

Some Thoughts

by Mahfuz Anam

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Dialogue with Private Sector

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofael Ahmed is trying to breathe fresh air into the private sector. He visualises the government in a purely facilitator's role as distinguished from taking on the functions of a 'businessman' or a business house, as it were. His logic is convincing: when government starts behaving like a businessman corruption, favouritism and politicisation are spawned to a degree that proves destructive for it as well as for the country's economy.

How is the government to play the role of a catalyst-cum-facilitator? The answer is not yet fully known except for the fact that Tofael Ahmed has discontinued the system of issuance of permit relating to certain essential items. Is that enough of a deregulatory step? If not, then what else is required? These and other questions are better thrashed out by means of intense consultations with the private sector.

There is another very cogent reason why there should be this government-private sector dialogue? The ruling party has its electoral manifesto to go by in framing what Tofael Ahmed calls the new industrial policy of the country. The popular verdict has given Awami League a mandate to pursue its economic policies as enshrined in the party manifesto. While doing it, the new Commerce and Industries minister's approach is to cut across party lines and bring collective wisdom and expertise to bear on policy formulation. This has two advantages: first, the policies are perfected and broad-based; and secondly, commitment is secured from all concerned to the implementation of policies.

We, therefore, welcome the Commerce and Industries Minister's decision, made known through his meeting with the MCC&I on Monday that he would soon have agenda-specific dialogue with the private sector.

Some leading businessmen reportedly suggested to the minister that the politically sensitive reforms had better be undertaken in the first year, well before thoughts of next election starts occupying their minds. This somewhat echoes what we had maintained in this column under the title 'Tough Measures Now' on Monday.

We can see that Tofael Ahmed has a shade different idea on divestiture of the loss-making state-owned enterprises when he says the government would run the SOEs on a commercial basis. Effective management of SOEs and rapid privatisation call for reforms in labour-management relations and in the financial sector as well.

Jail Reform

In a sensational jail breaking incident 13 prisoners — five convicted criminals and eight under-trial inmates — escaped from the Dhaka Central Jail in the early hours of Monday. The jail breaking is first of its kind since 1956 but so far as the prisoners' escape is concerned it reminds of the 1991 escapade of an unspecified number of prisoners in a virtual revolt. Clearly something has gone seriously wrong with the prison system. On the face of the problem, the jail authorities are to blame for their laxity in security and overall administration. But deep down the whole affair, a flawed approach to crimes, including pre-trial and post-trial treatment of the inmates of jail, appears to be mainly responsible for the situation.

When the Dhaka central jail with a capacity of 2,100 is crammed with 6,000 inmates — almost three times the accommodation capacity, everything from living condition to security is bound to deteriorate. This is not true only for the central jail but for jails in the country in general.

We ask, why the jails have more under-trial prisoners than convicted ones? Certainly a number of them could have avoided prison life had their cases been disposed of soon enough. So the judicial system has to be adequately strengthened to hear cases for their early disposal. At the same time jail reform has to be brought about urgently. If a prisoner comes out of the jail a more hardened criminal than before we certainly have reasons to worry.

The new home minister sounded a more humane note when he expressed the view that prisoners accused of petty crimes would be released and allowed the opportunity for correction. This is good thinking but not enough. Along with reform of criminal laws, correction centres rather than traditional jails will have to be set up for helping the offenders in the lighter categories to return to normal life.

Not Happily Ever After

The most celebrated marriage of our time — between Britain's Prince Charles and Princess Diana is set to end in divorce on August 28. A "decree nisi" in favour of divorce between the couple has all but delivered the coup de grace. Unless the couple reconciles, the possibility of which is remote, or a third party challenges the proceedings, Prince Charles and Princess Diana will no longer remain man and woman after August 28th.

Considered to be the worst royal crisis since the abdication of the British throne by King Edward in 1936, the Charles-Diana affair has not only received a surfeit of attention from the British press but also from media around the world. The divorce between Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson came about only recently with relative ease and without drawing as much public attention. The reason though is understandable: Charles is the number one claimant to the British throne when his mother queen Elizabeth relinquishes. So there is a whole lot of implications of this divorce.

There are more to this: the glamour and beauty of Diana that have cast a spell over people all over the world, thanks to newspapers, magazines and television. Diana has wished to be a "queen of people's hearts." She already is. That explains the attention.

(Continued from yesterday)

We begin today by repeating the question that we asked yesterday. What is Sheikh Hasina trying to prove by asking others to join her cabinet? These could be two answers, one cynical and the other, a bit generous. The cynical interpretation is that AL is trying to keep BNP isolated even in opposition, as it successfully did when the latter was in power. The rationale being that the bitterness between these two parties is so deep, and the personality factor is so irremediable that it is assumed that BNP will bitterly oppose the government, especially inside the Parliament, no matter what the ruling party does. Having taken BNP's obstructionist politics for granted, AL has decided to do its best to appease all other parties as much as possible so that they stay with AL and away from BNP. And hence the offer of cabinet posts to JP and JSD.

A more generous interpretation of what Sheikh Hasina is doing is that she is fully aware, in fact learning from her own actions as the opposition leader, of what a determined opposition can do and as such she is trying to create some sort of a unified approach towards running the country.

There is evidence all around as to how no government in Bangladesh can really hope to govern in any effective manner without the help of the opposition. To put it differently, no government, however powerful, can run the country ignoring the opposition. This Sheikh Hasina may have learnt, and may have learnt rather well. Her own

actions of the past two years are her best guide. Then there is also the experience from the time of her father. Compared to the power and prestige of Bangabandhu's government, that of Sheikh Hasina's is obviously far lower, and hence the need for cooperation of all.

Then there are objective reasons for which any government in Bangladesh needs to seek the assistance of all other political parties. Our socio-economic problems are so overwhelming, our demographic challenge is so enormous, our environmental options are so very limited and our resource base is so narrow that any governmental effort to bring the nation out of this clutch of poverty MUST, BY NECESSITY, BE UNITED. The fact that no previous government understood this fundamental truth is the reason why they failed. It is quite possible that due to her long stint in the opposition Sheikh Hasina understands it and as such wants this new collective approach.

There is one point about Sheikh Hasina's offer to other parties to join her government that we would like to bring out here. The two parties, JP and JSD, who have joined the government have been allowed to remain as opposition parties. This can be taken to mean that while sharing the powers of the government as members of the cabinet, these two parties will also enjoy all the privileges of the opposition. If this be the case then these parties have double gain — access to power, decision-making and information — and at the same time the

right to disown anything and everything with which they may not agree. Here the government needs to give some clarification. When Anwar Hossain Manju or Abdur Rab sit in on cabinet meetings and share the inner most thoughts and information that only the cabinet (and not even the whole government or the ruling party) has privy to, how much of it do they share with their parties? Since they are a part of the opposition, such information can and should be shared with the rest of them, which may prove to be quite sensitive to the running of the government. Then again, how can the government have them as members of the cabinet and yet treat them as members of the opposition? Can it lead to a situation where the cabinet itself can become divided — one layer (only own party) more trusted than another (including other parties)?

The point here is that if Awami League permits other parties to join the cabinet and yet allow them to perform their role as opposition then is it good for the country or bad? We admit it is very unusual, but so was the experiment with a neutral and caretaker government taking over the reign of the country every five years to hold free and fair elections. Just because it is new or has never been tried, is not sufficient a reason in our eyes to either discard the idea or look upon it with suspicion. For us, the criterion for judging this idea is only one — is it good for Bangladesh and necessary for its development?

(More tomorrow)

OPINION

The Leader of the Opposition

Nazim Farhan Choudhury

I think it was Farook Ahmed Choudhury, then Bangladesh High Commissioner in Delhi who told Rajiv Gandhi after his 1989 defeat in the Indian general elections: "In your defeat India has lost a prime minister, but has gained a leader."

Rajiv had won a landslide victory following his mother's death. He asked India to believe in him. And they did believe. He was an energetic young man with ideas. He represented a new India. A India with hopes and promises of a prosperous future. One like they had in the time of his grandfather — Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

Unfortunately within the span of a couple of years that dream was shattered. Bofors, corruption, Muslim social problem, a stagnant economy brought the administration crashing down. But most significantly it was Rajiv himself. His do-good image was tarnished. The Doo School gang and the rich NRIs transformed Rajiv's image into that of a Gucci-wearing snob who had lost touch with the common folks, even with his constituents in Amheth. The young Gandhi had by then very little knowledge of the political reality that surrounded him. The Congress after ruling the country for all but a couple of years, had grown arrogant. They were sure that there was nothing that could touch them.

They were wrong. A motley crew of dissident Congress men, regional politicians and the socialists had created enough noise to bring down the Rajiv government. With the Raja of Manda taking oath of office, the end of the unquestionable hold the Nehru-Gandhi family had on the largest democracy in the world ended.

With the fall of the Ershad government, Bangladeshis also had a dream. Despite popular perception at that time, they sent to office the courageous wife of a slain hero. To us she was a leader who had withstood the pressures of politics

and guided us through the turmoil of the autocratic Ershad regime. She represented to us a hope, a belief that we can make a difference in the world. With the aspirations of an 'emerging tiger' behind her, Khaleda Zia took her promise to uphold the Constitution and sovereignty of the country.

One of the first acts of the new government was to revert back to the parliamentary form of government. No longer would one person hold so much power. It would be divided between the 300 elected (and yes, 30 women) members of the Jatiya Sangsad. The representatives of the people discuss and decide on the welfare of the nation and pass the laws of the land. The Cabinet should send their policies to the Parliament for their deliberation. This would, of course, mean that the Prime Minister and her Cabinet would be answerable to the Parliament.

Unfortunately for democracy, the BNP government did not live up to the expectations. True, they had to undo the wrongs of the previous nine years but still the blatant disregard of the Jatiya Sangsad was no justification. The Prime Minister, it turned out, led a more autocratic regime than one could have believed would be possible under the parliamentary system. The not accorded the Jatiya Sangsad the respect it deserved. Her role in the House was kept to the minimum. She ended up following a presidential system of office, while only keeping the fig-leaf excuse of the Opposition. Even before the Jatiya Sangsad had ceased to function effectively, we had reduced the system to a mere rubber stamp.

This dream, too, turned into a nightmare. Like Rajiv's Congress, Khaleda's BNP, too, paid the political price. Those who live by the sword, it is said, die by the sword. We have today, for better or for worse, an Awami League government.

The honeymoon period is still on. We don't yet know how the Sister of the Nation will lead her government in Parliament. But I hope there now will be more of a respect for the apex legislative House of the country. And unlike her previous outbursts, there will be no reason to go back to the streets like bullies to settle matters which should be debated without hesitation on the floor of the House.

I know my somewhat simplistic analysis of the Khaleda government will draw criticism. But I am not trying to perform an autopsy of the BNP's time in power. The whole point of it all is to put across a request to the Leader of the Opposition. And it is she who should be just that — a Leader.

Already we see the tantrum coming. Taking her oath late was not a good sign. Neither is the fact that JCD has already started to shake the boat. Madam Leader should own up to the reality that her party has lost a free and fair election and not as she claims has had victory snatched from them. It is time, as she has so rightly said, to play a positive role and not engage in childish banter like her predecessors. Get the 'shadow government' in place and prepare yourself. The Awami League's romance days are numbered. I might be being a bit too critical of her; she is after all making some efforts to portray herself as a responsible leader.

Rajiv would have made a comeback if he did not meet a tragic end. Benazir is back in power. Why can Khaleda not follow suit? It is a time to be a Leader and inspire the country to strive. It can be done from both sides of the political bench. But most of all it should be done in the Jatiya Sangsad. What the country needs right now is not another opposing hurdle but a Leader. Hopefully Mr Choudhury's comment about Rajiv Gandhi also holds true for the Leader of our Opposition-Begum Khaleda Zia.

To the Editor...

Drug abuse Sir, International Day against drug abuse was observed in Bangladesh on June 26th as elsewhere in the world. The day was observed in a most befitting manner with holding of seminars, colourful rallies and cultural programmes by various social and cultural organisations and NGOs highlighting the deadly effects of narcotics in our society.

In fact, drug abuse in our country has reached its peak surpassing all past records. When the teenagers are supposed to study, they are puffing a stick of marijuana or sipping from a bottle of phenylephrine. Advanced items in the form of injections and pills are being added to their menu, destroying the budding intelligence.

Dept of Narcotics Control and the law enforcing agencies recover narcotic items from various parts of the country regularly but there is no end to it. It seems that as days are passing, more and more addicts are being born with the

increase and introduction of different narcotic items. Recently many anti-narcotic organisations have been floated and our society has started realising the ill-effects of drugs. This awareness should be maintained and boosted among all to achieve the ultimate goal of a narcotic-free Bangladesh.

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Turning dreams into reality

Sir, In the parliamentary system government is accountable to the parliament. So it is called "responsible government". But in practice, we see there is a tendency to avoid parliament. And several ordinances have been issued during the rule of BNP government, bypassing the parliament. This is not the parliamentary practice.

So, I hope that our recently formed government by AL will not issue any ordinance with-

out the consent of the parliament.

Besides, during the 5th parliament, the opposition members of the parliament made some specific allegations of corruption against some ministers and their respective ministries. A parliamentary committee was formed to probe into the matter. But reports have not been published yet. We do not expect such type of activities from the new parliament.

I think it will be good for the parliamentary democracy in our country if our new Prime Minister attend the parliament regularly, although our former PM hardly attended the parliament. If any member of the parliament ask any question to PM, she must respond to it. That is the least we expect from our PM.

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Of Charm and Promise

by Shah Husain Imam

THE crossing of swords by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia on the floor of the House in the inaugural sitting of the new parliament was politically highly engaging, and entertaining, too. No matter how one looks at it that is the bottom-line. Like all good things, its effect lingers.

The opposition walk-out, caustic remarks and quibbles could not quite reduce the charming effect of the two ladies' encounter. In fact, were it not for the frictional aspect it would have been dull going, laden as the first sitting

standards set by the caretaker government had an effect. But then the political idiom was definitely theirs, and that is where their calibre lay. Khaleda Zia could not be inconsistent with what she had been saying before she went to parliament without appearing to be doing a 'put up' job. So, perhaps, she decided to be herself. Besides, she has a large constituency which needed to be kept in spirit.

Yet what seems incredible to any neutral persons is that she holds on to the belief that her party's victory was

of this precisely what the voters sent their representatives to parliament for?

While felicitating the new Speaker Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, some members of the Opposition apparently overemphasised the onerous nature of his job in an oblique pointer maybe to stormy parliamentary sessions ahead. That was rather provocative.

Sheikh Hasina's evolution as a fine speaker, with wits about her and the political idiom and the turns of phrases, has got her high marks. Yes, she had the winding up advantage over Begum Khaleda Zia as the Leader of the House, but, well,

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was with rituals, however important these might have been. Anyway, all the day's work was done proving in the end that the walk-out was not meant to be an obstruction after all. A certain respect for popular sensibilities is discernible there.

For the tremendous pressure Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia were under — to perform — they came out with nothing short of flying colours, one must admit. There is no doubting the imprints of skilled oratory they have taken on them through the rigours of demanding electoral campaigns. Also, perhaps, the

snatched away' by Awami League. This was paid put by none other than the BNP-nominated outgoing President of the Republic Abdur Rahman Biswas himself in his address to the august House. It sounded like truth making itself felt one more time.

Khaleda Zia's prefatory note to joining the parliament sounded very much like a partyline statement: protecting the independence and sovereignty of the country. But we are quite appreciative of her view that the opposition's presence in parliament was essential for ensuring continuity of democracy. But isn't all

it goes to her credit that she utilised it to the full.

The fierce competitiveness between the two leaders will hopefully raise their debating and postulation skills to newer heights enabling them to provide dynamic and constructive leadership both in the government and in the opposition.

The new parliament has many veteran MPs — on both sides of the House. Their services are expected to be of enormous practical value to the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition. Our belief in democracy was strengthened by the inaugural proceedings of the Parliament.

Apres Yaqoob, Banking Deluge?

What we really need in the SBP is a banker who has good administrative experience, some of the bureaucrats being considered have no experience of modern commercial banking and cannot conceivably process even a normal LC (Letter of Credit). Our candidate must give sophisticated intellectual responses to IMF strictures and thus avoid commensurate pressure on economic development strategy, we must have someone dynamic with hands-on experience...

THE political crisis in 1993 has left a residual controversy over the tenure of service of the present Governor, State Bank of Pakistan (SBP). Every nation, particularly a developing one, needs a strong and independent State Bank to maintain strict monetary control, particularly when the government-in-power tends to be lax with respect to fiscal discipline. It must be said that Pakistan has been blessed with good chief executives for this most important institution and however abominable some of them may have performed in later life in the cockpit of public office, in their appointment as the head of SBP every individual till date has performed exceptionally well, maintaining their independence without compromising their integrity. V A Jaffery (the much vilified PM's Adviser on Finance) may seem servile and sennile in the service of PPP regime, one could never doubt his honesty and integrity in the SBP post. Before he manipulated and maneuvered himself out of both the presidential office and his reputation, Ghulam Ishaq Khan was a financial bureaucrat of some substance, albeit of the arch conservative kind. The present Governor SBP, Dr Mohammad Yaqoob, carries on the tradition of above par intellectual honesty, integrity and competence of his predecessors during their respective incumbencies. It is almost as if a mantle of impeccable sobriety in keeping with their responsibilities descends upon them as soon as they occupy the SBP chair, restraining their base faculties that tend to burst

all serving PMs — look what happened to Mian Nawaz Sharif once he was bereft of Qazi Abdulillah's holy breath!

Whatever the ambiguity, the relevant summary has been lying on the PM's desk for last two months without decision. In contrast to other crucial decision-makers, the PM is a literate human being and understands the international ramifications of failing to appoint a competent individual to the post. Certainly this appointment is far removed than making any Tom, Younus or Khalid President of one of nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) or the public development finance institutions (DFIs). A combination of nepotism, corruption and laissez faire has led to an inordinate rise in the 'bad debt' figure in the public sector financial institutions which stood at Rs 82 billion when Moeen Qureshi was the caretaker PM and has since shot up in three years to Rs 116 billion, a rise of almost 50 per cent and Ms Benazir's tenure has still two years to go (at least on paper, if not according to Time magazine!) At the moment, barring National Bank of Pakistan (NBP), every public financial institution is in a deep hole. NBP is about the only golden goose left and though it has a dynamic chief executive in the form of M B Abbasi and a comparatively small debt portfolio, it is not free from being targeted by motivated interests. The PM's purported misgivings in her sarter moments notwithstanding, our in-house parallel authority has reportedly been interviewing a wide range of colourful candidates for the post on the famous

lidity. To quote the SBP Act relating to appointment, duties, etc. of Governor and Deputy Governors as amended by the present regime, para 10 subsection (3) 'subject to the premises of sub-section (11) of this section the Governor shall be appointed by the Federal Government for a term of 3 years and on such salary and conditions of services as the Federal Government may determine, except that neither the salary of the Governor nor his terms and conditions of sources shall be varied to his disadvantage after his appointment.' Having been appointed on 24 July 1993 for a period of 5 years, it could be argued that the period for Dr Yaqoob expires on 24 July 1998, particularly when he was not freshly re-appointed on 12 Feb 1994. On the other hand, ambiguity tends itself to interpretations by different interests, open their motivation. There are rumors that having the temerity to question the imperious directions of those who matter in the parallel set up, Dr Yaqoob has himself decided to quietly fade away like a good soldier. If the nation is indeed faced with financial apocalypse as some economic doomday soothsayers predict then he should have gone public with his grievances to preserve the nation's financial integrity, his personal 'escape' is self-serving and does not serve the national interest.

On the other hand when some go even so far as to suggest that Dr Yaqoob's exit is tantamount to financial harakiri for Pakistan with respect to dealing with the IMF and

AS I SEE IT

Ikrām Sehgal writes from Karachi

forth into light in later life.

Yaqoob resigned from the IMF in 1992 and returned home, being offered the SBP job in 1993 on the retirement of the then incumbent, Mr N H Hanafi. However, political events caused quite a bit of constitutional confusion in 1993 and it was not till Moeen Qureshi as caretaker PM had confirmed his appointment for a single five years term (increasing the length of office from three years) that Dr Yaqoob took office on 24 July 1993. The single five years term was designed to maintain independence of the Governor by removing the possibility of inducement by any Government for another term. On 12 Feb 1994, the present regime was pleased to again change the Governor's tenure to two terms of three years each and thus the present anomaly. Should the present Governor SBP viz (1) continue for five years till 24 July 1998, (2) leave office after three years on 24 July 1996 or (3) stay in office for three years up till 12 Feb 1997 when the last amendment came into vogue? Given an independent streak and not given to the pressure of political patronage (though one daresay very seldom publicly), a majority within the present regime will probably like to see the Governor SBP disappear into oblivion on 24 July 1996. Among those trying to bid him a not-so-fond farewell are the major aspirants for this post, prime among them the present Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, Qazi Ahmadul Haque who was bitterly disappointed when Yaqoob was named to the SBP post and stopped bestowing the then PM Mian Nawaz Sharif with the customary prayer puffs he reserves for

"horses for courses" formula.

Dr Yaqoob is reportedly a difficult customer to digest in the matter of privatisation as well as in the dealing with NCBs of the UBL and Habib Bank kind and public DFIs such as Bankers Equity Limited (BEL), Industrial Development Bank of Pakistan (IDBP), etc. therefore the "pliability factor" is of extreme importance as an imperative quality requirement of a successful client-patron relationship.

Dr Yaqoob's differences with the IMF management rose when he was seen by them as challenging their uncompromising IMF approach towards developing countries and thus causing cracks in that strategy. Dr Yaqoob must find himself at odds with the present economic strategy that should be geared to making a comprehensive change in the tax structure and having a medium term view of the economy. However, critics say he has tended to go in more for micro-management rather than stay with his SBP mandate of macro-management.

Monetary policy must be prudent and above all we must be honest in the understanding of the present economic situation. Any effort to defer or postpone radical measures to put the economy on a development course is only an act of political expediency and not one of economic vision. The SBP Governor's position as one of the prime negotiators with IMF may have been eroded somewhat to the detriment of the country's interest because the government's failure to keep its financial commitment as well as adopting sleight of hand measures such as fudging figures and creative transfer of liq-

other world finance institutions because no other person is available having the credibility wherewithal to stand up to them, the reality is that the country's graveyards are full of indispensable people.

Naming of some of the candidates being interviewed by the parallel government for the post of Governor, SBP would cause embarrassment to the country and one daresay to some of the candidates themselves. Certain characters have not refrained from actively denuding their respective financial institutions of liquidity. To the supreme interviewer it matters two hoots since the prime requirement as far as he is concerned is dog-like obedience of the "pliability factor" over all other considerations.

What we really need in the SBP is a banker who has good administrative experience, some of the bureaucrats being considered have no experience of modern commercial banking and cannot conceivably process even a normal LC (Letter of Credit). Our candidate must give sophisticated intellectual responses to IMF strictures and thus avoid commensurate pressure on economic development strategy, we must have someone dynamic with hands-on experience, not someone who is either past his prime or who ingenuously subscribes to the theory that one can simply roll over the national debt by printing notes. And the printing of currency is an option one can repeat on good authority was indicated not too long ago by the governing authority in the land as a potent panacea for all financial deficit ills afflicting Pakistan's economy.