

## Leaders' TV Debate

We recall that Sheikh Hasina at one stage had challenged Khaleda Zia to a TV debate on the caretaker issue to which the latter responded yes, if held inside the parliament. That was when the 5th parliament was on, and the opposition was boycotting it. Much later, in a meeting with newspaper editors, the AL chief reiterated the debate challenge without invoking any response from Khaleda Zia.

Now that we are all poised to have the next election why not have the postponed debate on TV and radio? We think, for the sake of a better informed electorate, to create greater enthusiasm among voters and also to have a clearer understanding about what the issues are, there should be an open and direct debate between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. If these two leaders agree then we can follow this up with debates between other major contenders. We are fully aware that the natural tendency on either side will be to refuse such a debate thinking about the uncertainty of how their respective leaders will perform or how the viewers and listeners will accept it. But that is how party bureaucracy will always kill new ideas and new ways of doing things. Here the leaders will have to show courage to talk to the electorate directly.

We would like to argue that to look at the proposed debate on the basis of 'who will win - I or she' is to miss the point. We think both will win to the extent that the policies of their respective parties will be better understood by the voters and as such there will be far clearer understanding of the issues. What really needs to be worked out are the rules of the debate.

Various formats can be decided upon. There could be one in which each leader should first speak for 15 minutes each, then go for two rebuttals of 7 minutes each, with the speaker coming in first getting the last chance. Alternatively, the two leaders after speaking for a set time, could permit themselves to be questioned by a diverse group of experts selected on the basis of mutual consent. There could be a whole range of alternatives that the two sides can consider and agree upon. This newspaper, if given the initial go-ahead, would be happy to do the ground work in consultation with representatives of the two leaders. We hope both sides will seriously consider our suggestion and our offer to start the ball rolling. After all, for how long will we shy away from information technology and from modern ways of doing things? One such TV-radio debate will do the work of hundreds of public meetings — much faster and far cheaper.

## Election Observers

We welcome the three-member Commonwealth pre-polls observation team. This obviously means that the Commonwealth will be playing an active role in monitoring the 12 June polls.

Election monitoring teams from the UN, Commonwealth, IOC, EC, and specific countries like the US, UK, Japan, France, Germany, or who so ever is interested, should all be invited to come to Bangladesh and monitor our elections. There are many reasons why we suggest this. Larger the number of international teams observing our polls, higher will be its international credibility. More importantly, no party will want to be caught in any improper act in front of international observers. This will greatly decrease the possibility of election violence and whatever other bad intentions that anybody may have.

Election monitoring by outsiders have become a norm in elections where rivalry is so intense that chances of manipulation and vote rigging are high. This practice should not be seen as a lack of faith in our own system. On the contrary it should be seen as a mark of our self confidence about it. It also speaks of how transparent our polls are.

It is not clear what the Commonwealth pre-polls monitoring team will do, but we are sure we can learn a lot from them about how to go about setting up independent polls monitoring system. Not only that we want foreigners to monitor our polls, we want our own private bodies — like FEMA, and others — to observe the election as meticulously and as scientifically as is possible. In this connection we urge all public and private bodies concerned with election monitoring to set training workshops for volunteers from all walks of life who can help out in the process.

International and national private monitoring of the elections should be given the widest scope and all the facilities available with us.

## Dangerous Weapons

A national daily has reported that dangerous offensive weapons for personal use are on open sale in Dhaka. According to the report a stun-gun, now available in Dhaka over the counter, can indeed stun a person from a 15-foot distance with a discharge of 30 to 50 thousand volt electric power. Although the victim recovers without fail from the shock comparable to a fall from a three storeyed building, he or she would take days to be back to normalcy.

More than one brand of toxic gas sprayers are also on sale. Law cannot and does not permit individual possession of such offensive weapons. The report claims that the police are as yet not in the know of open sale of such weapons. Import liberalisation one step ahead of what we can take has been blamed. Import control is hardly equipped to know that stun-gun or cap-stun can have more things wrong than a suspected spelling error.

The sellers, in order that the business isn't harmed, are being discreet in choosing who to sell a stun-gun and who not to. So, not the government, but shopkeepers have become the authority deciding on who should possess weapons having all the potential of endangering the peace and social stability. The stun-gun literature says it is for use by security personnel only. What kind of security people or private gunmen or mafiosi are these being sold to?

The cap-stun type sprays may come handy to women travelling alone on Dhaka streets. This is only as good as keeping chilli-powder in the vanity bags. Such and other weapons for personal use have never served in effectively defending one. But contrarily miscreants can use them with great profit.

It is time that the government took steps to guarantee that no such weapons reach private hands. Or things will surely get out of hands.

# Few Fiscal Developments So Far

Bangladesh witnessed substantial improvements in terms of revenue collection and generation of gross national savings. However, the total tax structure still seems to be bedeviled with a number of constraints that make the tax base narrow.

were made by the IRBD Report 1995. The report attributes the success to the improvement in revenue collections. The revenue/GDP ratio, according to the report, compares from 8 per cent in 1985/86-1989/90 to 11 per cent in 1990/91-1993/94. At the same time, the tax/GDP ratio also witnessed a hike from 7 per cent to 9 per cent over the same period of time. However, although commendable efforts so far, the feeble improvement in revenue collection still leaves Bangladesh well behind its Asian Neighbours where South Asia Tax/GDP average ratio is 12.4 per cent, the East Asia average is 16.8 per cent and that for 82 less developed countries is 17 per cent. With a tax/GDP ratio of 11.9 per cent, Bangladesh is approaching the South Asia average.

One of the noticeable features in the realm of tax generation in Bangladesh so far is reported to be the introduction of VAT. It is reported that of the total tax collections in 1993/94, the contribution of VAT was about 29 per cent. 32 per cent. It may be mentioned here that at the initial stage, the introduction of VAT faced

insurmountable opposition from business, trade and industry circles. But as time rolled by, VAT appeared as relatively more transparent and effective by substituting the age-old multiple tax rate system, e.g. sales tax. However, Bangladesh's tax base is, allegedly, fraught with many limitations. For example, the tax

base is said to be narrow and mostly thrives on import based taxes which 'contributed' half of all collections in 1990/91-93/94 compared to 52.1 per cent in 1985/86-1989/90. Indeed 63 per cent of all VAT collections are import based. The dependency on import-based taxes has a further corollary. It tends to delimit the scope of import liberalization. To clarify the point, a government such as of Bangladesh would always try to mop up as

much as possible from import duties leaving the tariff reductions applicable only to those whose demand in the economy is relatively less or which are very thinly imported. In other words, in the name of rationalization of tariff structure and import liberalization, there would remain sufficient scope to manipulate the figures in

also not satisfactory. These factors only point to the urgency of widening the tax base of Bangladesh.

The IRBD report tends to argue that the ADP expenditures in real terms grew by 25 per cent. This rate is only 30 per cent high compared to the level in 1989/90. More often than not, the development budget failed to reach its own target levels. Thus the inability to keep the ADP on target and indeed at levels sufficient to keep our development expenditure at levels commensurate with boosting economic growth rates above 5 per cent, puts GOB claims about raising its contribution towards financing the ADP in a rather different light. It shows, that the much publicized success of fueling ADP from domestic sources owes to the non-fulfillment and reducing the ADP target and not from the fact that ADP is being enlarged and the allocation from domestic source is being higher. Thus in 1993/94, on the basis of the realised ADP expenditures, the domestic surplus was supposed to have financed 40 per cent of the ADP. But, in practice, had the ADP actually realized its target of Tk 97.5

billion, the self-reliance rate would have been 31 per cent. Another discussion on the division between revenue and ADP expenditures should be in order to wipe out the misconception lingering around self-sufficiency and development. It is reported that a sizeable portion of ADP expenditures are made up of revenue expenditures and hence could be categorized as revenue expenditures. Far example in 1990/91-93/94, 36.5 per cent of the development budget was considered to be comprising those items which are usually called items of revenue expenditures. Having argued so, the IRBD report tends to say that the share of recurrent expenditure has risen from 60.6 per cent in 1980/81-84/85 to 70.3 per cent in 1990/91-1994/95. 'On the basis of the re-estimation or revenue expenditures, during the 1990s, Bangladesh never did have a revenue surplus....'

By and large, it could be deduced that Bangladesh witnessed substantial improvements in terms of revenue collection and generation of gross national savings. However, the total tax structure still seems to be bedeviled with a number of constraints that make the tax base narrow. Unless the tax base can be broadened enough, the progress could turn out to be unsustainable and short-lived.

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



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the government's own political interest.

Bangladesh's tax base is also related to two other factors, viz. aid flows and dynamism in economy and both of them are said to be beyond government's control. It is unfortunate that the contribution of direct taxes to total collection, allegedly, is lower at only 14 per cent. This share is reported to be lower than 17 per cent of 1989/90. Again, taxes from the agricultural sector is

# Bangladesh Bureaucracy: Looking at the Problems

by A M Alimuzzaman

LET us trace the deep-rooted causes of the political unrest in our country and the debate over the role of bureaucracy. These are: (1) our constitution has given enormous powers to the President and the Prime Minister; (2) there is no mechanism in the constitution by which one can balance the other when both the offices are held by persons belonging to the same party; (3) the extensive power of the President/Prime Minister was given in pattern of the British model, but in the British system the personality of the King (Queen) acts as a balancing factor over the Prime Minister; (4) because of these vast powers our Presidents/Prime Ministers in the past, became so much dominant that they had either been killed, imprisoned or condemned; (5) and because of these vast powers of the rulers the bureaucrats have become instruments of power and also victims of abuse, degeneration and frustration; (6) after serving as instrument of power the bureaucracy is asserting that they must act above the party and the powers of the President and the Prime Minister shall be used in accordance with the will of the nation; (7) after serving loyally for more than two decades, the Bangladesh civil and military bureaucracy is disapproving Maxweler about a future populated by nonentities ('specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart....') the bureaucrats are demonstrating that they have spirit and they have heart; (8) this spirit will be lost unless the powers of the regime are balanced and supremacy of the will of the nation is established as a matter of culture in letter and spirit.

Sociologist Maxweler described bureaucracy as 'the means of transforming social action into rationally organised action.' The recent spate of transfer of Deputy Commissioners, Thana Nirbahi Officers and other officers at the national level is therefore surprising from the point of Maxweler's view of bureaucracy. But in our culture, we are just used to it. Everytime there is some social or political unrest, bureaucracy becomes the first victim. After the turmoil is over some of the bureaucrats are transferred, the administration is reshuffled and the 'business is as usual.'

But even then, the problems remain and explode with added velocity. We may recollect the past sequences: 1) After independence from UK in 1947, two Martial Laws, 2) independence from Pakistan in 1971, 3) Assassination of Bangabandhu and Martial Law in 1975, 4) Assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in 1981 and Martial Law, 5) Mass uprising in 1991 and imprisonment of President Ershad, 6) Non-cooperation in 1996 and resignation of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

With each event the rulers had suffered. The bureaucracy had suffered along with the rulers. The special feature is that the unrest is spreading and embracing members of all professions and tiers of society.

**The Colonial Legacy**  
As part of Pakistan we became independent in 1947 but we continued to be administered by the laws and traditions designed to maintain colonial domination. The rules designed to be applied from London to govern the Indian sub-continent remained almost intact. The first shock came when the Governor-General of Pakistan dissolved the elected constituent assembly of Pakistan. Speaker of the constituent assembly fought against this dissolution and won the first round in the Sindh High Court but lost the second round in the Supreme Court. On the point that the British Raj's law regarding the powers of the Governor-General were still in force, the Supreme Court could very well declare the action of the Governor-General null and void. Many said Pakistan was saved from a great crisis by the decision of the Supreme Court. But was Pakistan saved? The supremacy of the chief executive thus refrained, the bureaucracy had to adjust itself to retain its position as specialist. But in the process they lost their power as specialists and became instruments of power by complying with the directives of their political masters.

**Bureaucracy — a Power Instrument**  
The bureaucracy soon became a power instrument of our rulers and the economic disparity widened, ultimately leading to the disintegration of Pakistan. But the new constitution did not change the status of the rulers nor their powers were constrained. The bureaucracy soon became the power instrument of the first order for the rulers who control the bureaucratic apparatus. Although the rulers did not

last indefinitely but successive rulers seemed to have enjoyed this power game without going deep into the factors for their rise and fall. The colonial system therefore persisted and is still persisting.

**Almost Absolute Power**  
The President/Prime Minister of Bangladesh has powers almost equal to those of medieval Kings and ancient Emperors. The medieval Kings have been modernised, the Emperor lost their Empire, but our Presidents/Prime Ministers carry on with similar almost absolute powers. They are rather true to the words of the constitution not the spirit.

Based on the British model our rulers have forgotten that British constitution is mostly a set of conventions and in reality the British Prime Minister are two figures which are altogether different on the head of the state and the head of the government.

Then the parliament and the House of Lords are also two distinct bodies with different backgrounds. But in Bangladesh these organs of the State are rather jam-packed and there is no balancing of one by the other. Hence the British Prime Minister cannot just be inducted in Bangladesh with the powers, position and privilege of both the Prime Minister and the monarch sandwiched. Successive regimes seemed to have enjoyed this power and have not taken any steps to institutionalise these powers by the act of balancing. Thus, besides enjoying many financial, social, logistic facilities the President/Prime Minister has been given the powers of appointing, promoting, demoting, degrading of the Republic; key positions such as judges of the Supreme Court and the High Court, the Attorney General; key position of Public Service Commission, Election Commission; Vice-Chancellors of Universities, Professors, Ambassadors; retirement and re-employment, of officials; delegation to foreign countries; awarding ceremonial 'Padaks' and so on. These are powers similar to what were enjoyed only by the medieval Kings when they exercised absolute powers.

**The Caretaker Government**  
Even the caretaker governments seemed to have suc-

cumbed to the power theory. No doubt the constitution has given the Head of the State/Government enormous powers. But the constitution has not barred any President/Prime Minister/Chief Adviser to set conventions by following the due process of selection. (The due process is a process which has built-in checks and balances and transparency). Thus it is not known how the caretaker President's team of Advisers were selected, how did they make appointments to the key posts. The caretaker government may set some conventions of due process for future governments thus avoiding the process of amending the constitution.

**System of Patronage**  
The system of patronage as described earlier was observed by Thomas Paine long ago in his Criticism of the English Monarchy as: When extraordinary powers and extraordinary pay are attached to any individual in a government, he becomes the centre, round which every kind of corruption generates and forms. What is called the splendour of the throne is no other than the corruption of the state.

When such a vicious system is established it becomes the guard and protection of all inferior abuses. ... monarchy would not have continued so many ages in the world had it not been for the abuses it protects. ... By admitting a participation of the spoil, it makes itself friends; and when it ceases to do this it will cease

to be the idol of countries. 'Even these monarchies which began their control all over England as long ago as 829 A.D. so simply transformed themselves over a span of 200 years... acted in obedience to the unwritten rule of our national life which prescribes that the powers of the King shall be used in accordance with the will of the nation. They stood above party; they watched the nation; they joined with their subjects in bringing about change when the will of the nation was set for change and only when it was so set' (Sir Ernest Barker).

**Bangladesh Bureaucracy and Code of Conduct**

The joining of many bureaucrats, civil and military, in the War of Liberation, boosted morale of the people. The role played by the bureaucracy in 1991 and 1996 March has been hotly debated. One view is in favour and another against but from the third angle, was it not too late?

They could have protested against the decisions of the government when the so-called abuses started. The bureaucracy had therefore to be changed for tolerating and complying with the so-called abuses of the successive governments so long. We have to keep in mind that difference between a constitution and a government. As Thomas Paine observed: 'There must necessarily be a controlling power existing somewhere.' According to him this controlling power cannot be placed in the discretion of the persons exercising the government. This

discretion has to be placed in the constitution. Hence, the code of conduct for the bureaucracy which was made by certain individuals in the government cannot have the discretion of the constitution which is framed by the nation. The will of the nation is more supreme than the code of conduct.

**The Role of Bureaucracy**  
The role of bureaucracy, their tenure, promotion and other conditions of service have therefore to be spelled out in the constitution in all details. Appointments to other positions of the Republic have also to be spelled out. No doubt the President will appoint. But how? Mere consultation with somebody does not give a respectable and practical image. There must be checks and balances and transparency. Those are public appointments and no secrecy is needed.

Thus after balancing the powers of the rulers and other organs of the state we can expect 'a new psychology of dependency' throughout the bureaucracy. We can conclude with Maxweler's words: 'The honour of the official is the ability to carry out an order on the responsibility of the commanding official conscientiously and exactly in such a way as if it accorded with his own conviction, (even) when the higher authority insists, despite his protests, on an order that appears wrong to him. Without such ethical discipline in the highest sense and self-denial the entire apparatus would disintegrate.'

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## OPINION

### Party and Nomination

Munira Khan

of choosing a party candidate has been changed. People buy forms with money and deposit money for an interview. Although it was decided earlier whom they would give the nomination, the leaders give time to interview to please all the nomination-seekers. One such person was told me that although he knew he won't get a nomination, yet he went for an interview. He said that he bought the 'time' of the leaders by Tk 1500 a minute. That means he was interviewed for three minutes approximately. Isn't it interesting? Candidates are being chosen not by merit but by convenience, not by sincerity but by promise of surty.

Usually, in a democracy where there is a multiparty system, party conventions are held to select and choose the leaders who would be nominated to contest the elections. The party members who represent their constituencies, who can show the popular support and credibility and strength are chosen by the central leaders. It is not only a matter of interview for three or five minutes. The leaders must have knowledge about the constituencies and their candidates. They must have worked with them, have been associated with them for lifting the party ideals. Somebody who is new in politics, who is retired from his/her old position will have to be oriented first with politics, with people's interest — for people's benefit.

Anyway, the party leaders know better what is good for them. As voters, as the responsible citizens of the country, our duty and obligation are to choose the representatives correctly and intelligently. If all the parties choose good candidates who believe in the party ideals, who do not betray their own party, it would have been easier for us to choose and vote. But if they select people who catch fishes in the troubled political water only for their own benefit, who cross the floor and ideals and set the sail with the wind, we will be the ultimate losers.

It is always interesting to watch the political scenario in Bangladesh before any election. This year, changing and joining from one political party to other by politicians would-be politicians and to get nomination to contest at the ensuing election reminds me of the beginning of the seasons of cricket and football. Every year before the seasons start, we witness some players leaving their teams and joining new ones for, of course, a better offer and opportunity in their career. A cricketer or a footballer is offered to be included in a team by the management for his ability to play and enrich the team with his skills. Of course with the ultimate aim to win the championship.

It is amusing to compare a politician with a sportsman. A sportsman is a sportsman as long as he retains his talent, but a politician is a politician until he dies. A sportsman has to go through a training, and keep on practising to be a good player. A politician also generally needs to have political training or experience and service and sacrifice for the community, for his constituency.

But what do you think when you see some bureaucrats or generals or businessmen who suddenly after retirement decide to contest in Parliamentary election and join a party? It means that in Bangladesh you don't require any special qualifications or training to be a politician. How then is politics regarded as a specialised subject? What relations does a political party have with the politicians? According to political theories, a political party is an organised group of people who control or seek to control the government. Parties compete against one another in the elections to keep or gain control of a government.

In a democracy, people elect representatives from among the politicians to act as their agents in making and enforcing laws. At election time people vote for the candidates whom they choose by judging the manifesto and the ideals of the party concerning public

## To the Editor...

### Release of Ershad

Sir, Jatiya Party leaders have been pressing for the release of ex-President Hussain Mohammad Ershad in order to enable him to participate in the forthcoming general election. They are even threatening to boycott the election if their demand is not acceded to.

Everyone in the country knows that ex-President Ershad is not a political prisoner. He was arrested on very serious specific charges by the former neutral caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed ranging from Arms Act to grabbing of public money and utter misuse of power. These cases are at various stages of trial. Only recently, a High Court Division has rejected an appeal to grant him bail in one of the cases.

The demand of the Jatiya Party appears to be against rule of law and as interference in smooth dispensation of justice. If Mr Ershad is found not guilty, he will automatically be honourably acquitted. However, if he is released without trial, then the other accused facing various criminal charges will also have to be released. The Jatiya Party leadership should refrain from making such funny demands.

Let us not temper with functions of Judiciary, and let

natural justice take its own course.

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### Dudayev's spirit is alive

Sir, Dzhokhar Dudayev is physically dead, but his spirit is alive and will remain alive in the struggle for independence of the people of Chechnya. By his sudden death, it is not only the people of Chechnya who lost a great leader but also the Islamic Ummah. Actually, he also fought for the cause of Islam, but unfortunately, it seemed that Islamic countries remained rather silent over the issue, though many Islamic countries (big or small) have come forward in the rescue of Bosnians.

He (Dudayev) fought single-handed with a very big power and his death is due to the hypocrisy of Boris Yeltsin. Unfortunately, many Muslim countries are inclined to make friendship with Russia particularly for armaments and military hardware.

After the death of Dzhokhar Dudayev, the leadership has been taken up by another dedicated man named Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who has vowed to take revenge against the terrorist Russian leaders and we

hope he comes out victorious because the fight is against the evil.

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### Power failure in Dhanmondi

Sir, The power supply situation in the West Dhanmondi adjacent to Zigatola, Rayer Bazar area has become very bad of late. During the past weeks it has become worse. Power goes off a few times everyday with or without the slightest wind or rain and most often hours pass before it is restored. In the last few days we were plunged into darkness every evening until nine or ten. Sometimes power is disconnected and restored and switched off again at the interval of one to two hours. It is very troublesome to spend time in darkness with fans off during these hot and humid days. It seems people of this area are the victim of either load-shedding or some local technical problems. Will it be too much to ask that somebody should look into the matter and do the needful in this regard?

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