

Asia with Less Water

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has come up with a gloomy prediction for Asia. A severe water crisis is likely to spell a disaster for the region in 30 years' time.

Between 1955 and 1990, availability of water per capita recorded a decline by 40-60 per cent and we are already experiencing a water crunch. Starting from the capital to the north of the country, the ground water level has fallen between 10 and 30 feet.

Now here is a dilemma. Agriculture being the biggest consumer of water, an input that made the Green Revolution possible accounting for a doubling of rice production in Asia between 1965 and 1985, we are left with few options to wriggle out of the situation.

Following the second course voluntarily is unthinkable. In this case a better system of water management seems to hold the key. Water is more than abundant when we don't need it. But we are yet to make good use of the excess water during the monsoons.

HBFC Loans

On available indications, the House Building Finance Corporation (HBFC) has decided to reduce its rates of interest on loans, effective from January 1, 1996. Housing loan in the metropolitan area will carry an interest of 11 per cent in place of 12 per cent being charged now.

The one per cent reduction across the board may look somewhat negligible but it is not really so. After the first instalment of the repayment is made it will be deducted from the principal amount and it is on the remainder that a simple rate of interest would be charged.

There are going to be some other incentives, too. The grace period for loan repayment is being extended upto a full year. A borrower will start repaying one year after he has drawn the last instalment of loan.

The defaulting borrowers are being specially encouraged to avail themselves of this opportunity and clear their dues without ado. If those who have attracted penal rate of interest for delinquency start repaying their loans they will get a rebate of 50 per cent.

The HBFC had gone in a limbo due to the burden of unrecovered loans. Now that it is coming forward with a greater sense of reality — and hopefully, enough funds — it should be able to work smoothly.

Congratulations to Rotblat

Nobel peace prize citations have always held a special meaning and the one made this year has been no exception to this rule; except for the fact perhaps that it has had a sharp topical reference to France's nuclear tests.

The joint Nobel Laureate for Peace this year are Polish-born Octogenarian British physicist Joseph Rotblat and the anti-nuclear Pugwash Organisation, of which he is the moving force. It has been his life's mission like the late lamented Bertrand Russell's to campaign against nuclear armament.

Despite the end of the cold war era as we knew it, nuclear pursuits continue to feature in international politics in a perhaps more chaotic fashion than before in what is now a multipolar world.

France's nuclear tests bear a testimony not only to her nationalist ego but also to the hypocritical contradiction manifest in the world order. If the big powers have decided — as they seem to have — that they would need the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996 only after they have acquired their nuclear arsenals and perfected them to their full satisfaction, then they are surely taking the rest of the world for a ride.

We have great use for men like Rotblat today; for, he lends a moralist fervour to the cause for a nuclear-free world. Congratulations to Nobel Committee, Joseph Rotblat and the Pugwash.

Democracy, Crisis and Accommodation

by Dr Mustafa Chowdhury

When the institutions by which public opinion is formed and expressed begin to lose their vigor, democracy itself is in danger. Majorities and minorities must be free to give and take in the 'market place of ideas.'

DEMOCRACY is more than a way of governing; it is also an idea. Since ideas are the 'principles' which guide our behaviour, we shall examine democratic political theory as the pattern of ideas permeating our political activity.

All political theories are built on certain fundamental beliefs or assumptions about the nature of man, the nature of society, and the nature of politics. The democratic view of the nature of man is based on the principles of equality and humanitarianism.

Added to the concept of equality is the belief in man's humanitarianism. The concept of humanitarianism implies that man is capable of promoting the welfare of others, as well as himself, implying that cooperation is more basic than conflict.

The democratic view of the nature of society is based on the principles of individualism and progress. The concept of individualism asserts that societal arrangements are judged by their effect on the individual, who is valued more than any segment of society.

The democratic view of the nature of politics is based on the principles of majority rule and freedom of dissent. Majority rule is the fundamental operational principle of democratic government. It implies two things. First, it applies to the electoral process,

in that the candidate who gets the largest number of votes in an election becomes the representative for the societal unit. Second, it applies when the representatives make policy decisions.

However, the doctrine of majority rule is by no means absolute for not even the majority is competent to speak perfectly or permanently for all. For example, if a majority decided to abolish one of the basic freedoms, such as the right to speak freely, freedom of association, or the right of franchise, the system would cease to be democratic.

A corollary of the limitation on the principle of majority rule is that the minority will accept decisions of the majority as long as the majority does not violate such democratic values as political equality and the right to franchise. A political system ceases to be democratic if the minority refuses to abide by a policy decision of the majority or if the majority takes an extreme measure to suppress the legitimate rights of the minority and the people in general.

Therefore, the principle of majoritarianism itself implies the corollary principle of freedom of dissent. If today's minority were deprived of the right to try to become tomorrow's majority, majority rule in a continuing sense

would be dead. What is Democratic Government?

Democracy is one way of governing. Governing is always carried out by relatively few people in all systems, whether democratic or totalitarian. A responsible relationship between the rulers and the ruled is the distinguishing mark of a democracy. Those who rule must be responsive to the demands and needs of the people.

Democratic government depends on certain peculiar institutions, some official and some unofficial. For free communication of ideas, we rely on such agencies as the press, pressure groups, and the schools. A democratic constitution such as the one in the United States guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of press, and freedom of Association. When the institutions by which public opinion is formed and expressed begin to lose their vigor, democracy itself is in danger.

Political parties are the

unofficial institutions, and a free election system is the official institution. These are most essential for majority rule on a continuing basis. Political parties enable citizens to organize and win control of the political leadership positions, performing the key input functions of identification of interests and leadership selection. Elections give them an opportunity to seek these objectives peacefully and at regular intervals.

The crisis of democracy arises if the government cannot sustain legitimacy. Legitimacy crisis occurs if the government fails to promote socio-economic development, protect rights of the people including the right to exercise franchise. The present crisis of democracy in Bangladesh has apparently stemmed from the failure of the government to ensure free and fair elections. Elections provide legitimacy to the regime. If elections are not held properly and if the ruling party resorts to say, vote rigging, then the crisis of legitimacy emerges.

Mirpur, Bhola and Magura, opponents say BNP was involved in vote rigging.

The demand for a caretaker government has thus arisen as a result of the alleged manipulation of the electoral process by the ruling party. President Ershad was overthrown by a mass upsurge in 1990 for his involvement in rigging elections. Elections provide legitimacy to the system. Lack of legitimacy was the main cause of the mass upsurge. The only alternative to break the political stalemate, it seems, is to hold the elections under a caretaker government. The caretaker government may be headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, as Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League Chief, has suggested or it may be headed by anyone acceptable to both the government and the opposition.

The initiative to resolve the present political crisis should come from Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Under the parliamentary system of government, the prime minister is the most powerful person in the country. The government is the prime authority of the country and the prime minister is the master of the government. Thus the PM must feel the pulse of the

people and try to know true and genuine public opinion on matters which confront the nation. The PM should give the opposition a feeling that the government will not ride 'roughshod' over the wishes of the minorities. For all this, however, strength of character, gift of leadership, patience, tact and a devotion to principles are so essential that one must know what to say, when to say, and when not to say anything.

The failure to arrive at a solution will lead to the breakdown of a democratic political order. Therefore, the dialogue between the government and the opposition is essential to achieve order, peace and stability in the country. The consequences of failure to arrive at a consensus on the modalities of a caretaker government may plunge the nation into a state of confrontation, violence and anarchy. Both the government and the opposition should sit together immediately to solve the present political crisis. Such dialogue will only help establish the process of democratisation in Bangladesh. I would like to conclude with Harold Laski's observation on the importance of discussion in a nation to establish social peace. He writes: 'A society that is able to discuss does not need to fight, and the greater the capacity to maintain interest in discussion, the less danger there is of an inability to effect the compromises that maintain social peace.'

The writer is Professor of Political Science, Dhaka University.

A Referendum May Help Resolve the Present Political Crisis

by Ghulam Akbar Chowdhury

BANGLADESH is perhaps, passing through the most difficult period in its history. It seems a possibility that the hard fought freedom from autocracy that was won by the people in December 1990 may slip away once again.

Many reasons have been shown as to why the country has reached this hopeless state of deadlock. Perhaps, the primary cause has been the inability of the members of the national assembly to sustain the spirit with which they passed the 11th and 12th Amendments. More specifically, a few incidents would appear to be responsible for the wide chasm that has appeared between the viewpoints of the government and the opposition.

The first among them was Mr Nazmul Huda's remarks against the opposition members in connection with Hebron Mosque killings and the consequent uproar it caused in the National Assembly. Had the Prime Minister acted decisively following the opposition's demand for an unconditional apology from the Minister concerned, the opposition members would not

have boycotted Parliament for such a long time.

The second was the Mirpur and Magura by elections. The opposition made vehement protests against serious irregularities and vote rigging. In this case also, the personal initiative of the Prime Minister could have soothed the opposition's dissatisfaction by initiating discussions with them, even by agreeing to re-elections in those two seats. BNP had clear majority in the House. If, under a free and fair election, BNP were to lose a seat, they would have lost little but could have gained much needed credibility. And the opposition in return could not have come up with their present demand for election under a neutral, non-partisan government.

The third was the opposition's announcement in advance of an en masse resignation on 28 December 1994 if their dual demands of the resignation of the Prime Minister 30 days before election and elections under a caretaker government were not accepted. With no response forthcoming from the Prime Minister, the opposition was

left with no alternative but to resign on the 28th as promised. Yet, on the very next day, the Prime Minister announced her decision to resign 30 days before elections. Time was the essence in this case. The PM's announcement prior to the resignation of the opposition could have diminished the cause of impasse to certain extent.

Today almost all opposition parties have taken the position that free and fair elections cannot be held under the present government. They will not participate in any election which is not held under a neutral caretaker government. They further say that three consecutive elections of the parliament should be held under caretaker governments, headed preferably by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, as in 1991. They do not understand why BNP opposes the idea as it provides equal opportunities to all the political parties.

The Prime Minister, on the other hand, has been insisting on the point that her party has been democratically elected and her government

is different from the autocratic government of H M Ershad and therefore the same formula of caretaker government cannot be applied in the present instance. Yet she declared on 29 December 1994 that she would resign 30 days before the election, which clearly implied that her government would not be in power during election period. This means that she has virtually accepted election under a neutral government.

She has since stated in many public meetings that people have not given her the right to violate the constitution. But recently the Home Minister, Mr Abdul Matin Chowdhury, announced in a public meeting that Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury's formula of a caretaker government could be an acceptable proposition. He later said his statement was made on behalf of the party.

If we sit through the above, three clear points emerge: (1) Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina's demand that the PM must step down 90 days before election to pave the way for a caretaker government, (2) the

Prime Minister's decision to resign 30 days before the election, (3) BNP's tentative acceptance of the Mizan Chowdhury formula (as stated by Abdul Matin Chowdhury), which says that the PM will dissolve the Parliament, will resign her post, and refuse to accept the request of the President to continue as PM and accept a neutral person, agreed by the concerned parties, as head of the interim government.

Thus, the gap between the government and opposition is not so wide. A solution is possible. Why then is it not happening? Could the cause be a deteriorating relationship between the two leaders, which was revealed during the Prime Minister's recent discussions with the leading newspaper editors?

But then personal feelings cannot override the interests of the 12 crore people of this country. Because of the intransigent attitude of the political leaders, the poor people of this country cannot suffer and cannot be asked to make sacrifices by fasting during the hartal period. Both the opposition and the government are equally re-

sponsible for today's political impasse.

The Prime Minister has reiterated over and over again that people have not empowered her to violate the constitution. Surely, she can seek the people's verdict on this issue. It is clearly stated in Article 7 of the Constitution that (1) 'all powers of the Republic belong to the people' (2) 'this constitution is, as the solemn expression of the will of the people, the supreme law of the Republic'.

The verdict of the people can be obtained through referendum to seek the people's mandate to take decision on the current issue impasse. The Prime Minister may address the nation by saying that she is prepared to accommodate the opposition demand 'within the framework of the constitution'. And although they (the ruling and opposition parties) differ in view, they want a solution of the present political crisis, but since after resignation of the opposition, the present strength of the parliament members cannot amend the constitution, if necessary, she seeks people's mandate to settle the present political crisis.

I am confident that this will be a step in the right direction to resolve the crisis in question.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

'Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka Campaign'

Sir, As a resident of Dhaka City I want to congratulate 'The Daily Star' and its dynamic editor Mr Mahfuz Anam for taking the lead in organising the Citizens' Rally on 'Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka Campaign' on Friday before last (15 Sept), and following it up on last Friday (22 Sept) when hundreds of scouts and members of other youth organisations participated in cleaning up Dhaka city. This is in the right tradition of services to the community rendered through media set by Mr Anam's illustrious predecessor Late S M Ali.

The tempo already created to present a clean city to the citizens of Dhaka has now to be sustained and evolved into a regular conservancy system. This will be the responsibility of Dhaka Dhaka City Corporation, which is not going to be an easy job in which every household has to play a responsible role. Some suggestions: Every household has to learn and practise on a daily basis how to collect and sort out the accumulated garbage into polythene packets before they are taken to the nearest

dustbins. TV can play a major role in this learning process (b) The system of collection of garbage by trucks and its dumping at the dumping pits has to be substantially improved. The ugly sight of open trucks carrying the foul smelling garbage during traffic peak hours has to be stopped immediately. This essential work has to be completed before dawn everyday using covered trucks. Incentive payments should be given to those who would be made to work at odd hours before dawn for this purpose.

(c) Volunteers may be appointed in each mahalla/ward to assist in the cleaning work. Some such system is in vogue in Kalabagan area which may be closely examined for introduction in all the mahallas. (d) The services of garbage disposal experts from other neighbouring cities like Bangkok who could help design a sound system of collection and disposal of garbage for Dhaka city may be hired for as long as necessary. (e) Necessary equipments and machineries must be procured and manpower hired to make the new system work. If it needs extra budget, the money could be raised by adding a nominal

amount, say Tk 5/-, on the city corporation rate per assessee per year. (Nobody should mind paying this small amount as long they find a distinct improvement in the city's conservancy system.) (f) A bio-gas plant using garbage is reported to have been recently commissioned in Dhaka. The possibility of multiplying such plants should be examined on a priority basis. (g) Search for alternative sites for garbage dumping in future should be started immediately.

Mahmood Aminul Islam Dharmondi R/A Dhaka

Cleanliness of Road 26 (old)

Sir, The Citizens' rally on 'Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka' is a focus on a common issue not only for dwellers of this capital city but also for all the citizens living in other towns and cities of the country. This is a laudable but long felt initiative — an initiative for creating awareness among people regarding keeping the vicinity clean and live in a healthy environment. I welcome the organizers of the rally for their initiative and believe that it will leave a sustainable impact on our mind to keep our own city clean.

What can I do for keeping Dhaka City clean? I believe my first responsibility is to keep my own vicinity clean through which I come and go everyday primarily for my

own interest. Let me put forward cleanliness status of an area which I frequent almost everyday.

Our office has been shifted to Road No 26 (old) of Dhanmondi R/A. Unlike others, condition of this road in Dhanmondi is highly deplorable in terms of its cleanliness and construction. Everyday, as I enter this road, I ponder what are the reasons for which the cleanliness conditions of the road is so bad? I find two main reasons — firstly lack of care of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and secondly missing awareness of local people. No footpaths, bad shape of the main road for long time negligence in maintenance, small ditches all over the road depict lack of DCC's care. On the other hand, due to lack of awareness of local people, garbage are found scattered around the garbage hoarder at the vicinity of Satmasjid road hardly keeping any space for pedestrians to enter the road and spreading bad smell continuously. The condition further deteriorates if it rains.

When we talk about cleanliness of an area, we find two sides involved — local dwellers and the DCC. While the later is accountable for keeping the city clean, the citizens are responsible to help them carry out cleaning operation smoothly. For road 26 of Dhanmondi, like many other areas, we find both sides are responsible for the prevailing awful condition.

DCC's part is to repair the road and ditches so that water do not clog, create footpaths for safe walking, remove garbage regularly, vis-a-vis, the local dwellers have to cooperate with DCC people so that they can perform their duty smoothly. But nothing operates as desired. It is needless to mention, these services from DCC are citizens' right for which they pay taxes. It is observed that many garbage-droppers from the households come all the way near the garbage reservoir and throw the garbage around though the reservoir is big enough to hold all daily household-filth. The garbage cleaners of DCC finds it difficult to remove scattered dirt and as a result dirt remains uncleaned causing innumerable sufferings to the pedestrians including school children and patients.

The pitiable picture of a posh area as portrayed above is a common picture of the city. To revert this unacceptable picture, the Citizens' Rally, unlike other rallies, has triggered series of actions. Let us all make these actions successful and cooperate with the volunteers who have shown their commitment in keeping this capital city clean. In this regard, DCC's role is most vital. I echo with the editor of The Daily Star that the DCC should avail the now-created citizens' sentiment of maintaining cleanliness and convert the sentiment into concrete actions. The scouts are already in ac-

tions. I hope the local citizens and the DCC authority will take appropriate actions in connection with cleaning road No 26 of Dhanmondi R/A for mitigating sufferings of pedestrians among whom there are school children and patients.

Md Muklesur Rahman Dharmondi R/A, Dhaka.

Erratic power supply

Sir, Pisciculture Housing Society under Mohammadpur Police Station is a very large housing area consisting of about 700 plots. In this area, we do not have much problem with water supply and gas, but electric supply is very erratic, particularly at night disruption of electricity causes immense problem. The worst-affected are the inhabitants of Road No. 1 and 2 of the area. On many occasions, it was observed that power supply in the entire area was available excepting Road No. 1 and 2. When this occurs, it takes about one to two hours to restore the power supply. On enquiry, it is ascertained that a 200 KVA transformer located at Road No. 2 gets overloaded and creates problem.

With a view to solving the electricity problem of the area, I fervently request DESA to replace the transformer with a higher capacity one and thereby mitigate the sufferings of the people of the area.

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