

## 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. Alternately, 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.

In the wake of a dwindling foreign aid availability, mobilization of domestic resources should hold the key to the development of a country like Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's performance on this score is very poor. The gross national savings of Bangladesh in FY '94 constituted only about 13 per cent of the GDP. This leaves room neither for comfort nor complacency expecting the fact that the share has been rising in the early 1990s. From about 6 per cent of FY 81, the share dipped to about 3 per cent in FY 82 and then rose to an average of less than 6 per cent over the whole 1980s. It is only since early 1990s that a monotonic rise in the gross national savings/GDP ratio could be discerned. The improvement could be adduced to the positive developments in the arena of macro economic management. As compared to the 1980s, there seems to be an improvement in revenue collection on two fronts. First, during the period 1990/91-1994/95, revenue collections have been right on the target and reportedly over shot the target on few occasions. Second, revenue budget collection from both tax and non-tax revenue, has also been right on the line with less fluctuations in evidence.

The above observations

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

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

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



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

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 slice from domestic resource is being higher. Thus in 1993/94, on the basis of the realized 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. For 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.

## 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 disproving Max Weber 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 short-lived 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.

**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 final 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 restrained, 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 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)

natural justice take its own course.

Mahabubur Rahman Dhaka

### 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 his ball 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 honourable acquitted. However, if he is released without trial, then the other accused facing serious criminal charges will also have to be released. The Jatiya Party leadership should refrain from making such funny demand.

Let us not temper with functions of judiciary, and let

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 Empires, 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 monarch and 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 jampacked and there is no balancing of one by the other. Hence the British Prime Minister cannot just be induced 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 government seemed to have succeeded in 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 ideas of the party concerning public

and national interests. It is naturally to be taken for granted that the candidates nominated by the parties believe in the ideals of the party. But what we see in reality? Some candidates who uttered abusive words against and criticised a 'party' yesterday are joining the same party today! Are they starting to believe the ideals of the party concerned now? Some candidates who were criticised by a party yesterday are being taken in the party with garlands and enthusiasm today. What, then, is the criteria of being a member of any political party? Can anybody, anytime become a member of any party, no matter what he/she did or said previously? Is there anything called party loyalty here in Bangladesh? Rumours go that nominations are preferably given to those who have money, who have big names or titles (ex or retired) which are expected to help win the election.

No previous input for the party or the community is required — no involvement in the party is necessary. Above all, no experience or training for holding a public office is required. Some people feel that a service-holder's or bureaucrat's behaviour and attitude is completely different from that of a politician who is a public figure, has more proximity with the people, shares joy and sorrow with the people of his or her constituency and is aware of the problems of the people around, attached with their sentimental and practical issues.

On the other hand, a service holder, although an intelligent and efficient officer would lack the ability to behave like a politician because he was not trained for that. Bangladesh has seen many bureaucrats as ministers and members of parliament but none of them could be recognised as a good parliamentarian or a popular politician.

However, norms and ways

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 telling 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 surity.

Usually, in a democracy where there are 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 post, his/her post 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.

## OPINION

### Party and Nomination

Munira Khan

It is always interesting to watch the political scenario in Bangladesh before any election. This year, changing and joining from one political party to another by politicians would-be politicians and to get nominations 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.

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