## The caretaker government in an apprehensive polity



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Y all accounts and taking into view the highly charged circumstances of the immediate past week along with the socio-political developments of the last five years, it would appear that the present caretaker government has to act very cautiously and has to do lot of tightrope walking to ward off justifiable apprehensions about its efficacy and impartial conduct. While one may feel assured about the wisdom and administrative acumen of some distinguished members of the council of advisers, there is already a visible indication of the tactlessness and intemperate comment of one senior adviser.

According to 'The Daily Star' report this adviser came down heavily on some political parties for setting a deadline for the advisers to prove their neutrality and keeping their activities under watch. One would not be wrong to say that this adviser has perhaps forgotten that he is no longer positioned in a sacrosanct pedestal and that his present assignment is of a predomSTRAIGHT LINE

We have to reconcile with the reality that the caretaker system is a scathing indictment on the unreliability of our political classes and the responsibility, it appears, now devolves on the much-maligned bureaucracy to lift the nation out of the all-encompassing morass. Morbidity and mordant behaviour will only paralyse the nation. Therefore, our conscientious mandarins, of the present and the yesteryears, howsoever small they may be in numbers, in their responsibilities as appointed representatives of our society need to rise to the occasion and sustain our fledgling

inantly executive nature and thus subjected to full public comments and criticisms. Interestingly, this gentleman is perhaps oblivious of the fact that the 14-party combine has publicly stated that hey would watch the activities of the President-cum-chief adviser to be sure of the latter's neutrality and that the President's office did not take any adverse note of the apparently unpalatable comment.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that all around we are witnessing a comical situation of a disturbing nature. The outgoing Prime Minister in her last public speech undiplomatically cautioned her adversaries that they would have to abide by the President's directives as she and her party stand ready to do so. The suspicion is, did the former Prime Minister have a foreknowledge that the President was set to assume charges of the office of the Chief Adviser in addition to his own onerous assignment under the Caretaker dispensation? The BNP secretary general has already

certified to the efficiency and neutrality of the council of advisers and has advised everybody to render assistance to them even before the latter body has started to work. Is it because his adversaries want to watch the activities of the council and would not give a clean chit as of now? So, the scenario is that while one side of the political divide testifies to the acceptability of the council of advisers, the other side would like to reserve its judgment.

Another dimension of the amusing scenario surrounding the formation of the council of advisers is the appointment of three distinguished women. The cynics say that, this is a giant leap forward for the women's lib in this country. The innuendo and sarcasm apart, the guestion is what purpose would be served by such apparently progressive steps towards women's empowerment? A credible suspicion is that this has been done to forestall the induction of people who have the reputation of being administratively efficient and tough-talking. Readers may recollect the demonstration of a women's activist group in front of Bangobhavan clamouring for onethird portfolios in the council of advisers hours before the swearing in ceremony. One would surely appreciate the admirable gender sensitivity and equal opportunity employer credentials of Bangabhayan, Our future political masters would definitely feel encouraged to take a cue from such bold venture.

The above discussion brings us to the core question of the functions of non-party caretaker government. Article 58D of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh reads.

"(1) The non-party caretaker Government shall discharge its functions as an interim government and shall carry on the routine functions of such government with the aid and assistance of persons in the services of the Republic; and except in the case of necessity for the discharge of such functions it shall not make any policy decision.

(2) The non-party caretaker

Government shall give to the Election Commission all possible aid and assistance that may be required for holding the general election of members of Parliament peacefully, fairly and impartially."

From the above, it follows that

the caretaker government enjoying a 90 days lease has a very limited function relating principally to the holding of a peaceful, fair and impartial election. Venturing into the specifics of election related management where the preeminence of peace, fairness and impartiality has been constitutionally emphasised, it is only natural that the regulatory outfit of law enforcement including the armed forces personnel, the general administration including the subordinate magistracy and part of the substantive judiciary are the focussed group in the business of conducting the national polls. Admittedly, others are in a supportive role. Therefore, much need not be read into the allocation of portfolios of the advisers

Professor lajuddin will hold the

Chief Adviser's office, Armed Forces Division, Cabinet Division, Election Commission Secretariat NGO Affairs Bureau, Defence Ministry, Establishment Ministry, Bangladesh Public Service Commission and Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Education. Going by the book, it would appear that the Presidentcum-Chief Adviser is the allpowerful person insofar as the substantive function of the conduction of national election is concerned. Practically speaking, he has to largely depend upon the services of the Republic, meaning the Secretaries of important ministries under him who in turn would be guided by some advisers.

Coming to the specifics, the matters relating to postings and transfers of key executive and field personnel of the enforcement apparatus, the district level officers who would act as returning officers amongst others, the maintenance of law and order specially involving recovery of unauthorised firearms and preventive arrests of troublemakers would be done through committees headed by specific advisers. It would be interestingly relevant to see how such committees are formed and how they function.

The enormity and complexity of the job of the present council of advisers could hardly be overemphasised. In fact, Major General (Retd) Moinul Hossain Choudhury, former adviser, has already commented upon the improper modality of selection of advisers. Much, however, would depend upon the actual performance of the council of advisers as very admirably and

forthrightly pointed out by Lt. General (Retd) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury in his first reaction to waiting newsmen after the swear ing-in ceremony.

Acting forthrightly without fear or favour, however, would be an uphill task in our perilously polarised polity. A cursory look at the 11-point demand made by the 14-party combine would bear testimony to that. Even partial fulfilment of those demands is likely to cause acrimonious deliberations. Matters relating to the correction of voters list as directed by the apex Court and the reconstitution of the Election Commission are very substantive matters which, if left unresolved could invalidate the entire process of election. Utterances in supposedly responsible quarters do not raise much hope about a tolerably amicable solution. Fears are compounded as buffoonery in high positions is not condemned and cranky behaviour not subjected to appropriate chastisement

Article 58B clause(2) of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh says "The Non-party caretaker Government shall be collectively responsible to the President".

Clause (3) of the same article says "The executive power of the Republic shall, subject to the provisions of article 58D(1), in accordance with this constitution, by or on the authority of the Chief Adviser and shall be exercised by him in accordance with the advice of the Non-Party Caretaker Government"

From the above, it would appear

that our President is now perhaps uncomfortably wearing two hats. He is head of the government and head of the State. He is the functioning executive and also the superintending authority. In other words, he is answerable to himself only, a not very tenable position from the point of view of the conduction of State affairs. How we landed in this rigmarole may not be satisfactorily explained but as of now it is a fact that the nation has to live with. Concerned observers agree that the assumption of the office of Chief Adviser by the President may not strictly be illegal but is definitely an irregular feat in the face of objective situation. In such a process, there are chances of stumbling as few necessary steps have not been taken before resorting to ultimate action. The future course of events will testify to the veracity of such a premonition.

We have to reconcile with the reality that the caretaker system is a scathing indictment on the unreliability of our political classes and the responsibility, it appears, now devolves on the much-maligned bureaucracy to lift the nation out of the all-encompassing morass Morbidity and mordant behaviour will only paralyse the nation Therefore, our conscientious mandarins, of the present and the vestervears, howsoever small they may be in numbers, in their responsibilities as appointed representatives of our society need to rise to the occasion and sustain our fledgling democracy.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary

## Voting with their feet

Why is it that we insist on employing children in the first place? Even if their impoverished families see a short-term gain in their meagre salary, the long-term advantages of education would outweigh these pittances hugely. Is it just that we as employers want cheap labour? Or have we simply failed to grasp yet what it really means to talk of children's rights?

**ANDREW MORRIS** 

OWERFUL things, words. They have the potential to create beauty, to inspire, to liberate and to conjure up lasting monuments to the best that humans can achieve. They can also start wars, offend whole cultures, curse individuals and destroy confidence. In both cases words have energy, strength and vitality. They can be savoured, attacked, defended and justified.

But what happens when words are simply ignored? Here are some particularly splendid and, in our context, spectacularly well-ignored words. Take a look for vourself Admire their strength. Be stirred and impressed by them:

"[Every] child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding...The child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.'

Recognize these? Perhaps you immediately realized that they are from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. And when, motivated by the uplifting preamble,

you look a little further into the depths of this fine declaration you find the following

Article 19: States parties shall take all appropriate legislative. administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who as the care of the child.

Article 28: States parties recognize the right of the child to educa-

Article 29: States parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their ullest potential Article 31: States parties recog-

nize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the

Article 32: States parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Now, having applauded their muscularity and clarity, and having felt a warm glow that Bangladesh was an early signatory to the convention, ask yourself one simple question. When it comes to the children working as domestic servants in so many houses here, where on earth did it all go wrong? The value the convention places on welfare, and on the right of children to fulfil their physical, mental and spiritual potential, to rest and to play are undermined in virtually every house where children are employed. And in the worst cases. the right to basic freedom from exploitation and safety from harm -rights we would all of course protect blithely disregarded.

Many people in Bangladesh are familiar with the shocking case of Madhabi, aged 10, who was allegedly thrown from a 6th floor window in Dhanmondi, but survived, albeit seriously injured and traumatised, to tell the tale (Daily Star. September 1). Responses to the event from renowned human rights groups such as Drishtipat. and the public at large, were justifiably outraged. Madhabi's story is still unfolding. But before comfortably assuring ourselves that our own treatment of the children who work for us is a far cry from this. let's consider the less sensational stories: the banal, mundane tales that could be playing out, for exam-

ple, in our own homes.

Recently I visited the house of a good friend and colleague. We sat and talked, ate mishti, tucked into a hearty meal, and enjoyed the kind of occasion I've come to appreciate in Bangladesh: companionable relaxing, with no need for distraction apart from simple warmth and interaction. As we ate, food was brought and cleared away by a girl -- let's call her Ritu -- who was probably 12 or 13 (when asked, she couldn't say). Each time she approached the table she flashed us a delightful smile. At first she appeared reasonably contented, but even so I couldn't help thinking straight away -- especially as my friend works in the field of education -- that this child should plainly have been in school.

To be fair, the family in this case seemed to treat Ritu with genuine kindness, compared with the behaviour I have noticed and heard about in other houses. When my host spoke to her, she did so in a soft voice, often touching her arm.

Perhaps this was in recognition of the fact that it had taken them six months to find Ritu, after a long gap without anyone to help. But here too. beneath the benign surface, things were not what they seemed.

Ritu had already, two months into her new "job," declared her intention to leave. The family seemed bewildered. "We simply don't understand her mentality. We pay her 600 taka (£5) a month, we give her food and we bought her new clothes for Eid, and this is how she repays us. Back in the village of course she'll get nothing." This communication gap is in itself striking: the chasm between the classes here is much greater than it is in the West nowadays.

"Could it be," I wondered aloud, anything to do with the fact that she's locked in the flat all day?" "We have to lock her up," they protested, "Otherwise she will wander out and meet boys or get into trouble. Already whenever she gets a chance, she goes on to the roof and looks down at the street." Clearly fresh air is something from which this adolescent girl needs the Quite obviously she doesn't know what is best for her, and it's up to her employers to make those decisions on her behalf. In their innocence the family, like many well-to-do families who employ children, remain convinced they are doing Ritu a favour. Ritu, on the other hand, begs to differ: she knows who is benefiting more from this unequal relation-

Why is it that we insist on employing children in the first place? Even if their impoverished families see a short-term gain in their meagre salary, the long-term advantages of education would outweigh these pittances hugely. Is it just that we as employers want cheap labour? Or have we simply failed to grasp yet what it really means to talk of children's rights?

As we talked into the evening, Ritu sat on the floor in the hallway, making shy eye contact with us, aware that she was being talked about. What struck me above all was that this growing kid was probably bored out of her mind, lonely, without any playmates, and no doubt thoroughly depressed by the prospect of endless months of solitary servitude, and a dawn-tobedtime life of uninspiring chores, for which a few kind words and the occasional new salwar kameez are scant compensation.

Kids like Ritu are voting with their feet. Even though she may have little alternative source of income, and is unlikely to seek out a school for herself, she has taken one look at the conditions of service even in a relatively enlightened family and decided that it's not for her. And personally, I can only admire this decision. Good for her, deciding that there is more to life than this. And she is of course not the only one. Lower-middle-class families are

facing a new domestic crisis here. More and more girls are leaving for the garment factories (where conditions are hardly enlightened but there is at least a basic sense of autonomy). My friend's family will now be plunged back into a long search for a replace-



ment. However, as long as they offer the same conditions, I suspect their search will be fruitless

Perhaps this is an opportune moment then to recognize that the convention Bangladesh signed up to was designed to have real teeth, and that it is simply unacceptable to employ children domestically in this way. Other countries, not too far from here, have realised this and already enshrined it in law

Of course we often need help in the home -- life here is demanding and bringing in domestic help allows middle-class women, for example, far more prospects of their own in the workplace. But why not employ adults? There are plenty of women from poor or rural backgrounds who would be interested in augmenting their salary, although clearly not if that salary leaves them a long way short of the accepted poverty line of one dollar

a day. Surely it is time to recognize that this kind of intensive work deserves adequate compensation. It seems that the people who have been silently working for us for so long have already reached that conclusion without our help.

We should also maybe acknowledge that, even when we look instead to grown-ups, the automatic deference to authority, which has long characterised this society, is in decline, as it is elsewhere in the world. Workers in general are becoming increasingly aware of their rights, and just as importantly, their financial demands and their collective power. In the 21st century we need to re-engage with the working poor on terms which allow us to talk adult to adult, and employer to employee, rather than master to

Andrew Morris is a teacher and teacher trainer.

## Population: Where is it heading to?

A great deal of population momentum is coming from the low income families, such as poor, ultra poor and other lower income groups who together comprise 50 percent of the society. They are the ones who have very little access to education beyond primary, health care services and other benefits which government and society usually offer to the individuals. So if the goal of replacement level fertility is to be achieved any time in the next decade, our policies, programmes and resources should be directed towards them.

DR M A MABUD

HAT is the most pressing problem in Bangladesh today? The answer, unhesitatingly given in one breath is: political unrest, corruption and violence. When the same question was asked in the preceding three decades, the answer generally given was rapid rise in population. Bold demographers will say that in a country like Bangladesh where 144 million people are squeezed in an area of 55590 square miles, and about 2.2 million are increasing per year aggravating further the already deteriorating land-man ratio, unemployment problem, and overall environment of the country is still the most pressing problem which cannot be overshadowed simply by political unrest, corruption and violence; rather they may view that these are the consequential evils of the overgrowing population pres-

Bangladesh may not be very important in the global arena, but it has a large population making it world's seventh largest country ahead of Russia which has 143 million people only. A review in retrospect reveals that the area now comprising Bangladesh had only 18.2 million people in 1872. The rate of population increase was then very

trivial -- number of births was close to the number of deaths and resultant increase of population was less than one percent. Even in 1901, population census could report only 21.2 million people. Malaria, plague, typhoid, small pox and other deadly diseases took some 40/42 lives per 1000 population per annum. Thus in the next four decades, i.e. until 1941, population could grow up to 3.4 million. Up to 1960, the population growth rate sharply increased to 2.1 percent and the human number was estimated to be 54 million. Over the following next decade and a half, growth rate was hovering around 2.5 to 3.0 percent. In 1991, this population became more than double. Such a phenomenal increase in a span of 30 years was unprecedented. Analysts attributed to this growth two factors, namely high birth rate and declining death rate with resultant increase in high growth rate. This growth trend continued until 1980 and then started slowly falling down to the present level of 1.6 percent. Death matters no less than birth -

- indeed more, to demographers. As public health measures are likely to further improve, deaths decline particularly among the infants and thus, more babies will live to grow up. So a country's population becomes more youthful as in the case now in Bangladesh where 40 percent people are under 15 years

of age. More young adults mean more births. Birth rate may decline further through programmatic means reinforced by non-family planning measures like female education, micro credit facilities for women, skill training, use of media etc. All these measures will eventually help create a conducive environment to reduce birth and death rates leading to population stabilisation. But when? In seeking answer to this question, this writer offers a range of projections, hereinafter, called variants. Variant i assumes replacement level fertility (i.e. just over 2 children) in 2012 variant ii and variant iii assume the same fertility level in 2016 and 2021 respectively. Discussion that follows will mainly concentrate on medium variant projection to illustrate the future population prospects, timing of population stabilisation and changes in various demographic parameters in the next 100 years.

Demographic prospects

Acountry's growth potentials is built in the age structure of its population. Already stated that in Bangladesh, population below 15 years is about 40 percent and that women in reproductive age (15-49) are about 41 percent of total female population -- both are indications of future population growth potentials. Notwithstanding an elaborate and modestly persua-

sive family planning programme, fertility reduction to replacement level may be difficult to achieve by 2012 unless far more vigorous efforts are made at the grassroots level by the health and family planning workforce; and also, dysfunctionality that currently prevails in large chunk of underserved areas is removed. Assuming that public and private sectors efforts in this respect shall continue and that public health measures will augment considerably to thwart the menace of deadly deceases, Bangladesh is quite likely to achieve its demographic goal of NRR=1 by 2016. If the current pace of progress continues, life expectancy at birth is likely to increase anywhere between 68-70 years. As a result, age structural shift will occur in favour of higher age groups. The medium variant projection

that assumes NRR=1 by 2016 and life expectancy at birth of 70 years by then, shows Bangladesh's population will increase up to 175.2 million in 2021 and 233.4 million in 2051 which means 63.0 percent increase of present population. Population growth rate will be reduced to 0.56 percent in 2051. The implications of this projection are: the size of the population below 15 years shall be 49 million against 52.4 in 2001. The size of the school age population in absolute number shall decrease up to 32.4 million against 34.2 million in 2001; while the working age population (15-64 years) will increase up to 155 million (as against 85 million now), aggravating further the strained abour market: and number of elderly population (i.e. 65 year+) shall be 29.8 million (as against 5.8 million now requiring old age supports and medical care from which no responsible government can get away. The other obvious implications include: population density of 4157 persons per square mile as against the present density of 2591 persons. The existing man-land ratio of 1:14 decimals shall be reduced to a half. Because per capita availability of arable land will be reduced, per person food production will be reduced too. Thus, one may go on relating this growing population to any social and economic objects, but that will give simply a bleak scenario which will make one instantly feel bad about having too many people in too little space. Analysts have already estimated that Bangladesh is the world's seventh populous country comprising only 3000th part of its land

Momentum and stabilisation

Population growth momentum has already started; and a wave of various kinds of pressures has already been generated and the people have started feeling the pinch of it. So, population will go on rising even if Bangladesh achieves the replacement level fertility. The timing of population stabilisation depends on the time when replacement level fertility is achieved. In our present case, if Bangladesh can achieve NRR=1 by 2016, population will stabilise by 2070, followed by a

stationary population in next 12-15

years (i.e. number of births will be equal to number of deaths and resultant growth rate is zero). In medium variant projection, status of stationary population in Bangladesh is likely to be achieved around 2086 and thereafter, number of deaths will exceed number of births i.e. minus growth rate will begin which will eventually decelerate the country's population as is the case with Russia, Japan and some of the European countries now. The deceleration process (i.e. minus-growth rate) in Bangladesh shall start according variant-ii by 2097, and by this time, population shall have grown up to 250 million.

A great deal of population momentum is coming from the low income families, such as poor, ultra poor and other lower income groups who together comprise 50 percent of the society. These are the people among whom infant mortality and maternal mortality rates are the highest. Total fertility rate is twice as much of the upper middle and high income groups. They are the ones who have very little access to education beyond primary, health care services and other benefits which government and society usually offer to the individuals. So if the goal of replacement level fertility is to be achieved any time in the next decade, our policies, programmes and resources should be directed towards them.

There are, however, some grounds for optimism. A large number of women want children fewer than ever and the younger the women, the fewer they want. The recent surveys of married women reveal that there is a considerable unmet demand. Meeting this demand is not restricted to modern

methods of contraception; even traditional methods help plan family size as in some countries. But for this to happen, education, use of media, arousing people's consciousness and democratisation of social and political institutions at all levels to allow the hitherto neglected people to participate and involve themselves in all kinds of state sponsored development works are essential. If we can create an

sation may be advanced a few years Dr M A Mabud, a social scientist and

enabling environment through such

processes and other civilized

means, demographic momentum

effect can be significantly reduced

and the timing for population stabili-

demographer is professor of Public Health at North South University, Dhaka,

