

Resource Outlook

The new government will be stalked in its footsteps by a sizable resource gap and is almost certain to operate on a shoe-string budget for some time to come. There is an ace in the hole though as the worst seems to have been left behind in terms of political uncertainties with a mood of expectancy for buoyancy setting in by virtue of a well-mandated government poised to be saddled in power.

But let's face the facts as they are now. The tax and non-tax revenue receipts and foreign aid disbursements taking a dip, on top of two elections having been held within four months of each other, the government borrowing from the banking system soared to a record level. It is likely to cross the 1000/- crore mark by the end of fiscal 1995-96. The suction effect on the banks' liquidity position brought about by the government borrowing worsened as political parties and candidates withdrew money from their deposits to meet election expenses.

Going further back, imports declined lowering the customs duties collection. Even the reduced output from the underperforming manufacturing sector did not sell well due to low demand yielding much less VAT and profit tax than expected. Revenue collection from the low-ranking state-owned enterprises also went down. To add to this resource crunch was the huge expenditure incurred by the government in meeting the obligations of the three years' investment bonds.

The redeeming features have been a good crop, and an active service sector but not quite on the inputs side so far as power and fertiliser supplies go. So, while the growth rate may not have fallen drastically and inflation can taper owing to a good harvest, it will be for the new government to essentially deliver us from the cliff-hanging situation. Let the public sector utilities operate effectively and at no loss in the very least while local initiatives affected by the reform rush are given solid fiscal, input and marketing supports.

Unabated lending by the government from the banking system and a severe credit squeeze on the private sector are a very odd mix. We want a balance struck there — for an export-led growth. Simultaneously, the banks must be in a position to recover the outstanding loans with the help of the new government.

BNP as Opposition

Now that the election to all but one parliamentary seat has been completed, the nation is anxiously waiting to know the BNP mind. Chairperson of the second largest party, Begum Khaleda Zia is likely to give her formal reactions to the recently concluded polls through a press conference, but we still don't know when. A considered reaction after a thorough analysis of the situation is always better than a hasty and ill-judged one. Despite some initial grumbling and complaining by some of her party colleagues, we hope that her final official stand on the issue will put at rest any discordant note, about which she has already indicated when she said 'I am ready to accept the verdict of the people.'

The BNP may have some genuine reasons to be disappointed at the poll results. But in politics you cannot be too sure to have a swing in your favour all the time. Reverses are as much the name of the game as victories. These happen in all democracies, including the best ones in the world. What matters is how you accept the verdict of the electorate. The emergence of the BNP as a very strong opposition is one of the good things to happen this time. People have a lot of expectation from the BNP.

So the challenge before the party is to come up to popular expectations of what they want to see happening after the polls. Its strength will be vindicated by its responsible role in keeping the ruling party on track in the Jatiya Sangsad. Khaleda Zia has proved her leadership in so many ways — in the street and in power. There is no reason to think that her role — as the leader of the opposition — will be of any less importance. History has given her the onerous task of showing what an excellent role the opposition can play in a democracy. We hope the BNP chairperson will take up the challenge to prove that she and her party are equal to the task.

Weather Forecast

A three-day SAARC seminar on "Predictability of Monsoonal Rain and Flooding", being held at a local hotel, has stressed the need for accurate weather forecasts. This is a very small expectation but we know how challenging it can be for us to fulfil that expectation. Advance science and sophisticated equipment have largely been able to give a fairly accurate forecast about the change in weather. Yet admittedly, a few phenomena are still beyond scientific predictability. Tornado is a case in point.

Now there are cyclones, storm surges, tropical rains, droughts, floods, etc. which can be accurately predicted, thanks to modern scientific inventions. The sad thing, however, is that countries like ours more often than not fail to correctly forecast — and well in time — the magnitude of danger associated with the natural calamities. A forecast does not necessarily mean that the calamity can be prevented but it should help disaster preparedness.

In disaster-prone countries like ours, we should have fore knowledge of the nature of disaster. To have accurate information well in advance about the type of natural calamity calls for installation of sophisticated weather stations. Our resources may not permit us to have many of them. If we try to get information on weather through regional coordination, the job may be easier for us to handle. So why not have a regional weather forecasting system?

Election Debacle of BNP: Causes, Cases and Courses

Quite a few of the BNP stalwarts fell and fell miserably. More than half of the thirteen-member Standing Committee, the highest policy making body of the BNP, did not return to the new parliament. What caused such a debacle? The BNP needs to search its soul to answer this question.

NATIONAL election, in any democratic country, is an important event. Not only it is an indispensable and fortified rung in the ladder for a nation's gradual ascent to the ultimate in democracy, but its orderly conduct and acceptance to all concerned signify the acid test whether all is well in the process of the climb.

The present Bangladesh election had, likewise, passed off at a critical juncture during the infancy of democracy in Bangladesh. Like a baby, the democratic experiment calls for special care to achieve success and to nurture it to maturity. The turnout of voters in the election was unprecedented, a staggering 73 per cent of enlisted voters. This denotes two interesting aspects of our national characteristics. Firstly, the people are delightfully conscious politically and have proudly exercised their democratic right to franchise. Secondly, they constituting the silent or less vocal majority of the populace, have proved that they are not to be taken for granted, specially by politicians.

Whether election has been fair or not depends upon whom one is seeking the answer from. The Caretaker Government, the Election Commission and the Awami League have all in unison upheld the fairness and impartiality of the election. They may have been right, but all of them evidently do have a personal stake in this issue. The bulk of the other major political parties have voiced reservations. They cited cases of irregularities. Many of their candidates have filed complaints which, if they do not find redress from the BNP, the election results proved it to be so. A few of the thirteen member Standing Committee, the highest policy making body of the BNP, did not return to the new parliament. What caused such a debacle? The BNP needs to search its soul to answer this question.

As for the distinguished foreign observers, their statements generally indicate that the election has been free and

fair. At least, these constitute, in varying forms and degrees, the headlines of newspapers covering their statements. What the media do not cover, adequately and appropriately, are the qualifications the observers make in their reports, signifying the small number of polling centres they visited and the limited nature and duration of their inspection. After all, out of over 26,000 polling stations, they could visit only a few hundreds, that too briefly for an hour or less in each place.

Of course, there were relatively fewer incidents of violence this time thanks to the law-enforcing agencies and also to the apparent restraint exercised by some of the parties concerned. This is quite impressive to the international community. But, what happened inside some of the polling booths at different times during their absence was quite different from the outward ambience. But the observers are not in a position to take cognizance of these cases due to lack of conclusive evidence. It may not also look unnatural to subscribe to the general belief that losers always complain and they, in some measure, erode their credibility even while advancing genuine cases.

The outcome of the election was, naturally, foreseen differently by different quarters. Many forecast that the Awami League would have a thin or even a fat margin over the BNP. The election results proved it to be so. A few of the BNP stalwarts fell and fell miserably. More than half of the thirteen member Standing Committee, the highest policy making body of the BNP, did not return to the new parliament. What caused such a debacle? The BNP needs to search its soul to answer this question.

The first point that occurs

to one's mind is a high degree of complacency that was seen to have pervaded various levels of BNP leadership. The latter having won three elections earlier felt almost invincible and relied unduly on voters' memory for a quite impressive track record of socio-economic development during the first three to four years of BNP rule. The publicity was poor articulation was misguided and the impact was minimal. In contrast, the Awami League's strategy was different. It was down to earth, characterised by humility, and consequently became more effective. The very fact that sustained appeals of the Awami League chief, publicly

the BNP government was unable to cultivate journalists well and to make an inroad in the vast and influential print media of the nation. Apparently incredible, it represents a dismal failure on the part of the BNP. Similarly, electronic media, which had traditionally and, as a rule, favoured the establishment made an apparent volte face. The three-man panel BNP television programme was at times marred by inadequate lighting and audio system. The perceptible twist and turn as well as designed interruptions in announcing results of the election made concerned television officials almost partisan. The caretaker government

ness of the authorities concerned and making them look as if they were partisans in this case.

Some people contend that participation in the election of the 15th February sapped vitality and exhausted resources of many BNP candidates. They were unable to campaign vigorously, with meagre resources, in the parliamentary race of the 12th June against their political adversaries. Perpetual dependence on a fixed coterie of people for bestowing advice haphazardly must be shunned.

Another interesting observation made by some relate to a kind of negative voting. People having been disgusted at the combined erstwhile opposition's recent movement, marked by violence, destruction and material loss, would like to escape a similar situation at any cost. They therefore decided to vote for the Awami League. lest the latter repeats its performance following a defeat.

The most outstanding shortcoming of the BNP in this election was perhaps its gross mismanagement and inept handling of election related matters.

A committee was formed for this purpose merely a few weeks before the election. This was both too late and too inadequate. On the other hand, Awami League's election strategy was devised over a year ago to be implemented down the stream by organised cadres even at grassroots levels. Through well-planned methods and painstaking efforts they took actions that paid good dividends today. The same could not be said about the BNP.

Despite of all these, one must not feel that the BNP was rejected by the people. In fact, the BNP having won 116 seats so far is capable of playing a respectable and effective role in the opposition in what may be viewed as a gradual evolution of a two party system. The people have simply reprimanded the BNP in this election and warned it to be on guard against future mistakes. Some people also wanted a

change only for the sake of a change and for giving a chance to one who has been out of power for long two decades.

Electioneering today is an art that has to be developed with systematic planning through a duly constructed organisational structure by qualified and knowledgeable personnel. Specific duties and responsibilities need to be allocated to persons best suited for the purpose. Required facilities must be made available. Advisors should be asked to share knowledge frequently and to freely give their opinion in matters they are regarded as experts. Perpetual dependence on a fixed coterie of people for bestowing advice haphazardly must be shunned.

The Awami League chief's statement in favour of future government's rule by consultations and consensus instead of being goaded by a sense of revenge, if pursued in letter and spirit, would be welcome. On the other hand, if the new government resorts to the practice of witch-hunting, its popularity will plummet in no time. The opposition will then have greater incentive to take the political movement out in the street. This would hinder the democratic process and must be guarded against.

Finally, a penny for one's thoughts. The thought to ponder about has been prompted by a sense of pragmatism. Since most of the major political parties would find themselves restless to remain in parliament and play the role of opposition for the full term of five years, it would be prudent to devise a method to redress the situation to the satisfaction of both the government and the opposition. I should assume that, as in many countries, if the life span of our parliament is curtailed to four years instead of existing five, it would be beneficial to all. The opposition will then have to wait for one year less to tax its patience and the government will secure peace by way of official cooperation of the opposition within the parliament during its full tenure. The democratic process will then continue unabated. Would it be too much to expect of the new parliament?

OPINION

Election '96: Keep Up the Spirit

Prof Abul Kalam Elias

"There has dawned another blue day. Boys and girls, think, will you let slip away?"

— Thomas Carlyle

We, the people of Bangladesh are a forgetful nation, who does not know that those who do not take lesson from history, are thrown to the dustbin of history?

The parliamentary polls of June 12, 1996, acted as an eye-opener to us all. Credit goes to the caretaker government for creating such consciousness and awareness among the rank and file. This spirit and inspiration among the teeming millions can work wonder, if properly kept up in the neck of time.

It has become crystal clear that nothing is impossible to human endeavour. It is this caretaker government that has pointed its guiding finger to the path of peace, social justice and fair-play. At a time, when danger of every description lurked on the horizon, corruption of all kinds reigned supreme in all walks of life, frustration and despondency overtook the whole nation, the caretaker government came forward as the saviour, as it were, girded its loincloth, took the time by the forelock, ushered in a new era of consciousness and new vista of light and hope.

It is an undeniable fact that goons and hooligans, mastans and musclemen, extortions and terrorists, hijackers and looters, who got upperhand and raised their ugly heads, have rather fallen on evil days, today. The role of the caretaker government within a very brief span of time has been widely acclaimed by all — at home and abroad. Even its perpetuation has been demanded from some quarters.

The reason is not far to seek. Caretaker government this time proved good Samarian and rendered yeoman's service to the whole nation. We feel thankful and grateful to the caretaker government for its momentous role. We know that:

"Honour and shame from no condition arise."

Act well your part, there all the honour lies."

It is an accomplished fact that in an independent country the ballot is more valuable and powerful than the bullet. It is the caretaker government that kindled sparks of hope in the breasts of myriads of down-trodden and deprived people by arousing democratic spirit and sense of security among the benighted travellers at the critical juncture of history.

"Old order changeth, yielding place to new" — Tennyson

It is incumbent on us to make the most of this spirit and to make the best of this opportunity. We look forward to the day when a new consciousness will dawn upon us and pave the way for everlasting peace, progress and prosperity.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

asking for forgiveness for past mistakes and beseeching people to give them a chance to serve made an ordinary voter feel ten feet tall. To add benefit to it, in the process, Awami League's negative points, like past acts of one party rule, nationalisation of industries and famine as well as untold sufferings of the people and colossal loss to the economy during the non-cooperation and other movements in recent months, got washed off considerably. The television address of the Awami League chief, drawing upon public sympathy for someone who had lost her entire family, brought to play the human element to its utmost advantage.

The media was generally unfavourable to the BNP. After having ruled for full five years,

also could not entirely escape the wrath of the BNP. The posting of the eight controversial officials, who had publicly expressed solidarity with the erstwhile opposition's political movement, as Deputy Commissioners, was objected to vehemently. Even the BNP's demand to divest them of their role as Returning Officers in the election of a total of as many as 52 constituencies was summarily rejected, despite existence of no legal bar in the matter. Besides, there was no dearth of capable and impartial officers to take their place and to save the government an avoidable blemish in their impartial posture. To the BNP, this unjust rejection of its demand by the government and the Election Commission was incomprehensible, testifying to the inertia and weak

feel is essential for the success of parliamentary democracy of the Westminster genre. If my view is correct, then this would mean that a significant proportion of the votes cast for the Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islam will be, so to speak, "up for grabs" in the next elections. Thus if the BNP takes a long term view of matters, then they can bring these voters into its own fold and be successful in the future; after all, they trail only by four per cent of votes cast this time. But this will only be possible if instead of behaving like spoilsports they accept the results with grace and act constructively over the next five years. They should remember that the 1996 results show that the Bangladeshi polity has become matured and has learnt to choose wisely.

Sunday due to load-shedding by PDB and DESA

Can not PDB/DESA devise ways and means for rational distribution so as to adjust timing for load-shedding at a time other than 8 pm to 10 pm when national and international news are not involved and also will not collide with the show of movies like Akbar the Great?

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Rent of residential houses in Dhaka

Sir. There is no uniform norms for fixing up the rent of residential houses in Dhaka. As a result, the tenants who live in the rented houses are being charged with exorbitant rent in all the areas of Dhaka. The rent is not determined on the basis of space and other facilities. Besides, the rent takes an upward turn in every 2/3 years. The house becomes old but rent goes up like the price of gold. We know rental value of old house goes down with the passage of time as technological facilities available there become old and outdated. But this norm is not being adhered to here in Dhaka. The landlord gets depreciation benefits in income tax showing his old house. But the tenants are not getting the same.

Very often we talk about rent controller, etc. But these are outdated things and have got no legal effects whatsoever. The builders are building up highrise buildings in every nook and corner of the city. Besides, new houses are being erected everywhere. Even then the rent of the residential houses are not going down. The City Corporation and Works Ministry should fix up rent on the basis of space, area and facilities. There should be a timetable for enhancement of rent also.

They rather choose to publicise, by beating of drums, the unproductive achievement. They are all praise for 210 MW Thermal Power Project phase I and phase-II which are full of anomalies in technology and, unfortunately, without Chinese technicians these gigantic projects do not run. Therefore, the gloom is yet to be over. In the sultry month of May sub-scribers became victims of frequent load-shedding. They care a fig for the pains of the people.

Not to speak of the versatile genius of Akbar the Great which is currently being displayed by BTV and ignored by PDB (through load-shedding), incidentally at a corresponding time, to deprive the people. The builders are building up highrise buildings in every nook and corner of the city. Besides, new houses are being erected everywhere. Even then the rent of the residential houses are not going down. The City Corporation and Works Ministry should fix up rent on the basis of space, area and facilities. There should be a timetable for enhancement of rent also.

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Exams, exams.....!

Sir, Can anyone imagine in their wildest dreams an examination lasting for eight long months? I hope nobody else has the misfortune of experiencing this trauma. No matter how much we try to explain this delay to the "political turmoil" in our country, the fact remains that the Dhaka University authorities failed to complete the examinations within a reasonable time. Eight months are quite a time cut off from our lives. Our Masters (final) examination of 1993-94 held in 1995-96, started on the 25th of October 1995 and finally ended (after three postponements) on the 13th of May 1996.

Although this was the case with only some departments, the disturbing fact is that the departments that held Masters examinations in December 1995, have not yet published their results, even after five months. If this is the case, just imagine our agony as to when we will get our results. Time is passing by — jobs are hard to

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