

Bad for business

Our economic activity or growth must be indifferent of political developments. Political regimes should not be using the power or state institutions for oppressing the opponents, politicization of the civil/military bureaucracy, and taking the leading institutions to the brink of rupture for narrow interest of the regime. It is high time for economics to take the lead over politics.

MAMUN RASHID

THE most important role our constitution delineates for the state is to ensure that its people attain increasingly higher standards of living. A prosperous economy that continues to grow at a sustainable pace is thus an imperative for human development. Despite widespread corruption and unpredictable political scenario, Bangladesh's GDP grew by 6.7 per cent in the last fiscal year. While there might be reservations that this growth has failed to translate into improved levels of living standard for the most backward sections of the populace, the truth of sustained growth over the last decade is nonetheless undeniable.

But the growth trend that could have been furthered this year will surely see a reversal by the time the fiscal ends, mainly due to the political turmoil that has plagued the country in recent months, and particularly since the caretaker government assumed office last month. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report on Bangladesh has already endorsed that political turmoil may cause the economy to lose around 0.2 to 0.5 percent of the possible GDP growth in FY2007. The current stalemate has led to a

complete suspension of ports, transport system, and other commercial activities. Factory workers and employees alike have been forced to stay at home. Consequently, most of the commercial production and trading have become suspended. Stock Exchanges were shut too.

Agitation programs and blockades organized by political parties have brought the entire country to a standstill. Besides the common public and those living from hand to mouth, business and trade has suffered a severe blow. Even according to modest estimates, daily national GDP stands at some Tk 1,150 crore. Businessmen have claimed that each day of suspension results in a loss of about Tk 500 crore. When the World Bank and Asian Development Bank are continuously focusing on increased revenue earnings by the government, informal statistics show that the National Board of Revenue (NBR) loses around Tk 150 crores as customs duty due to the closure of Chittagong, Benapole, Chilmari, and other ports. A continued political crisis would have a crippling effect on the economy, apart from day to day life of the people.

Furthermore, effect of the current political stalemate would

last for several months to come. The unpredictability would not very surprisingly prompt international buyers to cancel their orders and shift elsewhere. Exporters are already facing extra expenditure having to send their consignments by air to avoid failure to meet the targeted shipment schedule. At the other end of the spectrum, prices of essentials, exorbitant as they are, have registered another rise due to the lack of supply or disturbances in supply processes.

Traders and businessmen, as reported in the newspapers, urged the president and chief adviser, to ensure that commercial activity runs smoothly across the country. They asked that the crisis be resolved immediately. The alliance driving the blockade has also agreed that this type of activities do impact life of the people adversely. We acknowledge the democratic right to protest, hold public rallies or bring out processions. Incidentally and ironically, since liberation, most of the legitimate rights of the people in Bangladesh were established through street agitations only. However things have changed as the society has gone through major cultural and educational advancements, and should continue to change with the change of the colour in the sky. The practice

of enforcing countrywide shut-downs by successive opposition parties over the last several years is the most potent in making the lives of the public even more miserable than they already are, and that too in the name of those very people that the parties claim to serve and whose lot these parties should be striving to improve.

It is almost certain that no matter which party or alliance emerges victorious in the next elections, the brunt of the economic meltdown or institutional collapse would have to be shouldered by the general people and future generations. A large portion of those people will also be counting their losses, not in crores of taka, but perhaps in terms of meals they would not have or the number of days they would be made to starve.

We all must acknowledge the democratic right to protest and establish rightful demand of the people. Also, we must admit that the current economic growth has not been equitably distributed. However, we must not forget that creating obstruction in the whole growth generating process will only create barrier in providing improved living standard for all the people of the country.

We have to change the culture whereby it has become almost impossible to protect and establish the rights of the people without street agitation and other form of anarchy. We must develop and strengthen institutions that would be sensitive to the rightful demand of people. If the growth generating process is not protected and encouraged, we would not be able

to generate enough wealth to change the fate of our down-trodden people. Strong institution should be able to guide the state to formulate policies that will ensure equitable distribution of wealth.

We note with concern that neither the government nor the political parties have been sympathetic to the cause of the common people and have merely engaged in what can only be termed as their battle to gain or retain state power. In a democratic process it is not unnatural that political parties will fight for power, but that fight has to happen within the framework of non-violent democratic principles and should not only happen at the cost of the possible future of this country.

Corruption has grasped our country and is estimated to have impacted our economy to lose out 1 to 2 percent of our GDP growth, but conflicting politics and unpredictable political scenario is taking our entire country backward in performance, perceptions, and projections. The most important partners and stakeholders for our growth need to visit us and feel the synergy of growth and speed to go forward.

At present they are not being able to plan a visit, commit themselves to support us, and expect smooth delivery against the commitments. Our hard earned brand image gained over last 35 years of "Despite, we deliver" gets seriously hurt with continuous political uncertainties.

Thailand has rampant corruption, but they decided to attack other important barriers to their growth before addressing corrup-



tion. Same is the case with China, where there are issues with regard to governance and political system, but they decided to attack the trade and financial regime first to pave the way for their growth, like Singapore deciding to fix their port in the fifties. Political corruption is also rampant in Japan and Korea, but by removing the important blockage to economic growth, they have become Asian superpowers, if not the world's.

Sri Lanka is a war-torn country where all planes land at Colombo airport dead in the night or early morning, but we are not concerned with our wives or lady colleagues even visiting Colombo alone. Unfortunately the opposite

is the case with our own motherland or city. We can't even think of our female family member taking a taxicab alone. Perception runs this world, take it or leave it. The perception about Bangladesh is -- uncertain political environment. We need to change that.

Security-wise Philippines is as bad as Bangladesh, if not more, for an expatriate, but look at them, they don't suffer from the problem of being a country or nation with unpredictable political scenario or economy is not impacted for uncertain political developments.

In India, while major political parties significantly differ, they can assemble together within an hour's notice to discuss urgent

national issues. On the other hand, our major parties, despite sharing same political and economic philosophy can't even decide on the colour of the sky outside the window.

Our economic activity or growth must be indifferent of political developments. Political regimes should not be using the power or state institutions for oppressing the opponents, politicization of the civil/military bureaucracy, and taking the leading institutions to the brink of rupture for narrow interest of the regime. It is high time for economics to take the lead over politics.

The writer is a banker.

Wake up, Bangladesh!

Civil society is creating awareness, but many more of us need to get involved. The politicians are the representatives of the people; therefore, accountability to the people comes first. The more the educated, progressive, and enlightened individuals enter this seemingly impenetrable bubble of politics, the better the future for Bangladesh. The opportunity to make this change is at hand, and with a little courage and a lot of conviction, we too can leave a legacy for the next generation to be proud of.

SHABNAM HUQ

BANGLADESH celebrates thirty-five years of independence this year. The first generation that was born in an independent Bangladesh has now come of age. Twenty years ago, we were too immature to understand politics, but we rejoiced with the rest of the nation at the fall of the military dictatorship. In 1991, many of us were not old enough to vote in the first democratic election, but

we stayed awake through the night as the votes were counted.

Over the last three decades we have learnt much from our parents and grand-parents who witnessed partition, liberation, and dictatorship. Sixty years ago our grand-parents gave us our language rights, thirty-five years ago our parents gave us a sovereign nation, thirty years from now, when our children will ask about our contribution towards their future,

how will we respond? How and where do we see Bangladesh in thirty years? The time has come to break out of the "bak shorboshho Bangalee" nature, and strive to give our children a truly democratic nation where the government is for and by the people.

The political situation is teetering at the edge of complete chaos. Rumour mills continue to grind out possible, probable and impossible scenarios. The politicians

threaten, and counter-threaten, of grave consequences. The caretaker government suffers from foot-in-mouth disease, as irresponsible rhetoric and callous actions spawn bigger controversies.

The civil society proposes solutions that fall on deaf ears. And the nation waits as tomorrows become progressively worse. The blame game is contagious. We blame the two parties who continue to vilify each other, we blame the diplomats for their failure to curb our unruly leaders, we blame the police, the administration, the reporters, the Third Force, the neighbouring countries, we blame everyone and everything, yet we do nothing.

Despite our inherent nature to be less generous in our praise than in our criticism, a section of

society does, indeed, appreciate civil society's attempt to find a solution to this quagmire, lauds Prof Yunus for tutoring his A+ student on the ways of leading a caretaker government, and hopes for an enlightened political option.

All this is fine, but is it enough? As politics becomes festered with goons and cronies, those with an ounce of sense shy away from it, voicing concerns at dinner tables and adda sessions among friends and family. But unless we become the change we want to see in Bangladesh, we continue to allow more undesirables to enter into the political arena; the vicious cycle continues.

It is unfortunate that the next generation leaders that have emerged in Bangladesh are far worse than their parents. The myopic vision of these new lead-

ers is astounding, as they expect acceptance and following from a generation that believes in action, vision, and options. It is this lack of a better option that seems to beckon the return of an autocratic regime. This must truly make HM Ershad's day. Our ex-president recently told the media that: "The presidential form of government is the only way to rule Bangladesh." Like our ex-president, I sincerely doubt if the other political parties also comprehend the difference between governance and ruling.

Times are changing. Votes are slowly becoming an individual choice, and are no longer family dictated. Fortunately, the days of blind loyalty are waning as the political leaders continue to trample on the nations aspirations. Individuals in a family of five are more likely, today, to vote for more

than one party. The awareness is growing, and soon this generation will want to know who will represent us in parliament, will this representative have goals and vision or be consumed by self serving deeds? We will want the option of good, better, and best, rather than that of the lesser of two evils.

If we truly want to make the gift of a democratic nation to our children, we must demand change in both the method of politics and the objectives of the politicians. The days of nepotism and auctioning of seats will have to come to an end. Civil society is creating awareness, but many more of us need to get involved. A collective message needs to be sent to all the political parties that, not only do we have the right to cast our own vote, but that it will go to the most deserving candidate, the best man for the job.

While no party or politician can be above criticism, we must also be fair and consistent in our views, but also demand exemplary personal conduct. In turn, the political leaders must change their nature, and become more open and transparent. The politicians are the representatives of the people; therefore, accountability to the people comes first.

The more the educated, progressive, and enlightened individuals enter this seemingly impenetrable bubble of politics, the better the future for Bangladesh. The opportunity to make this change is at hand, and with a little courage and a lot of conviction, we too can leave a legacy for the next generation to be proud of.

Shabnam Huq is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Restore law and order: The first constitutional obligation

The present failure in Bangladesh of secular democracy and of big government is the major cause for the rise of violent religious fundamentalist forces that is either foreign inspired or indigenous. Politicians when in power have wilfully stalled democratic institutions or the fragmentation of centralised power. To enjoy power and privileges that elections bring, our politicians have destroyed democracy, the only strength of Bangladesh, by wilfully unleashing activities that dislocate normal living.

NIZAM AHMAD

IN a country where Rule of Law is noticeably absent, there will always be powerful persons, groups, and organisations above law dominating the affairs of the state on a regular basis.

Leaders of such groups or organisations would want the seaport closed, and behold all activities cease at the port. They dictate closing of roads and markets and their party workers do the extra bit by burning and destroying properties, and causing injuries to many. They, the politicians, but not all politicians, are powerful enough to impose hartal and strikes and halt the activities of the people. They impose their will, their law, by motivating their violent party cadres.

Today we find roads, ports, markets, and all normal activities blocked by the organisational strength and command of the politicians. They may claim their demonstration is peaceful but the country is in deep distress and immensely at unease because of their political stance that they call peaceful.

Democracy equals dictatorship unless upholding the right of the minority. In a democracy, there is no "majority rule" but a "rule of law" that protects, first, the individual irrespective of his/her position, wealth, or religion. Contrarily, the

same political group who dictate the closure of ports and roads stand staunchly against frequent religious minority bashing in Bangladesh, but their perception of protecting minority, unless religious, or the right of an individual, unless belonging to their party, is unpardonably weak, foul, and unfair.

Most of our politicians who are on the streets today are from the old leftist guard. They see themselves as the providers of human rights, shelter, work, and of bringing food to the population instead of establishing democratic institutions whereby the majority of the people, as individuals, could happily, and securely, fend for themselves. To provide the needs of the people, as our Creator fulfils in the Heavens, our politicians seek power hence their open mobilisation of people to en throne them, hopefully, to absolute power.

In any country, there can be political turmoil, or stalemates, but it has to be without strangulating the economy or making life miserable for those not involved in politics -- the majority. Only if our politicians believed in limited governments, in free ports, low taxes, free markets, free media, property rights and personal security, our economy would have remained unaffected but growing as in the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic has no government since June 2006 due to political problems, but its economy seems not only undisturbed but also growing. Cato Institute's Marian Tupy in her article "Who Needs Government?" writes that Czech unemployment fell from 8.8 percent in August 2005 to 7.8 percent in August 2006. According to Marian Tupy, continued economic growth [projected 6 percent] suggests the "investors perceive the Republic as a safe place for their savings ... and that is the vote of confidence in the strength of the Czech institutional framework and the progress that the country has made since the fall of the Berlin Wall."

Czech politicians despite their problem of who or when would they have an elected government has learnt the lesson of keeping politics separated from economy. Pitiably, Bangladeshi politicians adamantly but ignorantly see politics as the country's number one priority and that politics will decide and control the economy. Apart from Karl Marx or World Bank/IMF guidelines when in government, no other author, philosopher, writer, thinker, or studies have influenced, changed, or improved the ideological mindset of our politicians.

The huge economic loss that Bangladesh politics bring is of no concern to our politicians nor is

the blood spilled by the people, neither are they ashamed of corruption allegations. The shutting down of the economy and the port were appropriate and heroic during the Liberation War but for simple reform of the election process, it is a gigantic price for the people to pay.

Today, after long 35 years, Bangladesh has the opportunity to uphold the rights of the individual, the minority, and prove, internationally, that the country is democratic. If the politicians win by sheer occupation of the streets, or just win an election and continue its corrupt and undemocratic ways, Bangladesh will go down into more chaos and into a rule by powerful groups, persons, and organisations as in Somalia.

Since long political groups control particular areas in the capital city and in other towns and districts. All citizens must respect the area dictates of the dominating group or risk damage to property and person. The citizens must obey the leaders not the laws of the country. By political decree the country's ports stay virtually closed overriding the demands of millions of traders, importers, exporters, bankers, shopkeepers, and all those connected with the port. Their program has cut off the capital city, Dhaka, from rest of the country causing innumerable distress and difficulties including market shortages and consumer price hike that is higher than the BNP times.

The BNP, that was an elected government with a huge majority, showed no intention, despite constitutional bindings, to grant judicial or media independence and had these institutions, and many more, functioned independently, today's political chaos that

engulfs Bangladesh economy would not have occurred.

The BNP, like the Awami League, has no eagerness to democratise Bangladesh by separating the judiciary or the media from executive control. Much of our media, if free from government control, can inform the politicians of real conditions and views of the people that are acutely harsh and critical. A free media can be an important institution to provide the check and accountability of politicians and their programs.

The present failure in Bangladesh of secular democracy and of big government is the major cause for the rise of violent religious fundamentalist forces that is either foreign inspired or indigenous. Politicians when in power have wilfully stalled democratic institutions or the fragmentation of centralised power. To enjoy power and privileges that elections bring, our politicians have destroyed democracy, the only strength of Bangladesh, by wilfully unleashing activities that dislocate normal living.

We must restore law and order to bring all citizens irrespective of their positions or wealth under a firm, unchangeable, predictable, Rule of Law, where proper but good laws will govern the economy and the country not the politicians who hold the country at standstill and as one of the most corrupt in the world.

Caretaker's sole job is to hold fair elections but without proper law and order, no election can be free or fair. Moreover, for any election campaign and participation, by the majority of the people, individual rights as the right to dissent or the state's guarantee of personal safety is essential, and



without it, elections are plain formalities.

However, to ensure or build these fundamental conditions, and for the greater interest of the people, the caretaker government should rightfully separate, on a permanent basis, the judiciary, the police, and the media from the government, or ask the people through a referendum, and then hold all elections. The caretaker system could then become obsolete and unnecessary.

The mainstream Bangladeshi politicians in unison with the Western governments, as the EU or the US, emphasise on elections but neglect the ground settings for any elections in a democracy. If in the US or in the UK their media or

courts are unfree, or the police institutionally politicised, would their voters find any value in elections without freeing the courts, the media, and the police from political control? Democracy is not simply about elections, however free or fair, and let it be so in Bangladesh as well.

We, as citizens, want our rights restored: the right to travel without fear, the right to keep our businesses open without the threat of forcible closure, and the guarantee of security to our life, liberty, and property. Let rules be established and institutions strengthened as it is not the person but the principles, the systematic procedures, that can make the office of the CEC neutral and accountable.

Mere changing a person cannot ensure neutrality of the institution. Ideally, the laws, if constitutional-institutional means take roots in Bangladesh, will punish a person, whoever he may be, if proven corrupt, guilty, or partisan.

If the CEC has to resign, it is plain that it will be under duress, which no modern democracy can celebrate. The politicians themselves, who claim to be democratic, cannot use coercion to achieve their objectives, as duress and violence will then become, everlastingly, the order of the day in Bangladesh.

Nizam Ahmad is Director, Liberal Bangla, UK.