

Good Luck to Observers

The foreign poll observers have begun on a positive note, so it seems. Some of them conveying their initial first-hand impressions of the atmospheres in the run-up to the polls and the arrangements being finalised for the conduct of free and impartial elections have noted with satisfaction that: (a) they are under no pressure to be on guided tours; (b) the election officials are well-poised for a conscientious discharge of their responsibilities; and (c) if they wished, they could make up for their numerical limitation by counting on 30,000 domestic FEMA poll watchers going afield to cover 1,14,749 polling booths to open in the country. They are hopeful of a fairly large cross-sectional view of the proceedings. This would help them arrive at an impartial judgement of the poll outcome.

Such preliminary findings of the international observer groups should enhance our confidence in ourselves and inspire us to give the finishing touches to the arrangements even to perfection and extend all the logistic support they might stand in need of.

Their presence itself is a measure of world-wide interest in our June 12 elections. And the initial confidence they have expressed through their pre-poll assessment is likely to raise the level of global expectations for a good election in Bangladesh. To that extent, the obligations of the political parties, the Election Commission, the caretaker government, the officials and men on election duty and the voters increase to make the election a success.

We welcome the presence of as many observer groups as might be able to come here — with all the grace we are capable of not merely as a hospitable nation but also one that is keen on sharing its genuine love for democracy with the rest of the world.

The very adoption of a neutral caretaker mechanism for the polls after a protracted popular movement that made world news so many times rules out harbouring any complex against foreign poll observers. Like the worldwide waves for economic liberalisation and transparency we have to stand the tests of political openness and democratic righteousness as the citizens of one world.

We wish the poll watchers a happy and rewarding stay. Good luck.

Issue is Inviolability

With 14 more June 12 poll contestants and two political leaders receiving warning from the Election Commission for violation of the election code of conduct, the total number of violators has risen to 100. We do not know if there are more waiting to be brought to the EC's notice. Whatever it is, the fact remains that the EC has been keeping a tab on the wayward among the candidates and party activists. The enquiry committees the EC set up to monitor the campaigns of political parties and their candidates are also doing a creditable job.

We appreciate the EC's concern for making the contending parties to go by the code of conduct that is obligatory for everyone. However, we do not know about the follow-up on the warnings issued against the erring candidates or their supporters. Have all those who received a warning rectified themselves and not repeated the offence? So far as we know no one has received any harsh punishment — other than getting a warning — such as imprisonment or cancellation of candidature. Should we assume them that the breach has till now been of mild nature?

If this is the case, well and good. But if the EC's dealings with the offenders who have undermined the election code give the impression that it wants to play safe and soft and ultimately one can get away with an act of breach, there is no knowing how the offences will end. The figure of the warned — 100 so far — bears testimony to the lack of keenness on the part of prospective members of parliament, not very keen to learn from official warnings. Clearly these people have not given a good account of themselves, so far as their candidature for the parliamentary election is concerned. We would very much expect that the EC will not hesitate to take a tough line against the violators of campaign rules. The candidates, their patrons and supporters must not labour under the impression that the code of conduct is more of a formality than an inviolable charter for all who participate in polls.

Nigerian Tragedy

Kudirat Abiola, wife of Mashood K Abiola — the man who is widely believed to have won the 1993 Nigerian national election, was shot dead on Tuesday. Accusing fingers have already been pointed to the military rulers of the country for the killing. Kudirat Abiola's daughter in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has gone on record how for months her mother had been followed by the intelligence service. Once the outspoken critic of the military regime was even arrested recently. The unusual attention to her, according to the daughter, had been a prelude to the tragedy that was to happen.

Kudirat Abiola's crime is not just she happens to be the wife of a man now suffering jail sentence but she herself was a politician of some stature who opposed the military rule in Nigeria. In today's world other than Burma, only Nigeria has the misfortune to carry on with military rule despite a popular mandate made a clear choice for an elected civilian governance. Abiola's offence is that he declared himself president after the man in power Gen. Sani Abacha had cancelled the election.

Although there is a strong ground for believing military's involvement in the killing, one needs to be sure. The best way for that, as the US State Department has demanded, is to carry on a thorough investigation by an impartial and most competent body. No amount of consolation will be enough for the loss the Nigerian opposition and its leader have suffered. However if the investigation brings out the truth, politics in Nigeria may once again get on to the right track.

BNP Demonstrates Bangladesh as a Self-sustaining Country

by Abdul Momin

In the early seventies it became fashionable to jive at Bangladesh as a bottomless pit. The gloomy prognostications of pundits took such firm hold in the public mind, that no amount of mere talk would have any effect and it needed to be demonstrated in the concrete that given devotion and single-minded action Bangladesh could rise far above the simplistic conclusions so far drawn.

It was President Ziaur Rahman who never called Bangladesh a small country, high-lighting its position as the eighth largest in terms of population. He was inspired with a consuming passion to establish Bangladesh as a truly independent and sovereign country which would be a desirable home for all its people. His Bangladesh nationalism emphasised reliance on our own strength and he roamed the country side digging into the scarce land along with the farmers, and in spite of primitive technology, produced a surplus of rice and sugar for the first time in living memory. This evoked widespread admiration as evidenced by a five-column headline in the International Herald Tribune "Bangladesh exports rice". President Zia's meteoric career holding immense promise was to the shock of everyone, cut short by a vile assassination plot.

A military coup d'état and nine years of autocratic rule intervened before the democratically elected government of Begum Khaleda Zia could pick up the threads again in 1991. The economic management of her government, during its 5-year rule would be topical in the current situation of the country. Under Begum Zia's leadership it was finance Minister Saifur Rahman who acted as the steward of economic management.

Revenue collection may be said to be the centre piece of the Finance Minister's work from which stemmed many elements of strength and which presented the nation with varied fall-outs of a beneficial nature, government revenues doubled:

Total Revenue (Crores of Taka)
1990-91
7551
1994-95
14210
(12.9% of GDP)
(9.6% of GDP)

The healthy revenue position enabled the government to accumulate a record foreign exchange reserve of over \$ 3 billion, as they did not have to draw on the inflow of export receipts and expatriate remittances for meeting demands pressing all around but could do so from the collection of revenue, particularly by curtailing current expenditure from 14-18 per cent of GDP in 1984-85 to 6 per cent in 93-94. It is true that with the impact of repeat of repeated droughts and floods in northern Bangladesh necessitating the import of unexpectedly large quantities of food grains and the schedule of foreign loan repayments have since brought down the reserve to something like 2.4 billion dollars but even that is adequate for a safe four month import needs. This quantum of reserve compares favourably with that of India's where for an economy ten times bigger than ours the reserve had recently come down to \$ 17 billion from \$ 25 billion.

It is easy but unfair to belittle this achievement by saying, "garments operators exported and earned, expatriate citizens should look to the petty little the government had to do". This pettyfogging overlooks the fact that until the Multifibre Arrangement is phased out by 2005, the garments market is governed by quotas and the all-important role of the government in securing quotas by means of forceful representations with foreign governments under the umbrella of overall friendly relations cannot be gainsaid. Nor should one overlook the fact that the quantum of emigration and the well-being of emigrants is a matter of government-to-government relations while such imaginative measures as Sonali exchange ensuring quick and safe delivery of funds swelled the official reserve.

Secondly, the healthy revenue position enabled the government, to finance progressively larger development budgets which in 1994-95 was nearly double that of 1990-91.

Industries having been left to the private sector (except for the coal and hard rock mining projects in northern Bangladesh), the investments were made largely in physical and social infrastructure, education being given the largest dose. The two novel measures of food for education and stipend for girl students in higher secondary classes have proved to be effective. At the primary stage drop-out rate which has been its Achilles' heel has come down steeply. Literacy which is universally accepted as the first indispensable condition for productive efficiency has reportedly gone up from 24 to 42 per cent. It is a pleasing sight now to see lines of grown-up girls streaming towards schools. One does not have to quote Napoleon's famous saying to conclude that these educated mothers will make for an educated nation. Health complexes have spanned every

thana. Education and health will thus enrich the nation's human resource and make them efficient agents of production.

As for physical infrastructure, first class roads are covering every part of the country. All the mighty rivers are either already bridged (Meghna & Gumti) or to be bridges (Jamuna in 97, Padma, Rupsha and Meghna (at Bhairab Bazar) planned for the next 2-3 years). The country can then be traversed easily from end to end. Digital telephone system covering the main cities will be completed in the next few months and will be conducive (together with electronic mail) for instantaneous business communication. Five thousand new villages have been electrified.

For reasons already mentioned, growth rates were not spectacular but they were an improvement on those of the 80s. The annual growth rates during the years 1990-91, 1991-92, 1992-93, 1993-94, 1994-95 were respectively 3.40, 4.23, 4.48, 4.61, 5.10. Nevertheless, Bangladesh numbers compare not unfavourably with those of Pakistan (4.7) or India (5.3).

It is pertinent to mention here that had not the martial programme, so relentlessly pursued by the opposition parties, constantly disturbed economic activities, the growth rates would certainly have been better. According to ADB estimate, Bangladesh loses between Tk. 1200 million and Tk. 1,400 million in production for each martial day. During 1995, for as many as 40 martial days Bangladesh lost between Tk. 48,000 million and Tk. 56,000 million in production which is about 3 per cent of GDP in that year. (Annual Report, Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh Resident Mission 1996). Besides, Foreign investors might be shying away being confronted with martial every time a delegation is here.

Sixthly, for the people in general and for the rural poor benefits flew from the macro-economic strength of the economy in the shape of low inflation and rise in agricultural real wages. For most of the period of 1991-95, inflation remained below 2 per cent but it took an upward trend in 94-95 on account of droughts in the north of the country resulting in failure of crops and rise in foodgrains prices. Nevertheless, the cost of living index remains even now at 5.49 per cent, the lowest in South Asia. Food for works and OMS sales together with massive imports have kept foodgrains prices within the reach of the poor.

Per capita income including rural income increased perceptibly. UN figures put the increase at \$ 220 from \$ 180 in 1991. However, more pertinent for poverty alleviation are the under-noted:

Agricultural Real Wage Index 1969 = 70 = 100
1971-72
1972-73
1973-74
1974-75
1975-76
1981-82

1990-91
1991-92
1992-93
1993-94

Seventhly, the achievement of the government from the point of view of self-reliance is manifested by its capability to meet as much as 43 per cent of the development budget from our own resources compared to only 5.6 per cent during 1985-86 to 89-90 period (IRBD report). This was, indeed a timely and fortunate outcome as it coincided with the end of the cold war when donor countries no longer having to compete were cutting their aid budget. During the eighties, Bangladesh Ambassadors, somewhat to their embarrassment, were asked to seek taka funds also from donor countries. The Finance Minister nearly



The impact of the oppositions massive non-cooperation programme during the early months of 1996 has been even more dire with the result that the growth would for the year at best be 4.5 per cent in spite of our valiant farmers producing a bumper boro crop.

Thirdly the strength of the finances enabled the government to make out currency convertible on current account, not lagging behind other countries of South Asia. The Take was able to stand the vagaries of a free market testing to the strength of our position. No doubt, there is an element of management by Central Bank as there is for other currencies. Export dependent sources such as garments operators occasionally clamour for devaluation but a 90 per cent import dependent country cannot follow the example of 90 per cent export oriented India, lest the price of essentials go beyond the reach of the poor masses.

Fourthly, the government was also able to finance several projects, such as the second Buriganga Bridge from our own resources and with our own engineering capability. In the process, not only the money remained at home and indigenous expertise and experience got a boost but also our eyes were opened to discover how much economy could result therefrom. Buriganga is to cost around Tk. 55 crores whereas foreign tender was double that amount.

Fifthly, with revenue and foreign exchange at their disposal, the government could confidently face emergencies, such as repeated droughts and floods. They were able to feed the people and not feel helpless as in 1974 when delay in food aid shipments caused thousands of deaths.

Except for the cyclone of April 1991 which hit right at the moment of the assumption of power, it became feasible for the government not to run about for outside assistance in case of disasters like droughts and floods but meet the situation from own resources whereas certain opposition leaders still appealed quite unnecessarily to foreign friends. It had become a national habit to speak of "disaster prone country" and to broadcast urgent appeals for outside assistance whenever a calamity overtook the country. Fortunately that phase seems to be over if the lead given by the BNP government could be continued.



reached the target he set before himself at the outset of attaining 50 per cent self-sustaining capacity at the end of the government's mandate. He has also spoken of the feasibility of Bangladesh becoming nearly self-sustaining by the end of the century.

The doubling of revenue inflow from which massive benefits flew, was not like manna showered from heaven, the Finance Minister had to work extremely hard for it.

It would be less than fair to dismiss this monumental work as "no reflection of higher efficiency of the BNP government". Observations in this area would be incomplete if one did not mention how the need for subsidising for two decades the enterprises nationalized in 1972 have been eating into the banking system and acting as shackles on the economy. Every year an amount of as much as Tk.8,000 crores has to be dishied out through the banking system to support these uneconomic establishments. Although Bangladesh Bank had regularly

Refinanced the amounts until the Banking Sector Reform measures were introduced, the burden has to be carried by the lending banks which made them sick. If these huge sums had been available for productive investment, that would have acted yearly as tremendous shots in the arm of the economy.

Government efforts at privatizing these losing concerns or otherwise putting them out of the way met with stiff resistance from militant labour which drew support from some political parties. It is fervently to be hoped that before the century is out, consensus would be established as to how to put an end to this blood-letting once and for all.

To sum up, BNP management of the economy has seen a doubling of the national revenue and of the development outlay, low inflation, moderate GDP growth which is likely to quicken up as the investments so far made have their impact, a sound macro-economic structure, a convertible Taka, some alleviation of poverty as well as attainment of almost fifty per cent self-sustaining capability. Hopefully, the next government will be able to take the country all the way to economic independence and well being for all sections of the people.

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OPINION

Lest We Forget: Reflections from Yesterday

by Kazi Alaiddin Ahmed

COMPLACENCY and conceit are the malignant twins born of malnourished or undernourished wisdom. Each, in turn, is a hydra-headed demon with totally blurred vision. The holders of either of these two crude elements can seldom see reason. Nor can they look beyond the periphery of their artificially lit domain maneuvered by greedy self-seekers. The past regime most intriguingly tallied with the described scenario.

The demand for a non-party caretaker government for holding free and fair elections to the Jatiya Sangsad for at least three successive terms was described to have been comprehensible only to an insane or a child. This was the firm and oft-quoted public conviction of the former Prime Minister. She took over two years and more than one hundred innocent lives to realize what it actually meant.

Having pitifully failed in her bid to get the mainstream opposition parties led by Awami League to sit for a dialogue she had decided to go all alone for the national election for the sixth parliament. Such a conjecture on her part raised her provocative activities to a dizzy height. It was indeed a farcical election. Still then, she took the oath of office as the Prime Minister and later formed her cabinet. In the meantime, she made a startling public announcement that all she was going to do was to pave way for another election in the quickest possible time under a non-party caretaker government. A bill to this end was very hurriedly prepared and unanimously adopted as a part of the 13th Amendment to our constitution. Thus, in her own words, she and her party had fulfilled an historical responsibility.

Likewise, her initial enthusiasm in surmounting her government as democratic government receded into oblivion. One possible reason to forsake qualifying her government with democratic passion

the innate organisational weaknesses at the time into a formidable strength and sustenance.

Against such a vicious backdrop the caretaker government of Mohammad Habibur Rahman was installed in office. Its prime task has been the immediate recovery of illegal arms but the rate so far has been far from being satisfactory. Every single political party including BNP has expressed its concern on it and doubted if a free and fair election would ever be possible while holders of illegal arms were at large. More intriguingly, the 'free license' allegedly granted to at least 20,000 BNP activists by the former Home Minister, shall have added to the genuine concern of the people.

Such linkage may be traced in the recent public utterances of some of the student leaders with BNP affiliations. Much of their audacious remarks are freely directed to their political opponents declared 'personae non-gratae' in Bangladesh. Some of these 'eternal students' can ill-afford to part with their alma-mater for some very palpable reasons. DUCSU election stands deferred for about seven years now and it is not conceivable how the office-bearers remain students for so long. I have a hunch that this student forum no longer belongs to students. I wonder if it should call for an immediate amendment to its constitution which would automatically disband it from the moment the term of office expires. For the interim period and until fresh election all its affairs may be vested with a specially appointed Senate Committee headed by the Vice-Chancellor. Such proposed amendment should be applicable to all other Universities.

Most of our political leaders nurse a misgiving that whosoever is adept in haranguing at the public enjoys bigger support. Such groups of people are often flattered by the size of the public meetings they address. Unfortunately, they



are not capable of measuring the illusion that such mass gathering pervades through. Carshed, before his unceremonious fall addressed a number of huge public meetings at different places but was eventually forced to swallow the bitter pill of deception.

Khaleda Zia's self-same overtures to her largely attended public meetings, even after stepping down from power continue to give her an air of vanity and a dubious sense of pride. However, she is yet to realize that she may also have to stand on the dock for the misdeeds, corruption, political killings etc. The cry for trial of the crimes of her regime is also gaining momentum.

There is a great saying in circulation that "emotions are masters, intellect the servant". So any act or deliberation, particularly in public meetings, when punctuated by emotional outbursts, can put the speaker in disrepute even internationally. While in power she did hardly utter a word against our big neighbour, except perhaps one or two occasions. But, now being out of the saddle of power, she is playing down the 'India bogey' and expressed her determination not to allow anyone to make Bangladesh another 'Bhutan and Sikkim'. She forgot altogether, beaten by an eerie emotion, that Bhutan was very much an independent country and one of the members of the SAARC. Of course, later she corrected herself by publicly apologizing but the damage was already done!

Nevertheless, she continues harping on the imaginary 'India-bogey' claiming that 'one party' (oblique reference to Awami League) if voted to power, would sell out the country to India. Here, she is found totally and conveniently oblivious that her open market economy later the nation did already convert our poor country an absolutely free market for Indian goods.

HEIKH HASINA, the Awami League Chief and former leader of the Opposition in the Fifth Parliament had the lamentation of her life in conceding defeat in the 1991 general election, although numerically the percentage of vote cast in favour of AL candidates was higher than that of BNP. I have no doubt that she was capable of reflecting upon the reasons of her defeat. Nevertheless, she had shown a remarkable power to convert

Although the other two parties in the trio are now talking otherwise, people know that the whole movement against BNP government would never have the bite if Awami League did not lead. True that joining hands with Jatiya Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami was regarded by many as an ominous conglomerate but saner and cooler thinking accepted it later as a politics of convenience.

In the process and during the penultimate phase of the non-cooperation movement, the emergence of Janata Mancha (platform of the people) was of course the shrewdest manoeuvre to outwit the Government of Khaleda Zia. Notwithstanding the full support of the top leadership, Mayor of the Metropolis Mohammad Hanif could be justifiably singled out as the 'architect' of such a novel platform. It was indeed a very organised effort of the party which ultimately reaped good dividends.

Still then, its use by a group of Civil Servants headed by Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, was though emotionally acceptable, it was not tenable in accordance with the conditions in Government Service Rules and discipline. Such an action on their part was fraught with a danger of inculcating a state of partisan spirit detrimental to effective administrative machinery. But, in consideration of the fundamental rights of a citizen, besides being a government servant, they could express themselves from their own association platform which could not be questioned by any body. However, their apparent dereliction was later squarely neutralized by another group of government servants belonging to the 'Brokers' who showed their enthusiasm for BNP by meeting its Chairperson. Both the entities, it appeared, forgot even peremptorily, their employment conditionalities throwing the entire nation into utter dismay. All will be well-advised to refrain from acting in such queer manner in future. Evidently, they were emotion-ridden which was humane.

Now, reverting to the organisational activities of the Awami League, more precisely, the party Chief Sheikh Hasina, over the past several months, one cannot but be impressed.

Sheikh Hasina has been able to distinctly demarcate her political offensive and spiritual composure.

On the political front her remark on a 'Consensus' to rule the country once voted to power, has been a, startling departure from the ill-founded legacy of the politics in Bangladesh. As I can see, from this 'firm' and unambiguous conviction of the Awami League Chief it connotes the prevalence of a unanimous approach to certain specific areas of governance where the position and the opposition shall have a common stand point. Here, the imperative importance of a diverse national identity, hitherto pitifully ignored, will have the upper hand.

On this I am tempted to cite an example. I presume that the Member of the Parliament belonging to the opposition will have a greater say on all developmental matters relating to his/her constituency. The government in power will seek the MP's plans for development backed by local level representatives of the people and give all out support to him/her vis-a-vis the constituency.

The whole country is now seized by the election fever. The national election under the present Caretaker Government and a reorganised Election Commission has been fixed on June 12, 1996. All the four major parties have expressed their hope to win the power slot. It may be pertinent to mention here that the ouster of BNP government by the combined opposition — spearheaded mainly by Awami League — provided ostensibly, greater benefits to Jatiya Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Meantime, party nominations have been given. Among the interesting ones are the gaol ex-president Ershad for five Rangpur seats and as many as three for his wife for Mymensingh seats. More interestingly, the drop out of Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury has rocked the electorate by a mysterious jolt.

Another most intriguing but squarely palpable event has been the pre-election speech of the Jamaat-e-Islami Chief Golam Azam. He has spoken of the oneness of humanity and added that Islam (truly so) does not believe in any distinction between the followers of different religions. Such a statement is though a positive departure from the party's usual orthodox footings, can hardly remove the covert ingredient of hypocrisy that has been historically its twin. Nor shall it efface from the public mind the horrid memories of the bloody gamble that this party played during our War of Liberation in 1971.

In any case, the whole nation shall continue to wait anxiously to have a stable government for leading the country on an even keel towards real prosperity.

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