

# 'Bangladesh Election '96 : Prospects and Possibilities'

The author writes in reply to the article written by M M Rezaul Karim (Dec 13) on his (author's) piece published last week (Dec 10).

As the ruling party prepares for its one-party election, its protagonists are naturally getting busy in justifying its actions. However, the article by Mr M M Rezaul Karim, a dear friend and colleague of many years, intrigued me. While he did not justify the one-party show, he said things which are likely to confuse the readers. For instance, no one questions the action of the President in asking the Prime Minister, after the dissolution of the Parliament, to continue to take care of the routine tasks of the government. However, there can be no doubt that the parliamentary mandate of the BNP has ended, Mr Karim's comments justifying the actions of the Chief Election Commissioner are not based on an objective analysis of the implications of the measures taken by the latter. Mr Sadeque's television interview on 13 December did not throw any new light on anything; it only emphasized his helplessness in coping with a situation for which he was not prepared.

Mr Rezaul Karim started well by pinpointing the motive, at least of a sizable number of BNP candidates, in supporting the one-party show. He rightly said, "A few of them (BNP nomination-seekers) are even elated at the prospect of becoming a law-maker with minimum efforts and expense." Yes indeed! This is how the vast majority of the people view the current exercise by BNP. Mr Karim also rightly pointed out that the "majority of the people, however, have become highly tense and are held in suspense at the prospect of an election without the major political parties participating in it due to lack

of resolution of the on-going political crisis." I appreciate his honesty in recognizing that an election without the participation of the major political parties will be a farce. Indeed, no one except those blinded by greed and lust for power, can ignore the political reality. But what he said subsequently in his article tends to give the impression that the steps taken by the government and the Election Commission are justifiable effort to promote democracy and political stability. I disagree with him there as I consider the steps taken to be ill-judged and motivated by narrow partisan interests and not the interests of the country.

Much has been made about the Prime Minister's loyalty and devotion to the Constitution of the country. Fidelity to the Constitution is very commendable but it is ironical that it was her husband, the founder of BNP Gen Zia who made extensive and fundamental changes in the constitution while he was the military ruler of the country. What was the purpose? He wanted to legitimize his rule. As regards Begum Zia, one may ask where was her much-vaunted respect for the Constitution when the Speaker disregarded the Constitution in the full view of the nation and came up with an illegal ruling to frustrate the resignation of the Opposition members and thereby prolong the life of her government? Since she was a beneficiary of the violation, she did not deem it necessary to defend the Constitution. Did she not violate

article 70 of the Constitution in enticing members of Parliament of other political parties? Did she not violate her oath taken under the constitution when she misused her official position in Magura by-election? Even very recently, did she not violate her oath in misusing the facilities of the government including those of the Bangladesh Railways in undertaking an election campaign tour at the cost of the public exchequer? There are so many actions of a ques-

tionable character that the point about her respect for the Constitution lacks credibility. She has been talking about it because it serves her purpose. She is prepared to go for a phony election in the name of the Constitution because this will enable her to cling to the office of Prime Minister, even if the election is rejected by the vast majority of the people. The disastrous path of confrontation and conflict that she has chosen proves her greed for power and not her loyalty to the Constitution.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



As regards the Chief Election Commissioner's decision to postpone the by-elections by three months, Mr Rezaul Karim was quite candid in admitting that it was "a matter of judgement on the part

of the Election Commissioner." The funny part is that the Chief Election Commissioner's judgement, in this case, is exactly what the ruling party wanted in order to prolong its tenure. What an interesting coincidence! Justice Sadeque seems to have the uncanny capacity to anticipate the acts of God! Innocence and naivete will not cover up his subservience to the government.

The Prime Minister wrote her last letter to the President. It is proceeding as if it has not even heard of the national demand for election under a neutral, non-partisan caretaker government. If it was sensitive to the prospect of a "walk over" by the ruling party, it would have taken urgent and strong steps to nullify the last-minute frantic effort by the ruling party, to arrange transfers, promotions and distribution of grants and relief goods etc to suit its electoral plans. The press was writing about it and even the civil servants themselves were getting fed-up with the BNP manoeuvre to politicize the civil administration.

Under articles 120 and 126 of the Constitution, the Election Commission has been provided with a strong mandate. Could it not make a public demand that such transfers be stopped forthwith? Is it aware of the newspaper stories about the scramble in the secretariat by the BNP candidates to get the officials of their choice transferred even by issuing back-dated orders. It is disgusting even to read about the level to which BNP government leaders including its student and youth leaders have descended to put pressure on the government servants to serve their party interests. It is against such abuse of the government machineries by the ruling party that the Opposition has been agitating for the last two years. Yet this is exactly what is happening today. I was puzzled to read Mr Rezaul Karim's hope that the Election Commission will prevent "undue reshuffling of public officials with the real com-

## CHILD LABOUR

### Toiling in the Hazards of Bidi Factories

by Saleem Samad

As the shadows descended on a quiet village of Haragachha in Rangpur, in northern Bangladesh, Maleha Khatoon, 28, and her eight-year-old boy, Idris, wrapped the last bundle of bidis hastily and asked the manager to pay their dues. During her day-long toil at the "bidi" factory, Maleha's other infant, a one-and-a-half-year-old girl, clung to her lap sucking milk. The infant's tiny chest heaved in and out with great efforts.

The reason for today's haste is that Maleha will see the village quota to get some medicine for the ailing child. She had been treating the girl with a talisman from spiritual charmers.

"My baby was quite alright when she was born," says Maleha, "but I had to bring her to the bidi factory and she developed this breathing trouble."

Her other child, Idris, also coughs vigorously. The dry whirlwinds in the lungs sound too horrible for a child of his age.

Maleha, with scores of other workers aged below 15, works in a suffocating factory making bidi—a cheap kind of smoking stick for millions of rural and urban poor.

Tobacco blended with liquid molasses and artificial fragrance is used to roll bidis in conical-shaped paper. Each bundle of 25 sticks is wrapped with a tax band and sold at Taka 2.50. Because of the low price, the sale of bidi is soaring high with seven billion sticks marketed every month. Approximately 35 per cent of the sale proceeds go for wages while the rest to factory owners.

kilometres from her village home to the factory. Her father lies invalid at home and Joshna had to take the job in the bidi factory to support the family. Incidentally, she is the only earning member.

In return for making 4,000 bidi in eight hours, she gets a miserable Taka 52 a day for her work. But alarmingly, she has developed breathing problems.

Ahmed Ali can sign his name. He had to quit school and start working. His wage has not increased since last five years and earns Taka 52 a day. Except an additional Taka 200 as festival allowance, he enjoys no extra facilities. He is not entitled to any medical and overtime allowances.

Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, a network of NGOs working with children to do a study on child workers in bidi factories. With the study, the Forum envisages to prepare strategy for lobbying for public policy on child workers in extremely dangerous jobs.

It was found through personal interviews, that most of the children suffered from breathing problems, coughs, chest pain, throat congestion, nasal irritation, headaches, asthma etc. The poorly-ventilated factory rooms, filled with tobacco dusts, is the main reason for the workers' health complications. When the children fall severely sick, they have to take leave without pay.

Child abuse is rampant in the factories whenever the workers make any mistake in their works. It seems that the child workers have accepted it as part of life.

For vast majority of employers child workers are a boon, being the cheapest source of labour available in the market and totally submissive to forces of exploitation. Employers find children more amenable to discipline and control," remarks Ishrat Shamim, the researcher at the Forum. Her recent study observes, that the participation of children in the workforce weakens adult wages and employment and is thus a factor aggravating poverty, that forces them (children) to work. Rangpur is best known as the tobacco-growing area of the country.

Touhidur Rahman, 42, a farmer from Gangachara in Rangpur says though tobacco-farming is seasonal, it has given them the ability to cross the threshold of poverty. His family can have two square of decent meals, children go to school and have their own handpump for drinking water.

With sales turnover of Taka 700 million a month, the bidi producers have emerged as new generation elites. These people, once voted to Parliament, exercise their political strength in the corridors of power. However, factories never get any attention from the Parliament.

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A common scenario in the formal sector, bidi-making in Bangladesh is mostly done by child workers and women. Besides they being docile, the employers also hire children and women because they are sincere and reluctant to join labour unions.

The "Employment of Children Act 1938" enacted by British colonialists and subsequently amended in 1955 states, that no child who has completed his or her fifteenth year shall be employed or permitted to work in any occupation. The "Factories Act of 1965" is more exhaustive.

The law prohibits employment of children below 14 in any factory. No child or adolescent shall be required or allowed to work in any factory for more than five hours a day.

In the sweltering heat, the children and elders are crammed into nauseating rooms with poor ventilation and insufficient light. Most factories lack hygienic toilets and safe drinking-water facilities.

Squatting on the floor spread with bamboo mats, Joshna Begum a 13-year-old girl-worker and Ahmed Ali, a boy barely in his teens along with 500 odd workers roll 200,000 bidis a day.

Joshna Begum walks five

# Land and Destiny : Recommendations

by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin



A nation of nearly hundred and twenty million people simply cannot be wiped away. Given all the adverse situation within and without, Bangladesh cannot afford to miss any chance or effort to break loose from its present quagmire. Industrialisation is the obvious answer. But as we have observed the experience of other countries it rarely happened without generating surplus from agriculture, either through market mechanism or coercion. Given Bangladesh's land ownership pattern, its geo-political position and very limited internal as well as external markets for its agro products, scope for generating surplus is limited. However, despite all odds and despair, Bangladesh can take note of lost opportunities, resolve to march ahead with clear, calculative, vigorous effort. Following are few recommendations to revitalize Bangladesh's agricultural sector and her destiny:

1. Agricultural sector must get topmost priority while allocating national as well as borrowed resources. Power, communication, irrigation, fertilizer production and distribution, storage and all other related infrastructural facilities in the agro-sector should be handed over to private sector with strict governing regulations as early as possible.

2. General policy should be to refrain from intervening with free flow of flood water as much as possible.

3. Peasant owners of all sizes ought to be treated as the engine for generating surplus. Their individual initiative should be assisted by the following facilities: a) Nationalized Banks which are overflowing with funds should make every possible arrangement to provide easy but closely monitored credit at the doorstep of the farmers. b) All agro sector extension units of both the government and non-government agencies should be directed to provide necessary technical skills to farmers who are risking investments. c) Existing bureaucratic services in both the sectors are totally inadequate. It can be made efficient by turning their services competitive—i.e., result oriented and incentive basis. d) Encourage diversification of agro products to provide incentives to fisheries, poultry, dairy, vegetable growers and tree plantation. e) Government at least initially must protect internal market by selecting and limiting agro-imports. Moreover it should also take initiatives to explore possible external markets. f) A constant provision of rewarding farmers for surplus production should be introduced.

4. Law of inheritance which fragments land ought to be amended. A possible mechanism without taking away the right of inheritance could be the formation of both private and public limited companies. Ownership of even a decimal of land can be secured by handing over ownership rights to the company in exchange of receiving equivalent number of shares. It does not require any stamp duty. In addition, the government can take the initiative to either waive or drastically reduce the registration charges in such cases.

Instead of buying or selling land one can always buy or sell shares of the company.

This way, farm holds can remain viable units without having to divide land into small patches. Management of the companies will remain accountable to both the shareholders and the public audit.

5. Government should take over ownership instead of custody of vested and abandoned land immediately and give permanent settlement of the same along with khas land in accordance with already declared criterion. An additional criteria will be, companies should get priority in getting allocation.

6. Strict law should be introduced against keeping any land fallow whether in flat terrain, water bodies, chars or hills.

7. Sharecropping or renting

of land should be discouraged. Absentee or non-farming owners should be encouraged to join the nearest company which is willing to take charge of farming the land. As shareholders, non-farming holders must also bear responsibilities in investment and profit/loss. Provisions should be made for landless workers to purchase shares by providing a stipulated amount of labour.

8. Keeping land records properly can be made easy by the following measures: a) Keep all title deeds, thana sub-registrar's office. b) Keep copies of DS, SA and RS parchas and mouja maps at Union Tehsil Office. c) Make mutation less cumbersome without entangling a whole clan. d) Any dispute concern-

ing the records and titles should be settled on the spot at village courts headed by a judicial magistrate. All male and female members of that particular village above the age of eighteen will be members of the court. Right of appeal to higher court will be allowed only after review of another court at Union level.

9. Basic as well as applied research should be vigorously pursued in all fields of agro-sector. People involved in research must be able to produce results of better, higher and locally suitable breeds and technology.

10. Water-logged regions, specially in the southern and south-western part of Bangladesh can be turned into gold mines by introducing corporate management of the wetlands. Shrimp culture as well as white fisheries have tremendous potential in these water-logged regions. By floating public or private limited companies where small ownership would be secured from piracy of robber barons at the moment. Of course, only laws will not suffice. Simultaneous social mobilisation will be an equal necessity.

11. All above measures if implemented properly will very

naturally attract a lot of fresh investments in land. It will absorb a lot of large number of surplus labour. However, this may not be sufficient. Industrial investments will have to take place simultaneously. Agro-based industries should get priority. Moreover, enterprises who are willing to make direct investment in agro sector through formation of companies and taking land owners rather than farmers as shareholders, which will obviously minimize capital cost to a great extent, should be promoted with all possible incentive by the Government.

12. Finally, no amount of sound macro policy has guarantee of proper implementation without a strong, transparent, accountable and, of course, elected local government bodies. Quite naturally, it will not come about without a central government with the same characteristics: A government which will stand up to western pressure with courage and introduce essential subsidies in vital agro sectors.

The author, a development expert specialising in land issues, is working in rural areas for over two decades.

## A Family Planning Success Story

A population programme's effectiveness depends on its ability to meet people's needs and provide ever increasing quality of care. Operations research is widely recognised as an effective mechanism to enable programmes to achieve these objectives. International organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often have the potential to conduct operations research.

Through the experiences of the Matlab and MCH-FP Extension Rural and Urban Projects, these workshops aim to discuss and analyse actual interventions tested and scaled-up to the national level in order to arrive at programme management strategies relevant to the participants' own countries.

The Matlab and the MCH-FP Extension Projects: It has been often argued that it is extremely difficult to increase contraceptive use in conditions of pervasive poverty and economic stagnation. Bangladesh has all the characteristics which result in low demand for contraception. The contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) in the country has increased from about 7 per cent in 1977 to nearly 45 per cent in 1995.

The role of the NGOs in the field of family planning has been an important one from the beginning. They first introduced the concept of family planning in Bangladesh in 1953. The



NGOs are viewed as innovators, and are expected to evolve designs and models for service delivery. MIS, training, IEC, community participation, and for creating social norms and values for a small family. They are attempting new ways of effectively reaching specific target groups. Since a decision was taken to expand the NGOs to the rural areas of Bangladesh, NGOs have increased rapidly, with current estimates of over 500 NGOs with 7,000 field workers working exclusively in the areas of maternal and child health and family planning.

The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) provided an early demonstration in its Matlab field area that it is possible to increase CPR and reduce fertility in poor socio-economic settings through an effective programme effort

which is based on sound operations research findings. In the Matlab field area, the CPR increased from 7 per cent in 1977 to about 64 per cent in 1995.

The project areas have experienced increased CPR levels and fertility declines which are higher than the national programme but lower than the Matlab area. Also, many of the service delivery and management innovations tested in the project areas have influenced national policies and programme management. Increased worker population ratio, management information system, and door-step delivery of injectable contraceptives are three major examples of field tested innovations which are being implemented nationally.

Workshop Objectives: The objective of the workshop is to learn from Matlab and Extension Projects experiences about the interventions tested and scaled-up to national level.

The specific objectives were — to share the programme-related research findings of the ICDDR,B in family planning and reproductive health which have been applied in NGO and government service delivery setting for improved programme outcomes.

To study the unique and various innovative family planning and reproductive health activities of the NGOs in Bangladesh which contributed to significant improvement of the national family planning and MCH programme in Bangladesh.

To identify effective family planning and MCH programme design and strategies to enhance improved management, with special emphasis on the emerging norms of quality of care.

Participants and Funding: The participants of the workshops held in 1994 and 1995 consist of programme managers from international organisations and NGOs, and policy and operations researchers from Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippine and Vietnam. Funding for this workshop is provided by Japan and the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh — Centre for Health and Population Research

