

It Can Only Result from Reversing the Process

by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

"Trickle-down" theory as a means of delivering the benefits of economic growth to the ordinary citizens has proved to be a failure. Yet "trickle-down" remains a valid concept for delivering good governance.

New Lease of Life for BR

At last the Bangladesh Railway (BR) seems to be ready to face up to the new challenges. Instead of abandoning some of its non-profitable lines — as reported earlier — the BR is actually going for further expansion of the railway tracks. More importantly, the railway is all set for a major reorganisation. We are happy to know that a reform study on the organisation of the BR has suggested modernisation of its equipment, rearrangement of its routes and improvement in its services. That the aim is to turn an out-of-date system into an efficient and service-oriented organisation will indeed sound music in the ears of disillusioned passengers.

The report carried in our Friday issue does not specify the extent of fresh investment in the sector. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a catalogue of quite a number of programmes on the cards, including the proposals for construction of several new rail lines to reach places with potential for commercial benefits, two things will bear repetition: turning our metre gauge into broad gauge and carrying increasing volumes of goods by railway wagons. The study appears to have taken note of the second issue in that it envisages raising the railway's carrying capacity of goods from a paltry 2.5 million tonnes to four million tonnes by just adding a few new engines. But the restructuring of the BR could push the capacity to more than 10 million tonnes, it insists.

Presently the railway tracks are in a state of dilapidation, making both the railway journey and the transport of goods unnecessarily risky, troublesome and unreliable. Unless the rail lines are taken care of, the infrastructural reforms are bound to go waste. The study has pointed out how much potential remains for the BR to exploit. To exploit this commercial potential the BR must be ready to invest as much as is required for developing a strong and reliable network for the transport of increasing volumes of goods and passengers. The proposal for constitution of a railway board will be meaningful only when the body will be able to implement the various good suggestions for making the BR competitive enough. One nice thing about it is that various user groups will have representation on this implementing body. Let's hope the BR makes the most of the suggestions the study has come up with.

Home Delivery System

Undeterred by traffic jams, salesmen's rude behaviour and the exorbitant prices, buyers are plucking goods at a feverish pitch in this last week before Eid-ul-Fitr.

So bustling is the situation that we feel it is time some home-buying, with phone-in arrangements with shops, started being in vogue. The flurry of public movement could then be reduced to a degree, with sales vans shuttling across as carriers of goods to a good number of homes. These can even ply through lean traffic by choice very easily. The wholesalers who may be transporting their goods to the retail shops can extend this transport service to the retailers on hire basis to help them round off the business transactions at the buyers' door-steps. Most of them make windfalls at a time like this anyway; and could afford it with the advantage of even reaching those buyers who give up in the face of traffic and shopping hold-ups combined. The big sellers can make their individual arrangements by acquiring some auto-rickshaws. The Dhaka City Corporation could perhaps have a fleet to offer to the shopkeepers on rental basis.

One may try to shoot down the idea dubbing it as unrealistic in our present conditions. There could be difficulty making good choices or settling the right prices. Besides, cash in hand is usually available at the fag end of the month of Ramadan ruling out any planned buying, the pessimist could say. However, our view is, let the system be started with solvent buyers and then the upper half of the middle ranging ones could be weaned away to this mode. For these two categories of consumers, booking goods through prior visits to the shops won't be difficult at all. We really think that time has come to operate pre-festival clientele service, as distinguished from the sporadic selling of edibles only at the doorsteps. We already have departmental stores in different localities which should lead the way in popularising home delivery service.

Such an organised marketing activity will largely leave the hawkers markets out to be visited by people who have to do this anyway. As for them, we would like more make-shift markets to open on purely temporary basis in empty spaces like maidans and parks to cater their festival-time demands.

In the meantime, why not the Dhaka salesman be as courteous and winsome in their manners as his Chittagong counterpart? Let's build up in this capital city traditions of good salesmanship.

No Headway in Kabul

The proposed UN mechanism for transfer of power in Kabul remains a non-starter. The reasons are not far to seek. On the one hand, the surging and virtually sweeping, Taliban movement, has proved to be a side with intrinsic power. On the other hand, President Burhanuddin Rabbani who is to share state power with the other parties is not ready to give this emerging third force anything more than a symbolic authority.

Furthermore, the stance he takes now on faction leaders Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Uzbek General Dostam and Abdul Ali Manzari may be unhelpful to the formation of a composite governing council. He says they no longer represent a force of equal power neither in comparison with himself nor with the Taliban. These anti-Rabbani elements will at best have a symbolic presence "if they are included in the UN-proposed mechanism", that is as far as the Afghan president is willing to go. Rabbani's use of the word "if" is to be noted.

Admittedly the sheer use of the barrel of gun or military might has brought Afghanistan to this sordid state of affairs. A country freed from Soviet occupation as early as in 1989 amidst hopes of making a new beginning has till now only seen the limited agriculture going further downhill and the people getting tattered, tormented and malnourished.

It is only through an election, which the UN wants held through a transitional arrangement, that the world will get to know who has the real support of the majority Afghans.

A great problem in many new democracies in Asian and African countries is the belief that the winner in an election is entitled to take everything leaving the loser with little or no role whatsoever. Along with it also is the almost reflex behaviour on the part of many public representatives that once elected, they are exempt from any obligation under the laws of the land — these are for ordinary mortals. This particular mindset and resulting conduct goes all the way down the entire government machinery providing some perverse kind of rationale for many transgressions by the public servants.

The other face of the same coin is the implicit assumption on the part of the many of the very same public representatives and public servants that regardless of what any law or regulation may say, no ordinary citizen has any right to anything. It is all a matter of discretion and an act of grace on the part of the man in authority which may range from the minister to the peon in the tahsil office.

Good governance ultimately entails a genuine belief that all citizens, from the highest to the lowest, are governed by the same law unvarying in its application. Even the best of systems and procedures formulated by the greatest of experts will not result in good governance as long as selective application of laws, rules and regulations continue.

The lead for change in this

collective mindset has to come from the national political leadership. The public servants will then have no other choice but to follow. If the minister does not keep the public ferry waiting for him for hours causing untold sufferings to the members of the public, Generals and Deputy Commissioners will hardly dare to do the same.

Good governance further requires that the public servants have a reasonable protection from any harm if they do the right thing or refrain from doing the wrong thing as enjoined upon them by law, ethics and morality despite persuasion, pressure or threat from their political masters or someone including their own superiors in the official hierarchy.

This has become all the more necessary due to recent shifts in the composition of the political elite, regardless of party affiliations. Increasing numbers of public representatives today are coming from what may best be described as the "entrepreneur class". Even those who may not initially belong to this class tend to gravitate to it, either on his or her own, or through the proxy of their relatives and associates. This creates potentials for conflicts of interest on the part of the public representatives, and dilemmas

and threats for the public servants.

It may be a matter of degree, yet this is not a development unique to Bangladesh. This is what was written about a year back in "The Economist" of London: "Britain's government seems more partisan than before, less accountable, sometimes downright sleazy. Old Whitehall hands fear for civil service morale, even service future."

Government Servants' Conduct Rules in force in Bangladesh prescribes penalties for doing things adjudged to be wrong. Yet there is no law, rule or any other mechanism for the protection of a public servant who runs into trouble for refusing to do a wrong thing or insisting on doing the right in the face of demand or desire — more of verbal than in writing — of those wielding ultimate political authority, whether by democratic election or autocratic usurpation.

Ministers are free to ignore the advice of the civil servants; but civil servants have no right to complain in public that their advice has been ignored. They can be, and often are, transferred every three or six months, denied promotion or sent on retirement without anyone having to explain why. Every decision making process is an official secret. Some ser-

of a "Freedom of Information Act" on the US lines could provide a measure of protection to the law-abiding public servants. At the same time, such a law could also provide a strong motivation both to the political masters and civil servants under them to act in the correct manner in most, if not all, official transactions. However, it would be utterly unrealistic to expect any such law to be enacted in any South Asian country.

The issue is what should be the rules of the game defining the relationships of the public servants with the public representatives. Public servants are, no doubt, servants of the government of the day and have to do according to the biddings and desire of the latter. At the same time, there are things they cannot and should not do because they are not partisan.

Most European democracies have more or less resolved this dilemma by enacting specific laws defining the duties, responsibilities and rights of civil servants. Similar measures have recently been recommended for Britain by an all-party committee of MPs which has been incorporated in a government white paper. It calls for a comprehensive code of ethics for the civil servants. At the same time, it proposes that civil servants

who feel they are being asked by their political masters to behave improperly should be able to appeal to an independent authority. The objective is to enable a non-partisan civil service to serve effectively and efficiently governments of whatever party.

A law on the same lines may be enacted in Bangladesh under Article 133 of the Constitution. Such a law, among other things, should make it obligatory on the part of civil servants to submit all relevant materials and speak the whole truth before any committee of the Parliament even if it causes embarrassment to the government of the day. It should also provide protection from any harassment because of his truthfulness.

"Trickle-down" theory as a means of delivering the benefits of economic growth to the ordinary citizens has proved to be a failure. Yet "trickle-down" remains a valid concept for delivering good governance. For years increasingly worse governance have been trickling down from the top to the bottom. Good governance can only result from totally reversing the process.

A story narrated by the great Iranian poet-sage Sheikh Saadi more than eight centuries ago may be relevant even today when we talk about good

governance. It was about Khosran Anushirvan (Naushevan), perhaps the most illustrious sovereign to have ruled the ancient Iranian empire. He was renowned as a just and able ruler — a true philosopher-king.

As the story goes, Khosran while on a tour of his domain set up his camp in a remote village. One day he desired to have eggs for dinner. Eggs were duly served. Before starting to eat he wanted to know wherefrom the eggs were procured and whether those had been paid for. He was informed that there was only one villager who had eggs and he would not accept any payment for the same despite all insistence by the King's men. The villager declared that it was a matter of great honour and happiness for him to be able to make this small offering to his beloved king. And, the price of a couple of eggs was too insignificant an amount to be bothered about.

But Khosran refused to touch the eggs. "Go and pay for the eggs. Return them if the villager does not accept payment," he ordered his men. "If the government officials ever come to know that king has eaten two eggs obtained from a villager without payment, soon there shall be no poultry left with any villager in this province."

Perhaps, in this tale, there is a lesson and a moral for our rulers if they really believe in good governance.

INSTITUTIONS IN A SEMI-FEUDAL REGIME — III

The Role of the Government

by Dipasis Bhadra, Zahid Hussain and Laura Jean Bhadra

CREDIBLE threats of physical coercion are a key instrument for the strangulation needed to maintain semi-feudal institutions. This is true even though use of such threats to influence exchange relations is virtually banned in every country in the world. We have enacted such laws banning physical coercion. Unfortunately, we have failed to offer anything substantial in its place. We have failed to define and implement an effective structure of property rights, failed to offer a well-defined market structure within which people can voluntarily exchange, failed to take away the rigidities from existing markets and failed to ensure a fair judicial and executive process to our people. These failures coupled with anemic economic growth guarantee the endurance of stagnant institutions.

South Asian economies, until very recently, have been primarily agricultural. Prior and in conjunction with the British Raj, feudal structures had been the primary institution in our countries. After independence, we barely did anything to change our old institutions. Consequently, we moved very little away from feudalism except declaring physical coercion and thus feudalism in its stricter sense illegal. Semi-feudal institutions have filled the vacuum left by the demise of feudalism.

Under the scenario sketched above, can one expect governments to be able to do anything to change the existing socio-economic and political institutions of the society? It may be impossible for governments to change or even make a dent in the system when, as an institution,

the government itself has evolved through the pressure of semi-feudal interest groups. Furthermore, semi-feudal goals are not served well if the tools of government policy implementation are beyond the control of semi-feudal institutions. This creates incentives for formation of the most powerful alliance: the dominant partners of semi-feudal economic institutions forge coalitions with the tools of government institutions. This alliance also serves as a safety net against possible risks to dominant partners if the leaders of government institutions should change their minds regarding serving the purposes of particular interest groups.

From the point of view of the government as a tool, such an alliance makes sense. The selection and promotion of most government officials is not based on well-defined criteria such as productivity, efficiency, and performance-based incentives. This is true even though our civil servants are drawn from the very top of the society in terms of ability and must pass rigorous tests in order to enter the system. While the ability of government officials may thus be substantial, the post-recruitment situation offers little incentive to fulfil that potential. Rather, remuneration (and even to a certain extent, recruitment and promotion) may be based on personal contacts. Personal loyalty to the system supercedes all other performance criteria. Such a system is necessarily overloaded with inefficiencies. People will naturally become inefficient when the incentives to be efficient do not exist. Evidence on this account proliferates our everyday life.

We often hear from some economists and political leaders in this region that liberalisation programme will hurt workers' interests. They also argue that introduction of markets in rural areas will not serve farmers' interests well since those markets will be immediately captured by a few. Once said, though not established by any means, this justifies government controls over virtually everything. Notice, the expansion of government controls, and therefore, government policy tools all across our societies indirectly serves the purposes of semi-feudal institutions and the strategic alliances that they formed.

Fortunately, however, aggregate wisdom of a society always overrides what the minority say to keep their own class interests. The direct evidence in this regard is that workers-farmers have begun to take up the challenges of the liberalisation programmes in this country. Those who started earlier have already begun to reap benefits. The only opposition to this trend today is the one planned, influenced, and even financed, directly or indirectly, by those whose very existence will be in jeopardy if the liberalisation programme succeeds.

Semi-Feudalism and National Politics

National politics is not immune from semi-feudal influences. This should be obvious to even a casual observer of the composition of central, regional and local committees of most political parties in this region. From the top leadership of the parties down to recruitment of field level party cadres, nepotism is rampant. Many of our top party leaders became so by virtue of the fact that they were related in some way to past leaders. This is not to suggest that such leaders are all necessarily undeserving of their positions. Indeed, some of these leaders have proved very effective in terms of pursuing their party objectives. Indira Gandhi is a case in point. However, competence

does not necessarily coincide with family relationships. Many become leaders not because of their qualifications but because of their dynastic connections.

One consequence of the application of semi-feudal rules in selecting party leaders is a high degree of factionalism in politics. The fact that we have so many political parties in no accident. The division between different factions appears on the surface to be ideological or issue based. But in reality, it is often based on personal conflicts arising from split loyalties to senior party members. Recent Rao-Singh feud in Indian Congress Party is a case in point. Failure to reach a compromise culminates in breaking up of the party into different factions. It is noteworthy that these factions are frequently named

after the person who led the divisive move. Once this happens, the factions obstinately disagree with each other even though their position on the issue may be fundamentally the same.

Who is in favour of the issue becomes more important than the issue itself in deciding the party's position. The policy debate then becomes sidetracked from the real questions resulting in arbitrary decisions and ad-hoc changes in those decisions. It also makes the ruling politicians totally ineffective in terms of their ability to control the executive branch of the government. This creates a wedge between the policy decision and policy implementation. Because politicians are too busy bickering with each other, they are unable to closely monitor the implementation process. As a result, even sound policy decisions, a rare specie, become distorted during implementation.

Day after tomorrow: Market Responses and the Transformation of the Semi-Feudal Economy

1995 — a Year for Tolerance

1995 has been proclaimed United Nations year for Tolerance, on the grounds that tolerance is an essential factor for world peace.

A year for Tolerance — Why? "Since wars begin in the minds of men," reads the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution, "it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Tolerance, we maintain, is one of those defences of peace.

Are you tolerant of others?

It's fact that most people consider themselves tolerant until challenged to their "tolerance threshold": the one nationality, group, mode of behaviour, that they simply cannot tolerate. We need to think more about tolerance because intolerance is on the increase and because extreme intolerance kills.

It kills in our societies through violent attacks on individuals and violent incidents between gangs or clans. Intolerance kills on a wider scale when it becomes institutionalized, for example, as genocide. It kills on a massive scale when the general public's tolerance threshold is identified and exploited to fulfil the political and territorial ambitions of an individual or group of individuals.

Why Now?

Because we need new tools to deal with a new category of threats to peace and we need a new sense of individual responsibility in the building of peace.

On the one hand, new threats are posed to international security after the breakdown of the political order in place since the end of World War II. On the other hand economic, social and political crises within national borders have been the breeding grounds of discontent.

These are potential areas of conflict. Exploiting people's intolerance in this time of confusion proves a very effective tool in getting them to fight.

International Insecurity

Many countries are now facing tensions between different groups. These are the result of years of oppression and tyranny. A new sense of freedom, combined with a sense of loss of a fixed, if unpleasant, order of things, has left people, little used to democracy, uncertain of how to express their new freedom.

increase, and becoming more widespread. Under these conditions, States may well disintegrate and further increase the threat of wars. The world of the Cold War may be superseded by a world of anarchy and the daunting prospect of an upsurge in local and regional conflicts, opposing hundreds of different entities, born out of the disintegration of nation-states.

There were at least 90 armed conflicts in the world between 1989 and 1994, according to the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Sweden. Of these, only four were inter-State conflicts. The remaining 86 took place inside the territory of States. They included civil wars over territorial and political issues, as well as ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts.

Domestic Insecurity
Crime and violence are on the rise worldwide, with an increasing proportion of hate crimes committed against minority groups, non-nationals, refugees and asylum seekers, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, human rights activists, writers, intellectuals, journalists... the list goes on.

Such crimes pose a threat to domestic security because targeting a member of one group leads all those who identify with the victim to share the sense of injustice and, possibly, to seek revenge. So violence escalates, often fueled by the intolerant rhetoric of those whose political and economic ambitions are served by the conflict.

And the Individual

Intolerance in society is the sum total of the intolerance of its individual members. This is hard to counter because intolerance in this case can simply be a visceral reaction. It's also hard to fight against because, while a racist attack is a crime, racism as an attitude is not. Nor are bigotry, stereotyping and stigmatizing

forbidden by law.

What is Tolerance?

A few thoughts on the subject: Tolerance is respecting others' rights and freedoms.

Tolerance is recognition and acceptance of individuals differences. It is learning to listen to, communicate with and understand others.

Tolerance is the appreciation of cultural diversity. It is openness to other thoughts and philosophies, derived from interest and curiosity, and refusal to reject the unknown.

Tolerance is recognition that no individual culture, nation or religion has the monopoly of knowledge or truth.

Tolerance is a form of freedom, freedom from prejudice, freedom from dogma. A tolerant person is master of his own opinions and actions.

Tolerance is a positive attitude towards others with no trace of condescension.

UNESCO's Objectives

UNESCO, as lead Organization for the United Nations Year for Tolerance aims to:

1. take a closer look at the root causes of intolerance;
2. mobilize public opinion in favour of tolerance and inform it about the dangers associated with the current increase of intolerance;
3. develop practical guidelines for governments, teachers, social scientists and public institutions in order to enable them to resolve problems of intolerance.

Throughout the year, policy-makers, political philosophers, jurists, social scientists and teachers will be brought together in many countries around the world. They will examine existing legislation for dealing with intolerance and contemporary forms of discrimination, and identify gaps and shortcomings in public policy and education. UNESCO's strategy is to inform, legislate, and above all, educate for tolerance.

To the Editor

An obsolete rule

Sir, The Sunset Rule of the University of Dhaka which restricts the movement of female students after sunset is, apart from being blatantly discriminatory, an affront to the dignity and integrity of our female university students. Now that they have called for this archaic rule, along with several associated regulations (such as obtaining written permission from guardians for external travel) to be waived, the authorities have established a commission to gauge public opinion on the matter.

One fails to see why the public should be consulted on matters pertaining to women's university education. In a society such as ours where the vast majority is uneducated and hold set and rather flippant views regarding women's education, public opinion may well be against the idea of women going to university altogether. Should university education for women then be stopped?

When the University has failed to curb campus terrorism and violence which results in death of students, its justification of the Sunset Rule on grounds of protection and security seem irrelevant.

The University's insistence on written permission from guardians as a precondition for travel outside the halls of residence is simply a ploy to transfer responsibility from the University to the guardians leaving unresolved the wider question of security. While it is true that the legal and social climate of the country is unstable and hence detrimental to the welfare of women; locking up the innocents can-

not be a remedy, or perhaps the authorities are under the impression that the students are not innocent at all but Jezebels in waiting.

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Dhaka.

Blockades

Sir, Along with hartals, processions, meetings and blockades — a war time action against enemies is being added to achieve objects these days in our country. Along with the political parties now different professional groups are resorting to blockade of roads, railways and waterways to pressurise the authorities for fulfilling their demand. Highways, railways and waterways are national property owned by the 12 crores people of the country. It is not the property of any professional group or any political party, even for that matter, not the government's.

Recently we found some professional groups resorting to violence uprooting railroads, even burning the railway stations. Facts remains that these properties does not belong to any government running the country. These are national property and anybody destroying/disrupting such properties has a questionable allegiance towards the country. We find opposition political parties keeping their eyes shut towards such actions when some professional group or the other is putting 12 crores people as hostage and unleashing their unruly act. Nobody should forget the story of Frankenstein. We are allowing it to grow to-

Agri-education Cell

Sir, Now an Agri-education Cell has started functioning in the Ministry of Agriculture for managing and administering the matters of Agri Colleges and other agri-educational institutions.

Academic problems are varied and complicated; the agri-colleges' authorities require to consult the Agri-education Cell for resolving these problems. So, we would request the Ministry of Agriculture to kindly set up the Agri-education Cell office outside the Secretariat because it is difficult to enter the secretariat very frequently.

We are hopeful that the Agri-education Cell will bring about overall development in the agriculture education sector and will also work to incorporate genuine competition in the arena of higher agriculture education.

M Zahidul Haque
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