

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 clearest 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's 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

Election Commission's (EC) much talked-about holding of free and fair elections has perhaps entered the process of fruition with the beginning of its task of producing Identity (ID) Cards of the voters. This newest and noble effort on the part of the EC got underway few days back in the city with the voters reporting to their nearest camps set up for the purpose. The voting population reacted positively to the idea of possessing ID Cards to cast votes smoothly that would partially or wholly negate the age-old phenomenon of vote rigging.

As expected, after listening to the announcement through mike in our locality, I went to the camp on the 6th of January for being ensured of an ID Card. I reached the place in time and completing necessary procedural formalities, queued

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

confirm the above conclusions about the deterioration in the poverty picture but available evidence is certainly a matter of concern. It is undeniable that the BNP government has actually presided over an intensification of poverty in the country.

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increase 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 Bengali 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

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 calorie 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

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card booths and seek his

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