

Restraint, Please

Today's gherao programme by the country's largest opposition party, Awami League, has a potential for plunging the nation into a crisis - if not a tragedy. Both the government and the opposition have been demonstrating a determination to strictly follow set courses without any willingness for a reconciliation through peaceful means. But the onus at the moment lies with the party resorting to agitation. This confrontational attitude is what gives us a real fright even before we set ourselves about the complex task of judging the merits of their respective positions. We all know what the AL's grievance is. It had been complaining that the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party's victory in the Magura-2 by-election was made possible by "large-scale rigging". The party demanded cancellation of the polls and sought a fresh election there. To this the AL added another demand for elections under a caretaker government. To press home these two demands, the party has taken up a programme that does not quite rhyme with the constitutional provisions.

The AL had almost a week to move a case against irregularities in the election. By the time the Election Commission (EC) was going to officially announce the results, did the party actually wake up to the necessity of filing a case in black and white with the EC but fell short of it. A party that has a long political tradition, has led the nation in the Liberation War and is the major opposition party in the country indeed missed the chance of its case being heard. The important question to ask is did the party exhaust all the options for getting its grievances redressed. It could very well go to the court - the High Court or even the Supreme Court - to seek a remedy, if it deemed necessary, before opting for the extreme move.

Given the AL's traditions, we have great expectations from the party. But we feel the premier opposition party is not rising up to the expectation of the people. In the later part of 1993, the AL was moving in a more constructive way and succeeded in turning people's attention to it. It could impress upon the people with its commitment to the parliamentary system and its hammering at the civic problems. This has had a stunningly positive reflection in the mayoral elections.

The bottomline, therefore, is that people want to see the AL behave in keeping with its status as the principal opposition force - a government-in-waiting so to speak. Instead of discontinuing its trust-building programmes and exercises, the AL should have built on the advantage of a brighter image following the mayoral polls by sticking to a positive line.

What the AL is ignoring is the fact that it must take along with it the people, who matter. Political savvy, not imposition of a party's will, is what ultimately counts. This is more so for the growth of a democratic culture. Lastly, we urge both parties to demonstrate maximum restraint so that the street does not become a venue for settling scores. Let the parliament assume its due role and become the centre of our political life, not the city streets.

Unseemly Fury

The allegations are of a most serious nature. And these merit the gravest concern of the highest levels of national and administrative leadership. In one of the semifinals of the national volleyball tournament on Monday in Kushtia BDR was vying with Bangladesh Navy for a place in the final. At par at two sets all, BDR was leading in the deciding set's tiebreaker with 17-16. Both of this team's players and supporters, numbering about 300, mistakenly thought that the match has been clinched and attacked the referee who had instructed the play to proceed.

While the referee was being given a hiding that could well squeeze the life out of him, a massive beat-up operation by the team's supporters on the other spectators quickly turned into a violent clash involving hundreds. It is said when armed police arrived to control the situation, the BDR elements snatched their rifles away. They also manhandled a press cameraman. Among the dozens that fell to their attack and were badly wounded were two players of the BN, a foreign coach and senior police officer. At the end of the clash the casualty toll passed a hundred.

The fact of a part of population being put in uniform and being armed by state places special honour and responsibility on the constituents of that assembly of people. They are raised and paid exclusively for the purpose of guaranteeing the security of the state and the people from both external and internal threats to stability of the society. When any section of the forces in arms themselves become a threat to the peace, something must have gone very very wrong with their training and all other facets of grooming as well as the question of their absolute loyalty to the sacred charge they are there to carry out, namely, enforcing and keeping the peace.

Cases of such unfortunate rampage, sometimes degenerating into carnage of the Halishahar kind or the Sylhet nightmare, do cry for specially harsh measures inside those establishments. But something must be done beyond harshness. It is quite possible some parts of the armed elements of this state have not been sufficiently motivated in the matter of the paramountcy of the people - which is just another name for plain ordinary persons - and made aware of the fact that they are there to serve just these people.

Subject to findings by the appropriate investigation which must be launched into the incident without delay, there shouldn't be any dithering on the point of banning the team at fault from competitive sport for some time.

We have now a truly political government. People will be watching with unflinching interest how the government goes about the business of disciplining its uniformed forces to a state that would only elicit love and respect and admiration of the civil population and not what must have been the feeling of the Kushtia citizenry right at this moment.

Sunset or Sunrise: For Newly Industrializing Bangladesh

NOTHING could better reflect the real picture of the textile and garment industry of Thailand than the negative average financial results of the companies in the Stock Exchange of Thailand. Out of 25 companies in the sector, only ten posted positive results while others lost money or encountered sharp drawdown on profits during 1993.

The dismal performance has been the reflection of the emerging realization that textiles are a sunset industry, about to die due to several economic conditions, particularly sharply rising labour costs, brought about by economic growth itself.

As labour accounts for a major part of the total production cost of labour-intensive textile and garment industries, Thai manufacturers are at a disadvantage to producers with plants in cheap-labour countries. From middle of march this year, the minimum wage in Thailand has gone up to US\$ 5.25 per day while in Bangladesh, China, Indonesia and Vietnam, it is about US\$1 only.

However, in Bangladesh we have been able to exploit the cheap labour potential only in case of garments. The entire range of textile finishing, weaving and spinning industries, although labour intensive, has not yet been able to make any headway. The sunset industries of Thailand and for that matter of several other newly industrializing countries should become the sun-risers for a newly industrializing Bangladesh in not too distant a future.

And, it is not only textiles and garments, leather goods including footwear, toys, carpets, luggage and numerous other items require a great deal of labour in their manufacturing. There is no reason why Bangladesh cannot be the

manufacturing base of all sorts of goods and services where labour costs account for a significant part of the total cost of production. Unfortunately, the time for the sunrise has not yet come on the horizon of Bangladesh while the same sun is already up in the sky, bright and shining, over China and Vietnam. On the other hand, leading jute industry of Bangladesh is facing a deepening crisis of the sunset for quite sometime now.

Workmanship

It is now well recognised that the quality of workmanship in our country is of international standards. Not only that, the ability of our workers to learn new techniques and methods is also of a very high order. Textile weaving in particular has a long established tradition: muslin, the finest cotton textile used to be woven in the district of Dhaka. Even before partition of 1947, "Dhaka Mulmul" used to be a well-known fabric all over the sub-continent. In recent times, the historic textile manufacturing centre of Dhaka has again been re-established as a leading garment manufacturing centre of the world. Pre-conditions have therefore been established for a massive as well as rapid expansion of all stages and categories of textile manufacturing. Starting with the spinning of the yarn, then weaving and followed by finished fabrics involving at least a thousand entrepreneurs, each employing at least a thousand workers on the average should have been a reality by 1995; but we find no such investment activity on the scale presently being realized in China and about to be initiated in Vietnam.

There is virtually an investment movement in China and it is being sustained for more than a decade now. Between 1980-1985, a period

of five years, 50 million Chinese workers left on-farm jobs to become manufacturing workers - the statistics is simply staggering. Beginning 1990 and at only 10 per cent of the scale experienced by China, we would have achieved the much sought-after fundamental restructuring of the economy by the turn of the century. Newly industrialising Bangladesh could have been achieved within the first decade of the 21st century.

In spite of decisive competitive advantage, we are lagging behind because of a tremendous lag in entrepreneurship as well as individual and insti-

private sector to flourish, we are yet to witness the rapid growth of private manufacturing concentrating on the export of labour intensive goods and services.

The sunset industries of east and south-east Asia basically involve stitching, knitting, weaving and screw-driving which are all intensive manual work carried out by hundreds of workers clustered together under one roof, using simple hand-tools or manually operated machines. Obviously, the wage bill of the workers constitute the major component of the cost of production. Given our existing wage levels,

so that through demonstration of actual manufacturing centres, the potential investors get the vital access to the knowledge and critical details of the investment decisions.

Secondly, such demonstration plants can also provide hands-on training to all categories of technical and supervisory staff. Thus we will achieve two objectives: (i) generate an increasing number of investors and entrepreneurs who have the knowledge of the task in hand; and, (ii) the shortage of mid-level supervisors and technicians will be removed.

Next, like residential houses, with all utilities provided, are available on rent, ready-made factories should be supplied on a hire-purchase scheme or on a pure rental basis, equipped with electricity, telephone/fax, water, security coverage etc., exactly the type of facilities made available by EPZ authorities but on a vastly expanded scale so that an accelerated target of at least 5,000 new factories per annum is possible within the next five years. The idea of factory development companies similar to the real estate firms, should be brought on-stream through active encouragement of the government. Also large-scale prefabricated factory buildings would not only speed up construction, it would reduce cost of buildings by as much as 25 to 30 per cent.

Simultaneously with the scheme for factory construction, large scale import of machineries, particularly second hand, at perhaps one-third to one-fifth of the original cost, should be organised preferably through the private sector. These will be available in south-east and east Asian countries where labour-intensive export manufacturing is becoming increasingly unprofitable. Also import of weaving,

stitching and knitting machines in large numbers through advance bulk purchase would greatly reduce the cost of imported machineries. Thereafter, these could be transferred to the manufacturers on a pay as you earn export revenue basis.

Market Development

Once the required information, skilled personnel, ready-made factory space as well as machineries are available, the next promotional task will be to initiate market development through design and product development centres within the country and setting up of display centres in all leading markets of North America, Europe and Japan. The labour intensive export products are usually retailed through the department store chains in developed countries, supported by whole-salers who are global in sending out their purchase orders, relying only on the cost and profitability of their business. The display centres will be the kingpin of export promotion - electronically linked to the thousand of manufacturers back home so that export orders can be generated as well as market information are enabled to reach the respective target groups within minutes.

No doubt all these call for strong public intervention but of a different kind. Government action usually mean and imply control and authority which will not work. Government must be the catalyst of growth and bureaucrats ought to be the most active promoters of 100,000 labour-intensive manufacturing enterprises that should come on-stream by the first decade of the new century. This is the vision and the foremost national objective that must be cherished. If we intend to become the newly industrializing Bangladesh,



tutional management capacities of various types. Somehow, it is not there, unlike the situation all over south-east Asia where the fortunate presence of overseas Chinese acted as the catalyst and pulled through the manufacturing sectors by dint of their heroic efforts. They had the vision of the industrial society that they wished to bring about in their adopted countries. Later on, the overseas Chinese entrepreneurs acted as the innovative demonstrators. Since seeing is believing, the locals also followed and economic modernisation eventually became indigenous national efforts - not the monopoly of any particular community.

The basic structural inadequacies which are non-economic and perhaps anthropological in character must be appreciated first. This is borne out by the fact that in spite of all sorts of incentives and deliberate promotion by the government of ideal conditions for

innate capacity of workers to acquire the necessary skill quickly on the job, those sunset industries of east and south-east Asia constitute sunrise industries of Bangladesh.

Yet, we must be aware of strong competitions from China, Indonesia and lately, Vietnam where such labour-intensive export industries have already established strong footholds. We must forcefully veer the tide in our favour; otherwise, the sunrise will remain heavily clouded - far away and remote on the eastern horizon.

Action Programme

This calls for an immediate action programme in order to remove the structural constraints as well as establish the competitive edge over the three major competing countries from within Asia. First task is to launch a massive awareness campaign and the required training programme

Democracy must Negate Laissez-faire, Breed Stability — II

by Md Asadullah Khan

DESPITE all the challenges that confront a democratic government, it has to breed prosperity to keep people drawn to the democratic ideals. In many countries that have done away with the communist rule, there has been an overt effort to link democracy with free market economy because they usually go together in the west. But the stark reality is that a democratic Govt. may, at least in the short-run, find it harder to introduce the free market reforms because of the painful experiences associated with it. There is no denying the fact that the reforms introduced may appear to be too draconian. To close inefficient plants, to lay off thousands of unnecessary bureaucrats and oversized employees are not easy to explain to the citizens who see their lives being made worse by their new freedom. The fact is that many of those citizens rejected communism not so much because it deprived them of political rights but as much because it failed to deliver the economic security and prosperity they saw in the west.

The counter effect that democracy can have if the malaises are allowed to mount up, if the wounds are not healed up, should be borne in mind. A democratic leader like the present BNP Chairperson who had stood up for the people against a discredited and an autocratic regime has a store of public goodwill that no autocrat can command. But looking around the world, we see that the need to impose stringent economic cures has led to another kind of distortion of democracy: Politicians like Carlos Saul Menem of Argentina and Alberto Fujimori of Peru, both of whom ran for election as populists suddenly changed their strategies once they had won. And in order to impose their programmes, both have governed increasingly by decrees.

Starting from Bangladesh to other Asian countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the pattern seems to be prosperity first and democracy later. The latter countries built up their booming economies under regimes that tolerated little opposition. Now they are gradually opening up their political systems partly because of pressure from the affluent middle class brought to the fore by prosperity. Admittedly democracy produces stability, but the fruits can't be reaped overnight. In a democracy, multiparty systems encourage a spirit of compromise. But for a country that has never experienced it before, it can be a destabilising force alarming to the government and even to the majority of the governed. A young democracy like Bangladesh has a lot to do for the people. Unless people's rights and interests are taken care of, chaos and resentment will mount up throwing the nation in the web of danger and destabilisation. Say, for example, a smooth road connection from Dhaka to southern districts of Bangladesh has long been overdue. Culverts and bridge construction including road repair, started during the Ershad regime and no body knows even now when the trouble-free road network will be operative. The result has been that in absence of a hazard-free, speedier and smooth network of road communication, the economy in this region is floundering. The Govt. could not strike new areas of investment in sectors such as development of forestry, creation of tourist spots and accommodation in places like the Sundarbans and Kua Kata and Cox's Bazar and spanning the road connection worthy of playing luxury buses between the metropolis and all these places. Government can think of leasing out such enterprises to private entrepreneurs imbued with the spirit of commitment to expansion of na-

tional economy. If necessary the prospective entrepreneurs who are very much cash-strapped have to be given money from the national exchequer where currency notes, it is learnt, are getting frozen in the safe vault of bank. Reports have it that after the collapse of communism in Russia in 1992 during the transition to free market economy, the Govt issued every man, woman and even a child in Russia a voucher worth 10,000 roubles to help purchase state property, to speed up the transition to free enterprise.

What the world sees is not always reassuring. And here the just concluded mayoral election serves as a warning for the ruling party that there is a limit to the burden people will endure for the sake of political and economic reform. All concerned have to take note of the grim warning that the future does not belong to those who are content with today and apathetic to common problems and people alike and timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects. Rather it will belong to those who can blend passion, reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideas, ideals and great enterprises.

In our country, however, we have made a big headway in establishing democratic norms than elsewhere in the world. Let us take the case of Algeria where the junta rode roughshod with the national election some two years back and set every thing meaning people's hopes and aspirations in a fiasco. Very possibly the political system that could have been imposed by the Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria would not be democratic, but should that inspire a group of activists to wipe out a system? To call off an election because it was turning out badly for a particular party is

totally undemocratic and may spawn popular passions likely to tear a country apart. Let us analyse the case of Philippines where President Corazon Aquino restored democracy but she could do very little to change the plight of the suffering people. Crony capitalism which raided much of the country's wealth for private gain still hamstringing the economy with vested interest well represented in the congress and in the administration. Filipinos even after five years under a democratic rule are still in the abyss of misery because of the concentration of land holdings and political power among an elitist group, burgeoning population growth rate of 2.5 per cent and entrenched resistance to reforms. Philippines could not fide over its financial crisis and gloom in the industrial arena because of the reluctance of the Filipino industrialists and businessmen to allow foreign investment.

Filipino industrialists other than putting a limit on foreign investment raised the protective walls even higher around their inefficient factories that produce solely for a captive domestic market. Should this trend be repeated in Bangladesh? Financial institutions in the country are fit total disarray producing high rates for borrower and low rates for savers like the pensioners, retirees and middle class citizenry. New investment in mineral exploration like oil, gas, coal and limestone and effective utilization of raw jute for paper manufacturing and other innovating purpose have to be encouraged. Let it not be that good intentions diluted by self-interest make situation worse. With a burgeoning population growth rate of 2.17 per cent annually, sharp decline in industrial production and a mismatch in the investment vis-à-vis income in the agriculture sector, economic rejuvenation of the country will be hard to come by unless people's initiative is matched with the Govt. incentive. The government can think of liberalizing its policies

by lowering import barrier to force heavily protected domestic industries to become efficient enough to compete in the global market. Currency should be regulated to make exports attractive and banking systems must be forced to offer competitive interest rates to both savers and borrowers.

Oligarchies based on ancient land holdings should give way to a sound land reform. Remembering the time-old truth in the world of economics "population growth slows as economies develop", the nation can't sit back and wait for a miracle to come about overnight. If we have missed the earlier chance to forge this reform, it is not still too late to change the course. Nevertheless, the sight of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia passing us should ignite us to revamp our economy. It should be brought home to us that vibrant growth and strong export performance help a country withstand the economic impact of the severest of disasters that this country is prone to.

(Concluded)

OPINION

Magura-2 By-election

The publicly promised statement from the Chief Election Commissioner Justice Mohammad Abdur Rouf on his abrupt departure from Magura did not come. Instead, came the 'expected' confirmation of the results of the election as forwarded to the Election Commission by the Returning Officer/Deputy Commissioner, Magura. Kazi Kamal of BNP has been officially declared elected by a big margin of over 30,000 votes. The singular demand from the contending opposition parties, to scrap the results and to arrange fresh election, has been rejected. The Election Commission, in a scantily worded press release expressed its satisfaction with the report of the Returning Officer adding that no formal petition for review was received by it from anybody.

Awami League Chief and leader of the Opposition in Parliament Sheikh Hasina had earlier rejected the election alleging large-scale rigging by BNP, particularly in Shalikhah centre. BNP nominee appeared to have received all the votes from there.

Leaving aside the alleged rigging of votes, one shall have observed an air of complacency in the Awami League camp infesting their election campaign. Covertly they must have thought that their 40-year old strong-hold would remain theirs for ever. Secondly they did not have a second thought about nominating late Asaduzzaman's immature child. Perhaps, they were encouraged by the victory of late Ilias Chowdhury's son in Gopalganj by-election. Thirdly, they could not effectively off-set the parochial ideas cleverly circulated by BNP that Shalikhah would remain unrepresented for long and Magura-2 seat

Kazi Alauddin Ahmed would never come out of the grip of a particular family.

On the other hand, taking a good lesson from the setback in Dhaka and Chittagong city corporation elections, BNP high command moved almost en bloc to the Magura constituency and offered atleast wordy lures to the voters openly. It was, however, funny to hear from the lips of the campaigning ministers that no development of the constituency was there during AL MP's time. People would not be fooled by such silly observations. The BNP leaders forgot that no Awami League governments were at the helm of affairs for most of the last 19 years. An opposition MP seldom has the resources to develop his constituency without allocation from the government.

Incidentally, the citizens of Dhaka and Chittagong metropolis are waiting to see the government's policy of cooperation with AL mayors. Discrediting political opponents has been a most favourite pastime in our country. In that context, flexible dispensation to the incumbent mayors in Dhaka and Chittagong shall entail a lot of 'sacrifice' on the part of the government.

Back to Magura-2 election. The CEC's abrupt departure from site preceding the election day, and the forewarning of the opposition leaders against suspected 'rigging' - all had clouded the situation.

Then with remarkable speed the results were officially announced and a gazette notification issued in favour of Kazi Kamal published with the oath-taking ceremony being completed on March 28, 1994.

It is not to suggest that the whole administrative machinery allowed itself to be influenced by the threat of a siege of the Bangladesh Secretariat on April 7 by the opposition led by Awami League. But the chain of events and the consequent commotion revolving around the Magura by-poll certainly demanded an objective appreciation.

The Awami League and other parties in opposition have been very vocal in their protest. AL and JP have indicated possibilities of not sitting in the Jatiya Sangsad which shall have a BNP member elected through 'mass-scale rigging'. The Awami League Parliamentary Committee has, in the meantime, forbidden its MPs not to attend JS Committee meetings.

Awami League leaders have very frequently stated in their speeches in public meetings that they would genuinely like to see BNP complete its term. However, their offer of cooperation with the government does not appear to be any consequence. The ruling party perhaps does not need it. The Jamaats are there.

We have a changed scenario now. The demand in Parliament for a constitutional provision for a care-taker government to conduct all national elections has gained some ground. It will be now more vigorously pursued. Meanwhile, the threatened siege of the Secretariat, the continuity of the walk out from JS, boycott of JS Standing Committee meetings etc. besides the opposition demands that the government step down immediately - all combined have made the situation volatile. A calamitous head-on collision can scarcely be ruled out.

To the Editor...

Falu Mia — man of the year

Sir, Time to time we distribute awards and give rewards to many persons for their heroism, patriotism and bravery, their contribution and services to the country in the field of arts, literature, culture, sports and games, science and technology and what not. But unfortunately we do not remember anyone whose life was thrown into the abyss of darkness and sufferings, one who fell victim to violation of human rights and was deprived of peace, happiness and justice for our own errors, irregularities and negligence of duties.

Falu Miah lost his prime time of life in jail for no fault of his own. While released from Dhaka Central Jail last year he looked blank with his eyes burning with anger for those who committed cruelty on him 21 years ago.

Even after his release from jail the government did not

take any step for the rehabilitation of this old, weak, sick and innocent man. Falu Miah has now sued the government for payment of compensation for imprisoning him illegally without trial for 21 years from August 27, 1972 to November 14, 1993.

Many of us cry for efficient administration, human rights and independence of judiciary but we wonder why an innocent man like Falu Miah (now 65 years old) should perish for 21 years in jail and suffer throughout his life.

We urge all concerned that Falu Miah may be declared as the Man of the Year 1993 - Bangladesh so that we may always remember the tragedy of his life, take lesson from his sufferings, and injustice done to him, and refrain ourselves from committing gross mistakes and negligence of duties in future.

We also urge the government to rehabilitate Falu Miah immediately ensuring a proper

living condition and a decent life for him.

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Pineapples

Sir, Pineapple is a fruit liked by people across the world. And we produce it in plenty. We have the right climate and weather conditions to further augment its production. Well then we can export the juices and jellies and jams and even the raw ripe pineapple in canned preservation. All this perhaps we are not doing at an appreciable scale.

Can't there be an appreciable gov initiative to augment our export earning?

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