

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 chiller 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 undescribable 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 Ruttan 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. Needful to mention here that part, *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: "In fact, 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 linger 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

activities. About the prices (how much and by whom) for these services, many studies found that "people in many developing countries are willing to pay for infrastructural services if their concerns are taken into account in the design of services, if the services are provided properly and if they can have a voice in their proper management." A participatory infrastructural development is, thus, called for.

Keeping output raising services of government at the level where they tend to be, the scheme of "getting prices right" may not materialize in practice. It has to be complimented by the schemes of taking those services to farmers' doorsteps. Given that these services are already at the disposal of the government, one could only expect that a more aggressive involvement of the state is urgently called for in building or moulding them, suited to changing demands. Market failures, it is said, mostly originate from a lack of these services and to arrest the market failure (and thus to get prices right) the government needs to intervene in right pockets, at the right time. Whether that would require a big or small government is beyond our enquiry at the moment. Suffice it to say, we want to live with those services and not live on "prices alone".

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 Binswanger 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 infra-

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 Bhartiya 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 Indira 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 partymen 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 Ganajanta Parishad (AGP) 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).

the states.

In Karnataka, the contest is between the Janata Dal and the BJP. Congress is a poor third. The communists' front has an upper hand in Kerala. After Ms Jayalalitha's outburst that her party, the ALADMK, will go it alone, there is no way whereby Congress can reach the present figure of 26. Both were, together in the 1991 polls.

Andhra Pradesh is Congress's best bet. The ruling Telugu Desam has got hopelessly divided. Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu and N T Rama Rao, who was pulled down, are out to destroy each other. The Telugu

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.

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 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

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 Hiteshwar 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

Jesus, while Sura : 155 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).

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.

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 belief of centuries against it.

Father Timu

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 '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

Crucifixion of Jesus

Sir, Wasif 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 Sura : 157. Sura 156 refers to the Jews' 'slander' or 'calumny' against Mary, the mother of

Jesus, while Sura : 155 states

about 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?

Holden continued, 'To make things more complicated the qualifications for state administrators will attract many back politicians who might not be qualified to direct dog-catching duties in their own home towns. So the question one has to ask is, why would the states be able to take care