Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Tuesday, March 14, 1995

Economic Reform Process

The World Bank has taken a critical view of the slow pace of economic reforms in the country prior to the aid consortium meet in Paris on April 25-26. The draft Country Economic Memorandum it has prepared and circulated to our Economic Relations Division juxtaposes the recent economic developments against the priority reform agenda and draws up the balance sheet. The critique does not come as a bombshell, given the routine regularity with which the Bank has stridently spoken of our reform process. Still, the World Bank's annual review of our performance needs to be viewed with an extra bit of seriousness by us because it is indicative of where we stand - in the eye of the WB - after having spent more than three years in the reform process.

According to the diagnosis of the World Bank, political commitment has been lacking behind measures such as services reorganisation, privatisation, activation of the private sector, financial sector reform and other allied structural re-adjustment programmes. We agree that the work on administrative reform has moved at a snail's pace despite this being an indispensable requirement to carry forward the economic reforms. What is worse, even the limited capability of the spokesof-a-wheel administrative system could not be taken advantage of owing to a long-drawn intercadre warfare. But the donor community's emphasis on de-regulation and less governance, specially in the economic field, together with its penchant for trusting the NGOs with development funds in preference to the government agencies, bred a degree of punctuating self-analysis among the functionaries the government must rely upon to bring about the administrative reforms.

We understand 'political commitment' in its extended connotation of bi-partisan political understanding on such vital reform issues as wages linked to productivity, disinvestment of sick industries, entrenchment of surplus labour, privatisation of service sector organisations and 'depoliticisation' of labour-management relations. Experience has shown that radical reforms entail such political and social costs that a ruling party cannot, all by itself, effect these even in an advanced democratic country, let alone in a nascent one with its inherent vulnerabilities. Without a working political consensus on the core content of the reforms we frankly do not see how these can be speedily brought about.

Meanwhile we ask the World Bank whether the disbursement of 700 million dollars to-date out of the pledged 2.1 billion dollars for this fiscal year has been entirely due to the poor rate of aid utilisation in the country or there was something else to it.

What is a Library?

If Dhaka is a megapolis, Narail should not be a village. Now it is the headquarters of a district. Not only for that or for the formidable S M Sultan the place was quite well-known throughout this country and across the border in West Bengal. Cultural attainments were one clue to that.

The Daily Star on Sunday published a report on the plight of the Narail public library. The library was established in 1957 — nothing to compare with the 150-year legacy of the Jessore or Barisal libraries, but nothing either to be dismissive about. The start was modest — the founders Sharit Abdul Hakim and Abul Kalam Azad donating 250 volumes or the whole of its collection.

Now, 38 years later, the collection has risen wonderfully to 300, at the rate of 1.3 a year. And the report says of these, 250 are for the use of non-adult readers. Even then a hundred eager readers crowd the place — to read the five newspapers that are available on its racks. Wouldn't they be interested to go for books had there been a good supply and a better choice there?

Perhaps libraries in all of the new district headquarters are in no better position. Are these joints libraries, in any sense of the term? There is, however, nowadays a welcome flurry of activity in the library division of the culture ministry. Hundreds of districts and its libraries are getting sizeable grants and the genuine among them good many are fake — are lining their racks with yearly supply of new books. A close look would reveal even hundred upon hundreds of such new accession hardly deserve to be picked up by a genuine reader with any taste for literature and knowledge.

From no-books-at-all of Narail to book-lined shelves of luckier libraries - all are equally contributing to the decline of the nation's intellectual and human capacity.

The Incomparable Thumri Master

Death at 90 can hardly come as a shock. Still a pall of gloom descended on all of Sylhet on March 6 with the spread of the news of the passing of Phul Mohammad, the vocalist. As the maestro never liked to travel beyond his best loved and adopted town of Sylhet, Dhaka and the other centres of music did not come to know him at his true worth. For that reason this may seem a local loss to Sylhet which is not quite true. He was the greatest exponent of thumri - the light-classical traditional vocal form - in our country. And after him we are now left with perhaps only one -Zaker Hussain — as adept in the form as the dead ustad.

Born in the cradle of so many musical geniuses, Brahmanbaria, on maturing as a singer he chose. as his pasture Assam which then included all the big towns of the subcontinental far east. While Moti Mia — the gurubhai of Ustad Alauddin Khan reigned over the vast territory with his violin, Phul Mohammad did the same with his thumri. The reason he did not become the doyen of the classical singers either of East Pakistan or of Bangladesh is his advanced years when he settled down in Sylhet.

Dhaka too was shocked by the news, fearing a namesake, one hailing from Murshidabad and settling down here soon after partition some 48 years back and earning through the long span quite a name as an accomplished teacher of kheyals, was perhaps dead. While we condole the death of the elder ustad, we wish a long long life to the junior Phul Mohammad.

Muslims between Past and the Future

THERE has existed throughout history an ironic relationship between the past and the luture. Those who glority the past and seek to recreate it almost invariably fail while those who view it comprehensively and critically are able to draw on the past in meaningful and lasting ways. People who have confidence in their future approach the past with seriousness and critical reverence. They study it, try to comprehend the values, aesthetics, and style which invested an earlier civilization its greatness or caused it to decline. They preserve its remains, and enshrine relevant, enriching images and events of the past in their memories both collectively and individually.

By contrast, peoples and governments with an uncertain sense of the future manifest deeply skewed relationships to their history. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiries into the past, neglect its remains but, at the same time, invent an magine past shining and glorious, upon which are super-imposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own time. The religio-political movements of South Asia bear witness to this truth. Many Hindus and Muslims alike glorify their history — that is what they imagine to be their history - in ways that separate them from the other: rather. pit them against each other. Thus for decades many

Muslims viewed the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb as symbolizing the strengths and virtues of Muslim rule in India. On their part. Hindu nationalist presented the Maratha chief Sivaji as an embodiment of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. In reality, both were tragic figures out of cinch with their own history, signalling the decline of Indian statehood, and the rise of a European empire in India. In this instance, as most recently in the Babri Mosque affair, history became a casualty of communal myth making.

In the summer of 1990, 1 visited Ayodhya and Mathura while researching the campaign which militant Hindu movements — BJP, VHP, RSS. and Bajrang Dal - had launched to demolish the Babri Mosque and build a temple on the site which they glaimed was the real birth place of Lord Rama two (or more) thousand years ago. I was particularly amazed at two features of this campaign. The Hindu revivalists had put out an enormous body of publications and 'educational material on the alleged excesses of Muslim rule in India. and Hindu resistance

Fees for American

Sir. Lately the local Amer-

ican Embassy has been

charging 20 US dollar in

Bangladesh currency from

each applicant seeking visa.

The practice is new for rea-

sons best known to the em-

bassy. Nobody should grudge

paying a charge for visa as

some other embassies also

charge visa fee. But the fact

that only a handful of appli-

cants, out of say on average

250, of various categories daily

are granted US visa makes the

scenario different. An over-

whelming number of appli-

cants are refused US visa for

various reasons though they

have to pay the entire charge

initially. This appears to be a

little unfair and hurts those

be safely guessed, given the

ever-increasing number of US

visa seekers. American

Embassy here would be able to

collect around five crore Taka

annually. This money is paid by

Bangladeshis and in local cur-

rency. Diplomatic missions are

established in countries for,

inter alia, promotion of politi-

cal relations, interflow of so-

cio-cultural activities, devel-

opment of business interests

and, above all, fostering

friendly relations among peo-

ples of respective countries.

Against this backdrop may we

suggest that the huge amount

text) pooled annually from visa

applicants be channelled to

such service sectors as having

direct bearing on the welfare

of less unfortunate section of

this country's population. Say

for example, a cardio-vascular

hospital, kidney disease hospi-

tal, a modern learning centre

for engineering and technol-

ogy, so on and so forth. The

money could not be put to bet-

ter use and no other effort

would match the good-will of

US government expressed to

much from a friendly country

Amar Ekushey

- when?

just, observed with due solem-

nity Amar Ekushey on 21st

February throughout the coun-

try. The early dawn of the day

this year too saw a sflent flow

of barefoot grateful millions

Sir. The proud nation has

257. Elephant Road, Dhaka

Will this expectation be too

Bangladesh.

M Gholam Mostafa

like US?

of money (in Bangladesh con-

By the rule of thumb it can

who are refused the visa.

By Eqbal Ahmad

to it. Apart from books, colourful posters portrayed in graphic detail the presumed atrocities and heroism of the Hindu-Muslim encounter in India. Narratives in prose and songs were also available by the dozens on audio cassettes. It seemed impossible to stem this tide of invented, poisonous history. To their lasting credit, the most eminent among India's historians openly and consistently debunked the rivivalists' claims, in the short run they had little success. Subsequently, their impact was not inconsiderable and the ire against them has risen in direct proportion to the decline of BJP and its ancillaries. "Inn historians kay five Hindustan men kot asthan maheen hat," says a ranking The phenomenon holds also

in Pakistan. There are, however, underlying difference between it and India. One is that during crucial periods of our history, governments have favoured the distortionist and actively discouraged historical research, instruction, and inquiry. The other significant difference is that because our institutions of higher learning rapidly deteriorated and also because our insecure rulers -Mohammed Ziaul Haq occupies the highest place in this pantheon - needed the crutch of inverted history, in Pakistan historians did not thrive and history ceased as a subject of serious study. Hence in Pakistan the inversions of history are greater and embraces such contemporary subjects as the birth of Pakistan and the views and personality of its founding father. But few subjects have suffered greater disfiguring as Islam and Muslim history.

On a daily basis Islam and its history have been invoked in Pakistan for more than four decades. Yet, during all these years neither religion nor history has been accorded serious attention in this country either from the state or society. I know of not a single noteworthy work on these subjects to have been published in Pakistan. The curriculum of deenyat, a compulsory subject in our schools and colleges, is almost entirely devoid of a sense of piety (taqwa), spiritualism (roohaniyat), or mysticism (tasswuf). At best it is cast in terms of ritualistic for-malism. At worst, it reduces Islam to a penal code.

As for history, any historian of Islam would shudder at what passes here for instruction in Islamic history. Three years ago, I queried an MA class in this subject at a major Pak-

proceeding towards the Shahid Minar, thence to Azimpur graveyard to pay their flowery homage to the departed souls of Shahid Salam. Rafiq, Barkat, Jabbar and many other brave sons, who sacrificed their lives to make Bangla sweet our state language. This was an unparalleled and unprecedented his-

Now, we are a free nation, a proud nation. We speak Bangla. we sing in Bangla, we dream in Bangla

torical event that a nation had

to shed blood for its language.

All these happened on the historical day of 21st February. 1952. But is it not a matter of shame, disgrace and great ignominy that the very Amar Ekushey, the glorious event of Bhasha Shahidan has to be observed every year on an English calendar date i.e. on 21st February. Why not on the right Falgun day. Should Amar Ekushey be not observed on the coinciding Amar Falgun

Abul Bashar **Mo**htu**ddi**n Dhaka Cantonment

ing countries.

Under his fancied broadbased agreements', perhaps he loves to see India in a role same as that played by Russia presently to Chechnya. But unmistakably Bangladesh is no longer a Pakistan, nor a Chechnya. If he is so much worried for 'artificial boundaries' that create 'unnecessary complications', he should put all his efforts first to remove such an artificial boundary between Russia and Chechnya and then all such boundaries separating the break-away republics to put the former

Dhaka

istani University. None of the 25 odd students there had an inkling of the issues which defined the first major schism in Islamic history — the Khawariji movement. None gave a satisfactory explanation of the Ash'arite doctrine and its place in Muslim theological development. And only one had an inkling about the Mu'tazila woh acchay log anheen thay. unki fikr men dahriyat ke anaasir thay (They were not good people. There were elements of atheism in their thought). We are witnessing, I had then thought, 'the end of history in Pakistan.' (Francis Fukuyama had not yet come out with his arcane thesis about history's end). I was wrong of course, for this sort of ignorance, being widely cultivated in our colleges and universities, can produce a history of sorts.

shall bear but a remote. formalistic relationship to the past, and provide no positive links whatsoever to the future. For the past is not being viewed critically of creatively in most post-colonial societies. Take the Muslim world as a whole. For three centuries, it has been in steady decline. Yet, few Muslim intellectuals have inquired with a degree of rigour and honesty into the causes of this decline. It is only when one identifies the problem that one seeks solutions.

The history thus produced

In the 19th century. Syed Ahmed Khan inquired loudly into the causes of Muslim decline; and sought to overcome it with reformist zeal. The little that the sub continent's Muslims accomplished in subseguent decades, they owed largely to his critical intellect. Similar efforts were made in the Olloman empire, and among Iranian constitutionalists of the late Qajar period. the Muslim tragedy is that subsequent generations failed to build meaningfully on this reformist beginnings

Politics are at the roots of this failure. For politics shape the intellectual environment. Isolated, illegitimate rulers no less than sectarian movements employ history and religion as ideological weapons and manipulative devices. Their appeal falls often on receptive ears. When the present is painfully replete with inequalities and frustrations, and the future holds little promise people, specially young people. turn to the past. The less they understand the past, the more they are prone to glorify, imagine, and invent it. The past then becomes the anchor of their hopes and their frustrations. The phenomenon is often, and wrongly I believe. identified as fundamentalism.

The author is a US based Professor of Political Science. who contributes regularly to newspapers in the Middle East and Pakistan He sent as this piece by tax

Looking back at March towards Independence

March 14, 1971

Zulfigar Ali Bhutto said that the Awami League had shown itself against discussion outside the Assembly, and its leader insisted on resolving all issues within the Assembly. In this context. Bhutto, asked why the Awami League had now come forward with four "conditions" that were decided outside the Assembly. He stated that his party had made the "utmost efforts" to arrive at an understanding with the majority party outside the Assembly on the constitutional issue, and "if the Awami League is not willing to this, we are

majority in the Assembly to frame Pakistan's comprehensive constitution which would ensure, the solidarity of the country and prosperity for its people. He urged Sheikh Mujib to ignore "advice and counsel" of those who had been rejected by the people in the last election. Meanwhile at a Press conference, the Baluch political

Mr Bhutto said his party was still willing to sit with the

leader. Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, called upon president Yahya Khan to transfer power immediately to the leader of the majority party, before the commencement of the National Assembly. After his recent visit to Dacca, he believed that Maulana Bhashani was the only leader who was in favour of separation of East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib, he felt, was interested in keeping the country united: "When Sheikh Muiib can rule the whole country, why should he be content with only half of it?" He said all four demands of Sheikh Mujib should be accepted.

Bugti also went on to criticise Bhutto, alleging that Bhutto had not even touched upon the constitutional crisis during his talks with Sheikh Mujib, but had confined discussions to "sharing power at the centre. He charged that Bhutto did not believe in democracy, was a product of dictatorship and would go to the extent of breaking up the unity of Pakislan to gain power. In a statement to the Press at Lahore, Vice-President of the Pakistan Democratic Party, Maj-Gen (rtd) Sarlaz Khan, suggested the formation of an interim representative Government at the Centre by the leader of the majority party "under the overall umbrella of Martial Law.

Begum Tahira Massod, a leader of the Bahawaipur United Front, addressing a public meeting in Karachi, urged the lifting of Martial Law and the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people. She «verely criticised Bhutto for his "provocative statements and undemocratic attitude." History, she said, would never forgive Chutto for creating this political crisis.

(Compiled by Rashida Ahmad)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'At Stake is the Credibility and Survival of Democracy as a System...."

Kazi Fazlur Rahman was an Adviser in the Interim Government headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. As a career civil servant, he served as Member of the Planning Commission and Secretary of various ministries including Energy, Education and ERD. He was also a member of the Executive Board of the Asian Development Bank. Following are his responses to The Daily Star questionnaire:

The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

Kazi Fazlur Rahman (KFR) The reason for the present stalemate is basically one mutual lack of trust between the party in power and the Opposition. Each side begins with a premise that the other side instead of really seeking a solution is really acting with deliberate deviousness. Sometimes it seems that the individuals speaking for the parties are more intent on scoring a debating point than resolving a real crisis. Leaders do not talk to each other; rather they, if at all, talk at each other. Sterile semantics and legalism - what constitutes a proper "invitation for a dialogue or when a "resignation" is not a resignation etc. - become more important than the substance. An ordinary citizen like me cannot help feeling that he is witnessing the acting out of a shadow play, and that in a slow

motion. The only way out is to bring about an early end of what The Daily Star Editor in a recent signed article aptly termed as "the dialogue of the deaf". In its place a proper dialogue befitting responsible and mature political leaders entrusted with the life and destiny of 120 million people must en-

The temptations to score points and being "clever-byhalf has to cease. Everyone must realise that what is at stake is much more than the chairs of office. At stake is the credibility and survival of democracy as a system of governance and a vehicle for the social and economic progress of the nation.

Government and the Opposition have to cooperate to end the present stalemate. Prime Minister's declaration of intent to talk, even if qualified by adding "if necessary", is a suitable starting point, and should be translated into concrete action without any further delay. Ask at random any hundred citizens on the street, and there is no doubt that at least ninety of them, regardless of party affiliations, will state that talks are "necessary" and right now. The onus for initiating a meaningful, serious dialogue lies with the government party as the senior partner in the democratic system. To allay any misgiving of deliberate dilatoriness, such a dialogue should perhaps have a definite

timetable. I believe that a basis for such a dialogue already exists. Prime Minister has already declared her intention to step down from her office before the general election. Leader of the Opposition has agreed to accept the President, despite his political affiliation, as the head of the government for a period immediately prior to and during the general election. In a sense, what other issues are still to be settled con-

stitute only details. Once an agreement is

worked out, legal or constitutional issues should not prove any insurmountable hurdles. There are more than enough highly competent legal expertise available in both the camps to give any agreement a legal cloak. In the last resort, even a reference to the Supreme Court for advice could be made, if found unavoidable.

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when it should be held - within the next few months, or later in the year, or at its schedule time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice. ' KFR: Timing of the election

should be a matter to be decided by agreement between the party in power and those in opposition in the course of the proposed dialogue. If the dialogue, heaven forbids, fails to produce any solution within the stipulated time-frame, the election has to be held as soon as legally possible. Even in the UK or for that matter other parliamentary democracies, there are not many instances for delaying elections till the last possible day.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

KFR: It is not how much independence or authority the Election Commission enjoys on paper, but how effectively it exercises the same in practice. It is doubtful if the constitutions of India or Sri Lanka bestow significantly greater power or authority, as compared to Bangladesh, to their ECs. Yet none can question their independence or authority, or the credibility of the elections conducted by them.

I feel that the Election Commission has contributed substantially to the current impasse by its unwillingness or inability to exercise effectively and consistently even the powers and authority it already

Even under the current laws and rules, every candidate is required with a stipulated date following the elections to submit full statements on his/her election expenses along with the sources of financing. Is it being strictly enforced? Has any action, as stipulated by law, been ever taken against any defaulter?

The current laws and rules further lay down restrictions on the sizes and colours of election posters and locations and sizes of the election camps. In how many cases the EC has acted, even before its very eyes in the city of Dhaka. against blatant violations in these respects? Has it ever tried to check the use of government vehicles or other official facilities sometimes being used by persons holding official positions while engaged in party election work? What about taking actions to stop al location of extra funds or other official largesse just before the election? Mr Sheshan in India

can do it. Will it be too much

to expect our own Chief Election Commissioner to have a try at it?

It is a sad fact that most CECs in the Pakistan days and afterwards in independent Bangladesh had dismally failed to discharge properly the sacred responsibilities entrusted to them. 'See no evil, and hear no evil' appear to have been their guiding principle. Quite a few of the Chief Election Commissioners had used their offices as the stepping stones to higher offices, even unelected political ones. Some other were found wanting, perhaps because of the lack of any administrative or managerial experience.

To ensure credibility to the independence of the EC, the Chief Election Commissioner on completion of his tenure must be, by law, disqualified from holding any electoral office or office of profit in the gift of any government. This exalted office should be his last one. The same should apply in case of Election Commissions, the post of CEC being the only exception.

Further, it has to be realised that conducting a national election is vastly complex and gigantic administrative and managerial task. This calls for much more than the finest of legal knowledge and ability to dispense justice in a court room. That is why India or Sri Lanka, even with their outstanding judicial luminaries, do not seek to find CECs from among the honourable justices. Yet, there has been no lack of confidence in these neighbouring countries in respect on independence or impartiality of the Election Commissions.

DS: How to formulate a code of conduct for political parties to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code?

KFR: A code of conduct is absolutely necessary. There are excellent models, already tested in practice, even in the neighbouring countries which could be adapted to our use Such a code must be enforce able under law. Serious infractions of the code should not only invalidate the election but also attract specific penal ac-

Cases relating to the breach of the code must be dealt with utmost expedition by setting up courts exclusively for the same. One reason why, even now, many candidates deliber ately commit election offences under the current rules is the knowledge that election cases take far too long to reach a conclusion. More likely than not, the electoral term will be nearly over by the time the fi nal judgment is rendered when even declaring his election void will be intructuous.

DS What are your views on the need for a computerised voters list and identity cards? Can we ensure fan elections without them? If we want them, what should be the time frame for elections?



KFR: Computerised voters' list and identity cards will surely help. But it would be naive to assume that these will solve all or even the major problems. What good will the identity card do if the voters are physically prevented from turning up at the polling centre? Or polling agents are not in a position to check and challenge any discrepancy between the face of the bearer and the face on the card? Or following the time-honoured tradition, ballot papers are just stuffed into the box? If all such practices can be prevented, a reasonably fair election can be conducted even before the identity cards are ready.

DS': We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the next election. What are your suggestions to make election funding transparent and accountable?

KFR: The most obvious solution is for the political parties to refrain from giving nominations to persons holding black money. Such individuals are not exactly unidentifi-

Election Commission has to be far more serious than in the past in enforcing the ceilings on election expenses and in scrutinising the sources of such funds. Black money is rarely used for direct outright bribing of individual voters. It finds its more effective use in hiring and equipping 'mastans" to intimidate the voters and terrorise the opponents. If the "mastans" are prevented from operating, the size and numbers of election camps are regulated, the rules regarding sizes and colours of posters etc are enforced, black money will lose much of its effectiveness.

DS: What are your views on the mechanism under which the next election should be held? What about constitutional amendments? KFR: My response to the first question. I believe, largely covers this.

DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political ruling party and the Opposi-

ing social and economic

understanding between the tion to ensure a free and fair election? Is such understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not? KFR: For the sake of the future of democracy and ensur-

progress of the country, there has to be not only understanding but also active cooperation between the ruling party and the Opposition The alternative is too grim even to contemplate And as I have already mentioned, the basis for such understanding already exists.

The man from Moscow

Sir. Because we have to be in possession, of our faculties we perhaps wouldn't be able to amount as deranged as Mr Zirinovsky were we given to answer his remarks in New Delhi. But if the man from Moscow was not altogether 'out', he should jog his memory to read that Bangladesh was freed in 1971 not to become 'acquired' or 'annexed' by any other state. This country is in dependent, sovereign, has its own international boundary and does not have any 'artificial boundary' with its neighbour-

USSR together!

Champak Barua