

Guilty in 'People's Court'

Only fools would be calculating who won and who lost from the move towards one-plus-fringe party election. Nobody won. Democracy lost, the country lost, each one of us, individually and collectively, lost. If there is anything called the 'people's court' then both sides stand guilty before it, for betraying our trust, demolishing our hopes and destroying our dreams of building a vibrant electoral process which, we had hoped, will throw up a new generation of political leaders capable of leading us into the 21st Century. In its place we find ourselves still chained to issues and conflicts of years past, and victims of a personality clash that has, by now, crossed all limits of reason and commonsense and, some may even say, of decency.

We find our leaders guilty of an all-consuming political ambition that has made them blind to the interest of the nation, and its millions of destitute inhabitants. However couched in democratic and constitutional rhetoric their posturing may have been, two years down the line, we can see them for what they really are — ruthless and naked ambition for political power, in the attainment of which nothing can be allowed to stand.

In spite of mounting evidence we refused to believe that it will all end without any understanding. Day after day we desperately hung on to the slightest gesture from either side to discover some positive meaning in them. As and when the two leaders — Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina — met on a social occasion we anxiously looked at their faintest smiles and tried to read a positive note in them. But today we realise that our worst fears were only our own — never for a moment shared by those whom we had placed on top as leaders.

It does not take an opinion survey to find out how deeply wounded and disappointed our people are. However, the question needs to be asked, where do we go from here? We would like to say it with all the strength in our command that the election towards which BNP is heading will neither amount to a verdict of the people, nor will it give it any additional power to solve the political crisis that we face. It will only raise the stakes higher, forcing a longer period of violence and conflict upon us. Begum Zia needs to seriously reassess her position. In a different sense, so does Sheikh Hasina. That is if they really want to make any positive contribution in our future development.

Traffic Jam

Who do we turn to for solution of our traffic problems? We have pleaded and implored so with no avail. What do we do now? Roads are like arteries and veins in our bodies for circulation of blood; without blood circulation the body will die, we will die. The simile may sound a bit too dramatic but in reality it is not. The promise of an urban centre is that its inhabitants must be given the facility to circulate. Unlike villages or semi-urban locations, the need to move about in a city is like the need to breathe. People live in a city because governmental decisions, trade, commerce, industrial production and all other activities occur in the cities. And for all that we need usable roads. Every city spends billions to build good all-weather roads. And so have we. But now we are creating all sorts of road blocks to prevent the very purpose for which we built those roads in the first place.

Presently our roads are under seize from several sources. Hawkers are occupying it in many areas. Government and the DCC blame each other and do not take any action hoping thereby to get their votes in the coming elections. Roads are also occupied by vendors who take up whatever space is left over by the hawkers, and since they are a floating group they tend to come more and more onto the road. Then there are the garbage bins in many spots that itself take up a lot of space. Adding to all these is the occupation of roads for political rallies, religious functions, party activities, etc. Even the business community's apex body, FBCCI, held a function occupying a major avenue creating serious dislocation of city traffic.

The question of the day is, are we just going to look the other way as city traffic becomes impossible? Traffic of high growth, as we have in many cities of South East Asia is one thing. But intolerable traffic because of misgovernance, incompetence and negligence is quite something else.

Cold North

Although TV weather bulletins show that the coldest days are yet to be here, people are dying sporadically from cold in the colder districts of the north. Only on January 16 two persons died in Kurigram from exposure to cold — biting at 7 degree Celsius and made chillier by an incessant drizzle.

In fact the whole of our northern region is now all frigid and life comes to a standstill even in the daytime. It was 6 degree Celsius with drizzle at Panchagarh the same day and it was the same picture at Rangpur.

It is not cold that kills a human being. The culprit is exposure. With neither clothes nor fire to keep one warm, the cold wave picks up the shelterless as the more vulnerable. There is no way to know if deaths haven't taken place in affected areas besides Kurigram but of the undecipherable suffering caused to the poorer sections of the population there is no doubt. People are submitting to cold in their individual entities with society standing beside uninterested.

Why shouldn't the schoolhouses be offered to the shelterless to protect themselves from exposure? And such centres can then be very easy places to be kept warm. Even in the United States recently all offices and establishments remained closed for three days, in recognition of people's inability to journey to places of work. We need the schools and such other establishments to close so that the affected ones can find a refuge from exposure and death. This is the least that should be done in the northern districts.

When "Getting Prices Right" May Not be Right!

"The relative importance of price versus non-price factors is a function of the level of development. At low levels of income and capital, more emphasis should be placed on building infrastructure and less on getting prices right..."

OVER the years, economists have been grappling with the issues of the determinants of and the determinants to the aggregate growth rate in an economy. To mention a few of the stalwarts in the field, names of R E Lucas, P M Romer and D Renelt need mention. These eminent economists are said to have shed a lot of ink in screening out the "mists" shrouding the growth rate. And in doing so, apparently, they landed with some general conclusions hovering around the determinants of economic growth. According to the available literature, three major factors seem to have emerged as the champions of growth. These are: (i) a rising share of investment to GDP; (ii) openness of the economy where openness is defined as the ratio of exports to GDP and (iii) the growth and development of infrastructure and human and non-human capital. As for the determinants to growth, two major constraints have been identified viz: (a) a leaping share of government spending to GDP and (b) price distortions that allegedly distance international prices from domestic prices.

The above observations relate mostly to the economy in general. However, the growth rate in the agricultural sector and its determinants also

stole thoughts of many famous economists, especially, of those who tend to lean more towards agricultural economics. One could only recollect the famous findings of Y Hayami and V W Rutan on the role of the technical inputs in augmenting agricultural supply response that accounts for much of the productivity differential among adopter and non-adopter areas/regions. To this effect, Bangladesh could be cited as an example where agricultural growth rate moved faster with the availability of the technical inputs. Needless to mention here that *pari passu* the growth of technical inputs, the role of the price factors also emerged to dominate thoughts of the development planners. These price factors comprised fair prices to farmers, subsidies to inputs, lower interest rates to credit etc.

In a recent article, an economist, R Faini, came up with some interesting observations which many of us, possibly, are aware of but which are hardly given due cognizance by our policy makers. He argues that in evaluating the performance of

the agricultural sector, the price factors should not outplay the non-price factors like the role of infrastructural development in a country. Hewing on the same line of reasoning, Alexander H Sarris of the University of Athens Comments: "Infact, it appears that infrastructural differences are vital in making aggregate supply re-

sponse that Faini hinted at seems to suggest that 'the relative importance of price versus non-price factors is a function of the level of development. At low levels of income and capital, more emphasis should be placed on building infrastructure and less on getting prices right. Once the level of infrastructure is substantial, then,

structural facilities. The above facts seem to finger at a re-discovery of the determinants of and determinants to growth, especially, in agriculture and also at redirecting the role of the state/government in agricultural development. The past obsessions with "beguiled" price related variables and the policy instruments that travelled with them, allegedly, failed to warrant a substantial supply response from the agricultural sector — the largest sector in terms of output and employment in many countries till today. Whereas, factors like infrastructure, education, health, extension facilities were relegated to secondary importance and as such those could hardly crowd in private investments in due course.

A state or a government should, therefore, be prepared to care more for the ways through which adoption and dissemination of new technology should find ways into underdeveloped agriculture, concentrate on providing educational facilities, build up infrastructural access, provide extension services and promote research

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



sponse of agriculture smaller in developing countries than in capital-rich countries. Hence the issue is not one of 'getting prices right' or providing infrastructure but rather one of complementarity. The policy issues concern the ways in which the enhancement of human and non-human capital can be accomplished better and the role government has in this process." Sarris further moves to argue that the relatively higher elastic supply

since supply response is larger, 'getting prices right' is quite important. Once again, one could relate these findings with those of H Binswinger who, long before, also rated infrastructural development above the price factors as far as agricultural growth is concerned. In the context of Bangladesh, studies by Dr Mahboob Hossain and other economists do pinpoint to a differential productivity between areas with better and worse infrastruc-

Poll Prospects of BJP and Congress

With Congress and the BJP out of reckoning — the BJP will get more seats than Congress — a combination of all-India and regional political parties look like assuming power at the Centre

HERE is no revival of Congress in the country. Nor is there any vibration, much less a wave, in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party. All that has happened is that the sharpness of dissensions in Congress has lessened and the dust raised by the revolt in the BJP in Gujarat has settled down. But neither of the two parties looks like winning even one third of the 544 Lok Sabha seats.

This is the impression I get after visiting 17 states in the last few weeks. I do not claim that I have held any opinion polls, whatever worth they are. But I have talked to local leaders, journalists and public figures. They generally make a good sounding board.

Let me start with Congress first. It has been practically decimated in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the core of the Hindi belt. Between them, they have 139 seats in the Lok Sabha. The party may not reach even a double figure in the two states put together. It won 14 UP and four in Bihar last time.

Madhya Pradesh, the stronghold of Congress, is already showing fissures following the battering by Arjun Singh, son of the soil. His Indiana Congress, a breakaway group, may not win many seats but it will cut into the Congress vote to the extent of eight to 10 per cent. This will be enough to pull down at least one third of Congress members, who won with a small margin in the 1991 election. Congress obtained 28 seats out of a total of 48.

Congress was secure in

Maharashtra till a few years ago. But now the Shiv Sena-BJP combine dominates the scene, although its initial hold as well as coherence has loosened. It is not so much disunity that dogs Congress as is the disinterest of its state leaders. They are willing to break a sword across their knees — a sign of Marathas' bravery, but not to work at the grassroots, which paid it dividends in the first instance.

From former chief minister Sharad Pawar to home minister S B Chavan, all leaders have used Maharashtra as a ladder to climb to the position in New Delhi but have bothered little about the party or the state. The present tally of Congress is 28 out of 48 seats. It may be able to retain 20 if all of them put their heads together.

Punjab, where the party won all the 13 Lok Sabha seats, is no more the Congress stronghold. It never was. The boycott of elections by Akali Dal last time had made the party sweep the state. This time the Dal, which looks formidable following unity in its ranks, will be contesting all the seats. The Hindus, who have been Congress vote bank because of the militancy in the state, are reconsidering their options.

They were all for the late Beant Singh, who defeated the militants. They find Harcharan Singh Brar, his successor, too weak, too compromising. He was not built to be a hero but he could

have given the state a steady, stable administration. He has failed to do so. Even his party-men are up in arms because they realise that he cannot lead them to victory in the next elections.

Assam is another state, where Congress did well in the 1991 election. This was largely because of the split in the Asom Gana Janata Parishad (AGJP) which has more or less been spanned now. What may turn out to be ominous for Congress is an adjustment on all the 14 seats among parties, except the BJP.

The role of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU),

at least seven seats this time, that is pretty generally agreed. The Janata Dal is also a divided house and the personality cult of Biju Patnaik will damage the party further.

As regards the BJP, it does not exist in the east, nor in the north-east, nor in West Bengal and Orissa. In terms of seats, it means 85. Assam is the only state where it won two seats last time. The situation is no different now except that the Guwahati seat may swing in favour of the BJP.

In West Bengal, the contest is between Congress and the communists. In Orissa, it is between Congress and the Janata Dal. The BJP may win three to four seats out of a total of 63 the two states have. The prospects of the BJP are no better in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the party has failed to secure even one seat out of 59.

In Andhra Pradesh, the split in the Telugu Desam gives advantage to Congress, not the BJP. In any case, the party has no Lok Sabha seat from the state. In Karnataka also, the BJP won three Lok Sabha seats in the 1991 election. There was a time when the party was number two in the state. It is still stronger than Congress but weaker than before.

The party, which has 10 out of 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra, will increase its strength. But its problem will be the Shiv Sena, which wants to register its presence at the all-India level. The BJP will have to give more seats to the Sena to sustain the alliance at the state government level. However, Muslims, who voted for the BJP-Sena combine with a vengeance in the assembly poll, are now turning against it. Their anger against Congress has lessened and

their disillusionment against the state government increased. In Gujarat, where the party won only 12 out of 26 Lok Sabha seats, may do better this time. The state is pro-BJP as it was pro-Congress at one time. But if a substantial number of seats are not given to the dissident group, it is determined to revolt and put up its own candidates. The Muslim vote in favour of the BJP will go down this time because it has changed the name of Ahmedabad.

More or less the same situation is prevalent in Rajasthan where Bhairon Singh Shekhawat has been able to keep the dissensions out of public gaze, but not been able to iron them out. Madhya Pradesh was once solidly behind the BJP. Now it suffers from rivalry. Although the contest is primarily between Congress and the BJP, even the small segment of tribals, which voted for the BJP the last time, has gone away from it.

In Bihar, the BJP has no prospects. The Alliance with Natesh, the Karmil leader and George Fernandes may not add anything to BJP's strength. Laloo Prasad Yadav seems to have cemented his rapport with the Muslims and the backward. Uttar Pradesh, from where the party won 52 seats in the wake of communal divide, is not going to favour it more than last time. In fact, it will be a miracle if it is able to retain the 52 seats.

With Congress and the BJP out of reckoning — the BJP will get more seats than Congress — a combination of all-India and regional political parties look like assuming power at the Centre. Congress may try to join that government. But I see no likelihood of the BJP coming to power, not even indirectly by making any other party a stalking horse.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

which has been able to reswing students on its side, is crucial. It appears to have reached an understanding with the AGP. Still, half the Lok Sabha seats are dependent on the votes of 'foreigners', who are on the side of state chief minister Hiteswar Saikia, who has reportedly said that there are no foreigners in the state.

In the four southern states — Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu — Congress, faces an uphill task. It has 105 seats out of their total of 129. There is no likelihood of the party coming anywhere near the current strength in any of

Desam's loss is the Congress gain. But already Congress has 38 out of 42 seats; it is bound to lose some.

In West Bengal, Congress has only four out of 42. It may wrest three or four seats from the left front. The CPI (M) is still strong and united against the divided Congress. The return of S S Ray from Washington will aggravate dissensions in the party, not lessen them.

Congress is Orissa has gained because of former chief minister Biju Patnaik's declining image. It secured only three out of 21 seats in the last election; it will gain

To the Editor...

General elections: Yes or no?

Sir, It is too late and outdated to discuss any more as to whether it is constitutional or unconstitutional to hold general elections 1996 under a caretaker government.

Over the last two years lot of water has passed through the Padma, Meghna and Jamuna rivers, there had been more than 730 sun-sets and sun-rises in the sky, and many of our near and dear ones have left this world.... But unfortunately some of our political leaders continue to pay a deaf ear to the agonies and sufferings of the people and perhaps sleep like Rip Van Winkle.

Today we are confronted with the burning question whether we are going to have our scheduled general elections 1996 or not? If not, it would be a disaster for the country and its growing socio-economic and political problems cannot be solved.

The Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina has said that her party would continue to fight, even if it took years for realising the demand for elections under a caretaker government. Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party and other opposition parties have also vowed to resist and foil the general elections if not held under a caretaker government.

What can the ruling BNP do? Hold a general elections of 1988 style without participation of the major opposition parties and throw the country into chaos and confusion?

The BNP government has failed to hold by-elections to 145 vacant seats of the Parliament due to opposition by AL, JP, and others. The scheduled date for general elections has also been postponed twice. The BNP government has also met with a fiasco to contain opposition parties' frequent hartals, strikes, rail-road-waterways blockades, street agitations etc.

The tenure of the BNP government ends on 5th April 1996. How would it, within this time tackle the

political crisis which is deepening day by day in the country? By holding an ostensive general election without the participation of the major opposition parties and making the people scapegoats — for the political whims of BNP, AL, JP, and others?

We feel that ruling BNP and opposition AL-JP and others are living in a fool's paradise. On the one hand some BNP leaders think that if general elections are held under a caretaker government they would suffer and, on the other hand, the AL-JP leaders believe that under a caretaker government they would win in the general elections.

But, as a matter of fact, who would win and who would lose in the general election under a caretaker government would be decided neither by the BNP nor by the AL-JP, but by the people.

So without fear or favour, or ill-will towards anybody, let us hold a free, fair and peaceful general election under a caretaker government headed by either the present Chief Justice of Bangladesh Justice M Afzal or former Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, and make post facto amendment in our Constitution.

There is no room arrogance, intransigence and confrontation in democracy. In the present political crisis, we have no alternative but to hold general elections under a caretaker government to do away with our political ills peacefully and save our country from catastrophe.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Put down the brakes before it is too late

Sir, In the evening of January 8, 1996, on the Laksham-Chandpur branch line two trains collided head-on, causing deaths to quite a number of passengers and in-

juring many more. It is very tragic and we deeply sympathise with those affected by it.

Though in the recent past train accidents were very rare, now-a-days it is increasing alarmingly. It seems that rails are trying to compete with roads in that sphere! Train journeys were considered to be safe but it is losing its credibility in our country. Railway authority must remain ever-vigilant and persons for whose negligence accidents happen must be given exemplary punishment.

Figuratively speaking, we, the people of Bangladesh are as though the passengers of two trains running on the same track from opposite directions: fear clutching our hearts, we are holding breaths for the collision which may occur any moment; the controls are in the hands of our two leaders who, ignoring all signals, are going on blindly, which, apparently, will result in a major disaster for all, including themselves.

Nur Johan
East Nasirabad,
Chittagong

Crucifixion of Jesus

Sir, Wasil Islam writes in a letter published on January 9 in your esteemed daily that Muslims cannot subscribe to the Christian belief stated in an article of Walur Rahman on Christmas that Jesus Christ was crucified and killed. Other than the fact that the Gospels relating the death and resurrection of Jesus were written several centuries before the Quran, there is also the possibility of interpreting Surah Nisaa Ayat (4): 157, in a different way than the writer of the letter. Both Islamic and non-Islamic scholars have many explanations.

One is that we have to look at the context of Surah: 157. Surah 156 refers to the Jews' "slander" or "calumny" against Mary, the mother of

Jesus, while Surah: 159 states: "And there is none of the People of the Book (Scripture, in the translation Mr Islam uses) who will not believe in him before his death. And on the Day of Resurrection he (Jesus) will be a witness against them." This particular interpretation says that the Jews believed that the Messiah was ultimately eliminated by his execution. But it only appeared that way to them. In reality Jesus lives. He lives because "Allah has raised him to himself" (4:158).

Though it would be preferable to have one belief, as we do in so many other points, I realise that this explanation has the weight of the belief of centuries against it.

Father Timm
Dhaka

Telephone circular

Sir, Recently T&T Board has issued a circular through newspapers stating that there are 25 per cent rebate for international telephone calls for certain time limits. Recently, I had an occasion for an international call to USA from Rajshahi. I presented the copy of circular for rebate to the telephone office who refused to go by the circular in newspaper as they had not received any official copy. So, I had to forgo the rebate painfully.

In Dhaka we hear complaints about dead telephones. And they say it has become a "private business." I would request any reporter to please visit Khilgaon bazar to see what "private telephone business" is like. One was telling me, "If you want to make a call to USA or UK, you can do so within a limited amount of money and without wasting much time." Of course at the cost of those phones which are dead in spite of repeated complaints!

M Ali
Khilgaon, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

One or 50?

MY friend, Anton Holden, lives in West Hollywood and therefore doesn't understand the first thing about how his government works. He told me that he is confused about block grants to the states which are supposed to save so much money for the taxpayer.

Instead of the federal government administering welfare, Medicare and Medicaid, the budget architects have suggested that 50 state governments carry out the same tasks as a way to save money.

Holden claims that he doesn't get it. If you create 50 bureaucracies instead of one, he asks, won't the system be 50 times larger and cost 50 times more?

Holden said, "Each of these state offices will require one administrator who must be paid in six figures. Instead of putting one friend of the president in charge of the programme, you will have to appoint 50 friends of the governors as political favours. The administrators might persuade welfare recipients that they'll get their checks only if they vote for the governor."

The last time I looked state officials were paid the same as federal ones, so how does anyone save money when 50 staff salaries are 50 times bigger than one salary?

Holden continued, "To make things more complicated the qualifications for state administrators will attract many hack politicians who might not be qualified to direct dogcatching duties in their own home towns. So the question one has to ask is, why would the states be able to take care of the poor cheaper than the feds? Congress can keep an eye on the one fed, but who will be watching all the state politicians running the welfare programmes?"

I admitted that he had a point. So I went to Capitol Hill to talk to one of the great minds working on the nation's budget.

Congressman Ball was annoyed when I quoted Holden as saying that one administrator was cheaper than 50. He said, "Everyone thinks they know how to balance the budget. We want to turn welfare and Medicaid over to the states so that we no longer get blamed when people's checks fail to arrive. By closing down another federal institution we are showing the American people that we love our flag. More importantly, if the states control social programmes and they screw up, it won't affect our 1996 national elections."

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB