

Postponed Again

As expected, Election Commission has, for the third time, postponed the date of the general election and along with it the dates for nomination and of scrutiny. The nation heaves a sigh of relief as the politicians get some more time to work out a negotiated settlement. Let us understand clearly that the postponement gives us some time - very limited at that - to find a solution to the problems that have bogged us down for the last two years. By all calculations, this is the last postponement that is possible without violating the 90 days limit put by the Constitution. So now the negotiations will have to be in earnest.

It is our view that in addition to the issues being complex and highly politically charged, what has made a solution difficult is the fact that serious negotiations did not take place between the contending parties on a continuous basis. After the organised negotiations facilitated by Sir Ninian, what we had were mostly ad hoc attempts. People met on their own, most often without knowing clearly the minds of their respective leaders. A small hint here, a comment there and some elaboration at a third place were the stuff that negotiations consisted of so far. Press reports also added to the confusion because each of us tried to weave out a story from fragmented attempts that took place.

We, therefore, suggest that to make the best use of the extra time provided by the postponement, attempts must be made by both sides to start serious negotiations on the residual problems. For that purpose we propose a Roundtable of the leaders of both sides. Let us sincerely thank the US Ambassador for his effort, but take up the rest of the negotiations on our own. We propose leaders of the three opposition parties and those of BNP should sit around a table behind close doors and not end the meeting till a negotiated agreement is arrived at.

About the two points where the talks are stuck, this is how we think they can be resolved. About postponing the elections after Ramzan, let the President immediately seek an advisory opinion of the Supreme Court. If the Supreme Court says 90 days limit cannot be crossed then the matter should end, and the opposition must agree to go to polls within the time limit. If, on the other hand, there is a way to postpone till March, then BNP should agree to it. About the power of the chief of the Advisory Council, we believe a power sharing formula can be worked out, in which the 'chief' is given executive power for matters pertaining to the elections, while the President can retain executive power in all matters of running the State and the government.

Import Performance

The Bangladesh Bank statistics on imports during July-October period give a warning to be quality conscious about our shopping list for the remainder of the current financial year. This is because the spendings went somewhat haywire not only in the volume but also in the pattern. While the total import bill for the period topped the previous one by as much as 43 per cent, obviously entailing that much larger a foreign exchange expenditure, it is the direction of imports that give us some worry.

Quite clearly, consumer imports surpassed previous levels with a massive car purchase edging out against the backdrop of emergency food imports. Then, one notices a sharp fall in the procurement of production goods, especially industrial raw materials. Capital machinery import on the whole increased but only marginally. The saving grace is discernible in the higher volume of cement and textiles machinery imports.

An expanded import bill needs to be counter-balanced by good export receipts. This did not happen during July-November period when import spending was US dollar 2798m as against an export earning of dollar 1583m.

More to the point, however, is how the valuable foreign exchange has been spent; and this is where the figures for July-October as cited above speak for themselves in the clear manner.

There could be a plea that not all the consumer imports were made by a deliberate choice and that there were compelling reasons for resorting to these - as in the case of food import, for instance. Yes, we agree some of the imports were inevitable; but what about a proportion that could be avoided. Besides, what has been reflective of industrial stagnation is the inadequate purchase of production inputs in the July-October quarter. We are keenly awaiting a change in the direction of imports effected through consultation with the trade and industry bodies of the country.

Out of Rhyme

Fireworks and cracker explosions were a demeaning distraction to the noble spirit of Shab-e-Barat. Despite a prior public announcement to avoid these, younger Dhakaites, in several parts of the city, clung to this aberration with scant regard for either the sacrosanct of the occasion or the hazards posed by their unbridled conduct. Given Dhaka's present density of population to the very nooks and crannies of the sprawling residential areas, one almost trips over a cracker set alight or gets hit by a swishing missile as one passes by.

The casualty figure this time around was telltale enough, with 50 persons being wounded while engaged in the activity. Out of them, some 12 were said to be in a critical condition. Much of this was avoidable.

The police hardly thought of stopping it at the source. Explosive material was allowed to be piled at familiar places. These should have been raided upon to pre-empt manufacture of crackers. Furthermore, they lost the opportunity of making amends for it when they failed to make action at the seller's level.

Next year on, policemen and community workers should make it a point to nip the extremely unhealthy festive mood in the bud.

Poverty Alleviation and the Saga of the Macroeconomic Illusion

Low rate of inflation was said to be the secret of the government's macroeconomic success. They cleverly suppressed the fact that low inflation and low growth rate are the classic symptoms of a sluggish economy.

FOR all practical purposes the BNP government's five-year tenure has come to an end. The Prime Minister and her ministers are breathlessly laying foundation stones of all kinds of assorted buildings and bridges to create, one presumes, the illusion of growth and development. They should realize however that one cannot conceal failure that easily. There are well established scientific methods to assess the economic performance of a government which cannot be concealed by clever propaganda. Our people are intelligent enough to know that with the general elections knocking at the door, the foundation laying ceremonies are nothing but publicity stunts.

Let us take up the issue of poverty alleviation. After all, this is not only a matter of electoral commitment, it is also a fundamental state policy enshrined in the Constitution. Article 14 of the Constitution says, "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to emancipate the toiling masses - the peasants and workers - and backward sections of the people from all forms of exploitation." Did the "toiling masses" - the peasants and workers - get a fair deal under the BNP government? Was there any significant improvement in their standard of living? According to the Independent Review of the Bangladesh Development carried out by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the real wages in the rural sector in 1993/94 was Taka 17.40 per day. In 1985/86 the corresponding figure was Taka 21.19 per day. In reaching this conclusion the Independent Review had taken into account different methods used for measuring poverty. Statistical data shows a clear decline in the real wage level in the farm sector reflecting an intensification of rural poverty. According to a Bangladesh Bank statistical survey based on a sample of 2250 households, released in February 1995, 34% of the households were deemed to be below the level of the 'hard core' poverty line in October 1994. Compared to this, 30.4% of households were living below the poverty line in 1991/92 and 21.5% in 1985/86. The Independent Review has also quoted the Hellen Keller International Survey which reported a sharp increase in 'distress sales' in the rural areas as between October 1993 and October 1994. Data on underweight children in 1994 show their percentage at around 74% which was the highest point since October 1992. More research and current data is needed to

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



of the Bangladesh Bank has also said that the statistical method used to measure inflation is defective. The size of the foreign exchange reserve over which the Finance Minister was often so effusive is due to stagnation in investment which in turn led to import repression. The myth of price stability has now vanished into thin air because today the rate of inflation stands at no less than 9% and may actually be even higher. According to figures released by the Consumer's Association of Bangladesh (CAB), in 1995 the consumer's price index rose by 11.76% and the cost of living index rose by 7.38%. Last year the corresponding figures were 9.55% and 4.50%. The increase in consumer's price index has clearly hit the poor the hardest. According to CAB the prices of vegetables increased by 35.14%, spices by 27.53% and house rent in the slum areas by 40.81%. In 1994 the price of rice increased by 26.32% and in 1995 it registered an increase of 17.25%. The cumulative increase in the price of rice over the last two years is 43.57%. This can be easily confirmed by a visit to the nearest market or by digging into the market report of the daily newspapers in 1994 and 1995. Obviously the crushing burden of the additional cost of daily necessities without a corresponding in-

crease in disposable income is more than what the ordinary people can endure. Indeed the critical situation of the farm sector under the BNP government is a subject which deserves to be examined in a separate article. The sharp rise in the price of rice and other food items has no doubt led to a further fall in the already low per capita intake of calories among people living below the poverty line.

The size of our foreign exchange reserves was another subject on which the BNP government harped on endlessly, as if it could claim credit for it. Actually our RMG exporters and the Bangladeshi expatriates should be thanked for the healthy trend in foreign exchange earnings. However, the low import bill reflecting the stagnation of the economy should be considered the main reason for the reserves which reached the peak figure of \$3.4 billion in April last year. The end of the BNP rule coincides with a steady decrease in the reserves which has now plummeted to \$2.64 billion. Mr. Saifur Rahman must be a sad man to see his macroeconomic house of cards crumbling down even before the BNP rule comes to an end.

There are several other macroeconomic variables one could examine to determine the performance of the economy. Revenue collection has increased but the factors responsible are most complex and are certainly no reflection of higher efficiency of the BNP government. ADP implementation which largely depends on the team work, decision-making capacity and overall efficiency of the government is a better yardstick to judge the performance of a government. In the first five months of the current financial year only 23% of the allocated fund was utilized compared to 16% last year. According to reports released by official news agencies, the BNP government is satisfied with 23% utilization of the ADP in five months! Some should tell the government that their threshold of satisfaction is very low indeed! What about the programme of privatization does not talk about it these days because his performance in this field has been so dismal that the failure of the government in this field including the reform of the fi-

nanial sector is now an accepted fact of economic life. I am told the number of industries privatized in five years is less than a dozen! What about the recovery of loans from the defaulting borrowers?

The BNP government launched a paper campaign early in its tenure for loan recovery but over the last five years the 'default culture' has become another fact of life under the BNP rule. According to the Bangladesh Bank governor, the banking sector advanced a total of 37 thousand 4 hundred 70 crore Taka as loans to both the official and private borrowers. Of the total, 29% or 11 thousand crore is considered to be bad loans. The number of loan defaulters whose loans exceeded 10 lacs is 12 thousand. This is what the BNP government is bequeathing to the nation after its five year tenure. Who granted these loans? Was it not the first BNP government of Gen. Zia which started the process? It is certainly not a pretty picture. The rapid disbursement of project loans in the last few months is a clear signal of politically motivated decisions on loans by the NCBs. One may justifiably ask the Finance Minister: why this unseemly haste? Even if you do not give an answer, the nation can make a shrewd guess. You have been rewarding people with politically correct connections with hefty loans from the NCBs.

Corruption, politicization of the administration, large-scale extortion by ruling party musclemen together with a break-down of law and order combined with a long drawn-out political impasse over the demand for free and fair elections under the aegis of a neutral and non-partisan caretaker government were among the dominant issues during the five years of BNP rule. However it is the BNP government's incompetence in managing the economy that will have no less of an adverse impact on the long-term fortunes of the nation. Five years of BNP rule has not only led to the intensification of poverty but the rising trend in food production has taken a negative turn. We are back again in the world market for rice. The prime minister perhaps does not know that slogans about 'dal bhat' do not put more rice in the pot, the nation has to produce more rice and other food crop if there is to be a significant improvement in calory intake.

As regards the economy, it will take years to regain the ground lost. History will no doubt return the verdict that the poor became poorer under BNP rule.

would bring the matter to the notice of his authority. He replied, "Please do, I am least bothered."

My patience finally paid off when few more voters came to the place and the obstinate photographer took our picture after nearly an hour.

Well, the above is not just to express my feelings about the process of redtapism and ill-manners involved in the production of ID Card but also to make a pointer to the state of affairs existing in the designated camps for the purpose. The EC often speaks and set rules for the code of conduct of the politicians during elections but I shall draw the attention of the CEC to the apparent absence of any code of conduct at the ID card booths and seek his timely intervention to mitigate the sufferings of the ID Card-seeking voters.

So long many Palestinians did not believe that Israelis would ever vacate their occupation; they thought Washington Declaration was in paper only. But with Palestinian self-rule authority taking over towns after towns in the West Bank including Bethlehem and Ramallah along with Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilia, Tulkarm they could see in reality the implementation of the peace declaration. Credit goes to Prime Minister Shimon Peres. He means business; he wanted implementation of the peace agreement and indeed he did it ahead of schedule. Yitzhak Rabin's assassination brought about this change in the Middle East peace process. With Rabin in charge, implementation staggered and could stagger again. It is

Let Bethlehem Peace Prevail



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

HERE could be no peace - no Christmas in Bethlehem if the city was ever returned to Palestinians. These were the types of talks from Israelis that poisoned the ears of Christians in Bethlehem for most of 28 years of Israeli occupation. But world has observed the serene and joyful atmosphere in Bethlehem during the Christmas night under only four days old Palestinian self-rule there. The report from Bethlehem said, "The carnival atmosphere sharply contrasted with the more subdued celebrations of Christmas under 28 years of Israeli occupation." Seventy-year-old George Tajjariyeh from Bethlehem said, "I've seen Christmas in Bethlehem under British, Jordanian and Israeli rule, but now it's our special day. This is the best Christmas I've had in a long long time."

Chairman Yasser Arafat, accompanied by his wife Suha, born as a Christian but later converted to Islam, and four-month-old daughter Zahwa joined the Christmas celebration at Bethlehem. Indeed, Arafat occupied the first row of the 1600 years old Church of Nativity built on the spot where it is believed Jesus Christ was born nearly 2000 years ago. The first row of the Church used to be occupied during Christmas night by Israeli generals but this time the Israelis were barred from entering Bethlehem.

The observance of Christmas in Bethlehem with full religious fervour in total peaceful atmosphere has not only removed suspicion and mistrust of the Christians but also speaks of political maturity, cooperative attitude and security management sense of the Palestinians. Now the Palestinian self-rule extends to an area which is just two miles away from the outskirts of Jerusalem which the Palestinians are determined to see as the capital of Palestinian State. When the Palestinians can be trusted security-wise within two miles of Jerusalem, Palestinians in East Jerusalem should pose no threat to the Israelis. Indeed, with the extension of self-rule in the wider areas of West Bank, the incidence of terrorist attacks has dramatically fallen. As the world can see, Palestinians' attitude towards Israelis is becoming friendly as the Israeli occupying forces are increasingly vacating their occupation. Even Hamas terrorists have virtually stopped attacking Israelis. Many Hamas activists are turning moderate. Though Hamas has not publicly announced its participation in Palestinian election on January 20, 1996 which will elect 86 members for Palestinian National Council, it said, it would not oppose the election. Indeed, various reports indicate that Hamas would ultimately participate and many Hamas members may contest election as independent candidates. Thus one can detect gradual acceptance of the peace process by the peace opponents and the gradual shift of attitude appears to be the result of vacation of occupation by the Israeli forces.

So long many Palestinians did not believe that Israelis would ever vacate their occupation; they thought Washington Declaration was in paper only. But with Palestinian self-rule authority taking over towns after towns in the West Bank including Bethlehem and Ramallah along with Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilia, Tulkarm they could see in reality the implementation of the peace declaration. Credit goes to Prime Minister Shimon Peres. He means business; he wanted implementation of the peace agreement and indeed he did it ahead of schedule. Yitzhak Rabin's assassination brought about this change in the Middle East peace process. With Rabin in charge, implementation staggered and could stagger again. It is

Shimon Peres who is the real architect of ME peace and he ultimately got the opportunity to implement it under his own authority.

Though it may sound somewhat unkind, it seems that the assassin Amer indeed made a mistake as his crucial action has removed a hesitant Rabin from crucial areas of decision on vacation of occupation and indeed turned less committed Jew towards peace more probably out of shock and on the sense of revenge. Rabin's assassination gave Shimon Peres the opportunity to work on nation's sentiment and push forward his vision of ME peace.

Israeli general election is only a couple of months away. But the very forthright declaration of Shimon Peres that peace is more important than his winning election indeed greatly increased the changes of his victory in the next election. He also moved ahead with the proposal of total withdrawal from Golan Heights in exchange for total peace with Syria. His recent address to the joint session of US Congress most of which was devoted to ME peace received widest support from the US Congress.

His open call to Syrian President Assad to come forward with open mind and without precondition for negotiation worked well on Assad. Peres indeed faced no-confidence motion in the Knesset which he won with a comfortable majority of 57-48. This indeed gave him the real strength to pursue the present peace negotiations with Syria which is now taking place in Maryland, USA. This is a real chance for President Assad. He will never get so much of openness and flexibility from the Jewish State. He should grab this and go for total peace that will ensure total withdrawal from the strategic Golan Heights with security guarantee from the US. Assad must give full assurance to Israel that he would not allow Hezbollah and other radicals to operate from South Lebanon. In return Israel must also withdraw from its self-declared zone in South Lebanon. Only such an arrangement can lead to comprehensive Middle-East peace.

But comprehensive ME peace would obviously depend on the ultimate solution of the problems between Palestinians and Israelis. The progress so far in this front is encouraging. But the most difficult negotiations lie ahead - the final status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian statehood, etc. As it seems, everything would depend on how Palestinians behave and organise their self-rule in the liberated areas. Palestinians must continue to show political maturity. They must act in such a way that would give sense of security to the Israelis including the settlers. Chairman Arafat's call to the Palestinians during his visit to the West Bank to respect their Jewish neighbours was very timely. The sense of insecurity of the Israelis who are surrounded by the Arabs is indeed the most destabilising factor. The Palestine and only the Palestinians can help remove that sense of insecurity and this would also vindicate Shimon Peres's stand on peace in the Middle East.

Peres said, "Give me peace and I would give up the atom" acknowledging for the first time that Israel has atom bomb. This only shows how serious he is about peace in the Middle East. Israelis must feel that they do not need security through much debated "separation" of both the populations. The conditions must be created where two populations could live in peace side by side with full security and protection. Let Arafat declare that along with Rabin family he and all Palestinian people adopt all Israeli families and work effectively to live as neighbours with honour and dignity.

all year. The opposition parties, whose term in Parliament lapsed after 90 days absence, have been demanding national elections under a neutral caretaker government, while the government insists that the elections have to be held according to the Constitution. The issue has to be resolved soon, and we hope it will not be done through violence on the streets. Please ask the Prince of Peace for a little help in this matter - a minor miracle will do."

Would all the parties considering the greater national interests please sit together and resolve the existing political crisis through sharing each other's feelings and sentiments?

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OPINION

EC and Code of Conduct

H K Chowdhury

for getting photographed. Alas! The expected photographer was not there and no official could tell us his whereabouts. I waited for half an hour and left the place in utter disgust.

I again went to the camp after about an hour and saw a young man carrying a camera was loitering around, and found two to three persons, supposedly voters, sitting on a bench in a room. I sat beside them and politely asked the man with camera if he was the photographer. He replied in the affirmative. After a while I again asked him why he was not taking

my picture. He replied that there should at least be eight persons for one snap shot and as the 'quorum' was not complete he would not take my picture. I brought the matter to the notice of the attending policeman that how long it would take to take a photograph and should I be harassed that way. He suggested nothing after listening to my plight.

At that point, I gave my identity and told the photographer that I had some important pre-occupation but he did not pay any heed. Being totally disappointed at his behaviour I told him that I

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.

BTV's performance

Sir, Television is an effective instrument of entertainment as well as a valuable medium of instruction. BTV telecasts various types of programmes every day. Among these programmes news, debates, drama, magazine programmes, band music, educational programme etc are mostly enjoyed. BTV has taken some strategies to make it popular. For instance, it telecasts drama (weekly and serial), magazine (weekly) under package programmes which are quite enjoyable. But recently, BTV is telecasting the serial drama

'Nana Ranger Dingul'. Every drama has its own goal which keeps the TV viewers interested continuously. But what is the goal of this drama which cannot be understood? Further, the magazine programmes 'Shuvachcha' and 'Cinema' are telecast on Friday once a month. These two programmes are not enjoyable and instructive. Fun, quiz etc are presented in the 'Shuvachcha' which are not of good quality and not instructive. And the magazine 'Cinema' presents some songs of Bangla films which are not pleasant. There is no more or less difference between 'Cinema' and 'Chhay-

achhanda'. Besides, weekly drama and magazine programme of Friday are telecast on the next Sunday and Wednesday respectively. This is nothing but spoiling time by BTV.

M Ariful Alam Arif
BBA, 3rd Year
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Four stroke leaders

Sir, Bangladesh can produce 4-stroke Mishuk auto-rickshaw with majority of the engine components locally fabricated; but why the Mishuks (and other 'baby' taxis) are not fitted with fare meters?

The majority of the auto-rickshaw licences are fake. Everywhere we see rackets of defiance to administrative discipline. How long shall we remain a 'street' nation? Our leaders do not know how to sit and talk? Let us have 4-

stroke leaders! The current leaders emit too much smoke, which is not good for political health!
A Husnain
Dhaka

Just for the records

Sir, I refer to Mr Waliur Rahman's article on Christmas, the other day. Just for the records, he has stated that Jesus Christ was crucified and killed. This is essentially a Christian belief which we as Muslims cannot subscribe to. The Quran which is the last of the Revealed Scriptures states otherwise viz. 'Surah Nisaa Ayat 157'. "And because of their saying: 'We slew the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, Allah's messenger. They slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a

conjecture; they slew him not for certain." Surah Al-Imran Ayat 55: "(And remember) when Allah said: O Jesus! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me, and am cleansing thee of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow thee above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then unto Me ye will (all) return, and I shall judge between you as to that wherein ye used to differ."

We are, however, one with our Christian brothers with regards to the belief that Jesus (may peace be upon him) will return one day.

Wasif Islam
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Ponder a little

Sir, I would like to reproduce here the last paragraph from letter written by Father R W Timm CSC which read: "We have had a national