

Growth Outlook

Our GDP growth at 4.4 per cent in fiscal 1994-95 as disclosed in the Bangladesh Bank Annual Report for that year looks worryingly modest.

Last year's 4.4 per cent growth of GDP was a slender improvement up on the 4.2 per cent recorded in 1993-94.

The broad indicators of growth came under strain during 1994-95. Agricultural production, the mainstay of GDP growth, declined by 1 per cent bringing in its wake an inflationary pressure, too.

The only redeeming features were a higher bank-supported domestic investment in the industrial sector, and, an increased foreign currency retention by exporters.

The biggest problem before the newly-elected government would be an inflationary pressure mounting in the wake of election-related expenditure. Its burden could be lightened if the caretaker government, the Election Commission and the political parties act cohesively to contain the electoral expenses.

The Bangladesh Bank Annual Report, 1994-95, is nearly one year too late in terms of topicality. Of course, as a record-keeping document it has its own value, but that is nothing to compare with the utility it would have had on seeing the light of the day in due time.

EC's Right Move

The Election Commission has taken a practical step to hold free and fair elections by constituting electoral enquiry committees at the district level. These will be charged with the responsibility to investigate pre-polls irregularities and other deviations on the part of individual candidates for the next month's election or political parties.

The committees will act either on receipt of complaints from aggrieved parties or on their own by taking cognizance of an offence. These are likely to be more responsive to a situation than the older-version election tribunals.

There is no doubt these enquiry committees have all the potential to play a key role in keeping the election process free of all the undesirable influences, including those of money power and muscle power. Now what is needed is to define the committees' role in detail and also to develop an efficient system or means for them to work.

Confidence in Police

The death of a conch artisan in police firing at Shankharibazar has been shrouded in mystery. Controversies over the police action vis-a-vis the attack on the police team by people at the bazaar are of no help to get a clear picture of what exactly happened there.

Whatever it is, at a time when the police are engaged in a country-wide arms recovery drive, an action like that could tarnish their image somewhat. The police should avoid getting any extortionist image. So far as the present case is concerned, no one has the right to draw a conclusion about who is to blame.

What is of utmost importance is the restoration of public confidence in the police. If the police work neutrally and still have to share the blame for some past misdeeds of their colleagues, that cannot help police-public relations.

Will the Next Parliament be a Millionaires Club?

by Nural Kabir

THE major power contenders — Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Awami League — seem to be desperate to win the forthcoming general elections. This has been evident from the last extended meetings of the parties' central bodies held in the capital last month.

Such attitude of the major parties would really make it difficult for the Election Commission (EC) to hold the polls in a peaceful atmosphere. When major contenders consider the results of an election to be a life and death question for them, one has the reason to apprehend that the activists of the parties might make efforts to rig the polls in favour of their respective candidates.

The hunger for power of the parties has meanwhile reached such a height that both the organisations have, in the hope of winning certain seats, recruited a significant number of moneyed individuals who had no connections with the parties concerned the other day and many of whom do not enjoy reputation for lawful earnings — reportedly to award nomination in the polls.

With a conviction that moneyed outsiders have brighter prospects in the polls than the middle class insiders, the parties have resorted to invite even highly controversial personalities into their respective organisational folds. They have also welcomed some political personalities who had even a few months ago served the rival camps.

In the process, the League, which still loves to boast of leading the nation's War of Liberation in 1971, has received in the party people like Justice Nurul Islam and Shamsul Huda who had effectively collaborated with the occupation forces of Pakistan in 1971.

The corrupting influences would not even end with the passage of the outsiders in the polls. Once elected to Parliament, the first thing they are likely to do is to make attempt to recoup their money spent with profit by manipulating, if not the Parliament itself, their membership in the House.

On top of all, such members would not be able, even if they are willing, to represent the interest of their electorate; because they are believably not familiar with the problems their poor constituency-people confront every day.

Thus, the Jatiya Sangsad stands a chance to turn into a mere club of a few nouveaux riches, instead of being a national platform to make laws and address issues with a view to changing the lot of the millions.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Impartial administration for fair polls. Sir, Success of the caretaker government will be manifested in its action. The caretaker government, of course, will act through the bureaucracy which it has in its disposal.

Hawala scandal and our Supreme Court

Sir, The 'hawala' scandal of India unearthed by CBI continues to occupy important position in most of our national dailies but unfortunately no such 'hawala'-type scandal has been brought to light by our investigation agencies. The opposition political parties in our country often complain about alleged corruption by the party in power.

The alleged corruption cases of BNP League, Awami League, MNP etc., continue to get lost and none could be caught; instead, many politicians lead luxurious life in Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani or Dhanmondi who may not earn an honest living. However, the Supreme Court of India directed CBI an agency under prime minister's secretariat, to report directly to the Supreme Court in respect of investigation. Against this backdrop, I am tempted to know whether the Supreme Court of Bangladesh can direct our investigation agencies in a similar fashion.

The urea fertiliser scandal for the past two consecutive years, diversion of all the primary education funds to one constituency, purchase scandals in all the cases, telephone tender scandal etc., continue to be published in many newspapers but could it be unearthed like CBI's 'hawala' episode? Only recently Supreme of India has directed

The Indian Elections — Fight for a Majority

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

FINALLY, the third and last phase of the Indian parliamentary elections has taken place on Tuesday last and all eyes are now cast on the outcome of the polls. Full results are expected to be clear within five days of the conclusion of the elections.

The Indian elections have always been a matter of immense interest all over because of the vastness of the country and the nature of governance. The functioning of democracy under the federal setup involving nearly 900 million people warrants interest for obvious reasons.

The general impression is that the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is making a desperate bid to capture power in New Delhi this time as this party is favoured to gain maximum seats in a widely speculated 'hung parliament'.

Who will be the prime minister of India this time — Mr Vajpayee or Mr Rao will continue, or a third front comprising the national front and the centrist Janata Dal will emerge in the centre stage after the elections and find persons like West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu — the communist stalwart — or the Bihar chief minister Janata Dal president Laloo Prasad Yadav to lead India from New Delhi in the event two likely contenders for power — the BJP and the Congress — fail? These questions are hounding the minds of people all over since the impact of the result has a bearing not only on the major countries but also evidently on the neighbouring nations like Bangladesh.

Both Congress and BJP rejected the prognosis of a 'hung parliament' and asserted that they will be able to form government by own strength. Only the National Front and Janata Dal have accepted this as inevitability of the elections. But the Congress, in reality, will be happy if it can attain the status of single majority and gets the first chance of forming the government with its allies like regional parties of Ms. Jayalalita of Tamil Nadu

Andhra Pradesh state. But the death of undisputed leader Rajiv caused a vacuum in the Congress leadership and Mr. Rao emerged as the least controversial to lead the Congress. He began as a weak political leader since Mr Rao was more known in the Indian government as an intellectual and scholarly person.

This time, the Congress is fighting an electoral battle for the first time without the charismatic figures of the Nehru family. Late Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was in the helm for nearly seventeen years since the independence, his illustrious daughter Indira Gandhi, who had the credit to stage a comeback to power after losing the 1977 polls, her two sons Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi — all were seen as vote catchers for the Congress even though party's debacles at times also owed to them. Sanjay never enjoyed state power.

The agitation began some time ago when the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, representing workers and farmers, found out that the money given to build roads, schools or health centres had gone to the pocket of middlemen and overbearing public servants. Some amounts were shown even against the labourers who had died many years earlier.

The demand of the protestors is that the development shown on paper should be visible on the ground. They want the right to photocopy on payment bills, vouchers and muster rolls so that they can scrutinise whether the allocation was spent correctly or spent at all. The hawala scandal has made them still more conscious of corruption at high places than before and they talk about it in the context of candidates and their choice.

There is a connection between election expenditure and pilferage of state resources," says Mrs Aruna Roy.

"On The Record" Sir, I would like to ventilate my feelings about the article in the column "On The Record" published in The Daily Star on 28th April '96.

In his article Mr Kibria seems to have pointed his gun of fury at the BNP and its misdeeds during its last five-year rule. He seems to forget the other side of the coin. Just after the Liberation when there was no BNP and their armed party activists, we have seen the ballot boxes from DUCSU and Medical College elections were looted at gun point. Which armed activists did that?

The arms race is the legacy of that. We have also seen the arms recovery at that time. The armed terrorism in Dhaka University started at that time. The politics of armed 'mastans' started in our country at that time.

Of course, like that time, now also the peace-loving, innocent citizens want a mastan and terrorist-free society. But what is the obstacle to that? Is it only the BNP? Or are others also equally responsible? The answer is obvious. Because only one evil in the society can't exist in a place where all others are good.

and is already engaged in exercises towards that direction. The BJP, on the other hand, has not lagged behind in forging such alliances like — with the Haryana Vikash party of the former defence minister Bansi Lal. In fact, a recent remark by Mr Vajpayee that a section of Congress may extend help in forming government by the BJP after the final polls results are announced brought sharp reactions from the Congress.

This is a kind of day-dream — the Congressmen in no way will come to play such a role' retorted Rao's close aide and external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee.

The scenario, as such, is complex and the result will have big impact on both the main parties vying for power. Mr Rao is under pressure from some party leaders about his leadership and the last one to fire the salvo was Mr Karunakaran from Kerala, the union minister, who said the Congress would ask for 'one man-one post' after elections — meaning Mr Rao cannot hold both prime ministership and post of party chief after the polls. Most Congress leaders decried this and rallied behind

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The polls outcome will also indicate the future attitude of Rajiv's Italian widow Sonia Gandhi as regards to her approach to the Congress of Mr Rao and the factional leadership of Indira Congress since she seems to be watching the scene with her son Rahul and daughter Priyanka — both believed to swing into politics at an appropriate time in the future. Whatever verdict the Indian electorate gives, one thing is certain that the post-election scenario promises to be very interesting.

Elections Cost Over Rs 2,500 cr

Still, the force of the Rs 4.5 lakh limit for a Lok Sabha candidate goes on. A parliament constituency embraces roughly 10 lakh voters. The sum of Rs 4.5 lakh is not adequate even for a post-card to the voters. The Election Commission was realistic in suggesting to the prime minister to raise the limit to Rs 15 lakh.

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national survey has revealed that the rural areas in Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh get only five to seven per cent of foodgrains disseminated through the public distribution system system since the demerit of the beneficiaries in the countryside receive only four annas in a rupee. But he was playing to the gallery, not wanting to find a remedy. Had he been serious, he would not have routed the kickbacks from the purchase of Bofors guns to Swiss banks and his Italian connections.

In fact, such transactions for black money and funds stolen from the government till in the name of development are the bane of fair elections. Congress has been the main culprit but other political parties also do not come clean. The current Lok Sabha election is an indication. It appears that no political party is short of funds.

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lakh limit for a Lok Sabha candidate goes on. A parliament constituency embraces roughly 10 lakh voters. The sum of Rs 4.5 lakh is not adequate even for a post-card to the voters. The Election Commission was realistic in suggesting to the prime minister to raise the limit to Rs 15 lakh. But the resourceful prime minister had said no, even though every Congress candidate was reportedly getting Rs 5 lakh from the party. There is no limit placed on the party, although the Supreme Court in its latest judgment has said that the party must account for the money it spends on elections.

Travelling through several states, I found that the election campaign had picked up slowly. In the beginning, candidates were careful. Now they have thrown caution to the wind. Voters were confused over the proflicacy of certain candidates.

Estimates vary but the general impression is that the total expenditure of parties and candidates will be somewhere around Rs 2,500 crore — nearly 400 times of the amount disclosed in the hawala scandal. How much money will be required after the elections to buy MPs is anybody's guess. Many Indian and foreign outfits were in the queue to swing

No doubt, too many candidates, too many parties and too many factions indicate uncertainty in politics. Still, it may finally result in how a temporary coalition. But what does one do about corruption? Villagers at Beawar have proposed transparency in government expenditure. This is probably the best suggestion that has emerged during the elections and needs to be followed up.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

who is leading the stir. "Funds do not reach the field but they find a way to election campaigns." She has many examples to cite about false bills and vouchers, supported by the confessions of corrupt employees.

Rajasthan chief minister Bhanu Singh Shekhawat is aware of it. He promised to punish the guilty long ago. But the tainted bureaucracy has not allowed any action. He recently offered to give copies of muster rolls free of cost. But that too is merely a statement so far. Top officials have made it a prestige issue. Thus corruption has got condoned.

Lack of action against corrupt bureaucracy is, however, not peculiar to Rajasthan alone. It is all over India. Bhopal gas victims are still suffering because of dubious procedures. Compensation for Narmada dam oustees remains entangled in the red tape that the rapacious public servants lengthen. Gandhian Sunderlal Bahuguna is so exasperated over the Tehri dam scandal that he has gone on a 49-day fast to make Prime Minister Narasimha Rao review the whole project, something he had promised to do.