

Sowing the Seed of Consensus

Through editorials, commentaries and articles we have tried to impress upon our political leaders about the critical need to have a consensus to push forward our development agenda. But so far we have had no takers. We notice with extreme concern that the gap between the two leading parties — the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League — has widened over the past months instead of getting narrowed. A deep suspicion marks the relations between them with the result that each tries to outmanoeuvre and also look for every possibility to embarrass each other. This perhaps is the norm of party politics and is quite in line with parliamentary democracy that we have instituted.

But it is definitely not healthy for a country that is faced with a monumental development challenge. Commonsense dictates that the task is too big for any one party or group to accomplish in isolation of the others. Yet our political parties continue to follow the go-alone policy. Why? The obvious answer is political shortsightedness. It appears that they have taken a vow not to learn from the experiences of the past. Once elected, the party in power seems to believe that no other party had ever been so elected, and what they are going to achieve will outshine everyone who preceded them. With that assumption, they brush aside all suggestions for co-operation from those who lost and whose offer of help is seen as an attempt to share in the glory. This has been the case of the victorious Awami League after our liberation and it is equally true for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party which is now in power.

So what do we do now? If any meaningful consensus is to emerge, the initiative will have to come from the ruling party. The finance minister has correctly pointed out that on the issue of promoting private-sector-driven economic development, there already exists a policy-level consensus among all political parties, especially between the AL and the BNP. Now the challenge is to turn this policy-level consensus into an action-level consensus. How? Our concrete suggestion is that the BNP and the AL must stop the current reckless competition to win over thugs and criminals among workers to capture labour unions in the hope that it will give them a political dividend in the near future. In a mindless competition to capture CBAs and unions in big industrial enterprises — the most important case in point being Adamjee Mills — the ruling party and the AL are wooing all sorts of criminal and opportunistic elements into their folds. The recent incident at the head office of Titas Gas clearly shows how the same old elements — those who served the autocratic regime — are trying to enter the ruling party once again to serve their personal and coterie interests.

However important the services of these criminal elements may appear to be in the short run, in the long run these very elements will ruin the good name and the goodwill of the ruling party. The Awami League must also take a long-term view of things as far as industrial discipline and productivity is concerned. If they do not help the BNP to restore discipline in the industrial units, it will be served with the same 'medicine' as when they come to power in the future. The most important thing is that the labour unions will have to be rescued from the hands of the corrupt and the criminal elements and handed over to the genuine representatives of the workers, who cannot but be interested in raising the productivity and thereby the living standard of our workers. Therefore the BNP, the AL and the genuine labour leaders should come to an understanding to save our industries. For the sake of the country and millions of our impoverished people, set your petty party squabbles aside and work for the benefit of the people, whom you all profess to serve. Let the seed of consensus be sown in every productive unit.

Breastfeeding Campaign

Extolling the virtues of breastfeeding has been added to the futile exercise of waxing eloquent on an array of important subjects for a few years now. Such rituals, however, expose their intrinsic weaknesses by the double standard so manifestly maintained. In a country where anti-tobacco drive is consistently outmanoeuvred by promotion of smoking in a rather subtle way, it is only natural that the same publicity formula will continue to defeat the campaign for breastfeeding. But it is a long story of breast milk relegating itself to the back-stage leaving the centre-stage for the so-called milk substitutes. Multinational companies resorted to a non-stop media bombardment in constructing a false myth around the canned milk products. The impression cannot be easily removed.

It took years to create an image, although a false one, for the milk substitutes and again it will take almost equal — if not more — time to dismantle that make-believe empire of those products. One of the reasons for the apparent failure of breastfeeding campaign is that it has been pitted against an adversary whose strength is derived from the monopoly of market it enjoys. Indeed, the financial backing multinational companies can provide outweighs the individual government's feeble attempt to set the campaign for breastfeeding on course. This is despite the fact that advertisements on baby food has been banned either on television or in newspapers.

Feeding breast-milk was the usual way of providing babies with nourishment throughout the centuries. No more now. Because we have a penchant for blindly following the West. The fact that imitation may sometimes prove suicidal does not dawn upon us so easily. Even on that score, we need to have confirmation from the West. What a pity!

The problem lies with the imperfect education, specially health education. Child care and primary health care have not figured prominently enough in our socio-political programmes. Breastfeeding in isolation from these two cannot stand much of a chance of success. It is necessary that they are integrated keeping in mind the social condition of the country. In this context, it is only desirable that the mother's health is also taken care of. The government should develop a system of easily available routine check for the pregnant women. Health card providing subsidised nutritious food can be distributed among women of the poor section during their pregnancy and for at least a year after the birth of their children. Thus the purpose of observing the World Breastfeeding Day in the country will be adequately served.

FOREIGN direct investment is a catalytic agent for economic growth. In fact, foreign investment has historically played a crucial role in the development of many countries including that of the United States. In the 19th century, capital flowed from Europe to North America and helped the opening and development of the vast continent. The United States in turn became a major source of finance capital in the industrial and infra-structure development of many countries around the world. The transnational corporations have become an integral part of the contemporary global economic scene. To day these great enterprises move their operations across the borders of sovereign states with ease and often with the encouragement of the host country. These corporations are seen as the source not only of capital but also of the latest technology and management skill. It is hardly necessary to point out that there is nothing better than depending on one's own savings to finance economic development. However, given the rate of domestic savings and the resources that can be mobilized within the country it is only reasonable to expect that Bangladesh should look towards foreign investment to finance its development efforts. It should also be noted that the volume of official development assistance has not been growing and it seems unlikely that it will increase significantly in the coming years.

For a long time Western Europe and North America were the two most important sources of capital. Today, led by Japan, East Asia has joined them as a major source of foreign direct investment. The surplus generated by the booming economies of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hongkong and Singapore is fuelling the rapid economic growth in South East Asia and China. During the period 1986 to September 1992 Japan invested in the ASEAN countries a total of \$29,187 million. Together with the investments from Taiwan, South Korea, Hongkong and Singapore, the flow of resources has been massive in volume. This has played a major role in transforming the economies of these countries. In fact, East and South East Asia have become a model for growth and many countries in other parts of the world are trying to emulate their example.

Foreign Investment: What are the Prospects for Bangladesh?

There is the question of security of investment. Low and order situation has deteriorated to a point at which it is a matter of questionable wisdom to commit ones resources in an industry where the labour unions establish their stranglehold, often by violent means, even before the unit goes into production.

enough interest to become a significant target of investors from Japan and other East Asian countries. Even countries like Thailand and Singapore, forgetting the hostilities of a decade, are moving in to invest in Vietnam. Apart from the determination of the Govt to privatize and deregulate the economy, their biggest asset is the discipline and quality of the labour force. The literacy rate is high and the people are known to be one of the most hard working in the world. There are no strikes, hartals

and "gheraos." Foreign investors take this as a big positive factor in their decision to locate an industry in a particular country. Vietnam is today poised for rapid growth and progress.

In Bangladesh we have also promulgated very liberal and, from the point of view of foreign investors, very generous laws. Our infrastructure is not very developed and modern but it is not primitive either. The banking system is adequate to support industrial development though its efficiency is low. The technical and engineering manpower is available to support the foreign entrepreneurs. Yet the investors turn their back on Bangladesh while they form a queue in neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Bangladesh is not very richly endowed with natural resources, at least in relation to our population. So our human resources must be our principal asset. Bangladesh should be very attractive to those industries in which labour cost is the major component of the total cost of production. Yet this is not happening. In fact, India and Pakistan and even Sri Lanka seem to be more attractive to

investors are a demoralized lot. Genuine entrepreneurs are pushed aside by those who have the right political connections. Naturally these phoney businessmen seek quick buck either in trade or in easy bank credit which they know, they can avoid repayment, by using political influence. Quite apart from this problem there are other, perhaps more serious, negative factors. There is the question of security of investment. Low and order situation has deteriorated to a point at which it is a matter of questionable wisdom to commit ones resources in an industry where the labour unions establish their stranglehold, often by violent means, even before the unit goes into production. Under these conditions why should he risk his fortune and perhaps even his life by investing in industry? Violent clashes between rival unions leading to death and injury is a routine news. Then there is corruption in the administration. At every step he will be obliged to pay kickbacks or else suffer indefinite delay in the movement of his file. Indeed in Bangladesh bribes have to be included as a cost of production because no business

gets done without paying it. Despite assurances to the contrary, official support is necessary before one can move even a single step. In securing land, bank credit, power connection, telephone lines, and in getting import permit for intermediate products and in many other matters the support of the bureaucracy is indispensable. Can we honestly say that this support will be given to him without payment of bribes? If this is the situation for the local investors what can we expect for the foreigner? He is considered a fair game for extortion from the moment he lands at the airport. One has to recognize that a foreign investor risks his funds in a foreign country for profit and not for charity. He seeks profit with security. The sight of strikes and hartals, often accompanied by widespread violence is enough to send him back home in a hurry. In addition, he soon finds out that load-shedding and interrupted power supply is a daily occurrence, communication is subject to the control of anti-social elements, telephone connections are unreliable and files in offices move at a snail's pace unless kickbacks are paid. What about labour productivity? How do we compare with the neighbouring countries? Our largely illiterate labour force is an eloquent answer. Why should a foreign investor invest in Bangladesh where the educational level of the workers is much lower than the neighbouring countries? Surely he knows that the rate of productivity of an illiterate worker is low. The relatively lower wage rate cannot compensate for this factor. Even expatriate Bangladesh nationals are reluctant to invest their funds in the country because of these very reasons.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

Here a word about financial discipline and the sanctity of financial transactions may be in order. In the prevailing

How to Reconcile Islam with the French Way of Life

Clare Pointon writes from Paris

AS Muslims answering the call to prayer weave their way through the streets of Paris towards the front entrance of the mosque, tourists and French alike sip tea in the Oriental cafe at the back of the building.

For the newly-appointed rector of the mosque, Dr Dalil Boubakeur, there is nothing contradictory about the two worlds. He wants to help teach them to live together.

Boubakeur, a 52-year-old general practitioner and hospital consultant, was born in Algiers, but came to France at 16, where he studied medicine and met and married a French woman.

He takes control of the mosque from Tedjini Haddam, an Algerian who was appointed to the ruling state council in Algiers following the cancellation of the country's first democratic elections last December.

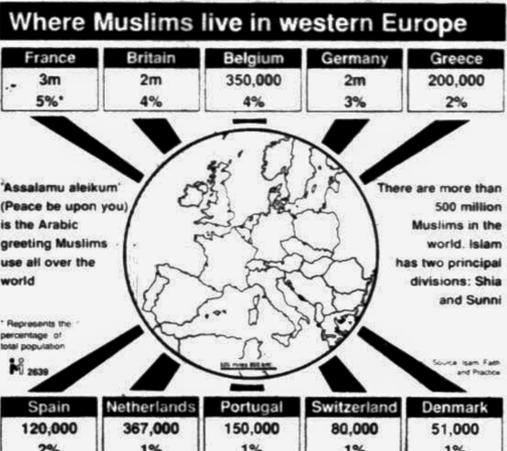
For the French government, which objected to what it saw as Haddam's "incompatible" political and religious roles, the appointment of a French Muslim spells a change of direction of the mosque, which, since its creation in 1926, has been mostly controlled from Algiers.

For Boubakeur, it's a chance to open greater dialogue between France's three-million strong Islamic community and the secular administration.

In a public message aimed at representatives from both sides, he said he saw the mosque as "a natural link between Islam and France."

Less formally, he says he hopes to be an example for young Muslims to embrace an Islamic identity which fits into the world in which they

The new rector of the Paris mosque, Dr Dalil Boubakeur, wants to open a dialogue between France's three million Muslims and secular administration. His approach runs counter to claims by the extreme-right National Front that Islam is not culturally compatible with French traditions. As Gemini News Service reports, the rector wants to dispel misconceptions about his religion and bring a new sense of identity to young Muslims.



French administration and representatives of France's Islamic community, stressing that French democracy can live comfortably with Islam.

"We Muslims respect France's structures and way of life, its republican values; they are our values too. At the same time we are Muslim and we want to show that our religion is authentic and, with mutual respect, to work for the same representation for Islam as for Judaism or Christianity," he

says. Such a message of openness runs counter to claims by France's extreme-right National Front party — which polled more than 13 per cent in the March local elections — that Islam is not culturally compatible with French traditions.

It also breaks with the tradition of the mosque, which has for many years been financed largely from Algiers by a series of rectors more closely connected to Algeria. Boubakeur intends to work towards the institution's independence — both financially and politically.

Alain Boyer, responsible at the Ministry of the Interior for Muslim affairs, welcomes such statements. He sees them as healthy signals to the country's young generation of Muslims, many of them born and educated in France.

"There has been a great evolution in the Muslim population here in the last 30 years," he says. "We now have more than three million Muslims — one million of them French citizens. These are often young people integrated in our society, so it's very important that the head of the Paris Mosque is himself a French citizen."

However, he is quick to point out that he hopes to see the mosque take a co-operative

approach towards the council of Islamic advisors appointed by the government in 1990 — the Conseil de Reflexion sur l'Islam en France (CORIF) — which the leaders of the mosque have so far largely ignored.

Members of this council complain that they were given no say in the mosque's appointment of a new rector. And they argue that it is still run by a small circle of Algerians.

Hadj Mohamed Zeina, general secretary of the CORIF, says he welcomes the appointment of a French Muslim in principle, but criticises the mosque's administration for failing to consult with representatives from the mosque than 70 different countries in the wider French Islamic community. But his comments appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

Boubakeur considers the CORIF to be a level of government administration that is redundant in a climate where he and other representatives of the mosque are willing to talk directly to the government and to other Islamic institutions. He has his own ideas on how consultation could take place in France.

"The mosque of Paris cannot be the only representative of all these millions of people, it is true. They could never all

have the same way of thinking. But I could imagine an Islamic council (a Majlis or Shura) bringing them together which would take decisions on cultural rituals such as feasts, the dates of Ramadan and preparations for pilgrimages to Mecca," he says.

In the cafes on the streets of Paris' mainly Arab quarter of Barbès Rochechouart, where young Muslims listen to a mixture of traditional music and modern rap over Kebab and a Coke, reaction to news of the country's new Islamic leader mixed.

"For me, it's positive move," says one, named Farah. "I think that, especially for the new generation of Muslims in France, a French imam, or at least an imam from another culture, is needed to motivate the young people to practise their religion."

Hassan does not agree: "As a Muslim, I don't think the fact that this rector is of French nationality makes any difference to me. I don't know him, but in principle, I don't think he will change much."

For Samia, it's more than just a question of how the Muslims themselves will react. The appointment of French rector could teach the French population at large something about Islam.

"There are huge numbers of French people who at some time or another will find themselves in a mosque. At least those who visit the mosque of Paris will now have the opportunity to understand what he says. And that's important, at least to help them appreciate Islam."

To the Editor...

BCS exam and optional subjects

Sir, There are many important things that demand reform. The matter of optional subjects in the BCS exam is one such.

In the BCS exam a candidate is allowed to choose three subjects as optional. The most salient feature in the choice of optional subjects is that the examinees who belong to subjects like physics, chemistry, mathematics or any branch of engineering usually take related subjects like physics, applied math etc as optional ones and can obtain almost cent per cent marks. But the opposite is the case with the candidates who belong to the subjects of arts and they usually take arts subjects like English literature, philosophy, psychology,

sociology, political science, history as optional and obtain very poor marks. It is very difficult for them to get 60% marks even trying heart and soul. I opine that this is a kind of disparity for the students of arts.

Since our honourable examiners are not accustomed to giving cent per cent marks in the subjects of arts, the matter of the optional subjects should be reconsidered by the respective authority. I had a well thought-out and suggestion in this regard: There should be no optional subject in the BCS exam because the compulsory subjects are enough to judge the merit of a candidate. But if there is any subject as optional, it should be a subject through which one's competence will be truly measured whether he or she belonged to

arts or science.

From the above discussion we can understand it well that there should be no debate regarding the suggestion. I have the issue for BPCS's consideration so that they take necessary measure in this regard and ensure employment of the eligible candidates.

Rushayad Ehsan Supat
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Bangladeshi environment

Sir, For the "survival of the country", environmental hazards faced by Bangladesh have to be minimized, was pronounced by Bangladeshi Foreign Minister at the Earth Summit.

already learnt to live with many drawbacks that are gradually contributing to the degradation of characteristic Bangladeshi environment.

Unlike developed countries where mechanical pollution is worst and environmental maintenance is best, Bangladesh has yet to master modern know-how of maintaining her environment up to the standard.

That least developed Bangladesh does share the blame of unscientific manipulation of the ecosystem with uncontrolled deforestation, unabated atmospheric pollution, flawed developmental efforts causing environmental hazards, etc. should necessitate formulating appropriate strategies to combat decaying quality of her urban and rural environments.

On the part of aids dependent Bangladesh, social and moral obligations to protect and upgrade her environment in keeping up with the fast improving segments of the acumen must not be ignored for the sake of human wellbeing in the times to come.

Hence, to achieve the feasible objectives an urgent footing can Bangladesh consider a few projects, such as: intensive campaigns on awareness about importance of environment care; arcaise national programmes on conservation and advancement of environment; posting environmental regulations; probable penalty for violation; national recognition for outstanding contribution to the development of environment; measures to defend the state total environment against parasites' invasion; and mandatory

condition of the country the clever ones are those who wear the ruling party label (they usually change complexion with change of regime) and misuse public funds from nationalized banks or other official sources for private gain and profit. This is not a situation conducive to the growth of genuine entrepreneurship. In fact, the prevailing environment encourages even the genuine ones to top for the easy path of securing official patronage instead of depending on hard work, enterprise and business acumen for success. The essence of privatization and deregulation is that while the government withdraws from the production sector it concentrates on its regulatory function. The legal framework within which the private sector will operate is established by the gov't. The example of Japan should be very valuable for guidance. Rigorous and methodical enforcement of the financial laws and rules and regulations is essential to create a sense of confidence about the determination of the nation to make the sacrifices necessary for lifting themselves up from the depth of poverty by hard work. There are no short cuts. Unfortunately we do not happen to have wealth like oil or gold hidden under ground. We do have a huge labour force and it is an asset only when it will work with a sense of purpose and in discipline. Foreign investment can put them to work if we can remove the negative factors which are nullifying all the efforts of the Government to attract foreign capital. The example of Vietnam seems to be relevant for us. We have to be honest enough to identify the real reasons and not delude ourselves with explanations which put all the blame on either the transnational imperialists and donor countries or some other evil exploiters in some distant lands. Those countries are trying to promote their own national interests; so there is not much point in blaming them for doing what we should be doing ourselves for our own country. The remedy lies in changing the total climate for investment before we can expect foreigners to risk their capital in this country. Given the serious situation prevailing in the country today it is not going to be an easy task. But then we should not kid ourselves into thinking that it is an easy task.

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Reciprocation

Sir, Respect and affection is a two-way process; that is, one must respect and give affection to others; for others to reciprocate the same. One should not think that one is only entitled to receive respect and affection from others without reciprocating. Let us practice the two-way code of sharing respect and affection for the cause of establishing true and unselfish relationship.

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