

Questionable Conduct?

In our view a very serious question has been brought before the Parliament last Thursday by the senior AL leader and MP, Tofael Ahmed. He showed a letter before the House which, he claimed, was written by the Superintending Engineer of the Power Development Board (PDB), calling for a meeting of all Executive Engineers of the same body, to raise funds for the local football club. According to Mr Tofael Ahmed, the Superintending Engineer asked his colleagues to raise Tk 10,000 from each PDB contractor. He claimed, as told by Mr Mahbubul Alam Tara, the Acting Chief Whip of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

In reply Mahbubul Alam Tara said in the House on Thursday, that the Feni Sports Association was not a party organisation, and the fund that was being raised was for the good of sports in that district. In fact he is quoted in the media to have said that Tofael Ahmed was causing a great harm to the development of sports in Feni by raising this issue, and making it look like an act of corruption.

If we go by what has been reported in the press, Mr Tara has not denied attempting to raise funds for the football team. He has not also denied that he wanted to raise funds from PDB contractors. What he denied is, any wrong doing on his part. He also claimed that the local Awami League MP, Mr Joynal Hazari, was present in the meeting where the decision was taken to raise funds by asking the PWD contractors to make contribution. This claim the AL MP has vehemently denied.

The question of wrong doing, we will leave to the appropriate authority to judge. But we think this method of raising funds, for however a noble cause, was improper. Mr Tara shows extremely poor judgement as to what constitutes proper behaviour for a person occupying the position that he does. The fact of the AL MP's presence (which has been duly denied) is of no consequence. Even if Mr Hazari was present, the action would still be wrong.

How could it be that a government officer is asked to raise funds from contractors who are carrying out work which they must have gotten through competitive tender or some such process. Doesn't the BNP leader know that contractors will never pay from their own pockets? What they will do is raise the amount demanded by either raising the cost of the work, or by giving that much worth of less input. Thereby ultimately making the tax payer the big loser. The very linkage that a member of parliament, in this case the Chief Whip of the ruling party, should not think anything wrong in asking the Superintending Engineer to get involved in raising funds, raises serious doubt about the maturity of the ruling party's MP. It is a very good cause to promote sports. We are all for it. But the method adopted by Mr Tara showed very poor judgement, and a very low level of political immaturity.

There are two obvious ways of interpreting what Mr Tara did — the uncharitable, and the charitable. The uncharitable interpretation leads us towards abuse of official power and corruption. That judgement we leave to competent authorities. The more charitable interpretation leads to lack of political maturity, naivety and a very very poor judgement as to the proper behaviour for a man of his stature. The conduct was improper, in our view, and definitely questionable. This incident, since not denied, can be taken as a clear indication that the ruling party leaders are involving government officials in questionable activities. This is a matter of serious concern, and all concerned, especially the BNP, should sternly warn all its MP's and high officials to desist from such activities forthwith.

Dead and Dignified

Milan Kundera, the irresistible Czech writer, is adept in making cruel digs at all kinds of sacred bulls. One of his stories plays irreverently on the subject of old deads needing to be replaced by new dead at burial facilities.

There is now news from Cairo fittingly about old deads — rather too old, some 4,500 year-old mummies of Pharaohs. The Egyptian administration is pressing into service 11 mummified bodies, in an excellent state of preservation, of Pharaohs for effecting an increase in foreign tourist inflow. One thought that mummies were mummies — purely so and not Pharaohs or their viziers and perhaps one could, on a visit to the fantastic collection at the British Museum, ask to be shown the mummy of Tutankhamen. But no, there is a problem in showing. A mummy can be a long-preserved body of anyone, a curiosity intriguing people by the number of years it has been dead.

But Tutankhamen's mummy is Tutankhamen himself — only dead, and all the more sacred for the thousands of years before which he lived — just for 17 years. It — or better he — cannot be an exhibit to be displayed for turning in some money, displayed to multitudes of people who never in their lives would have an inkling of what this body, when alive, meant by way of power and wealth, glory and awesome majesty. This ignorance would harm the visitor not only the greatest patch of antiquity will be lost on him or her but treating Rameses-2 as some curious dried fish kind of human body would disable him/her in the matter of knowing the mother of civilisation. The harm to Tutankhamen or Rameses or Nefertiti was well understood by President Anwar Sadat — who although some 180 generations removed from his illustrious forebears — was after all a successor to them.

President Sadat banned exhibiting the mummy of Pharaohs for tourists for money saying that this was inflicting indignity on the world's first and most royals. Perhaps Sadat was concerned more about the royalty of the bodies than the sanctity of the body of any dead human. Does he not have a point there? There is a whole world of difference between any carcass and the body of an identified human. The identity at once warrants respect for, although dead, this is now a person. And when that person is identified as Queen Nefertiti, that is Cleopatra multiplied by a thousand, how much dignity should there be in handling her mummy?

To make the best out of the contrary arguments cannot the Egyptian department of antiquities display the 11 mummies as living royals, with due pomp and dignity? That could earn Egypt more dollars — the argument that decides finally.

Election Debacle: Are Reforms to be Guillotined?

by Abdul Bayes

THE results of the just-concluded Mayoral elections, although evenly won (in terms of the number of Mayoral seats), tend to produce more heat than cool among the ruling party supporters, rank and file. The reasons are not far to seek. The arch enemy Awami League regained the lost title and appears to be very much back to the ring. Needless to mention, the success that followed from the hard work and the able leadership of Awami League should provide its ardent supporters with certain rays of hope. The BNP, on the other hand, left no stone unturned to add more to its accumulated strength by winning all the seats and thus to bag popular mandate on its various policy measures during the last three years in power. The election results, however, seemed to bear an opposite testimony.

It goes without saying that a panoply of factors are usually found responsible for victory or defeat in any particular election, be it national or local.

The decomposition is very difficult and tricky too. Nevertheless, it is sometimes necessary to go for an X-ray to arrive at correct policy prescriptions. It appears from newspaper reports that, in their quest for the villains of the election debacle, the BNP supporters threw heavy shells of attacks on the current reform measures in the economy and termed these as the dominant cause of their failure. The attackers, some among them policy makers also, seemed to argue that the open economy policy of the government turned out to have antagonised a large number of voters to swing the tide against the ruling party. Beneath the roaring, there appears to lie a sense of urgency to reverse the policy

is under control, as claimed by our policy makers and the donors, the remaining concern should have centred around those hitherto "neglected" non-economic factors. If those factors are not behaving well and proper care is not taken accordingly we should assume that Bad Governance would persist and it is that Bad Governance which should be blamed for voters' apathy or supporters' attacks on reforms. Unfortunately, the episode of governance has been bypassed, excepting a peripheral reference to it, by both the Hon'ble Finance Minister and his learned colleagues while looking for the villain in the election debacle. Now, what is

(especially TV and radio) through presentation of neutral news and views on national issues; (iv) sealing of the aperatures through which corruption thrived and; (v) initiating an era for the country to gradually march towards bureaucratic de-controls.

If for a day, those who are in power could wear the shoes of those who are not, they would have probably felt how growing terrorism, toll collection and hijacking are making life miserable.

follow could hardly stop BNP from facing a rocking boat again.

It is true that the reforms and stabilisation measures undertaken so far only provided us with a macro-economic stability but the "meso" link (micro-macro link) is still to come by for which necessary growth (say, 6-7%) is not forthcoming. And the "meso" link could not be established due, among other factors, to the under-development of the socio-economic infrastructure. The current state of the utilisation of ADP funds at 18% places an additional concern to this effect.

Economic growth is not merely a function of some economic variables alone but a volley of non-economic factors also tend to play a role. Those factors usually constrain investment growth — the linchpin of economic growth. Once macro-economic management

that bad governance which shook the massive popularity of the ruling party in Dhaka and Chittagong — both having a relatively greater concentration of conscious voters?

One should remember that the expectations and faith that the people had kept with the present government were much higher than these obviously used to be in relation to the previous regime, simply because the present government is an elected one. But that does not mean that people expected 'polao or biriani' as the everyday meal, that they wanted 'Dish Antenna' over the roof of their houses etc.

Higher expectations simply mean, inter alia, that there should have been serious attempts for: (i) an improvement in the law and order situation; (ii) more democratisation of the institutions; (iii) a substantial departure on the part of the news media

is being alleged that government-backed student fronts create such a reign of terror. The news media has been carrying the ghosts of the last regime. The complaints against corruption are no less now than they were before. The bureaucrats tend to dominate the politicians in every sphere and it becomes very difficult to find a place where the bureaucratic spectre is missing. A further element contributing to bad governance is the inefficiency of the line ministry, a point well made by the Hon'ble Finance Minister.

And what is the impact of this bad governance? Required utilisation of development funds remains a far cry, expected foreign investors are seeking blessings in neighbouring countries and domestic investors are waiting on the side line. By and large the economy, after having had a favourable macro-economic

stabilisation, is waiting to take off. But the runway does not seem to be clear due to the presence of some of the evils mentioned earlier. The need of the hour is to enhance the supply elasticity in the economy and thus allow fast and smooth reshuffling of resources from unproductive to productive sectors. The longer the time required to clear the runway, the more is going to be adjustment cost and more would be the apathy to reforms.

To a layman (and for that matter to those who argue against reforms), import liberalisation and de-control of the public sector units would appear as the main elements of the reforms package. On those scores only, Bangladesh appears

account of clearing the goods from Chittagong port?

Since the Hon'ble Finance Minister is in charge of the reforms and since he boasts of the deeds on this account, the questions are posed to him. The non-economic factors, as mentioned earlier, are causing reforms to recoil. Investment is not forthcoming nor it will under the given situation. How is that other Finance Ministers elsewhere are enjoying more growth and investment from reforms? Are we running too fast or too slow? If you think it is too slow, then please hasten the process. It is the party in power who should do it and if necessary, should solicit the cooperation of the opposition. If the opposition could cooperate on the formation of a Parliamentary system government, on the import of duty free cars, on the enhanced allowances of the Hon'ble members, then I think there should not be any problem here also. We should remember the famous saying "asking is sometimes getting".

It follows, therefore, that the reforms were not the major determinant of the election debacle. The debacle seems to have been caused by an array of non-economic factors which antagonised voters and annoyed investors. The debacle should not slow down reforms but giving due respect to the causes of the debacle, the ongoing reforms should be helped to bear fruits. To turn the "short-run pains" into "long-run pleasure", quick steps are required. Otherwise, short-run pains would also bring long-run pains. And probably more pains for the ruling party.

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Judge Challenges Zimbabwe to Put Liberty before Order

Charles Rukuni writes from Harare

A legal battle over repressive security legislation originally introduced by Ian Smith's white minority regime in Southern Rhodesia but still in force in independent Zimbabwe is expected to come to a head on February 25.

Home Affairs Minister Dumiso Dabengwa has been ordered to appear in court to show why the Law and Order Maintenance Act should not be declared invalid on the grounds that it violates the constitution.

The Act was introduced in the early 1960s by then Prime Minister Ian Smith's colonial regime to suppress black nationalists fighting for independence, but — like many similar tough colonial security laws in other countries — has never been rescinded and has been used by the post-independence government against opposition parties and organisations.

Even at the end of Empire the issue is still alive. Pro-democracy campaigners in Britain's last remaining major colony, Hong Kong, are currently pressing London to scrap harsh colonial laws before the territory is handed over to China in 1997.

The Zimbabwean Supreme Court order arose from a case involving six members of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade

Unions (ZCTU), which itself illustrates changing political relationships in Zimbabwe.

Initially, in the first flush of independence, the labour movement was effectively a wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front). But relations with Robert Mugabe's ZANU (PF) government soured in the late 1980s when the labour movement severed ties and said it wanted to be apolitical. In 1992 the government banned a planned ZCTU demonstration against a labour law amendment that was widely perceived as undermining workers' rights.

The union also wanted a slow-down of the Structural Adjustment Programme drawn up by the International Monetary Fund, and the reintroduction of subsidies on basic commodities.

In his judgment in January, Chief Justice Anthony Gubbay found that the Law and Order Maintenance Act conflicted with the freedoms enshrined in the constitution.

He said the regulating authority's discretionary power was uncontrolled because the authority could issue a ban on a procession on a ground that did not relate in any way to public safety or public order.

ZCTU denied the accusation, arguing that it would remain a labour movement fighting for the rights of workers irrespective of their political affiliation.

Despite the ban, the protest went ahead and six trades unionists were arrested and charged with contravening the Act, which requires organisations planning to hold meetings or processions to seek prior permission from the police.

The six challenged the validity of the charges, arguing that the Act violated constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, assembly and association.

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Justice Gubbay argued that the rights of freedom of expression and assembly were primary and that any limitations were secondary.

Coming down unequivocally in favour of free speech, however awkward to the authorities, he quoted from an article which said that "Public assemblies do not only impact on those who personally see the demonstration, but influence the broader community. When the message is an unpopular one, or one that mainstream thought would prefer to ignore, the constant presence on the streets of processions promoting a contrary view has an unsettling effect which forces the opinion to be debated. The underlying problems giving rise to the procession are thus brought into the open and redress of grievances may arise."

Other provisions of the Act are outdated that they do not make any sense. It is, for example, illegal to jeer or jibe at someone because they work for a particular employer. Punishment: up to a year in jail.

Watching or besetting any premises, persistently following a person from place to place or behaving in a manner likely to make that person apprehensive can draw imprisonment of up to 10 years.

Encouraging people to boycott a business carries a punishment of up to seven years. Uttering a statement likely to excite disaffection against the president or government

OPINION

Road Accidents and Urban Life

A traffic accident is an occurrence which comes absolutely unwarranted. But when it supersedes all records of previous time of home and abroad it becomes a real threat for the whole nation.

Traffic accidents occur in all places. Sometimes it is caused due to sheer negligence of a driver and on other occasions, for some faulty vehicles. In Bangladesh, road accidents have become quite frequent. Few weeks back, the whole nation became petrified by the untimely death of the medical student Rumana Parveen.

Though every traffic accident involving a death has got equal importance, but the way it occurred this time, whipped the consciousness of any sensible person. The aforementioned medical student was hit by the truck and fell on the ground. She was not fatally injured but by the instigation of the helper, the driver pulled that heavy vehicle smashing the poor girl. The ruthless accident or the death which could be easily avoided took place in the wink of an eye. It is now high time to think what measure should be taken to stop this grave situation.

The root cause of all these accidents are trucks. If, like many other countries, the heavy load-carrying vehicles pay after 10 pm up to 6 am, then as much as eighty per cent of the accidents could be avoided.

Sometimes, at night they move without headlights causing confusion for the on-coming drivers. Then faulty brakes, gears, and a disproportional body and engine are also causes of a lot of accidents. And the speed with which they move within the city cannot be permissible at all.

But the whole nation becomes hostage when the helpers who haven't got any proper driving training or experience sit behind the wheel. A maximum period of three years will suffice for arrear claim and failure on the part of utility service authorities like WASA, PDB/DESA, Telephone, Titas etc. will also be punished.

It is also evident that they come out unpunished with the help of their all-powerful union. They threat the affected party, observe strike

and ultimately these wrongdoers always win. So, this grave situation is prevailing day after day. And at present it has gone to such an extent that the main roads and government vehicles become the training centre and accessory for any driver. The owners of the private vehicles, knowing fully well about this malpractice, help them.

Again, the traffic law enforcement authorities don't do their responsibility sincerely.

In Bangladesh whenever an accident takes place the enraged people on the spot of the accident take the law in their own hands. They beat the drivers, causing fatal injury which leads to even death, burn or smash the vehicles.

Sometimes, for fear of this attack, the offending party tries to flee away causing further confusion and damage.

In Libya, even if any driver kills a pedestrian, he wouldn't leave the place. And the relatives of the victim also behave patiently. The police would come and take the whole matter into their control. Not only that, no garage would repair any damaged car without proper police verification certificate.

In the USA the driving licence are treated almost like a citizen's identity card. For several violations of traffic rule, the driver gets warning tickets and ultimately cancellation of the licence, which is extremely efficient.

If stern actions are taken, here also the rate of traffic accidents would obviously come down to the minimum.

Road dividers, street lights, cat's eyes, road signs should be everywhere to stop any kind of accident and chaos. Underground pedestrian crossings or overbridges in the industrial areas as well as busy business areas are essential to avoid any mishap and delay.

Rumana Parveen is not only an individual, she is the symbol of all ill-fated persons whose lives are at stake. Evil acts of this kind should be dealt with stern hands before the situation goes out of control and causes further loss and suffering to innocent lives.

Fakila Haq
Dhaka

Bosnia

Sir, Defying all odds and threats and overcoming all obstacles and hurdles the Prime Minister of Turkey Tansu Ciller and the Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto have together visited the besieged capital of Sarajevo amidst heavy shelling by the Serb hordes from atop the surrounding hills.

We support the holding of an international conference on Bosnia. We strongly feel that such a summit should be immediately held in the capital of Sarajevo and it should be attended, among others, by the US President, Russian President, Chinese Prime Minister, German Chancellor, Japanese Prime Minister, French President, and the UK Prime Minister.

Half of the population of the Muslims of Bosnia has already perished. The remaining Muslims are passing their nightmarish lives. They are starving to death and freezing in cold. Men are being maimed

Sadiq Alee
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