities to sensitive areas in large numbers."

This reform is long overdue. The Mumbai and Malegaon attacks underscore its urgency. The police rounded up scores of Muslims in both, although Muslims were the terrorists' sole target in Malegaon.

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gram. Two reporters bought 250 grams of it, without any special introduction, password, or determination of its intended use.

We must own up to an unpleasant truth. There are enough grievances in India, which, deplorably, provoke extremism. The Indian state has aggravated many grievances through its prejudiced or communal behaviour.

The "Western" framework that Dr Singh criticised views terrorism as "Islamic" and advocates an Islamophobic approach to counter it. This framework worsens the problem. It'll make our citizens more insecure.

The existing approach will further communalise security and police agencies and accelerate the cycle of violence and counter-violence. The Congress must discard the approach -- as quickly as it revised the SEZ policy.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.