

For a New Politics

The election outcome will be clearly known by this afternoon. EC hopes to announce results of all 300 seats by that time — barring those where polling has been stopped. Trends say there would be nominal. So, from this very day a new countdown would start — that for the induction of a new government.

Now is the time for the political parties, specially the two contenders for power, to prove their bona fide as forces of democracy. The victor must show it by their restraint and the vanquished by their sporting spirit. Our realities can afford neither a bad loser nor a bad winner. Magnanimity on one side and equanimous reconciliation with the outcome on the other will help the present transition to set the tone of governance for the next five years. The nation needs the repeat performance of the wonderful show of restraint that all sides made on the resignation of the previous government — only on a much grander and more sustaining scale.

Whoever wins, Bangladesh's next government must be one of reconciliation. Politics of conflict and confrontation, of mean lies and dangerous half-truths, of wholesale hoodwinking have broken the nation into mutually repellent pieces. The gap has to be plugged, the gaping wound healed, a whole generation, that of the youth, inculcated with the sense of unity and struggle in consonance with the patriotism of the sixties. Rather than worshipping this or that leader, our people must be steadily and surely brought round to love and revere all of the constituents of this land — man, nature, history and culture. Bangladesh today is in dire need of a holistic approach to societal and value entities rather than the dangerous fissiparous tendencies so fondly fanned only on consideration of power.

Only an unremitting trudge down the road to a great national reconciliation can equip this polity to attain stability and engage the challenges posed by economic and social, cultural and technological backwardness as well as by the demands of the new century and tremendous global advances.

Talk soft, be modest, aim high and give all you can to the building of our society its future — and you will eventually triumph. That should be the lesson of the short history of Bangladesh and indeed the whole history of mankind.

The Unflattering Sides

Governmental agencies have been for some time patting their own backs and administration leaders simply gloating over spectacular achievements in child immunisation programmes. Claims of revolutionary advances in the health sector were advanced as election clinchers. The UNICEF report released in Dhaka on Tuesday gives out the unflattering side of the situation. And what a reality it paints!

Close to 50 million are not yet covered by iodised salt. Although the improvement from a 50 per cent coverage to 62 per cent has been lauded by UNICEF, a hapless 50 million continue to be exposed to the horror of leading a moronic life, disfigured and incapacitated. What is so daunting about making production of salt wholly iodine based? Is it so difficult to see that not a gram of non-iodised salt is produced in the land?

As against substantial gains made in the matter of primary school completion and child mortality, malnutrition of children continues to be stuck at 67 per cent. And do we not know malnutrition is almost wholly a case of hunger? If hunger persists, how can the overall picture of child development improve?

The UNICEF report also draws our attention to the unacceptably high death rate during child birth. Preventing such deaths and ensuring maternal health is an integral part of public health, without which no population planning will succeed. We thank UNICEF for once again drawing our attention to some extremely vital aspects of development challenges.

Vote Holiday

It was quite ingenious of a Bangla daily to coin the above headline. Indeed, the government holiday declared on the national polling day has assumed a new meaning with the coining of 'vote' with the general leave of absence. The Bangladeshis never run short of excuses when it comes to taking leave from office or work. So we find that the three days' Eid holiday extends beyond a week. The two Eid holidays virtually are responsible for a mass exodus of employees from their work places to their ancestral homes — mostly from the cities to the villages.

Well, old habit dies hard. The June 12 national holiday has been extended to three days or more by employees on the plea that their names as voters have been enlisted with the voter lists at their respective permanent addresses in villages or towns. All they had to do is to have granted today's (Thursday's) leave of absence. Now they can comfortably spend three days' holiday together. Most of these people left Dhaka or other cities on Tuesday.

We would like to take this opportunity to call upon the future government to take a serious look into the number of government holidays that we now have. Twenty days of official holiday is among the highest in the world. Can we afford this luxury?

A Menu for Action: Expectations from the New Government-II

by A M A Mubith

ANOTHER piece of early legislation should again be in pursuance of the provisions of article 22 of the Constitution relating to the separation of judiciary from the executive. In addition to a specific law that may entail the abolition of the Law Ministry leaving an enhanced and enlarged office of the Attorney General, the original articles 107, 109, 115 and 116 may be restored from the 1972 Constitution establishing the supremacy of the Supreme Court over all courts, including tribunals. The office of the Deputy Commissioner will have no place in a system of powerful local government and the sooner their magistracy function is taken away the better.

Such a legislation will only be one step in the struggle for establishment of the rule of law, without which, social stability as well as economic progress are just not feasible. The political parties and especially the party in power will have to play a very major role in curbing terrorism and violence in the country. The patronage of area masters and especially armed elements in the student community must be shunned by all parties with the party in power taking the first initiative. If the law enforcement agencies are left free to deal with the goons, things will improve as we are now experiencing under the caretaker government. Of course, terrorism in urban pockets and in institutions of higher learning is often said to be patronised by unaccountable agencies of the government, which hopefully will cease to operate if this action programme is followed. Elimination of campus violence must feature prominently in any attempt to establish law and order on a firm footing. The practice of having student wings of political parties must be discontinued. Student politics should be free of interference from political parties and government agencies. Simultaneously some measures should be taken to free students' politics from perpetual students, of which we have a classic case in the DUCSU.

For the rule of law all black laws should be voided. Preventive detention was legalised by the second amendment, specifically by the modification of Article 30 of the 1972 Constitution. Preventive detention of enemy aliens or in a period of emergency or for the purpose of enquiry into high level cases of corruption can be justified but not for partisan politics. Therefore the original Article 30 should be restored with the provision for the three exceptions. This will make preventive political detention ultra-vires. Another instrument of arbitrary detention is Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code. While limited application of this law is desirable for maintaining law and order its harmful effect should be removed by directing that detention without charges cannot be extended beyond a fortnight under this law. There are many other emergency and unwise laws, including the identity law or the bonded properties law, as well as many arbitrary provisions under other laws. They should all be voided, where necessary after proper identification.

We all recognise that we have mistakenly neglected universal education and that it should enjoy the highest priority is not questioned anymore. Educational achievement is primarily a matter of national commitment. Education has increased but our resources are limited and hence we must get the maximum leverage from the enhanced investment. The real weakness in our educational investment is its centralised control and execution. Primary, Secondary and Vocational education must unequivocally be the responsibility of district governments. Pending the implementation of an appropriate structure of local government, the responsibility should be devolved to some Committee at the district level comprising educational administrators, parents representative and peoples elected leaders. The educational manpower must be responsible to district authorities and the Directorate General at national capital must be wound up altogether. Policy making and inspection as well as services demanded by districts can be undertaken by an agency working directly under the Ministry. The physical facilities of primary schools can be better utilised by introducing shifts. Books and teaching guides can be adapted from those of BRAC, GSS or FIVDB. For adult education area based

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A policy decision should be made to privatise every public enterprise. The process will be conversion of each enterprise into a separate entity and then offloading its shares in the market, outright sale through competitive bids, or closure and salvage.

social mobilisation may be undertaken for saturated programmes of six or nine months duration.

At the secondary level an extremely important measure will be introduction of computer literacy at least in five schools per district for which the real inhibiting factor will be availability of teachers. The Cadet Colleges should be brought into the mainstream of the national system and converted into elite public schools for meritorious students. In each district there should be at least one elite school. In the field of higher education, in each district one centre or excellence should be the five year target. Such a centre need not have too many faculties or departments. We shall have quite a few universities in Dhaka as all the sanctioned private ones make their appearance. We should now concentrate on developing autonomous institutes/universities in the districts. Such a programme will greatly enhance the responsibility of the UGC; it will be required to set and monitor the standards in these institutes and make sure that coverage of subjects and disciplines is rational. In such a scenario there will be no place for a National University only to award degrees. It will be desirable to abolish this nascent institution before it becomes another campus-based University. In the new institutes and universities the contents and duration of

under-graduate study should be appropriate and not follow the rule of conformity.

At a very early date, steps should be taken to fulfill the pledge made in 1990 about free press. Shahabuddin Government ensured that no newspaper can be banned. But government controlled press and electronic media still exist appropriating substantial public resources but serving no public interest. The press under the control of the government including the news service should be auctioned off despite the pleas of journalists who are simply government employees. The management of the electronic media presents a serious problem. Even if full autonomy is granted and a code of conduct is established, how do you insulate from partisanship the process of selection of the directors of the autonomous body. One method considered in some other country appears to be the least objectionable. A nominating board or a search committee could be established by parliament with eminent people selected by all parties. Then this body could be entrusted to recommend candidates not only for the media board but also for other bodies which have become victims of extreme partisan behaviour of the last government (e.g. Public Service Commission, University Grants Commission). Distribution of

investigation or solicit the services of other bodies for holding an investigation. It should submit an annual report to the parliament on its activities specially indicating actions taken on its recommendations by the Government. Simultaneously a law on Freedom of Information should be enacted. Matters relating to recruitment of public servants, award of contracts and project agreements should be made public as soon as recruitment is made or an award given or an agreement signed. Papers on sensitive matters should be a general rule be released after the lapse of five years unless there are special reasons to do otherwise.

A package on economic management and development initiatives should follow the policies that were being followed prior to the budget of 1994-95. Because after that the policies have been thoroughly partisan, ambivalent on reforms, primarily ad-hoc and above all profligate. Before the meeting of the next Aid Group (i.e. September), a review of macro-economic framework and reform measures should be undertaken and the outline of a new memo of understanding should be developed on the basis of consensus. There is no dispute on the objective of poverty alleviation and employment generation and the modality of open economy measures. We have pretty good expertise at home to

with the support group of experts. This is a drastic measure and I recommend it because of a number of reasons. First, the strongest objection comes from the employees not because of national interest but because of threat of unemployment. Second, the next layer of objection is from bureaucracy and more so from illegal perks and patronage opportunity. Third, the consumers welfare is the victim of inefficient public enterprise; nowhere is it more obvious than in sugar industry. Fourth, the culture of control and regulation that is instilled by public corporations is a positive impediment to investment growth. Even our private sector likes this culture when it suits them, such as for avoiding bankruptcy, getting undue benefits in trade regime or getting advantage from government purchase. Finally, the resources released (sale price as well as relief from subsidisation or preemption of credit collapse) can be spent much better in public investment.

Measures should be taken for halting agricultural stagnation. Consumption of fertilizers and use of irrigation water are virtually static for the last five years. New varieties of seeds are not coming up or being popularised. The extension system is in a state of virtual collapse. Net agricultural credit delivery has not picked up much despite the remission granted in 1991. Scope for diversification of crops is limited

Technology Village in the pattern of EPZ. This new technology has provided opportunities for leapfrogging the traditional development process. The creation of the Village has to be matched by progress in computer literacy which has been emphasised earlier.

Restructuring the financial sector has been one of the very important ongoing programmes. A number of legal reforms have been awaiting government approval for a long time. For bankruptcy, loan recovery, financial courts, credit insurance, or foreign exchange risk as well as accounting methods we need a propitious legal framework. The default culture is a politically patronised phenomenon. The poorest people of the country do not know this habit (note the performance of Grameen, BRAC and other NGOs). Stern action, not fettered by partisan considerations as well as realistic rescheduling of overdues, can change the habit. At least why should it not be tried again? The issue of strengthening the equity base of the Banks should be examined afresh: who should bear the burden and how should it be shared? The pervasive culture of control and regulation must also be relaxed.

Social investment should accelerate with savings from current expenditure. However, as mentioned earlier the responsibility not only for education but also for health and population, sanitation and social welfare and housing should be devolved to local government. This is an area needing social mobilisation, a job in which the NGOs have demonstrated great success. They in cooperation with the local authorities should undertake most of the social programmes as well as targeted employment programmes.

Most important of all, current expenditure must be controlled by generating savings from three large items of expenditure, namely, salaries and allowances of civil servants, security expenditure and debt servicing on both foreign and domestic counts. Reforms in public administration must provide for severe contraction of government on three counts — privatisation, devolution to local government and merger of directorates/directorates — general/attached offices and secretariat into limited agencies under the Ministers. Domestic debt will come down with privatisation and limited scope for profligacy due to devolution of functions. For external debt some relief measures should be considered by the donors even though Bangladesh has a perfect record in debt servicing. Bangladesh has increased the rate of domestic investment at the expense of foreign investment; foreign aid has been at a static level for a number of years. This must change; growth in investment in a big way will require both domestic and foreign aid inputs.

(Continued)
The writer is a former Minister of Finance and Planning and a former Secretary to the government.

Virtuality of Corruption

DESPITE PM Ms Benazir Bhutto's wide-eyed poker-faced disavowal about corruption (what corruption?) to the David Frost question in his *Breakfast Show*, "Virtual Reality" is that the corruption perception index for 1996 produced by Transparency International (TI), a multi-national organisation dedicated to curb corruption in international business, places Pakistan second in corrupt countries behind Nigeria, adjudged to be the most corrupt (not by far) among the 54 countries surveyed. Among the least corrupt countries, New Zealand was first, i.e. at No. 54. In order of rascality among the Muslim nations (other than Nigeria that preceded us) Pakistan was followed in order of demerit by Bangladesh (at No. 4), Indonesia (at 10), Uganda (at 12), Egypt (at 14), Turkey (at 22), Jordan (at 25) and Malaysia (at 29). It is scant consolation that India is not far behind us (at No. 3 position) in the corruption stakes. We are happy that we are more corrupt than our perennial arch-rival or hang our heads in shame that even they are less corrupt than we are? To some of us, it is a matter of embarrassment, to those who have worked overtime to put us on this shameful pedestal, does it really matter?

According to an article in the *Financial Times* (Monday June 3, 1996), TI, with Headquarters in Berlin, defines corruption as "the misuse of public power for private benefits". It tries to assess the degree to which public officials and politicians in various countries are involved in such practices as siphoning bribes, taking illicit payments in public procurement and the embezzling of public funds. TI's summary of findings is based on 10 international business surveys, most conducted among foreign businessmen doing business with the survey-target countries. Corruption index, sliding from a low of 2.25 points out of 10 in 1995 to even low 1.00 point in 1996, were bracketed by Nigeria's 0.69/10 and Kenya's 2.21/10 (at No. 3 position). At the reverse end of the corruption scale, New Zealand retained its least corrupt status

but fell slightly from its high of 9.55 out of 10 (1995) to 9.43/10 (1996). Even the so-called 'Banana Republics' that people in (and out of) uniform are usually scornful about are considerably less corrupt than Pakistan, the closest being Colombia at 16th position with 2.73 points out of 10.

A short time ago, a gentleman of leisure purchased a 400-year-old several hundred (or thousands?) acres estate in Surrey in England, out-bidding in open auction the Sultan of Brunei, considered to be the richest man in the world. While there are rich Pakistani expatriate businessmen who can conceivably afford to splurge quite a quantum of money on such real-estate baubles, these expatriates scarcely have the combined capacity to take on the likes of the Brunei billions. Pretensions of landed gentry notwithstanding, anyone attempting to equal the style and snob appeal of British nobility and the Sultan's wealth has to have either oil wells in Brunei or have an illegal 'largesse well' in direct approximation to the corruption level obtaining in Pakistan. No doubt such 'investments' abroad have contributed to our rapidly declining reputation with respect to corruption.

The virtual reality (or virtuality) of corruption may have seriously damaged the economic fabric of this nation, the more serious havoc has been to the moral fabric of our body politic as well as our reputation in the rest of the world, particularly intending investors. Quite frankly, we have no credibility at any level in any discipline. The endless greed on display is a kin to a platter of food placed before a really hungry man who then proceeds to wolf down the food with both hands. But what about those who are not corrupt themselves but chose to deliberately ignore this reality of corruption? Those among our leaders, whether political or military, business, etc. who could not believe that since they themselves do not take part in looting the nation, their benign abstinence absolves them of any responsibility and/or culpability need to

be rapidly disabused as to this fantasy. They cannot be absolved of their liability that should affect not only their conscience but is also a constitutional and moral obligation. There is no such thing as a 'free-ride' in the matter of conscience based on benign ignorance. When one has the intimate knowledge of wrongdoing in high places there is public responsibility that one owes to the State (and its citizens).

While some of our hierarchy seem to feel that as long as they choose to close their eyes and ears to the cacophony of malfeasance around them, violation of the public trust by others does not require any protest from them, a stage has come where most of our senior bureaucrats fall over themselves in ingratiate themselves to whoever is in power, compounding the situation by teaching ways around established checks and balances

transferring illegal money abroad and inflation. This is a Catch-22 situation where each negative factor feeds on the other and the cumulative effect puts us that much deeper into an economic morass. Gradually the day to day needs are going out of the reach of the common man as inflation feeds on massive corruption. Electricity is almost unaffordable to the middle-class at the present time, in a few months so will the telephone be. With gas and transportation not much behind, almost 95 per cent of the population is well on the way back to the Dark Ages, kept aloft only by the sheer populist rhetoric of our leaders. Virtual Reality is that those who have brought us to this state will probably be enjoying their homes on the outskirts of Paris, the French Riviera, Surrey, etc., while we become a footnote to history on the Somalia/Liberia pattern. Every citizen has fundamen-

obfuscation, the rhetoric of the contrary, one wonders why? Maybe she knows that generally those who matter, in and out of uniform, tend to remain reluctant in interfering with nepotism and corruption as long as it does not directly affect them. Her reading of Virtual Reality seems to be based on the sheer apathy of the common citizen in

OPINION

Urban Poverty

My attention has been drawn to the lead news in The Daily Star published on the 7th of June. Your concern about the problem, urban poverty, is well taken. You should, however, have been more careful about verification of the results before printing them.

A day-long workshop was organised last month on this very Report on urban poverty. Many of the participants including this writer pointed out serious methodological flaws in the analysis. The survey was focused on the poor only, mainly in the slums. The non-slum population or households were not included in the study. There is no basis in the Report for estimating the number or percentage of poor people in the totality of urban areas. Thus any increase in the proportion of poor people, if it has happened at all, may have occurred only in the slum areas, not in general.

Second, the averages for the urban areas were calculated by combining figures from very large towns like Dhaka and smaller towns without adjusting for cost of living. Thus, the same poverty line income has been used for say, Dhaka and Pangsha. Now if Tk 500, say, is the poverty line income in Dhaka below which a person may be called poor; using the same level of income in Pangsha will certainly increase the proportion of poor to very high level there as the cost of living is certainly much lower in Pangsha than in Dhaka.

Third, it is not clear how the averages have been esti-

protesting white-collar crime. It is a matter of great regret that even the confirmation of our corrupt status has not shamed us into some action, surely even a hint of protest will be enough to bring accountability into our body politic. For the sake of our continued existence as a nation on the face of this Earth one hopes that we should soon find someone who will be willing to risk that Virtual Reality.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

that only bureaucracy know how to circumvent without creating masses of evidence. The most disingenuous argument used to justify their collaboration in this chicanery is that it does not fall in line with their 'constitutional' responsibilities. Democracy's strength lies in accountability by all the trustees of government, not in their active collaboration on dubious grounds. Virtual reality is that our economy will not be able to withstand further rape, it will lead to the collapse of our financial system not-withstanding all the glib rhetoric in the world. This will certainly have a disastrous effect on the whole socio-economic infrastructure and most particularly national security.

The rapid decline of the Pakistani Rupee makes it more expensive to replace our critical military hardware and as everyone knows there is a direct relationship between

tal rights, among them the right of self-defence. When the people's right of existence is being threatened, should they forswear the right to defend themselves? And how does one defend oneself in a sham democracy? And on the same analogy, are the people right in expecting that the civil and military hierarchy that is not involved in the malfeasance have a national duty to take up cudgels on their behalf? Or should they stand aloof behind the figleaf of 'constitutional obligation' while the country becomes bankrupt?

Buffeted by a combination of years of administrative excess and neglect, our people have developed a fatalistic tendency when faced with the hydra-headed twin monsters of corruption and nepotism. Ms Benazir went so far as to label the Berlin Report as 'Dim Flare'. Instead of reacting positively by identifying malfeasance the PM has resorted to

dated. Very likely these are unweighted averages thus giving more weight to, Pangsha than to Dhaka. As Pangsha's estimated proportion of poor is already biased upward, this will definitely raise the over-all proportion of poor above its 'true' value.

Fourth, and this is most important, the comparison between 1991 and 1995 is untenable. It is not clear how the 1991 figure has been arrived at. If it is the national figure from Bureau of Statistics as it appears to be, then the comparison is clearly unwarranted as the former is an average for many towns and the Report figures are focused on only a segment of people and already biased upward and possibly unweighted at that. If the 1991 figure is on the basis of the Report authors' data on perceptions, this is likely to give a grossly distorted picture as it is well-known among the social scientists that people generally glorify the past compared to the present.

I hope that a newspaper like The Daily Star, which is usually admired, will be more careful in publishing reports like that on urban poverty. This is particularly so as this a politically charged time and such uncritical publication on a sensitive matter may be used unscrupulously to level charges on political opponents.

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