

Economic Outlook

Donors have been sharply critical of our economic performance in a mid-term review meeting with our officials in Dhaka on January 30. Although it is customary to have such an interaction every year prior to the Paris consortium meet, this year's exercise assumed more than a routine significance. For, Bangladesh not only faces a serious political crisis its tally of gains in terms of macro-economic stability look threatened as well.

The political deck is not likely to be clear in the near future but we can perhaps try and maintain a certain level by economic management by way of controlling the damage posed by confrontationist politics. The rise in fiscal and current account deficits, upswing in the rate of inflation, and decrease in the rate of savings have the makings of a serious economic stagnation; but then these trends are not beyond the ability of the officialdom to roll back.

The income and direct tax remained well below the target for the past two years, the government borrowings have increased in proportion to the credit expansion in the private sector which prompted the central bank to apply a credit squeeze much to the slowing down of growth in the private sector.

The import bill escalation by 38 per cent till November as against the 11 per cent export growth at that point in time — of the ongoing fiscal year — bore an eloquent testimony to the trade imbalance. Lately, this has been bridged but only very negligibly. To boost our exports we shall have to take part in 'competitive devaluation' that is in motion regionally with the major South Asian currencies getting quickly adjusted to the value of dollar or sterling pound.

Imports can be brought down by keeping the consumer liberalisation in check.

These are some of the economic indicators where we can bring about a degree of improvement by recourse to administrative efficiency. Professionalism has to come into full play to stop the nose-dive into a spell of economic stagnation.

A Serving on a Sieve

Last Monday two teachers came to the education ministry from far-out Jalpurhat. Their mission was to get the teachers' benefit or the government subsidy part of the salary of the teachers of their private school cleared. The concerned official wouldn't oblige them before certain complications were sorted out. The teachers allegedly spoke of political backing that could mean bad consequences for the official. When that too didn't work they put down a closed envelope on the table. The official reported this to his superior and when police came to take the teachers away to lock-up, the envelope was found to contain Tk 4000.

If one reacts to the episode with a how-should-teachers-stoop-so-low exclamation, one must have descended from Mars. Bribes and kickbacks are now tearing apart the solid tradition of honesty and integrity at the top political spots. Cases of bribery do not scandalise any sensible person in Bangladesh — someone found to be above or beyond this national institution is taken for a freak.

The two teachers must have been sent on this errand by the administration of that school. And this couldn't have been the first time for that school to clear their payments in this manner. Any payment in Bangladesh involves giving *cha-khawa-pois* to those that see through the payments. This is a standard and well-entrenched practice particularly with the educational payments that run into hundreds of crores of Taka each year.

Unless the case of the two teachers is hushed up and if they are charged in court, we pray that they in defence make a clean breast of the practice most schools have to bow down to. It is a strange symbiotic partnership that underlings in the departments and ministries on the one side and the private schools on the other develop to the benefit of both. The schools do not only get salary subsidy — there are other grants, etc.

The big educational budget is a serving of soup on a sieve. The customer — society that is — gets so little in return for what it invests.

Approaching AIDS

The plan to hold of a regional workshop on Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in Kathmandu on February 6 constitutes a positive and timely response to that fast spreading epidemic in South Asia. While Europe, America and even Africa — considered to be its worst victims — have woken up to the deadly grip and sweep of the disease, South Asia in particular, appears to be much less concerned. Experts, however, have detected a shift of the pandemic's focus from Africa to Asia.

What the scourge of AIDS can mean for the world's most populous region needs hardly to be exaggerated. Already India gives the impression of being hard-hit by it, and her neighbours are fast catching up with the trend. Reportedly, the share of South Asia's AIDS cases has risen from just one per cent of the global total to six per cent between mid-1993 and 1994.

The looming disaster looks more real in the context of the refusal on the part of the region's societies to talk about sex-related issues. The growing threat sends a clear signal to us that no longer can we afford to treat sex-related issues as taboos. We must confront these squarely.

The Kathmandu workshop will provide the South Asian nations with a very useful opportunity to put their thoughts and acts together to combat the disease in a coordinated manner. Can we ask the seven nations of the region to put the issue on the SAARC agenda in a collective bid to effectively deal with this transnational malady?

Costs of Constitutionality

The monetary cost of the on going election project is reported to be around Tk 300 crores. The cost might hike substantially in the event of another election in the near future as could be sensed from PM's nationwide speech recently. It remains to be seen as to how could the spending be justified for an election with very little democratic flavour, if any.

could be at stake. I shall not attempt to air the views of the opposition on this score for reasons of space constraint but would like to examine the implications surrounding the upcoming polls.

The concern of the present government for the constitutional continuity and hence for democracy should be viewed positively and seriously. After all, the constitution is the touch-stone of our democracy, governance, human rights etc and hence any attempt to subvert it should never be welcome. The most pertinent question is are all that is availed through constitutional means necessarily acceptable to people in general? Let us take a few examples. The shift in the nature of government from a multi-party democracy to one-party rule during Awami League regime was in consonance with constitutional provisions but was that acceptable to the public? Largely not. President Zia's or General Ershad's coming to power could hardly match the constitutional provisions which in due course had to be constitutionalised. No question of people's acceptability arising or bothered about. The power of Justice Sahabuddin's caretaker government had to be legitimised through amendments to the constitution. And last but not the least, despite the fact

that a Presidential form of government is not unconstitutional, the present ruling party agreed to bring the 12th amendment first to show respect to people's choice for parliamentary system of government. Three major political parties in Bangladesh viz. BNP, Awami League and JP thus are observed to have changed stances from time to time, probably to show respect to people's demand, although

upon. The monetary cost of the on going election project is reported to be around Tk 300 crores. This money is likely to be spent for much of the ordeals although not for much of the audience. The cost might hike substantially in the event of another election in the near future as could be sensed from PM's nationwide speech recently. It remains to be seen as to how could the spending be

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Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



those stances had always been in the line of constitutional provisions.

The upcoming general election, like-wise, is going to be significantly constitutional but very insignificantly democratic in the absence of participation of major political parties who seemingly represent over two-thirds of the total voters (in the light of votes cast in their turnout in earlier to the rationale of such an election, let us now concentrate on some of the costs of the upcoming election and the benefits there-

justified for an election with very little democratic flavour, if any.

The opposition en masse vowed to sabotage the election in the face of government's firm commitment to go along with it. This means (and as could be in evidence from the recent happenings) all over the country that a lot of lives and property have to be sacrificed to reach the goal of the other party. This should be weighed against the loss of many days due to hartals and the loss of investors' confidence in

Bangladesh.

Needless to mention, the opposition parties promised to continue their anti-election and anti-government movements even after the 15th February. A recognition of this threat might lead us to a reign of terror and horror in the days to come. En passant, it may be mentioned here that the opposition's vow to deter the voters from exercising their rights to franchise does not seem to fit democratic norms; either. What they should do, at best, is to convince people not to participate in such 'farical' election, but leaving the judgement to the citizens themselves.

The various reform measures announced by the present government have already been stalled due to political uncertainty. A deepening of the crisis would only add fear to the uncertainty as a result of which the economy might get further shocks. A government that boasts of being the 'architect' of these reforms cannot be expected to be the silent spectator of their gradual demise. It may be noted here that the donors are reported to have already aired their annoyance at the slow pace of reforms. The macro-stability is already threatened, political unrest is causing exports to dwindle and the law and order situation has already been diving

to its worst level. All these episodes have begun to gripe the economy and peaceful civic life of Bangladesh.

As told earlier, in the case a parliament is voted to the ruling party would undoubtedly emerge as the lone lion there to roar with a capacity of over 200 seats. A further flip would be provided to their strength by the so called opposition in the parliament whose track record of parliamentary parleys is almost nil. That fertile situation might tempt the majority BNP to go back to a presidential form of government, enact laws and regulations allegedly considered 'black', heighten some cosy wishes of the members of the ruling party and, finally, rule like rulers unchallenged. The country, therefore, appears to stand with a bright chance of witnessing a bleak scenario in the aftermath of the general election of the 15th February.

The nation is, thus, set to be back to the origin — an origin from where its people shed blood to crawl forward. A commitment to uphold the constitution, the only benefit against such huge costs, may be a welcome move but one should not lose sight of the fact that the constitution is for the people and not otherwise. A government that stepped into power through the most glorious electoral process in 1990, is sadly geared to end up with an electoral event to be seriously condemned. Thus the government entered but this it is not going — that is the discomfort to live with.

Analysing the Political Scenario : Let Goodsense Prevail

by TMA Samad

AFTER the dissolution of the Parliament, the nation expected that the government would bring in a break-through to the question of non-partisan caretaker government and the opposition would also withdraw their agitational programmes. Unfortunately, there is yet no sign of resolving the stalemate; rather the country perhaps is heading towards a catastrophe. I am to note with great sadness that 25 years after independence from tyrant Pakistani rule all those sacrifices made by the sons and daughters of the soil in the liberation war seem to have been made in vain. An act of hypocrisy — a system characterised by intolerance and mistrust — is ritualised in politics in our society.

It is really painful and not desirable that after ousting the autocratic government of the former president H M Ershad, when the country was heading towards an expected smooth-sailing of democracy, the en masse resignation of the opposition MPs should strike a severe blow to the growth of democracy. If we analyse the pre-

mand of holding the election under caretaker government stands almost justified after the Magura, Mirpur-by-elections which were allegedly beyond the ethics of electorate norms and code. If the ruling party makes a mistake there is no harm to admit it and such honest move would always carry a plus point for them.

If we look back then it reveals that when the main opposition party first walked out of the parliament on a responsible remark of a minister, that could have been a brief walkout had the minister expressed regret and apologised in time which is the normal practice of parliament. The opposition, however, also should have returned to the parliament as they had protested against through walkout.

Unfortunately, it continued and present political stalemate is the cumulative effect of accusation from both sides. Political sagacity calls for seizing opportunity at the right moment for an amicable settlement and this initiative should have come from the ruling party; the ruling party is the senior partner in the

must work in and outside the parliament in a constructive, well-thought out manner and with non-violent attitude in the interest of country and the people and continue to log in ruling party's mistakes, whims and corruption, if any, and make people aware of them. At the same time they should project their plans and programmes, both political and economic, so that people can take all these into consideration in casting their votes in the future election. To resign from the parliament and go to the street, apparently for power, is not good politics, and not envisaged as democratic practice.

Speaker's Ruling

The political firmament became clouded after the ruling of the Speaker mentioning the resignation of 144 members of the parliament constitutionally unacceptable. It was stated on behalf of those who resigned that the decision of the Speaker was incorrect and unacceptable and their resignation did stand. I personally

deared. Unfortunately it appears that the main goal of politics that they have since been pursuing is 'power'. Power is no doubt very lucrative but then the phobia of losing power always works in mind. And history reveals that those who cannot shake off this evil from mind and thus cannot come out from the clutch of illusion, fall into the trap.

Institutionalising Democracy

It is true that democracy cannot be institutionalised overnight. But if we take lessons from others, perhaps things will improve. Few days back, if I remember correctly, an American weekly published a feature on democracy in South Africa where it had rightly pointed out that 'free election and a noble Constitution do help, but first and foremost, a democracy needs democracy.' It is true that without free and fair election democracy does not stand but without honest process of electing honest persons of principle democracy will

like to quote from the statement of Hon'ble Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia while addressing a group of lawyers in her 30, Hare Road residence that there can be development and prospects only if there is rule of law and a democratically elected government in the country. No one can differ with this statement because rule of law is a basic pre-requisite to democracy and any progress in the country. Now what is needed is its implementation. Commitment should be translated into action and there lies the solution. We should always bear in mind that a stable economy and stable political order cannot be built up in an unstable society. A strong social fabric is a prerequisite to sustainability.

Again the Hon'ble Prime Minister has rightly said in a national seminar 'Bangladesh Facing the 21st Century' that none of our politics and reforms would succeed until we are successful in alleviating poverty and empowering our people. As a matter of fact unemployment and frustration as well as providing shelter and patronisation to miscreants under the umbrella of political party are breeding terrorism in this country. Hence, restructuring of the economy in a manner that ensures employment and income generating opportunities for the people at large is inevitable, for this will turn the idle forces into a working force and reduce tension in the society.

There is no dearth of talents in this country and if the right path to political behaviour and economic development in context to our own situation and problems could be chosen where politicians, scholars and intellectuals could contribute together then possibly it would not be very hard to find out leaders as well as ways and means to solve our problems.

'Constitutional Crisis'

The ruling party believes that rule by majority is the essence of democracy. Actually democracy is 'the continuing practice of majority rule and implies the corollary principle of 'freedom of dissent'. If today's minority is deprived of the path to become tomorrow's majority, rule in a continuing sense would be dead.

However, at this stage I would like to emphasise on one point that the present crisis is political rather than constitutional and common people should not be misled under the banner of 'constitutional crisis'.

Our Constitution has given all the powers to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and further ordained that the Election Commission shall be independent in the exercise of its function. Article 118 (1) 4 illustrates that it shall be the duty of all executive authorities to assist the Election Commission in the discharge of its function (Art 126).

It is encouraging to note that the newly appointed CEC Mr Justice A K M Sadeque has expressed his determination to ensure free, fair and impartial election, and rightly pointed out that he had no compulsion to satisfy any quarter since he cannot be terminated by anybody except a Judicial Council, before the completion of his tenure.

Now that all efforts to reach a political consensus on the issue of a caretaker neutral administration failed and the ruling party had decided to go to polls unilaterally, the political scenario in the country had undergone a radical transformation. We believe, under these circum-

stances, the Chief Election Commissioner has a very important role to play by declaring publicly that without participation of mainstream opposition, an attempt to hold election will not only be a futile exercise but also waste of resources which may even lead the country into very unpredictable consequences. Once the country is thrown into 'deep-water' trouble, it will be well-nigh impossible to 'salvage' it. We hope and believe Justice A K M Sadeque will be able to sustain his spirit and surpass the commendable role of Mr T N Seeshan of India and Mr D K Silva of Sri Lanka by taking full advantage of our Constitution. The President at this stage can also rescue the nation from the current impasse exercising his vested power within the constitutional authority. However, he needs to act with strong wisdom and integrity beyond all doubts prejudice and bias that he belongs to the ruling party.

Context : Ramadan

We believe, the government will still find ways to avoid holding of election during the holy month of Ramadan and keeping mainstream political parties out of the electoral battle. We also believe the scale of violence, which is likely to follow such elections, will not only contribute to deterioration of law and order in the society but also tarnish the sanctity of the holy month which is bound to hurt the sentiment of the majority people.

However, for the sake of strengthening democratic institutions in the country I would venture to put forward some humble suggestions. The Constitution should be amended to provide for holding all parliamentary elections in future under a caretaker neutral government. All political parties will be in equal position to contest in such elections. Continuity of bringing the highest Judiciary in the political arena perhaps will not be fair and justifiable because it will have a bad impact in the long run. Even in case of CEC it should not be necessary to appoint a Justice. We should keep the Judiciary above any/all controversy.

Restrictions

The Constitution may incorporate a provision that puts restriction on the parliament members' right to resign. Any reason other than personal/health ground may come under careful examination on individual basis to avert any en masse resignation on political ground. The members of sitting parliament shall not be entitled to enjoy package of personal benefits and advantages by passing a new bill.

The South African model of transition to majority rule from the hated apartheid can serve as a glaring example of reconciliation among contending parties. The Constitution may incorporate amendments to consider the leader of the political party securing overwhelming majority as chosen prime minister. However, the ministerial portfolios will be distributed in proportion to the number of seats each party own in the parliament. This system may help emergence of the tradition of constructive politics and democratic tolerance in general.

Last but not least, I caution that failure to reach a political consensus will ultimately push the nation toward serious confrontation, violence and anarchy leading to the breakdown of a democratic political order.

The author is Principal Training Officer, BARC

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sent political stalemate it seems that the main reasons are intolerance, crisis of confidence, putting self and party interests above national interest, lack of appreciation that democracy can only be run through effective consultation with the opposition and, above all, indifference to people's right and lack of regard for democracy.

Though it is difficult to pinpoint the precise reason for the stalemate nevertheless if some one ponders over the question the answer perhaps will come as ruling party's tendency to overlook problems and taking the tactics of time killing, keeping the problems unresolved. Say, for example, when the bill to create a permanent provision for holding elections under a caretaker government was tabled in the parliament the stalemate was not created then, and it wouldn't have been created if the bill was discussed in the House to avoid political bedlam.

Lack of Initiative

The crisis could perhaps be resolved if the government took the initiative to settle the political issue with political wisdom. Now the situation has been complicated over the time and has come to such a pass that there seems no way out but to elections under a caretaker government. Here, I do hold the opinion that the question of opposition de-

political business and should take the opposition into confidence and treat them as partners in the democratic process. In fact, understanding between the ruling party and the opposition is a precondition for running a meaningful democracy. Negative attitude of the politicians is the main cause of this political pandemonium.

Since the government is for the people, and for their interest, so there should not be any tendency of bypassing a problem, rather the government should be wise enough and have the unwavering courage to face any challenge and make complex issues simpler and not make simple issues more complex. We have seen in the past as also we do now that the ruling party claims as the real patriot and custodian of democracy and the opposition is always blamed to be on the path of destruction and ruining democratic values. Perhaps this accusation is always not true and brings in confrontational attitude rather than harmony. On the other hand, the opposition also should not be miserly in duly acknowledging instead of drawing a curtain on ruling party's achievements. In fact that should be the spirit and magnanimity of leadership.

In any democracy the opposition should also have the patience and wait for their turn in the next general election. Meanwhile, they

feel that the Hon'ble Speaker's ruling would have been more straight forward as well as convincing if he had proceeded on the basis of the English version of Article 67(2) of our Constitution and Rule 177(1) of the Rules of Procedure adopted by the parliament. Ruling no doubt was given based on reasons and in the light of interpretation of the Constitution. Speaker in his ruling mentioned that members of the parliament had the right to resign, but that right was backed by an obligation to represent the constituency from which a member had been elected. Resignation should not be used as a weapon hindering the democratic process as a whole. His logic in this regard is absolutely right but keeping the issue of resignation hanging for long and subsequent dilly-dallying in sending it to the President and later on to the Supreme Court for opinion was not perhaps necessary when the Constitution has given the Speaker absolute authority to decide the matter on his own.

Both the ruling party and the opposition collectively suffered and sacrificed a lot in ousting the autocratic government of H M Ershad. If they had done it in the interest of the country, the people and democracy then it was their responsibility to ensure collectively that the democratic process was not hin-

never be institutionalised. Hence an easy mechanism to elect honest people is also very important factor.

We have had great leaders in the past on whom the nation could repose its trust. Their integrity, simplicity and accessibility made profound impression on people. Unfortunately, this is lacking now.

The ruling party has failed to keep its promise made through the 'three alliances'. They did not take any step to separate the Judiciary from the Executive. Such separation is essential to keep the Judiciary above partisan influences and, to implement the laws impartially. The failure of implementing laws impartially is the resultant terrorism that persists in the society, particularly in educational institutions.

I may quote from Viscount Bryce on the role of Judiciary in preserving the democratic institutions: There is no better test of excellence of a government than the efficiency of its judicial system, for nothing more nearly touches the welfare and security of an average citizen than his sense that he can rely on the certain and prompt administration of justice.

Unfortunately we have failed to build viable institution that could guarantee the rule of law and support continuing economic growth of the country. Here I would

BTV's Bangla cinema

Sir, I have indeed one leap, the right direction for BTV to start screening Bangla movies every week instead of once a month. However, these Bangla movies have

Kibria as an advisor to the Awami League chief, the Awami League could not rise upto the dire and desperate need of the country and prevent it from falling into a deep, dark abyss.

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now become stereotyped with the same old faces acting in almost all the films and with the same old stories etc.

I would only like to make a proposal to BTV to consider screening of films of the sub-continent. I am sure most of us understand the major languages of this continent, and this screening can be on alternate weeks. I am sure this will give a further boost to BTV and the viewers will be very happy.

Furthermore, we would appreciate to watch SARRC programmes at least once a month, be it educational, quiz, or musical ones.

Please consider my proposal.

William D'Silva

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Why the talks failed

Sir, Mr Shah AMS Kibria in his article 'Why the Talks Failed' (The Daily Star, January 21, 1996) stated that BNP's proposal of the President heading the advisory council 'would change the very structure of the constitution from parliamentary to the presidential system'. Would he like to comment on the fact that if the Awami League had so much regard for the parliamentary system how come they all resigned turning the parliamentary system into a mockery? A sign of Awami League's maturity and respect for parliament would have been if they compelled the caretaker government to undertake the caretaker government issue while they were members of the parlia-

ment. I have to admit that even if they tried to do that they did not try hard enough to mobilize the whole house to do the needful.

Even if we assume, as Mr SAMS Kibria states, that the government was never serious about a settlement which would bring the opposition parties to the election, would not the image of the Awami League in the public eye be glorified if their leader sat down in face to face talks with the PM, without any prior conditions? That would have shown that the leader of the Opposition truly cares for the welfare of our poor country and its people.

I cannot but make a concluding remark that with such an eminent and knowledgeable person like SAMS