

Privatisation Policy Statement

The two-day workshop on privatisation held in the city last week would serve a useful purpose if it helps deepen the understanding by the society of the issues involved in the divestiture of state-owned enterprises...

Apart from the policy makers and officials, a cross-section of the society including economists, professionals, business leaders and trade union representatives, attended the workshop jointly organised by the Privatisation Board and the World Bank Resident Mission in Dhaka.

Divestiture of state-owned enterprises is very much an ongoing affair. Yet, society's perceptions of privatisation still remain hazy. Some see it as a donor-driven programme, taken on hand without ascertaining the real needs of the economy first.

The workshop also provided a window on how the programme works in some other countries in the region. Top level representatives from Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, related their experience with privatisation. They also narrated how they were able to overcome resistance to privatisation from the bureaucracy, labour fronts, consumers and other interest groups.

It is high time that the government issues a privatisation policy statement, clearly setting out the goals and objectives of the programme. The workers should be told in unambiguous terms of job security during a transitional period, severance arrangements, safety net programmes, including retraining and employee share participation schemes, if any.

Much has been made of a need for strong political will to carry out the privatisation programme. Political will cannot grow unless there is a broad-based support for the agenda. To lend such support to the programme, the society must first know that privatisation would benefit the community at large.

A Laudable Surgery

The Commerce Ministry has gone for surgery to eliminate a blistering wound and stem the spread of a rot embedded in Bangladesh's trade wings abroad. This undoubtedly is a laudable act manifesting for once the capacity of the government to take resolute steps and clear-cut decisions.

Trading is a highly quantifiable activity and figures speak very frankly and undeniably of whether certain people looking after our nation's interests abroad are worth their keep. How to measure the performance of less quantifiable activity such as diplomacy and all that is supposed to keep diplomatic enterprise shipshape?

The encouraging operation at the Commerce Ministry, however, gives rise to a number of unavoidable questions. Was surgery done only after a prolonged treatment with medicine or was it necessitated because of a gross lack of it?

The biggest question, however, involves the point of what will now happen to Bangladesh's huge trade transactions with Calcutta. We need there as effective and strong trade initiative and monitoring as is called for balancing the current irrationally adverse accounts with our neighbouring Indian state.

A CROSS the board, there is a general feeling that Bangladesh economy continues to be locked into a low investment - low growth trap. This kind of phenomena should be unlikely in an economy where macro-economic stability tends to persist.

Judicial Reforms and Investment

by Abdul Bayes

macro-economic stability of our order. Again, suffice here to mention, the public investment failures spill over into private investment decisions since there is strong evidence that high quality public investment crowds in private investment.

Bangladesh Judicial Scenario

While the number of studies relating to constraints on investment run galore and most of them being related to incentives and deregulations, little concern seems to be on the surface about the health of our judicial system - one of the most vital determinants of private investment.

which are audited and certified can be relied etc. In fact, the basic premise of a capitalistic growth, or for that matter, a market oriented growth, is the establishment of property rights where production and exchange take place under the umbrella of law.

Unfortunately, such an environment in Bangladesh is alleged to be absent. Weak general legal framework, shaky confidence of public in the reliability of regular law enforcement, doubts about the speedy, competent, independent and impartial administration of justice and transparency of legal rules as well as proceedings are the order of the day.

In Bangladesh files are alleged to be most often misplaced or "lost" but hardly any one faces a speedy trial. Because no market rate of interest is charged to the date of judgement or when an amount of money is found to have been due, there is every incentive to delay the proceedings.

The independence of judiciary is yet to come. The facilities, security and incentives with which the machinery has to work do not tend to be conducive to quick disposals of cases. One might like to ask: how could, in the past, private investments (maybe 5 or 6 per cent of GDP) take place despite such constraints in the legal system?

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Changed Circumstances

Now the things are a bit different. The economy is poised for growth via the free play of market forces. Not more are DFIs with money that would be like "free launch". Foreign Direct Investments are now sought for and all doors are being kept open for them.

It should not, however, be construed that we do not have enough laws to cover us but the fact is that existing laws cannot deliver goods properly

cal interference in loan sanctions for which merit of the project was a secondary consideration etc. clients used to rush to the banks and did some investments, mostly the domestic ones. Some of them are now sick and on the brink of extinction.

The government should, therefore, take up this issue more urgently than anything else. We hear of some initial steps being taken but a slower move would delay the response to reforms. Only economic policy reforms are not sufficient to give the dividends.

Rebel Leaders Wary of Ramos' Amnesty Offer

Abby Tan writes from Manila

After two years' work on the small print, President Fidel Ramos has offered an amnesty to supporters of the communists, Muslims and army officers who have taken up arms against successive governments in The Philippines. Gemini News Service reports on his latest move to secure peace.

IN an attempt to end the Philippines' endemic insurgencies - which have helped make it the least successful of Southeast Asia's booming countries - President Fidel Ramos has offered an amnesty to rebels who have taken up arms against successive governments.

The move is a follow-up to Ramos' opening of peace talks with all rebel groups after his election in 1992.

He described the amnesty, which has taken the government two years of consultations with legislators to thrash out, as part of an "unrelenting quest for a just and enduring peace" that has escaped the country for three decades.

The amnesty offer also includes soldiers and police charged with crimes arising from anti-insurgency activities, raising suspicions that it may be a smoke-screen for security personnel to escape the consequences of their actions.

Leaders of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), the Muslim guerrillas of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and officers in the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) have rejected the offer.

They criticise Ramos for putting the amnesty ahead of the conclusion of the on-going peace talks, which they say is the priority.

Said Satur Ocampo, a communist negotiator during the unsuccessful 1986 peace talks: "The preferred amnesty is one which is part of a negotiated political settlement where in there are clear agreements for a joint resolution of the social, economic and political problems at the root of the armed conflict."

The MNLF, fighting for an autonomous homeland in southern Philippines for the five per cent Muslim minority in the predominantly Christian country, brushed aside the proposal as inconsequential.

And former army colonel Gregorio Honasan, who led two coup attempts to overthrow Ramos' predecessor, President Corazon Aquino, commented: "If amnesty is the only meaning of the peace process then we feel it's a waste, because this is not the point. It is not amnesty or ceasefire which is the beginning and end of the peace talks, but good government."

The leaders, however, may not speak for rebels tired of fighting who may see the amnesty as an opportunity to return to normal life. That is partly why rebel leaders see it as a manoeuvre to decimate their declining ranks - which may indeed be part of government thinking.

Communist leaders are particularly worried since a bitter internal crisis is wracking the 25-year-old movement.

Ideologically orphaned by the collapse of communism internationally, the Philippines communists have been tearing at each other in disputes over the leadership of party founder, Jose Maria Sison, who clings to the orthodox theory of taking power by force.

Internal dissension has hampered peace negotiations because it is not clear who really represents the movement. The bitterness of the split was underscored just days after the amnesty proclamation when the NPA executed a rebel leader, Hector Mabilangan, who had surrendered and was cooperating with the government.

Government estimates put the number of armed NPA guerrillas at 8,500, down from a peak of 23,000 in 1986.

The Muslim rebellion has also receded. Fighting was at its fiercest in the 1960s when the MNLF, backed by Libya, waged a secessionist war in

Seeking peace in The Philippines



Mindanao for a separate Muslim homeland, citing centuries of neglect by the national government.

But a ceasefire has been in force since 1986 and a second round of peace talks is due to take place soon in Jakarta. The government estimates that there are about 15,000 men in arms, but many rebels have turned to extortion and kidnapping for survival.

Many of the few hundred military junior officers involved in the Reform Movement are known to want to take advantage of the amnesty, aware that diminishing popular support is whittling away their prospects for success.

The movement wanted after two coup attempts and seven mutinies against the Aquino government between 1986 and 1989. It was Ramos, as Aquino's defence chief, who beat back the rebel officers.

Negotiations have been subject to fits and starts but it seems likely that an agreement can be reached. To be granted

an amnesty, rebels have to submit a request to the government. A commission has been established to consider the applications.

Some specific requests will prove controversial, such as the case of the two communist killers of United States mili-

tary officer James Rowe, who was gunned down in Manila in 1989. The US has made known its objection to an amnesty for the two men, who are serving life sentences.

The NPA maintains they were convicted for political crimes - part of a struggle to

remove US military bases - and they are therefore eligible for amnesty. The government says they have been convicted of murder and may not be eligible.

The government is hoping that by the time such controversial cases have to be dealt with, peace agreements will have been reached with all insurgent groups.

ABBY TAN is a Singaporean journalist specialising in economic and political affairs. She has been based in Manila since 1977.

OPINION

'Universities and the Source of Sickness'

Abu Taher Mojmuder

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui has again thoughtfully written about the incongenial academic atmosphere now prevailing in our universities. Being an academician at Jahangirnagar University, he quite reasonably starts by referring to this university or hinting at the state of affairs that prevails here. Being an insider he is well aware of what is happening around him.

He has been writing about education and the higher seats of learning with a zeal and enthusiasm which is characteristic of him as an educationist. It also manifests his concern for the 'good health' of our universities, for the future of our education and, by implication, for the future of our nation.

In the column under reference he has sought to diagnose the causes of sickness of our universities with the help of concrete examples. He has mentioned the 'desperate search for a formula that will lead to a solution of this intractable problem' of sickness.

According to Prof Siddiqui, 'along with others, the government, too, is to blame' for the sickness of the universities. In support of his assertion he has referred to the removal of such a distinguished scholar as Dr Mahmud Hossain from the position of Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University.

No doubt that the political government has its due share in the sickness of our universities. However, to be genuinely objective, Prof Siddiqui could have pointed out that the sickness, which was at a curable stage, aggravated when all and sundry were invited to join BAKSAL and people, including university teachers and officers went in batches to register as members of BAKSAL. The gate was opened to government officers as well. It was a dangerous move but, apparently not too many people were aware of the danger that lurked behind.

Probably, for his own reasons, Prof Siddiqui has not thrown any light on the seamy side of teacher - politics based on personal ambition and aspiration in the universities. This is certainly another source of sickness deserving very serious and dispassionate consideration. This kind of politics often leads to inveterate intolerance, opposition and hostility.

Jahangirnagar University, to which Prof Siddiqui often fondly refers, provides a very glaring example about the resignation of a Vice-Chancellor who polled the highest number of votes in the panel-election and enjoyed a reputation for being very honest, sincere and dutiful, because some of his peers would not accept him for the second term although he was 100 per cent democratically elected. He is a professor of this university and is a well-known personality. What a love of democracy and autonomy has been demonstrated in his forced resignation under very unfortunate circumstances and what a 'splendid' treatment did he receive from some of his colleagues!

'Debased politics at the national level and academic purity at the universities' cannot really go together because the universities are not outside the nation and are very much exposed to all sorts of influences. But it is certainly unfair to blame only the party in power for 'debased' politics, the opposition parties have their due share in it. Prof Siddiqui must have meant it when he used the word 'national'. We expected him to be more explicit. It is thus clear that debased national politics is another 'source of sickness' of our universities.

Prof Siddiqui, however, has not touched upon another source of sickness which is represented by student politics in its present form, entailing clashes, shooting, knifing, bomb-blast, death, etc. He has, of course, hinted at it when he said that government and political parties should not 'look upon universities as citadels of power'. It would have been very fair on his part if he had said that neither the government nor the opposition parties could be exonerated 'from the charge of undue interference in what concerns only the universities' simply because the opposition parties also work in subtle ways to unsettle matters in the universities through their student wings to discredit the government whose share of doing harm may be greater for being in power. The postponement of DUCSU election is an example of opposition interference.

of the Act/Order made this office (chairmanship) rotative. The office has since virtually lost all its academic weight. No modification or refinement of a blind principle was ever attempted. The same has happened, to some extent, in the case of elected Deans of Faculties. In neither case is seniority and academic standing a factor any more. This is a lamentable fact in so far as academic advancement is concerned. We have, it seems unwittingly, pushed democracy and autonomy a little too far.

Professor Siddiqui's circumspection and insight unequivocally manifest in yet another diagnosis of the sickness when he says "The difficulty with our democratic Syndicates is that it is both bar and bench merged into one". For being "obligated to a constituency" the Syndicate is exposed to "ever present pressure" and "undue pressure". This is obvious because the teacher-members (they form the majority) are dependent on voters for any future election and find it difficult to be "less partisan". Besides, the Syndicate is not answerable or accountable to anybody and can act without restraint. However, if it were answerable to the Senate in some way or other, for the Senate is the miniature legislative body of the University resembling the Parliament in some of its functions, its activities would have been more streamlined and its authority would have been exercised with due circumspection and restraint.

Now what is the panacea for this sickness? Professor Siddiqui has provided some suggestions, no doubt, but I think he perhaps has omitted the most important one - our ungrudging, unstinted, unequivocal, sincere and spontaneous commitment to adhere to whatever is good for ourselves, for our universities, for our country and nation. As teachers, as students, as politicians, as political workers, as professionals in various capacities and as citizens in general we should aim at, in word and deed, acquiring and exercising good sense and judgement. We should aim at learning and exercising the virtues of toleration, understanding, accommodation, self-criticism and appreciation. Let us be educated in the true sense of the term and cultivate the habit of putting a bridle on our ego and unconscionable aspiration whenever necessary. The university teachers have a special responsibility (along with other educational institutions) in that they provide the most highly educated manpower to the country. If the quality of the manpower is good, the affairs of the country and the nation will be well taken care of. After all, the human factor in all states of life is the most important factor.

The writer is a professor of English, Jahangirnagar University.

To the Editor...

Corruption and transparency

Sir, Democracy has often been qualified by various terms in the Third World countries to suit the requirement of the party in power. The stratagem was cleverly devised and catchy phrases were cunningly coined by henchman with view to clinging to power that is, by hoodwinking the unsuspecting and illiterate mass.

We have also come across phrases like "basic democracy", "democracy of development", "democracy of production", "democracy of Dal Bhat" and now comes democracy of "transparency and accountability" as a hot newest cliché. Ironically, all these ornamentalations have not enriched democracy, on the contrary they have circumscribed it. There was nothing wrong about the smart phraseology -

the rot lay in their motivated, nay, diabolical application.

Recent non-holding debate on corruption is a case in point. Corruption, as is well known, in its various shades and ramifications, has permeated the work and woof of our society. All said and done the monster is eating into the very fabric of all that we hold dear over the ages. Humanity is a hostage to this hydra-headed monster. Yet neither the Treasury bench nor the Opposition was in a position to debate on such an all-pervading issue as corruption by resorting to a maze of legal jargons thereby leaving conscious citizens mortified. If such a social malady does not, by warranting exposure, become transparent and accountable what else does at this hour?

Monsur Ahmed, 18, Central Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

BRTA office

Sir, At present, motor-vehicle driving licence, learner's licence, conductor's cards, route permit, fitness certificate etc. are issued by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) office in Mirpur. But the people are facing a great problem in getting their respective works done at the BRTA Mirpur office because this office lacks staff and accommodation. Moreover, the only sub post office which receives a huge number of applications with fees for various purposes is manned by only one post master and another staff.

We would urge the competent authority to take urgent steps for solving the above mentioned problems of the BRTA office.

M Zahiedul Haque, Assit Prof, BAI, Dhaka.