

AL's Economic Policy

It was a right move made by the Awami League (AL) to hold an open forum with the country's leading industrialists and traders, including representatives of various chambers of commerce, on the organisation's economic policy, now in the process of being put to final shape. The meeting provided an ideal opportunity to members of the private sector to share their thoughts with the opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina and her associates, while AL leaders could throw considerable light on what now clearly looks like a changing position of their organisation on many complex economic issues.

At this stage, it may be a little premature to discuss AL's economic policy on the basis of extracts from a draft resolution, as published by the local press including this newspaper. But we should recognise the rethinking now going on within the organisation, in the light of the changed global situation and the existing realities in the country. True, the references made in the draft resolution to AL's support for "mixed economy with the public sector playing a minor role" and to the assurance that "no commercial or industrial establishments would generally be nationalised" are welcome reiteration of positions taken by the organisation during the election campaign last year.

In the circumstances prevailing in the country, not to mention Dhaka's relations with donor nations and aid agencies, it would have been most surprising if AL, a party aspiring to be in power one day, could take any other position or, to be more specific, an anti-privatisation stance. However, it is important that AL does not commit itself to "mixed economy" as a matter of expediency. It should do so out of conviction to earn credibility from the private sector.

Besides gaining the much-needed credibility from the private sector — indeed, from the country at large — AL must present as comprehensive an economic resolution as possible, identifying specific problems and their solutions. Again, the very term "mixed economy" is open to many interpretations. After all, how mixed is the "mixed economy" and how minor will be the role to be played by the public sector? If it is important to clarify these issues, it is almost imperative that people at large and the private sector in particular are assured that AL has right men for right jobs when (and if) it comes to power. Herein lies the challenge of effective implementation of what may be otherwise a sound economic policy. This question is raised in many minds because far too often, as it happened during the meeting of AL leaders with the private sector on Saturday, issues are presented or discussed in rhetorical terms. Unfortunately, the same also happens at meetings of the ruling party.

The meeting on Saturday marks a good start. Without a continuous dialogue between members of the private sector and AL — and the ruling BNP — we will never know where our political parties really stand. But, then, the private sector also bears as much responsibility as political parties to make this dialogue as substantive as possible. After all, the tendency of playing to the gallery or capturing the headlines of newspapers is not confined to politicians alone. It is hoped that leading figures from the country's trade and industry press for the continuance of this dialogue with both AL and BNP and treat these meetings with seriousness and after due preparation of the issues under discussion. The private sector shares this responsibility with political parties, a responsibility as important as the role it plays in the economic progress of the country.

Sympathy to Tremor Victims

Turkey, or geologically the Anatolian Plateau, has again been jolted by a strong earthquake taking a huge toll of life and property. As in all such cases, it will take some time before the true extent of loss will be known. One thing is certain even at this initial stage of evaluation and salvage, rehabilitation and attempts at recovery — that the Turkish city of Erzincan has been reduced to ruins. It is strangely the same city where in 1939 a severe earthquake took a hundred thousand lives. The date was, however, different — December 27.

This plateau, patently because of the dictates of the tectonic configurations and activities of the area, is particularly tremor-prone. However, the Erzincan tragedy cannot but evoke universal sentiments of sympathy and a sense of identity with the victims, specially those that live. We feel that to do justice to the truth of our feeling in the matter, we should go out and extend an effective helping hand. This can be done ideally by sending out to Erzincan at least one medical mission either from the Army Medical Corps, who should prove specially suited to the needs of the situation, or from BMA who shouldn't be either found wanting in their performance. Secondly, Bangladesh has a number of good builders and efficient and experienced building workers. Could we not persuade our construction firms to do some voluntary work there and earn a good name for our country?

Science has travelled far since Isaac Newton, and specially after Albert Einstein who was with Max Planck the great inaugurator of the quantum revolution but later was to opt out of the game. And science also very ably charted, weighed and counted space and matter and time of the knowable universe. But it has done very poorly to predict an earthquake. H G Wells's pertinent satire in his First Men on Moon comes pat to mind. The Selenites or the moon-people were amazed by human foolishness of flying to moon some 280,000 miles away and yet not get even the miles deep into their own planet.

In Bangladesh we are lucky that meteorology has advanced so far as to enable us to know of an impending storm or tidal bore some days ahead. The tremor-prone areas are unfortunate that comparable progress has not been so far made in seismic studies. The early Chinese promises of getting the warning from deep-dwelling frogs of the wells do not seem to have made any headway either.

However, scientific advancement is winning ever new ground every minute. It is a safe bet to hope that in a decade's time the first tremor predictions, however erratic, will be around.

Our hearts go out in sympathy with the victims of the tragedy.

ON the face of it, the proposed Democratic Forum should fill a vacuum in the political life of Bangladesh. Here, my main assumption, to repeat a point made in this column of few weeks ago, is that it will be something of a 'think tank', non-partisan in character, deriving its strength from its association with intellectuals and like-minded people from various professions. It should carry out research on issues facing the nation, speak out on current problems, organise seminars and closed-door discussions and, hopefully, publish a journal of its own.

By now, one should be clear what the proposed Forum is not — or what it won't do. As we see it from outside, it won't be an organisation with a decision-making structure of its own. It will seek prestige and a voice, instead of power and authority. In this sense, one of its objectives should be to mould public opinion on wide-ranging issues, preferably through intellectual means, and seek to influence the decision-making process of the government, whichever party is in power.

The need for such a Forum would not have been so immediate if the major political parties in the country, especially the Awami League (AL), had, by now, set up their own mechanisms for free discussion on national issues, performing at least some of the functions which the proposed Forum may undertake. Unfortunately, this has not happened. That's one reason why we talk about a vacuum in the country's political life.

Instead, something else has happened, which prompts this writer to return to the subject in a new perspective.

It is now clear that the top leadership of AL regards the proposed Democratic Forum with a mixture of hostility and suspicion — some would say, as a possible adversary — instead of adopting a convenient "wait and see" attitude towards the venture. This negative mood was reflected in the deliberation at the recent extended meeting of AL executive committee. There were even talks of ultimatums being served on a member of the AL presidium, Dr Kamal Hossain, either to stay in the organisation or to leave it if he was that keen on the setting up of the Forum. There were — indeed, still are — speculations about splits within the leadership, disaffection in the rank and file and an offer of resignation — a usual ploy to test popularity — by the president, Sheikh Hasina.

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party

Democratic Forum Offers Good Prospects — and Needs a Chance

(BNP) has been watching the development with some satisfaction, seeing it in the limited perspective of the beginning of increased disaffection on the opposition front. It is far from clear if anyone in the leadership of BNP sees the proposed Forum as one performing an effective watch-dog role over government policies and, to that extent, of being of some assistance to the opposition.

If the top leadership of AL has adopted a negative attitude towards the proposed Forum, many impartial observers would undoubtedly put a lot of blame on Sheikh Hasina, for her short-sightedness, poor perception of the democratic process in the country, a certain lack of political experience outside the narrow limits of the day-to-day power struggle and, finally, for her built-in distrust of some of the

times in any sense of the expression.

There has been another area where Kamal Hossain apparently failed. It was in using his position as a senior AL leader, as a member of its presidium, to help the younger generation within AL and outside with the understanding of the political process in the country, especially of democratic norms and practices, right from the time of 1972. So, just before his eyes, thousands of young workers and supporters have grown up inside the organisation without any real understanding of the complex problems — and of their possible answers — facing the country, problems ranging from growing absolute poverty in rural Bangladesh to crisis in our industrial sector, from decline in our moral values and standards to continuing violence in our educational institutions. On all

democratic norms and practices. Unless we are able to bring about such a change, what hope is there for our country?

While the Forum should reach out to the young generation, it will also have major role to play in providing a channel for communication to members of various professions, regardless of their age or political inclinations. At the moment, they are largely left out in the cold by major political parties. They include retired civil servants with plenty of practical experience in various fields, university and college teachers with time to do some serious research-oriented writing, retired bankers who know how the sector they once served so well works, doctors, industrialists, so on and so forth. Having known some of them through my work as a journalist, I know for sure that they have answers to at least a few of our problems and that all they want is to be heard and to be accepted for their commitment. In several Southeast Asian capitals, or even in New Delhi and Colombo, their counterparts have much better opportunities than us to be involved in national affairs, without seeking office or authority.

If the proposed Forum takes a far-sighted view of its challenges and obligations, it will certainly find a way of using experts of the older generation as resource persons in discussion groups which, in time, should help with orientation of our post-liberation generation.

The question has been asked, "Do you see the Democratic Forum as a possible third force in the politics of Bangladesh?" Perhaps it is this question that has prompted Sheikh Hasina to take a somewhat jaundiced view of the move.

In a broad sense of the term, the Forum could well provide a third force, but only in the intellectual sense in so far as it will identify problems, with their possible solutions, which major political parties have either deliberately ignored or failed to comprehend. But it should not be in the power struggle nor, for that matter, be an active player on the political front. In coming into its own, it will be obliged to strike a delicate balance between seemingly conflicting compulsions. At this moment, my own gut feeling is that it will work and, without performing any miracles, serve the best interests of Bangladesh, during the rest of the decade and, indeed, in the next century.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

veteran leaders of the party, especially Hossain and Tofael Ahmed.

What is overlooked by these critics of Sheikh Hasina are the lapses on the part of Kamal Hossain who, according to one insider, has done precious little to build a relationship of trust with Hasina. Some say that having been instrumental in bringing her to politics as the president of AL, thus setting the trend of dynastic politics which he now most certainly regrets — Hossain probably expected to be something of a guardian angel, a position which the daughter of Sheikh Mujib was hardly willing to accept. So, there was an understandable conflict of interests, which neither Hasina nor Hossain tried to resolve. But there have also been divergent perceptions held by these two people of the political process, even of the day-to-day developments, with Hossain representing a sophisticated erudite approach in sharp contrast to Hasina's down-to-earth somewhat simplistic attitude. In the best of circumstances, the two could play complementary roles to the great advantage of their organisation, indeed of the democratic process in the country as a whole. Unfortunately, we are not living in the best of

these issues, an AL worker, in the age group of 30, knows no more than his or her counterpart in BNP, except putting all the blame on long periods — 15 years for the AL and nine in the case of BNP — of autocratic regimes. Like other politicians, Hossain speaks at meetings and rallies, but he has not been able to set up small discussion groups, say, with university students, writers and journalists, and members of the private sector, where he could share his undoubted knowledge and expertise with fellow-Bangladeshis — and, above all, listen to them.

So, we welcome the readiness of Kamal Hossain and others like him to start a new process, reflected in their move to launch the Democratic Forum. It is through this process that the post-liberation generation will gradually become well-equipped, intellectually and otherwise, to understand the challenges facing Bangladesh, not in terms of rhetoric and clichés but with the help of facts and figures. Given the right type of political training and motivation, it is this generation that can one day join the mainstream of national politics, even enter parliamentary elections and gradually bring about a qualitative change in our

South Africa Faces its Moment of Truth

Mondli Makhanya writes from Johannesburg

THE blacks of South Africa are again looking on as white voters decide whether constitutional change is to proceed. By going for a referendum on March 17 President FW de Klerk took a gamble on the future of the negotiation process.

His announcement came in a week in which the working groups of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) — the multi-party body planning the route to a post-apartheid constitution — had made substantial progress.

If de Klerk loses the referendum he has promised to resign and call a general election. He would almost certainly lose to the right wing Conservative Party (CP) led by Andor Treurnicht. That would nullify all the progress made in two years of delicate negotiations. A CP government would return the country to the Sixties.

The CP split from the ruling National Party in 1982 and still adheres to the old apartheid dogma. Under the slogan of the "right to self-determination," it wants to revive the homeland policy and divide the country into 12 tribally defended republics.

It would reintroduce job reservation for whites; separate public amenities; separate schools; and racially defined residential areas. It also wants to put Nelson Mandela back in jail.

Hence the African National Congress calls the poll "a hallmark of racism" aimed at giving "whites a veto over the future of our country."

With its allies, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the ANC plans a mass protest around the time of the referendum which could include a general strike on the day of the poll.

Other major black liberation movements, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Aza-

The right wing Conservative Party and the extremist AWB have both decided not to boycott the while referendum called suddenly in South Africa by President de Klerk. Their decision makes the outcome even closer than at first predicted. De Klerk is telling voters that if they do not back him, sanctions, sporting boycotts and pariah status will be back on the agenda.

The vital question



President F.W. de Klerk

On March 17 the 5 million whites of South Africa are being asked:

Do you support continuation of the reform process which the State President began on February 2 1990 and which is aimed at a new constitution through negotiation?

Yes No

Estimated total population of South Africa: 37.5 million

nian People's Organisation, both of which have thus far kept out of the negotiations, view de Klerk's move as vindication of their refusal to negotiate until a constituent assembly is elected.

Unpopular through the decision to hole a referendum is with the left and elements of the right, nobody denies the tactical brilliance of de Klerk's move. He is hoping to neutralise the vociferous right wing parties which have been casting doubt over his mandate to negotiate on behalf of South Africa's five million whites.

The announcement came hours after de Klerk's National

Party had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the CP in the Transvaal town of Potchefstroom. The seat has been vacant since the death last November of former Speaker of Parliament Louis le Grange. He had won it in 1989 by only 200 votes. Now the CP won by more than 2,000 votes.

Both parties had billed the by-election as a litmus test of white response to de Klerk's reforms of February 1990, when he lifted the ban on black resistance movements and released Mandela after 27 years in jail.

In victory the CP repeated its oft-made claims that de Klerk no longer had the sup-

port of the white voters who elected him, and challenged him to a general election. De Klerk said: "I had to settle the matter once and for all. The CP attack us at every turn and say we do not represent the majority of whites."

At the same time he is seeking to reassure a jittery white populace that they still have the power to reject the changes he has embarked on.

De Klerk is expected to win by a narrow margin. By choosing the referendum route he increased his chances of avoiding a general election, in which the CP would have more chance of victory.

Parliamentary constituencies are weighted in favour of rural areas populated by conservative Afrikaner farmers fearful of losing their land if a black government embarks on land redistribution.

De Klerk is expected to win by a narrow margin. He has the arsenal to win. He is able to scare whites contemplating voting for the CP by telling them that South Africa would again face sanctions, sports isolation, cultural boycotts and a return to political pariah status if it does not go down his road.

He also has the advantage of having the support of the state-controlled broadcasting corporation and all the major newspaper companies. Even so the margin is likely to be close.

After the referendum the stage will be set for serious horse-trading between de Klerk and the ANC without the State President having to keep

looking over his shoulder at the right-wing threat.

A marginalised right wing could still prove dangerous. If the constitutional avenue is blocked, right wing organisations might find they have no option but to resort to the violence they have threatening for so long. Given the right-wing sentiment within the security forces, the right has the capacity to wreak havoc.

Two weeks after the referendum, CODESA will sit down to discuss progress made by the working groups investigating the technicalities of negotiations. It will hear what they have decided on the creation of the right political climate and the protection of minorities.

The main players in the talks — the ANC and National Party — have moved closer to agreement on the need for an interim government to rule during negotiations and also on the issue of an elected constituent assembly to draw up the constitution.

All that would come to nothing if the Conservative Party were to win.

— GEMINI NEWS
MONDLI MAKHANYA is on the staff of Weekly Mail, Johannesburg.

OPINION

Agriculture Policy

Recently Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia while inaugurating the two-day grand convention of the Krishibid Institution, Bangladesh announced that the government was working out an agricultural policy to bring momentum to the agri-sector so that dependence on foreign supply for food could be eliminated. We greatly appreciate the move. A national agriculture policy is needed as a guideline for the country's overall crop, livestock, forest and fisheries management, distribution, internal and external trades. Such agri-policy should reflect govt's real strategies for the development of the agri-sector including matters of subsidies.

Meanwhile, I fully endorse the view of the PM that "the policy would not be enough — if it was not implemented properly". For its successful implementation, sincere and dedicated services of the Krishibids coupled with active government cooperation are needed. The Prime Minister said that there are still areas in the country where information and training pertaining to improved new farming technologies have yet to reach. She called upon the agri-field workers to reach the new technologies at the door steps of the farmers. In this context, I would like to say that there are shortage of appropriate manpower though a large number of agri-graduates are now unemployed. We would strongly suggest the government to appoint agri-graduates at the union level, that is, let declare the union level posts as entry points for agriculture, livestock and fisheries graduates. This will not only help to reach the new technologies at

the door steps of the farmers but will also solve the unemployment problem of the agri-graduates. If agri-graduates were posted at the union level, they would get more opportunity to live in close association with the farmers. In fact, at present, an agri-graduate has to look after a large area. As a result, the effectiveness of the agricultural extension activities is less visible. To meet up emergency crop, livestock or fisheries problems, small labs of the respective research institutions should also be set up at the upazilas.

While referring to the issue of absorption of unemployed Krishibids, the PM cited the problem of surplus staff. But the question is — who is responsible for creating the surplus problem? Surely not the unemployed agri-graduates or even the employed ones. Then why should they suffer for others' mistakes? It has been stated in the convention that about 6000 posts are lying vacant in various agri departments. And these posts are exclusively meant for the agri-graduates! Why at the costs of Krishibids' posts, we should met the expenditure of the surplus staff, who are non-Krishibids? Can government expect to realise its agricultural development targets by keeping such a huge number of Krishibids' sanctioned posts vacant?

I would fervently call upon our honourable Prime Minister and her government to consider the cases of absorption of the unemployed Krishibids with due attention and sympathy.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof. BAC, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Appreciation

Sir, It gave me great satisfaction and sensation going through the articles being published in your daily, particularly the one written by Brig. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Rtd) in the issue of 2nd March and that of Mr. S Alam Rashid appeared in the issue of 5th March. I thank them both for expressing the ideas so boldly and clearly.

I am afraid not many of our countrymen had the chance to go through these valuable articles since these are written in English. To enlighten our mass population I would request these gentlemen to re-write these articles again in Bangla and publish them in the Bangla

dailies. The voters must know the games being played in the National Assembly by their elected members with the days and destiny of the nation. It will help them to cast their votes more judiciously when required next.

A. Karim
Mirpur, Dhaka

Admission to schools

Getting a child admitted to the school is such a difficult matter these days. There are only that many seats and the number of students who apply are five to ten times more in ratio.

Every parent wants the child to be well educated but

to start with he/she must find avenues to get the child admitted — which is not easy at all. Sometimes donations are accepted by the schools and this complicates matters as regards admission.

Although new schools are mushrooming in the city, parents would still prefer the old established schools for their offsprings. I wonder what can be done to improve matters in this sector.

Shameem Rehman
Tikally, Dhaka

Author of a famous book

Sir, The article "The Universe within the Universe" by Shirreen Bari which appeared on the Science and Technology page of the 8th March issue of your esteemed daily is indeed very interesting and informative. Through the article the authoress very lucidly explains the relation between the fundamental forces of

physics and symmetry. Her demonstration of the behaviour of the forces at work using the analogy of Alice's experiences as written in the book "Alice in Wonderland" is very impressive. But unfortunately, Ms Bari has inadvertently made a mistake in mentioning the author of the book as Charles Dodgson. The truth is that "Alice in Wonderland" has been written by Lewis Carroll. The book was a bestseller in its time and still stands out as a literary classic; a book which brought fame and celebrity to its author, Lewis Carroll. Moreover, it will be recalled by avid TV viewers that the English TV drama series "Alice in Wonderland" was being shown on BTV recently, which is an adaptation from the book under discussion.

In the light of the above, I think it would be a shame if due justice is not meted to Lewis Carroll by giving him recognition for his famous story book.

Ms. Ghulam Murtaza
Dhaka