

A President for All

In an informal meeting with the press, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, immediately after his election as the republic's president, gave replies to various queries by newsmen. The president-elect in his usual humble but straightforward manner touched upon the issues to the best of his ability as a head of state in waiting. Where legal and constitutional bindings were not restraining, the former justice and acting president was found to be giving his opinions without any inhibitions whatsoever. That the office of the president has no scope for toying any partyline or that the post is ceremonial and yet indispensable for maintaining and upholding the democratic system are facts of which he seemed to be manifestly conscious.

Justice Shahabuddin has brushed aside any possibility of enhancement of powers of the office of president. But regarding relations between the government and the president he has some straightforward views. He is quite aware of the office's limitations but does not hesitate to sound a warning that in the event of any major conflict of attitudes and principles between him and the government, his option might be to quit. In effect, the president-elect sets his sight on keeping the office beyond controversy. On this count, he exudes supreme confidence because his forte is his trust in people. By implication, he points to the need for developing a political culture of taking people into confidence.

As for the role of the opposition in a parliamentary democracy it is an article of faith with him that under no circumstances should it be allowed to be undermined. Extending the idea, Justice Shahabuddin relates it to the topical issue of a consensus government. He is of the view that induction of one or a couple of ministers from parties other than the majority one in the cabinet does not necessarily mean that it is a consensus government. Contributing to the popular views, he observes that it is in times of great emergencies that the question of consensus government arises. Otherwise, the opposition must play a critical and constructive role in parliament.

However, there are issues on which both the government and the opposition must get their policies and programmes to converge, meaning that consensus there is a must. He puts the problems concerning the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the sharing of the Ganges water in that category. The president-elect appears to be clear about every political party's role in a parliamentary system and that should enable him to maintain the neutrality of his office.

Ideal Responsiveness

Good governance is nothing if not responsiveness, quick and effective. A very good example of it has been illustrated by the unfortunate case of the SSC set code blunders being righted within some weeks' time. In a press conference held on Tuesday, Dhaka Secondary Education Board chairman Professor Moyezuddin Ahmed said results of the victims who had failed only in one paper because of set code mistakes would be published in a week's time. The number of such failed students he said was 908 for the Dhaka Board alone. The other three boards also have this set code problem and its victims. And they would follow suit in this matter.

The action has been prompted evidently by the Prime Minister's taking direct interest in the case. The poignancy of the tragedy as also the urgency of the solution were demonstrated when Professor Ahmed said that if the 908 now get only pass marks on their missing scripts there would emerge 42 with distinction or star marks, 342 in the first division, 510 in the second and only 14 in the third.

Administrations — of any kind — were for long wont to defend their own mistakes when these were pointed out by others. That was thought to be synonymous with defending their position and authority. Why, Professor Ahmed almost said as much while praising his battery of computers. But then he thankfully remembered the abominable part the invigilators played in the bad business. It was their responsibility to ensure that every set code was filled correctly. Think of other times, the Boards would just ignore the hullabaloo and procrastinate if pressure came from above.

We feel our government has scored even better than that bunch of good and bad scholars. With one fell stroke they have cut loose from a bad tradition of defending crimes and set things right within days. They should find their place in the merit list, too.

One last word on the learned chairman's claim of his computers being a hundred per cent error-free. Any ordinary computer scientist can tell him mankind has yet to make a fully infallible computer.

The Incredible on the Road

Early on Tuesday morning something unforeseen and incredible happened on the road starting out towards Green Road from its intersection with Panthapath. The road rose, as if heaving, just across itself and describing almost a straight line, with a terrifying report. Glass Panes or windows of many a building in the vicinity cracked and splintered down. There were few pedestrians on the road and even sparser was vehicular traffic at the time. So the timing of the happening saved the city of a major disaster. Could an earthquake be so much localised. It sounded and looked to be one all right.

Yes, it was a man-made quake. The box culvert storm sewer that was made to make Panthapath possible burst that morning due to pressure of accumulated gas in the boxed up underground channel, buckling the road above. Although both WASA and the City Corporation seem to have got their message from it we would like to underline the same anyway. Exactly, this or even worse may happen to all the box culverts in the city. All of them must at once be checked and measures taken to make them safe.

As unforeseen as this, there may be lurking a thousand threat to public life in the city. The city fathers must wake up to all such possible disasters.

New Promises to Keep

by Connie Samdani and G Samdani

We are often told that the world is divided into rich and poor countries. This view is misleading because it presents a too simplistic and static picture of a dynamic world.

The life of the millions and millions of ordinary people, we see most people toiling hard to eke out a subsistence-based living and living in cramped and dirty dwellings. They were at the mercy of powerful forces of Nature, such as flood, drought, hurricane, earthquake and the extremes of cold and heat, which they did not understand. Violence was part of their daily life, and most of the time their thoughts were about the unpleasant side of nature: dirt, disease, and death.

When we look at the developmental history of the family of nations with this kind of dynamic perspective, we see that all countries were once poor, and that through a process called industrialisation, some countries have already reached the coveted goal of being rich, others are nearly there, and still others have a long way to go.

There are some who categorise countries as "already wealthy" (with per capita gross national product over \$10,000), "nearly wealthy" (\$5,000-\$10,000), "well-begun" (\$1,000-\$5,000), and "barely started" on the road to wealth (less than \$1,000). Clearly, Bangladesh has barely started in terms of nominal per capita GNP.

But there is another side to this story. Although the nominal per capita GNP for Bangladesh is about \$250, the figure adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) is around \$1,300. PPP is an index of how much more or less each country's money would buy compared to the official exchange rate. For example, at PPP value of 520, Tk 100 will buy 5.2 times as much in Bangladesh as one could buy in the US with the dollars for Tk 100 at the official exchange rate. In this sense, Bangladesh may be said to be well-begun on the road to prosperity!

Financial experts say that by giving recognition to these markets, the new indexes could attract new money to their respective countries. That's because huge pension funds, insurance companies and large institutional investors from the developed countries will use the new indexes to direct their initial investments in the markets. Further, experts project that emerging markets will account for 40 per cent to 50 per cent of the total world stock market capitalisation by the year 2010, up from the current level of about 15 per cent. And that's good news for countries like ours.

Meanwhile, the government must ensure the political stability, attract foreign investment, and the business community must be able to provide adequate returns for these investments. Raising purchasing power of the people, improving infrastructure and a strengthened regulatory framework could make Bangladesh a more fertile territory for direct foreign investment. Without concerted efforts from the political establishment and business community, this possibility may continue to be nothing more than a mere promise for a long time, instead of becoming tomorrow reality.

Another factor favouring fast growth of today's emerging economies is that they can "leapfrog" the learning curve for industrialisation by quickly adopting or adapting modern technologies and management methods. We need not re-invent the wheel each time we want to improve productivity or build new things.

Nobody could build a power generating station to give even George Washington, the first president of the US, the electric light to read by because electricity for household use had not been invented yet. No amount of money or capital could produce the electric light for George Washington at that time. But people in

Bangladesh need not wait for electricity to be invented. If we can come up with the money (from savings) or capital (from investors in the stock market, for example), we can acquire the technology right away and, if necessary, adapt it to meet our local needs.

Thus it is possible to jump ahead to advanced forms of production, transportation and communication methods without first going through the experimental stages. For example, Bangladesh could install advanced wireless communication systems thus bypassing the cumbersome wire-based telecommunication stage. The same applies to the adoption of high-performance materials, machinery, and transportation system. This "leapfrogging" to the most modern technologies offers opportunities for much faster growth in today's developing economies.

Again, almost everything to jump-start and then sustain the economic prosperity of a country is now available "off the shelf." If the country can prove to the world community that it's an attractive place for investment, capital not in short supply either. Therefore, it boils down to having a government and an enterprising people that can offer the credible promise of a good return on the capital investment. Can the people of Bangladesh afford a government that cannot deliver on this promise?

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THE good news about last month's general elections was that it didn't generate much bad news. The overseas press was seemingly at a loss to make sense of it all. In the June 16 issue, the all-knowing New York Times had this to say: "Despite angry protests and threats by some of the losing side, the victory... of the party that led Bangladesh to independence in civil war 25 years ago appears increasingly likely to be accepted without a recurrence of the turmoil and violence that have often marred politics here."

As Bangladeshis living in the United States, we were relieved to learn that the country somehow averted another crisis in its political leadership. More than relieved, we even felt a sense of pride as we read in the same New York Times article this assessment: "These elections have been a magnificent demonstration of democracy in action and have established a basis for Bangladesh to emerge from the political crisis that has recently beset the country. It has been a long time since we were proud of something we read about Bangladesh in the overseas press. Most of what we read tend to reinforce former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's characterisation of the country as a 'bottomless basket.' That's shame indeed."

Can we now prove Kissinger wrong? How about starting with our self-sufficiency in food? But are we up to the challenge to bring our population growth under control and thus make the self-sufficiency status sustainable? What can the government do to curb corruption? Is corruption a form of "social pollution"? If so, can it only be contained or minimised, rather than eliminated, by proper management techniques? If these are difficult questions to ask, they are even more difficult to answer. But ask us, must we wish to take our rightful place in the world club as a

ance of the independence of judiciary.

Article 66 (2) (C) says, "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of parliament who has been, on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release." Further Article 27 of our Constitution says, "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

We wonder why Ershad alone has been released from jail when thousands of other convicts are languishing in the prison. We also fail to understand how Ershad continues to be an MP and attends the Jatiya Sangsad? Is it by dint of an executive order of the government or in violation of judgement of the court of law?

We would be grateful if our Home Minister and the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs kindly let us know under what law, rule or regulation or provision of the Constitution Ershad is entitled to special privileges?

We would like to add her that we want accountability and transparency not only in the matter of income and expenditure of the government but also in all spheres of life including executive orders of the government and affairs of our judiciary. We want to know whether Ershad as a citizen was deprived of his fundamental human rights, wrongfully and politically victimised or the authorities concerned have done nepotism and favouritism towards him.

O H Kabir, 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

Let the Mayor start work

Sir, Mohammad Hanif, as it appeared since he became the Mayor, is more a dedicated political activist of AL than an active Mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation. Although, the office of the Mayor was engaged for the cause of the political gains of AL it is time the Mayor gives attention to his responsibilities as Mayor. Hanif as the Mayor could not start work because BNP was in power. Later on, too he failed to start any work as because a caretaker government (whose only job was to conduct national election, not to do anything so far the Mayor was concerned) was in power.

Now his own party, AL, is in power. Will he now start a work? A Mayor needs wide vision and imagination while managing a city. He must possess deep aesthetic sense with intricate art of observing things meticulously. Does Hanif lack these qualities? When will the Mayor start working? He should start right now. The city of Dhaka is decaying fast to be called a city at all in the true sense.

I urge upon the Mayor to start working with the task of cleaning the city streets and

pavements from the occupation of all kinds of hawkers and vendors. These hawkers and vendors operate with the help of a long chain of mastans. Eviction of hawker and vendors will give the city a civilized look, give the citizens their lawful right to use pavements and eradicate activities of anti-social elements. It will also improve the law and order.

No one will ever find in any capital city of the world that the city's pavements and over-bridges are occupied by the hawkers and vendors selling meat, fish, chickens, fruits, spices, toiletries, garments, tailoring services, shoes etc. The whole city has been turned into a bazaar — a big hawkers' market.

Mayor, please save the city of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

M R R Khan, 38, Naya Paltan, Dhaka-1000.

A passenger on Biman

Sir, My nine-year-old son and I travelled on Bangladesh Biman flight No. 024 from Karachi to Dhaka on 23rd June 1996, holding Pakistani passport No. A 259975 and ticket No. 9974202192549/715. The flight was via Mascot. We were travelling to Dhaka for the first time after many years to spend our holidays with my Bangladeshi parents in Dhaka. As I was visiting after a long time and was going to see numerous friends and relatives, I had bought a number of presents to give away.

On arrival at Dhaka airport on 24th June at 5.45 am, my suitcase which was brand new was found missing. The matter was immediately brought to the notice of the authorities concerned at the airport who gave me the necessary receipts in exchange for the suitcase tag which I handed over to the 'Lost and Found' office.

I ran back and forth between the airport and my parents' house at Indira Road almost everyday to enquire about my missing suitcase. I was always told that the suitcase had not been traced. Finally, after numerous visits in vain I was told to lodge a claim which I did on 3rd July 1996. After all this I was given a paltry Taka 1,000 by the Lost and Found office to help me buy a few essentials like tooth paste, tooth brush etc though I refused to accept such a small amount which would hardly last out more than a couple of days.

Every time I visited the Lost and Found office I was asked to produce some new document or another which was sheer harassment judged from the number of times I was forced to travel back and forth. The claim I have lodged is for a nominal amount of US Dollar 2,800 as compared to expensive items such as a brand new expensive suitcase, designer clothes, shoes, bags, cosmetics, Nikon camera which were all in the suitcase.

On my final visit I was astonished to learn that the Lost and Found office had recommended that I be paid for 10kg at the rate of US Dollar 20 per kg for a suitcase that weighed 30kg which I declared as my own. I simply could not understand this logic and my arguments were completely in vain.

If this is the manner in which passengers travelling by

Biman are harassed and especially a single woman passenger with a child who had no recourse to further action, then why should I like scores of other passengers travel on Biman at all? I implore on the authorities to look in to this case and at least do me the justice of paying me a reasonable compensation that I am entitled to if rules do not permit the full claim to be disbursed to me. I feel gross injustice to a helpless passenger, to say the least.

Zeba Shah, 75, Indira Road, Dhaka

The unusual cardphone and TSS

Sir, My attention has been drawn to your editorial of the above subject dated July '96. It may be mentioned that cardphones were purchased by TSS on tender and the requirement, specs are prepared by their engineer. Those floated single envelope tender with below standard specs. This gives advantage to the lowest bidder with whatever system they may offer such as substandard, old stock, backdated design, etc. over other suppliers. If a substandard or old-stock material is supplied, our agencies procured equipment very short span, as of spare parts later became unavailable in world market or price is so high that adding the price of equipment and spare one can buy a new system. Still no effort has been taken for adoption of latest technology, two envelope system and reliable products.

The new ministry should stop these malpractices immediately. There are other tenders in TSS such as 7000 line digital PBX on BTL and 500 telephone set etc., under process. The ministry should go through it. Otherwise the nation will only suffer.

Hasan Quamrul, 56 Kamal Ataturk Avenue, Barani Bazar, Dhaka-1212

Save us from session jam

Sir, We are the students of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) Mymensingh. We passed the HSC examinations in 1992 and we got ourselves admitted into the Bangladesh Agricultural University in the 1992-93 session. But in 1996 we are only in the 2nd year. I believe that it is a matter of sorrow. There is a dangerous session jam in BAU. It is like an octopus. It was said that we can get the graduation in 1997. In fact, we would get our graduation degree in 2000.

We are the sons and daughters of our poor parents who sent us to the BAU to be learned persons. They have dream regarding their sons and daughters. Because of session jam, their dream breaks at mid-way. So I request to the prime minister of the Republic, please save us from session jam so that we can get our graduation in proper time. We want to be a real humans, not statues made of soil.

Sazzad Hossain, 340 Soharwardi Hall, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh-2202

OPINION

Education System Needs a Change

Md Anwarul Kabir

It was our Prime Minister who herself said that she wanted to know through media if there were any wrongdoings in the past so that they can rectify themselves. I must appreciate the courage and in this light I would like to point out a very important issue which was initiated by the then Awami League government and which needs to be given a serious thought at present.

We strongly feel that imposing Bangla in all respect and cornering the English medium schools at that time in a hasty manner was absolutely a wrong decision by the then government. Why? Let us now evaluate the present scenario which also involves employment.

We really fail to understand why was this decision been taken in such short time when we just achieved our independence from Pakistan. Practically, all over the world, English is treated as the second language. One might argue and say that there are few countries such as Russia, China, France, Japan etc. who give importance to their own language and are doing very well in the world economy. Yes, that is true but we must also try to see what countries are doing. They are the developed countries — and we are still under developed who have to rely on them till we become self-sufficient ourselves. Countries like Japan, China, France etc. are so much advanced in their own technology that they really do not need the assistance of another country and can still survive.

But what about us? We have to rely on other countries (as of now) and for doing that we need to communicate in English. Even China, Japan, France, Russia are also thinking seriously to introduce English in their educational system if they are to compete and penetrate the world economy. Therefore, it won't be wise for us to stay rigid with our present educational system. None of the government who came into power gave a serious thought on this issue.

If the system at all needed to be changed then it should have been done TOP DOWN and not BOTTOM UP. In other words, the victim of this system are the school and the college children of our country. Setting aside the few English medium schools that we have at present, the standard of English has really gone down in the government schools and colleges mostly because of lack of teachers, and mistakes in the Board text books. Therefore 80 per cent of the students who are passing from the government schools and colleges have very weak English structure and as such they are facing problems when they are going for higher studies. The medical books are all in English, the Engineering books are also in English and different subjects that one chooses in the University are also mostly so in English. So they face problems because the books that are in the library are mostly in English. We find most students translating these books in Bangla and then sitting for the exams. Is this at all logical? The transformation from English to absolute Bangla should have been made phase by phase and not drastically and not without a serious decision. The first phase should have been the higher

level books and then gradually go down to school level.

Let us see what impact it has on employment. The dream of every student is to have a good job and a good salary after they complete their higher education. In reality, good jobs and good salary are mainly with the Multinational Companies, Foreign Banks, Joint Venture Enterprises, and of course the Top Private Organizations. These companies/organisations will at first in their interview or screen test will basically judge the strength and weakness one has in English. Irrespective of what he/she has obtained in SSC, HSC, or higher studies.

One who is weak will automatically get dropped in the screen test provided he/she has a relative in a reputed and a respectable position to pursue. Some do get lucky with 'his/her own ability but the percentage is very nominal. The interesting part of this system is that even in the Foreign Service of the government which is a lucrative department in the government service, they are also looking for candidates who have strong English background; eventually this becomes a contradictory issue. Higher studies like MBA, CA, ICMA are all in English and big companies are indicating in newspaper advertisements their preferences mostly on these subjects. What is the fate of the rest of the students then? Did any government thought of that?

The present government has taken a decision to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor but they are unlikely to be successful unless they change this basic system of education. Let us face the truth, there are some private schools in our country where from one can obtain "O" level or "A" level, but can one imagine what is the tuition fee of these schools? These schools or Private Universities are meant for the elite class and the higher income group of people in our society. These schools basically look for students who are capable of paying tuition fees and also have strong family background (if needed). The interview that they take is not with the children but basically with the parents! These schools and universities are something like Harvard University in the United States where only elite class and powerful people can study. Is this what we really want in our country?

In conclusion, I really would like to suggest to our present government that they must start giving importance to English at the lower level i.e. the schools and the colleges. Let there be more English medium schools at the government's initiative so that one can study at a reasonable tuition fee. We must give importance to our mother tongue (Bangla) no doubt, but definitely not by creating difference between two groups of people and not in an unplanned manner. People are very much alert nowadays, it really does not look nice if the lawmaker's own children are studying abroad since they can afford it. Does it? I do know that this will involve time and cost of the government, but let it start now and be optimistic that there will be a balancing situation in our society.