

Riding popular choice to personal ends

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SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE outgoing prime minister said in her farewell address that our per-capita income has increased from \$440 to \$480. I regret to say that there is little comfort in it. The bewildering price hike has increased the load on the common man so much that he cannot take pleasure in it.

As a matter of record, Bangladesh is ahead of Nepal whose per capita income in 2004 was \$260. In spite of the low per-capita income, general elections in Bangladesh are expensive exercises. Our electoral law has set a ceiling of Tk 5 lakhs on the electoral expenditure of a candidate. It is good that electoral posters are printed in black and white, but it will be preposterous to believe that the electoral expenses of the candidates remain within the ceiling.

The general tendency of inducing leading industrialists and businessmen of the country into political parties indirectly reflects the need of massive funding for the galloping

electoral expenses. There are instances where a sitting member of parliament and a youth front leader had to make way for a leading industrialist. The youth front leader was however conciliated by being inducted as an adviser with the status of a state minister.

Similarly, a former speaker of the parliament had to make way for a business tycoon for a seat in a southern city. The honourable speaker was sent on overseas duty to pay respects to the British queen as our high commissioner, and in his place the business tycoon member of parliament became a cricket baron.

In another example, a former student leader from the medical community withdrew his candidature in the south-western part of the city to make way for a disgruntled aspirant, a fearsome don in his own area, of the other major party.

I believe these examples will suffice. The point I am trying to make is that the political parties need money because they are drifting toward the policy of spending their way to power. There is no

harm in political parties collecting contributions. It is an established practice in America, and in western democracies. The only difference is that it is strictly audited, while financial contributions to our political parties are cloaked in divine immunity. The noticeable development in this regard is that our watchdog institution has undergone a ceremonious change of name, from Bureau of Anti-Corruption to Anti-Corruption Council. Unfortunately, the change has robbed the institution of initiative, and it is believed to be in a stupor.

In the absence of transparency it is almost impossible to vouchsafe about the honesty of financial practices inside political parties, and in the conduct of holders of public office. It will be indecent to make any categorical statement in such a void. We understand from what we have seen, and what we see, that politics, to our misfortune, is adding to the common man's load.

Representative politics in Bangladesh is increasingly becoming a means to an end. It is sought

to a greater degree for acquiring the clout that comes with public office. The clout feeds unleashed ambition, passion for self-promotion, and greed for the acquisition of wealth, and for the fulfillment of pleasures and fond wishes. In common parlance, we call this power. Such is the venality that duty, honour, and oath are forgotten.

To a lesser, or a greater degree, it is endemic in developing economies. The resulting cost for Bangladesh is a telling burden because of its large population and limited resources. Indeed, there are shining examples that stand out for selfless service and upright sense of duty and honour. It is, however, a fact that the dignity of public office is under threat of declining credibility. More and more it is seen as a stepping-stone to greater gain, a mantle of "touch me not," a privilege of immunity and a useful shield and armour that endows a person with a hallowed and impregnable public profile.

The outgoing communication minister came out with a clean bill in his first term during 1991-1996 as the information minister. This cannot be said of his term as the communication minister. The CNG three-wheeler racket has tainted his reputation. It was, perhaps, the most talked about racket of the outgoing government, where a CNG three-wheeler was sold for

even up to Tk 4 lakhs in place of the official price of Tk 1.5 lakhs. His detractors try to find a reason for the racket in his thin margin of victory, by 3,000 votes, in the last general election against another business tycoon.

The principal culprit behind the erosion of the prestige of public office at all levels is the flaunting of riches incompatible with the official and valid income. It is further exposed by the flagrant discrepancy in living standards and personal belongings before, and after, the assumption of office. For a quite long time there has been a marked tendency for raising the perks and privileges of the holders of public office, and public representatives. The nature of the demands, and their gratification, betrayed an immoderate love for material gain. Duty free importation of luxurious cars, and the allotment of NAM flats, were hefty benefits that may lead one to think that our public representatives have become sultans of public choice.

The allegations of corruption against public office holders, and public representatives, of the last regime thrived vigorously in the face of the imperturbable stand of the alleged wrongdoers. It is, in a way, a loss for the nation. The image of public office is going downhill. Our age-old values of modest living, and the cultivation of ennobling ideals that make a model

person, are losing ground, and, at the worst, have become a matter of derision.

Corruption is an age-old presence in human society. It draws sustenance from the fragility of human nature. It does not, however, justify a decline in our moral vigilance against it. Otherwise, the moral quality of life and living will suffer, to the detriment of human society in any part of the world. Most of all, no decent society can allow corruption to strut around to snub the hopes and beliefs of ordinary citizens.

It is a fact that the common man, disappointed about alleged corruption, looks on governance with declining faith. There is a general perception that the degree of use, or to say, misuse, of public office at the highest level for personal ends during the outgoing government was of considerable nature. I had heard of corruption in public office when I was growing up, and there was corruption after the birth of Bangladesh, but this time the level of corruption is alleged to be as big as the mandate the government got.

I remember a time when representative office in the provincial town of Dhaka was a contest between the candidates already enjoying a public profile. The last such instance was when the municipal election was held in 1957. In our area of Dhaka, Khan Saheb

Abul Hasnat, a formidable personality of the town, was fighting his last electoral battle against advocate Badruddin Ahmed of 37 Becharam Dewry. Dr Shahidullah's left leaning ideologue son, Taquiullah, was also in the fray for the post of commissioner of a ward. It was a stiffly fought battle and the old guard won, and there was a fine example of exchange of courtesies between the candidates.

I grieve the loss of those times, and the stature of the candidates. The contest has become so banal. As I have learnt, the deals are done in a desperate manner -- favours are given in exchange for money, in sack-loads or safely stashed away in Singapore, leases are given that lead to ownership, even approving nods do the work, verbal blessings are given for the collection of tributes (extortion money), and areas are earmarked for collection of booty, etc.

In the past, hardworking sons of the soil like Zahurul Islam used to compete against non-locals in medium scale construction business. Now, marauding roughnecks, under the shelter of public representatives, prowl the entire range of business, medium range construction, tender bids, river, wet and public land grabbing, collecting extortion money from kitchen markets, bus, truck and river terminals, grabbing minority and abandoned properties, and collecting

extortion money from sale of land or properties, and, yes, the cattle market.

I lament when I see what has happened to the good name of public office. Transparency International has thrice put Bangladesh at the top most corrupt country list. There are, indeed, more corrupt countries than Bangladesh, as has been shown by this year's list. But the fact remains, we are a corrupt country of 140 million struggling people.

The wetland behind Pan Pacific Sonargaon was slumbering. Suddenly the area has come alive. A sleek, glass cased, BGMEA building has come up. A gas station is there. It is like finding gold in the Black River of California during the gold rush. Dig, and you will find the lucky ones that struck gold. These are the perils when public office is used for personal ends. We hope our new set of leaders will correct the course. But that will not be enough. A new journey has to begin.

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Social repair in Bangladesh

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE end of the tenure of the BNP-led alliance government and the transition to a caretaker government in preparation for the parliamentary elections has not been smooth. Although one may be relieved that a doom's day scenario of mayhem has been averted, at least, temporarily, the crisis is far from over.

In the words of Maj Gen (Rtd) Moinal Hossain Chowdhury, there has been a unilateral ceasefire. The situation is still tenuous and potential for instability looms. No matter what the odds are, it is time for introspection and to take a hard look at the possibility of social repair which entails both a civil and political repair.

Political crisis in Bangladesh today is the surface reality, underneath there is a deeper social collapse. The whole nation is fractured and the social collapse has been unraveling over a period of time. National election is important but more so is to create a political framework that will survive not only this election but many more in the future.

Thinking people -- which fortunately, Bangladesh has plenty of -- should sit down and reflect to salvage this great nation. By social repair I mean finding a way to solve the confrontational stalemate in the short run and paving the way for a durable political cultural frame within which disagreements between political parties can be

resolved in a peaceful and civil manner. A cool-headed, reasoned approach is necessary to resolve the problems now and prevent the recurrence of such crises in the future. A diagnosis of the deeper problems in our society is a prerequisite.

There has been a steady erosion of a number of social values in Bangladesh, the most important of which is a decline in respect. Both respect for oneself, i.e. self-respect, and respect for others have reached a low point. Respect for others entail both people and institutions such as the constitution, the rule of law, and finally the truth. Respect is one of the bases of civility. And without respect for truth a reasoned discussion is simply not possible.

At the personal level, lack of self-respect is often one of the causes of corruption. A respectable person will avoid being tainted as corrupt and dishonest. He or she will remain honest and shun corruption out of respect for one's own reputation and dignity. Failure to respect others is a source of fragile solidarity. These two failings: decline in self-respect and failure to respect others are related.

Some people, categories of people, and institutions have lost respect because of their conduct. For example, how can a corrupt minister command respect from others? He may be feared for his power which he usually mistakes as respect. The police force is not known for commanding excessive

respect. Judges, once the paradigm of social respect, are not so any more; a few bad apples by taking bribes or doctoring diplomas have tarnished the reputation of a whole group that includes some fine and upright men and women.

Politicians who show no respect for facts and truth not only cause irreconcilable differences between political parties and undermine a nation's history which is a treasure for the entire population and the future generations. In the long run, paying no regard for truth damages human community by undermining some of the fundamental values on which civilization stands.

One of the reasons we are in the present mess is because some of our leaders failed to respect the constitutional provision of a neutral, caretaker government by trying to undermine the value of neutrality and then to do the "legal," but not the legitimate, maneuvering of trying to make a partisan judge the chief of the caretaker government.

Such an attempt -- though now foiled -- should be condemned as a blatant attack on the spirit of the constitution. What is regrettable is that those who were supposed to protect the rule of law found ways to and tried to abuse the same law. It is regrettable that tens of thousands of people had to agitate with sticks and oars to foil the design. The extreme situation could be avoided had there been the right atmosphere for a resolution of disagreement through dialogue.

One of the main failings of the

recent governments has been to institutionalize the rule of law which is predicated on the independence of judiciary. The lack of respect for law has been so pervasive that every time a law is enacted, the next moment people sit down to find ways of bypassing, thus undermining, the law.

We love Bangladesh and fail to respect the leaders who collectively sacrificed for the independence of this nation. The trial of the murderers of the leaders remains incomplete, because the idea of justice is not fully respected.

A political crisis in Thailand was averted because of the respect the Thai people have for their king. In Bangladesh, we do not have any group of people who we respect collectively. Upon her return to office, when Prime Minister Khaleida Zia replaced the portraits of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, with her own, she traded respect for history for megalomania.

We talk about respecting constitution but disrespect the framers of the constitution many of whom are still alive. Have we lost all self-respecting people? No. Col (Rtd) Oli Ahmed of LDP, Mr GM Quader of JP are there, just to name a few.

A good starting point in this process of social repair is to respect men and women of integrity and to reject those who lack it. Sacrificing basic values for political expediency will make our society irreparable.

The author is a sociologist.

13 and 300

NADER RAHMAN

MOST of us simply look at China in awe; we view it from afar as an economic superstar without rival, but the real question is how did a country that The Economist once said would amount to nothing more than the world's largest mushroom grower transform its self into an economy without rival.

Leaving out libraries of information as abundant as their population, the simple answer is "export." And sometime in early November, that one word along with its accomplices "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)," "cheap labour," and "potential growth" will be lined up as the prime suspects in the greatest heist of all time, one trillion dollars.

Although there will be no official figures till January, at the end of September China's foreign exchange reserves stood at \$987.9 billion; with an average increase of about \$18.7 billion a month, the magic figure of one trillion dollars must already have been reached. Just to put that into perspective, one trillion dollars is about enough money to buy the real estate of London, all of it. With that money China can buy up the world's gold reserves, twice over. With such a gargantuan amount of money the most important question is: what's next?

This is where it all becomes a little tricky, to the layman increasing foreign exchange reserves is never viewed negatively, but for China their reserves have reached

almost unmanageable levels. Their foreign exchange reserves are built on the US dollar and approximately \$200 billion in US Treasury Bonds; there is a hypothetical possibility that if they decide to liquidate their assets, and invest in other currencies and strategic materials for sustained economic growth that the US dollar may collapse.

Needless to say, that would be the financial end of the world, but while that may be highly improbable it is far more likely that in an effort to reduce their foreign exchange reserves or merely to branch out of the nest that they have made from dollars, China could take up the stockpiling of crude oil. Some economists say that could create another global problem altogether.

Another short term release to the problem of rapidly raising foreign reserves (one wonders where that will be heard again) is to increase imports. For China that option has a number of benefits, aside from keeping its reserves in check it will lessen the trade friction with some countries that have accumulated huge trade deficits with China. The perfect opportunity to enact such measures could have been their recent trade talks with Africa, yet exactly how much Africa can help ease the burden of a few hundred billion dollars from China is also a matter to be looked into.

For a nation as economically powerful as China they have few friends when it comes to the terms

of trade, their exports have flooded markets around the world, and with astronomically low prices they have almost become public enemy number one. A couple of hundred billion dollars worth of imports spread out over a few years would not only boost their relations with other countries but would also keep those pesky dollars out of their country.

China is not the only country dealing with rapidly raising numbers; recently America's population reached the 300 million mark with muted celebration. In November 1967 America hit the landmark of 200 million, Robert Ken Woo was judged to have been the so called Mr 200 million. It is ironic that a child of immigrant parents turned out to be the poster boy of middle America. In actuality all he did was pave the way for the future of American population growth, which now 39 years later is identified by the massive increase of immigrants (both legal and illegal) and their children.

The US census bureau calculates that one American is born every seven seconds, one dies every 13 seconds, and an immigrant arrives (net) every 31 seconds. Add those together and you get a net population gain of one person every 11 seconds. All this has led to massive shifts in composition of the average American household and thereby changing spending patterns, the patterns may have changed but the spending is still raising.

The United States amounts to

about 5% of the world's population yet it consumes about 25% of the world's energy, if it were for this aspect alone the increasing population would be a worry not only to America but the entire world. But in America all the attention of this landmark is fixed entirely on its immigration policy and the Hispanic population. By 2050 the non-Hispanic whites would have been whittled down to 50% of the population while the Hispanics would have doubled their numbers to about 24%. These major changes will affect the United States on a number of different levels, politically and socially.

The two most important economies in the world would have reached significant figures recently, but like the old saying goes statistics hide more than they reveal. For America it is more than likely that the 300 millionth American will not be born in a hospital to white parents but will illegally scurry across the border from Mexico.

It has become a nation propelled by the immigrants dream, through their dreams and sheer numbers the economy will remain upbeat, after all the consumption keeps rising.

For China they will have to contend with a 13 digit foreign exchange reserve. It remains to be seen if that number will be as ominous as it sounds. Who knows, one day it may even be known as the lucky 13th.

Nader Rahman writes for the Star Weekend Magazine.

Will the real America please stand up?

GARY KAMIYA

IF the Democrats don't grind the Republicans into the political dust Tuesday, I'm moving to Transylvania. I really don't want to spend my waning years in Karl Rove's remake of "Night of the Living Dead." A doomed member of the reality-based community besieged by hordes of flesh-craving zombies. I'd rather take my chances in the land of Vlad the Impaler.

It may seem harsh to accuse those who plan to vote for the GOP of being uncoordinated, shuffling cannibals who won't stay dead. But it's difficult to come up with any other explanation. Because this election, in the immortal words of Dick "waterboarding in defense of liberty is no vice" Cheney, is a no-brainer.

Let us review our choices. In one corner, we have the worst president in American history, a feckless know-nothing whose resume includes launching a disastrous war for no reason, illegally spying on Americans, trashing the ancient writ of habeas corpus, ignoring the catastrophe of global warming, running up a ruinous national debt, pouring billions into the pockets of the super-rich, severely weakening the military, doing a heck of a job in

New Orleans, and making America more hated abroad than at any other time in its history.

In the other corner ... well, actually, who even cares who's in the other corner? Unless the Democrats were Satan himself and his minions, the choice would be obvious. Come to think of it, even then it'd be an easy call. After all, say what you will about the devil, he knows how to get things done. With Lucifer at the helm, the Brownies, Rummies, Wolfies, Bremers, Tenets, and other colossal Bush administration failures would not be praised, given Presidential Freedom Medals and sent off to head the World Bank. They'd be roasted with jalapeno butter and basted slowly (actually, eternally) on a mesquite grill.

So anything short of a major GOP defeat will raise serious questions not just about the American people's political beliefs but their sentience and even their species. It is true that certain animals have been known to engage in self-destructive behaviour, but a Republican victory in the midterms would go well beyond all previously recorded examples and could force scientists to consider the possibility that many apparent humans in North America are, in reality, disguised ferns or other biological anomalies.

Since that is unlikely, a

Democratic landslide would seem to be all but certain. But there's one little problem: the 2004 election, an event that cast more doubt on the theory of evolution than a million Bible-thumping sermons.

Just two years ago, Americans went dutifully to the polls, closed the curtains, and in the sacred privacy of the booth voted for ... four more years of the same idiot who had already surpassed such luminaries as Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, and Warren G Harding to establish himself as the biggest dodo ever to sit in the Oval Office.

If they did it once, could they do it again? Even though these are the midterms, and Bush is on the ballot only symbolically, the possibility seems insane. But it seemed insane two years ago, too.

It's true that 9/11 was a serious anomaly, a massive thumb on the political scales. The 2004 elections can't be understood without understanding that people do weird things after they've been mugged, especially if they don't know who mugged them. And it's also true that in 2004 Iraq had not yet descended into total hell, and Katrina had not yet swept away the idea that Bush might possess some m i n i m a l c o m p e t e n c e .

Nonetheless, by November 2004, it was amply clear that Bush was an unmitigated disaster. It was already obvious that

Bush's administration had lied its way into Iraq. And the war had turned irrevocably south. The dual uprisings in Najaf and Fallujah had made a mockery of the administration's claims that the insurgents were just a few Baath Party "dead-enders" or foreign jihadis. The appalling Abu Ghraib story had broken. The Middle East was melting down. Osama bin Laden was still at large, and the Taliban were creeping back in Afghanistan.

At home, Bush's invasion of Iraq and the Machiavellian tactics of his political mastermind, Karl Rove, had left the country more bitterly divided than at any time since World War II. Domestic initiatives? Besides huge tax cuts for the rich, an easy-for-Leonardo Medicare reform and some desultory gay-bashing aimed at the GOP's troglodytic base, zilch.

And on the second day of November the American people looked upon what Bush had done, and they said it was good.

Bush's re-election was the most depressing political event in the post-war era. It was close, but that only made it more painful. Most of the people I know still haven't gotten over it. We felt like some perverse deity had switched countries on us when we weren't looking. And we were filled with deep anger not just at Bush but also at those Americans who re-elected him.

are more modest. Now we're simply hoping that those of our fellow citizens who let us down so badly two years ago throw the bums out. That good old American common sense will prevail. In short, that we haven't completely lost it.

This is no time for false optimism. Even if the Democrats clean up, it won't be clear how much the country has really learned about the Bush administration or its ruinous "war on terror." The education of the American people has been more pragmatic than profound; more like a cat burned on a hot stove than a Socratic dialogue. People have not turned against the Iraq war because they have learned about how US Mideast policies feed Arab and Muslim rage, or have come to question the morality of preventive war, or the limits of even America's vast military power. They have turned against it because they know it's not working, and they know they were lied into it.

That's a start, but it's a long way from wisdom. It leaves unexplored the assumptions, and the knee-jerk emotional reactions, that allowed the war to happen. So whether the Democratic Party wins Tuesday or not, its politicians need to begin educating the American people -- and educating itself. America must never again find itself in a situation where a demagogic president,

surrounded by ideological zealots, can use the emotional response to an attack on U.S. soil to push through an unplanned and unjustified war. The Democrats, so intimidated they have not even challenged the very idea of a "war on terror," bear as much blame as the American people do for allowing this to happen, and they have to understand why and make sure it doesn't happen again.

This isn't just about controlling Congress, or eventually winning back the White House. The stakes are much higher. It's about what kind of country we want to be. A country of laws, not men. A country that doesn't spy on its citizens, or create secret prisons, or torture people. A country whose media has the guts to stand up to a mendacious administration even in times of war hysteria. A country that will not allow powerful wrongdoers to hide behind a cloak of secrecy. A country that cares about its poor and its minorities. A country that wants to be a good neighbour to the world, not dominate it. A country that has a soul, not just a flag.

Ere we still that country? Were we ever that country? And can we learn to become it? On Tuesday, we'll get some answers.

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