

Monetary Policy

Nonplussed by a current account deficit of as low as 1.2 per cent of the GDP, Bangladesh Bank should not be driven to tighten its monetary policy any more than it has already done. This seems to be the sum and substance of the advisory note, the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry has lately put across to the Bangladesh Bank.

The 'comfortable' forex reserve, a pillar of strength for macro-economic stability, is in for a decline due to the rising import bill. Food procurement from abroad worth US 1.4 billion dollar had already exerted an inflationary pressure on the economy, but this is likely to ease when the winter harvests reach the homes and markets. However, the shopping list for consumer items need to be curtailed. So, basically we are for an import approach to come on top of the current account deficits and thereby reduce the depletion of our forex reserve. The other approach consists in continuing the upward trend in the export performances so as to fetch more foreign exchange to the national exchequer, especially when remittances from overseas have reached an inelastic point.

We have already expressed a concern that the rise in the interest rate would increase the cost of funds leading to a constriction of investment and productive activities. On the other hand, we may not be a guaranteed beneficiary of a devalued currency. Some of our key export industries which are supposed to gain from devaluation rely on imported raw material that would cost them more owing to a depreciation in the value of our currency. So, even devaluation would not come in handy as a solution to inflation, unless of course, we have had a productivity-based addition to the strength of our currency.

That is a long term view of things depending for its redemption on political stabilisation and healthy bipartisanship in basic economic affairs. In the meanwhile, could we expect the Bangladesh Bank to exert its influence in recovering some of the outstanding loans with the public sector while the scheduled banks did their best to mop up the arrears from their private sector debtors?

Dangerous Indiscipline

Compared with the week-long hartal, the 72-hour hartal was supposed to be less eventful. But this has been somewhat belied by the assorted incidents of provocation, intimidation and violence that marked the first day of the strike. Even on the night before the first day of hartal unnecessary violence erupted creating an environment of panic.

The message of the hartals sought to be conveyed by the main opposition parties to the party in power has seldom been ignored. This time the opposition could expect to draw the people's attention even more because of the persisting lack of understanding between it and the ruling party which goes on still negating the prospect for a fully-contested general election, so near at hand. The spirit of confrontation so very evident on both sides appears to be misplaced. We urge restraint and tolerance across the board.

Some opposition activists are not obviously abiding by the publicly announced spirit of the movement. Attacks on vehicles go against the spirit of any pro-people struggle.

Opposition's democratic right to protest must be respected. But that cannot be used as an excuse to commit excesses, which we have witnessed in the last two days. There are evidence that all opposition activists are not as disciplined as the situation demands. If the movement should intensify, then these elements will have to be brought under strict control. Otherwise, indiscipline may overtake the movement.

Rokeya's Legacy

Begum Rokeya's services to the women-kind, indeed to the humanity, by an extended implication, have had such a transcendental recall value that a single day's commemoration of these can hardly be an exhaustive tribute paid to her. This is how we would like to evaluate the observance, yesterday, of her 115th birth and 63rd death anniversaries, her advent and demise having been both on December 9, in an extraordinarily momentous fashion. Then we feel inclined to recommend that her legacy be internationalised as part of the heritage of the sisterhood of global women as heralded at the Beijing conference on world's women.

Rokeya's ideals for women's emancipation, voiced a full hundred years ago, basically for the sake of the educationally backward and societally shackled Muslim Bengali women, have a relevance to this day in two specific ways: First, there are still backward societies dotting the globe where prejudices rankle; and secondly, even in terms accomplishing women's rights in sophisticated settings her messages can be useful.

What is so very appealing about her impassioned calls to the women? Obviously, it is the logic behind these that make them so forceful. "Educate yourself," she said, adding that education led to economic self-reliance and freedom from the stranglehold of prejudice.

SOME of my foreign friends who take a friendly interest in the affairs of this country like to believe that monitoring of elections can achieve wonders in ensuring fair polls. They are pinning their hopes on "FEMA": Fair Election Monitoring Alliance. Their faith in this newly established body is very touching but hard-boiled observers of Bangladesh politics attach little importance to these initiatives.

A coalition of NGOs, they reason, is no match against the vast powers and resources of a government. A few months ago these foreign friends believed that the strengthening of the Election Commission was the secret of success in guaranteeing free and fair election. They do not talk much these days about it because the conduct of this august body in recent months has left no doubt in any body's mind that it is nothing more than a handmaiden — a pliable instrument — of the ruling party.

Indeed this is how it has always been under the military autocrats who ruled the country since August 15, 1975. The dictators chose their men from amongst the exalted rank of the Supreme Court judges but their profession or rank did not affect the outcome. The governing party always prevailed. Regrettably, the present Chief Election Commissioner, ever since his appointment, seems to be doing exactly what his predecessors did: cooperate with the government in using the Election Commission as an instrument for staying in power. In some of the crucial issues, he has given little evidence of independent judgement. His actions seem to reflect precisely the electoral plans of the ruling party.

The circumstances leading to Mr Sadeque's appointment was significant. Political circles in Dhaka but especially the donor community believed

Was it proper for the prime minister and the ministers who accompanied her to use government funds and state facilities for a journey which was quite clearly the opening gambit of her election campaign? If so, what action has been taken against them for their improper conduct?

that the appointment to this high office could be an important confidence building measure if the BNP government would consult the Opposition before making the selection. This would be a proof of its good faith. Indeed such consultations might have opened a new opportunity for dialogue on the central issue of the crisis.

But the government made the appointment without any consultation with the opposition. Disappointed at the unexpectedness of the decision, the donor community fell silent. Justice Sadeque, in his turn, made a number of naive public comments which did not reassure anyone about his competence. Political circles were intrigued at his reported remark that he accepted the appointment simply because it was offered to him! It did not occur to him that the post he was being offered was no ordinary government post but one which carried heavy responsibilities under the Constitution. When he realized, after accepting the job, that he could hardly fulfil his mandate without the confidence of the opposition, he said he would resign if the opposition parties did not want him. Well, the opposition parties do not want him but he is still clinging to the office!

Soon after his appointment it became clear why this gentleman was chosen despite the opposition's publicly expressed lack of confidence in him. In a move, that appeared to political observers, to be geared to help prolong the BNP government's life, he deferred the by-election in 145 seats vacated by the opposition members. The reason given was floods. Justice Sadeque must be a seer or a 'darvesh' because he could foresee the coming floods

months ahead of their actual occurrence. Admittedly there were floods in certain districts, but only a few constituencies at a time were affected. Yet Mr Sadeque took shelter under an act of God. In this he seems to have followed the Speaker who disgraced his office by acting the way he did.

Why did the Chief Election Commissioner announce the election schedule without awaiting the outcome of the negotiation between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition? Was he asked to go ahead with the elections regardless of the outcome of

election without all the opposition parties representing nearly 70% of the electorate would have either moral or political validity and legitimacy.

The government of India, if one may recall a recent Indian experience, decided to hold election to the Kashmir state assembly regardless of the security situation there. According to press reports, the central government wanted to hold the polls in order to facilitate a political settlement in that disturbed state. The Chief Election Commissioner of India, Mr Seshan went to

long and may even compound the political crisis. Unfortunately, he decided to shut his eyes to these hard political realities.

The 5th Parliament was dissolved by the President on 24 November. This is a significant date because the process of electing the next parliament within the next 90 days begins on that date. With the dissolution of the Parliament, all the members including the Prime Minister lost their seats in the House and under article 57 (1) (b) of the Constitution the office of the Prime Minister fell vacant. Though requested by the President to continue as Prime Minister under the enabling provisions in clause 57 (3) and 56 (4), there can be no doubt that the present government's mandate to govern expired with the dissolution of the Parliament. It is a long established parliamentary tradition that such caretaker governments only carry on the routine business of the government and refrain from acting in a manner which prejudices the holding of the free and fair election. If the government violates this well known principle, the Election Commission is empowered by the Constitution to take appropriate action. But when the Prime Minister went on a grand election tour by train, using state resources, the Chief Election Commissioner did not dare ask a single question about the misuse of state funds and facilities for party propaganda. I ask the Election Commission the following question: Was it proper for the prime minister and the ministers who accompanied her to use government funds and state facilities for a journey which was quite clearly the opening gambit of her election campaign? If so, what action has been taken against them for their improper conduct?

Perhaps more important for ensuring the impartiality of the administration are the re-

ports about hundreds of last-minute transfers and promotions being made. Not only the opposition parties but even neutral observers and columnists have written so much on this issue that the Election Commission should have been sensitive on the question. Despite reports about back-dated transfers and promotions, nothing seems to have been done to counter this flagrant attempt at abusing the civil administration of the country for promoting the interests of the ruling party.

There are reports from every part of the country about the defective and incomplete electoral rolls. According to some estimates, as much as 15 to 20 per cent of the voters have not yet been entered in the list. Further, most of the lists have not yet been printed. Yet the Election Commission went ahead to declare the election schedule in a hurry. Why? Is it because that is what the BNP strategists wanted?

The inaction and lack of initiative on the part of the Election Commission on these issues simply highlights the basic contention of the opposition, namely, given the legacy left behind by the military autocrats, neither the Election Commission nor the administration will function impartially during election time under a party government. All these bodies will behave properly and reasonably impartially only if the government is neutral and if the government is determined to ensure the fairness of the polls. Thus the conduct of Justice Sadeque is a part of the basic malaise.

The political culture must undergo a change and this cannot be achieved in just one general election. For this we have to work patiently and accept the slight inconvenience of a neutral non-partisan caretaker government for three months prior to the general elections for the next three or four elections. Is this too big a price for ensuring political stability and for giving democracy a fair chance to take root in the country?

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



The efforts to reach a negotiated settlement? If he was not asked to do so by the government and if he acted on his own, then it only confirms the widely held impression that the gentleman, despite his years in the bench, does not have an understanding of the political processes of this nation.

The Prime Minister wrote her 4th letter to the President of Awami League on 2 December and the election schedule was announced on 3 December. The Chief Election Commissioner does not seem to have any patience with the correspondence between the two leaders. Is it possible that he might have had prior knowledge that the exchange of letters was doomed to fail? If he really wanted to ensure the election to be a proper democratic exercise, he would have surely exercised his judgement to determine if an

Kashmir, reviewed the security situation in the state and decided that it was not possible to hold a free and fair election in Kashmir at this time. This, if I may humbly point out to Justice Sadeque, is how an independent Election Commission functions.

Justice Sadeque ignored the political impasse. He ignored the nationwide movement for a free and fair election under a neutral, non-partisan caretaker government. Why? Are these not relevant factors for the general election? His commitment to make the election meaningful and fruitful should have been total. If all the parties except the ruling party boycotts the election, its purpose will be frustrated. His first priority ought to have been a prior settlement of the outstanding political crisis. A 1988-type election, he should have known quite well, would merely pro-

Ershad's Last Address

I was trying to recollect what President Ershad told me precisely 54 hours ago in the helicopter. He was back to his old game of deceit and bluff — now again planned to cling to power. Cronies and favourites who thrived and deeply entrenched around Ershad had taken full control of Ershad.

He had seriously damaged his credibility in the past by repeatedly breaking commitments, assurances and understandings. Under the present circumstances, it would be difficult to convince them even of his honest and good intentions. I mentioned about his last address of 27 November '90 in which he blamed India for the disturbances in the country implying that Opposition Alliances were getting help from her. He admitted that it was inappropriate but Prime Minister Kazi Zafar insisted to include it in the address just to divert public mind. That was, of course, an old practice in the subcontinent to blame neighbours or USA or Russia for anything going wrong in the country. On reaching President's office the President went straight to his room. I found Vice President Moudud Ahmed and Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmood and few others connected with the speech writing waiting for him.

I never knew that the final fate of Ershad was being cast so fast on that day. I also did not know that main features of his offer of resignation was already decided and those were something different than what he discussed with me on 1 December '90 on board the helicopter. The draft speech was probably prepared earlier at night. He called Mr Moudud Ahmed and Mr Anisul Islam Mahmood for discussion. They remained in the President's

office till final recording of the address. At one stage, Mr Mizanur Rahman Shelly, Minister for Information, joined them. I was more or less confined to my office, only once he called me to tell that TV and Radio recording arrangements to be kept ready in his office at 6:30 pm. Maj Gen Ashraf Hossain, DGNSI, meanwhile, joined me in my office and remained seated there. He seemed very confident of the whole situation. I knew that he was aware of the future plans and activities of the President but did not



FALL OF GENERAL ERSHAD

by Maj Gen Manzur Rashid Khan (Retd)

ask him anything. After some time, Brig Nasiruddin, DGFI (Director General Forces Intelligence), also came to my office and took seat beside Ashraf. They left my office when they learnt that President's address would be recorded at around 6:30 pm.

Vice President Moudud, Minister Anis and Shelly were busy in finalizing the speech in the lady's room next to my office. Around 12:30 pm the President came out of his office room and past through my room up to the lady's room. As I joined him, he asked me who were there. I told that three of his ministers were busy in finalizing his speech; he peeped through the half opened

door, smiled and turned about before they could join him. I walked upto his office room door. I found him relaxed and very confident. When I took seat, the ADC rang me on intercom informing that I should keep the ministers busy inside the rooms as the President would leave office incognito. He often used to go out of office stealthily; purpose and place of visits were only known to a few of his trusted aides. This was one of his routine secret trips either for pleasure or to meet some opposition politi-

cal leaders. But it was more apparent that he sneaked out for pleasure. I was utterly shocked to see him going out of office when the country was united to oust him. I felt disgusted and left office immediately for my residence leaving the ADC, the Vice President and the ministers in the office. Before leaving, I informed Mr Toab Khan, Press Secretary, to keep TV and Radio recording crew ready in President's office at 6:30 pm. It was also decided that the address would be broadcast at 9 pm.

When I returned to President's Office around 6 pm, TV/Radio persons were busy in setting their recording equipment. Mr Moudud and

two other ministers were still in the side room. I met them and talked about progress of speech writing. They said that it was complete and being printed finally and Mr Shelly was translating it into English. I found there was some elements of unusual secrecy being maintained by all involved in the speech writing. The Vice President and the two ministers did not leave the President's Office and I did not see any other JP leader around President Ershad at that time. I still do not know if anyone else was involved in the crucial decision-making process. Gen Ashraf came after some time and sat down giving a look of confidence and authority. I was feeling eager to see the draft. I talked to Lt Col Saif, President's Private Secretary (PS), through intercom to know if the draft was ready. It was ready and he sent an English copy to me straightaway. While I was reading Ashraf stood beside me and read quietly. I read the text twice but could not believe what was in the final speech that would be broadcast in less than two hours time! I was trying to recollect what President Ershad told me precisely 54 hours ago in the helicopter. He was back to his old game of deceit and bluff — now again planned to cling to power. Cronies and favourites who thrived and deeply entrenched around Ershad had taken full control of Ershad.

President Ershad sat down for recording after taking light makeups. This was the second time during my presence, President's address was recorded in this office. He was feeling little shaky and had to rerecord certain portions a few times over. Total duration of the speech was about 13 minutes. While recording I stood there for some time then returned to my office. My mind was boiling on hearing texts of the address and the blunders he was making. I felt helpless and miserable. On 1 December he told me that he would leave the presidency to any person nominated by the Combined Opposition and would not contest in any election, even would quit politics. And now he said that election for the Parliament and President would be held on the same day. He would be a candidate of JP in the presidential election and would leave the office only 15 days before submission of nomination papers. I wondered how could he think that his opponents would step into his trap again. In the last nearly nine years period he betrayed many political leaders including some who joined his party. I had no doubt in my mind that he would not succeed this time. After discussion with him on 1 December I thought Ershad had come to senses and believed his sincerity, hoped the country would be spared of disorder and saw some rays of hope for peace and progress. But what a dangerous turn he had taken now! He had lost his senses and had taken very damaging decisions.

Tomorrow: Ershad's Last Address-II

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.

Internet and Bangladesh

Sir, While participating in the discussions following a live demonstration of Internet working sponsored by the Ford Foundation in Dhaka recently, it struck me as unfortunate that we Bangladeshis, only for want of a 'server' are not yet directly on the worldwide Internet linkage system. Our neighbouring countries, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are already availing the economic and other benefits of instantaneous global linkage (graphics, video and sound) while those who have an electronic mail (e-mail) address in Bangladesh can link

up only three times a day as we have to go about it indirectly.

Internet messages are much cheaper than faxing. For instance, my brother, an engineer in New York, needs to pay only the charge of a local phone call within New York city to contact my sister in Dhanmondi via the Internet. Once Bangladesh gets directly on the Internet, we will be able to send messages to New York paying the charge of a local Dhaka telephone call (less than two taka) only.

At present, the five or so firms in Bangladesh offering electronic mail addresses to their customers charge about eight taka per page. The fi-

nanial advantages of the Internet for indenting agency houses, diplomats, geographically separated fiancées and all others needing a lot of foreign correspondence do not need to be elaborated upon.

As a retired technical executive, I request all scientific intellectuals and others interested to urge upon the T&T Board and other bodies concerned to do the needful about this matter.

I look forward to more letters in newspapers about the subject mentioned in this letter.

Syed Mahub Ali
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For free and fair election

Sir, Now that the Election Commission has announced the schedule for the next general election, we expect

our politicians, whether in the ruling party or in the opposition, to jointly work out the mechanism for holding free and fair election and participated by all parties. Mutual trust, long range vision and, above all, patriotic zeal are demanded of them at this crucial hour. Let it be remembered that the electorate did not commit any mistake in the past. Let this factor dominate their thinking and dispel mistrust and bring them closer to understanding.

The EC on its part should go all out to ensure experimentation of the recently formulated code of conduct for election-seeking candidates. It should work without fear or favour and try to emulate the achievements of Chief Justice Shahabuddin's Interim Govt in ensuring a free and fair election unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh.

Peace has, therefore, to be ensured, by peaceful means, through Presidential Order and Decrees and their faithful implementation. Else, peace will have to be ensured by other means, if deemed necessary, to help the nascent democracy survive and help the 'emerging tiger' to come out of the cage in the economic field.

Down with anarchism!
Long live democracy!

Kamal Uddin Ahmed
Crescent Rd
Dhaka

Recalling the past

Sir, The month of December's typical cool and dry weather, the clear blue sky with scattered thin white clouds, remind me of the last days of our struggle for independence. During this time, 24 years ago, most of us were 90 per cent sure of the

much awaited independence. So many years have gone by, but I still remember climbing up the roof top with friends and neighbours, both elderly and youngsters and excitedly watched dog fights of aircraft. The sad part is, many friends did not care much to see the country grow but opt for overseas, taking the opportunity of the fresh green passport.

I suppose, for some all that excitement meant something more! And those who all along remained in the country should nevertheless be contained and quite happy with whatever things have been offered. I believe and I am optimistic like anyone that the country is going through a certain phase of time. Let's hope and pray that things soon get better for all of us here in the country. The supreme sacrifices made 24 years ago must pay off any-time even if it is late.

K Viqar Motruddin
Dhaka