

Budget 1996-97: Some Remarks

Everything depends on the availability of good governance. The legal system, the administrative set up and the law and order situation are going to dictate the fate of the targets in the budget.

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In Bangladesh, the discrepancy or distance between word and action seems to be consistently yawning at every conceivable place. Even the Jatiya Sangsad or the National Parliament, a place so important and sanctified for a nation's pledge to democracy and, more simply, people's rule, has been found to be tainted by this tradition.

Parliamentary proceedings in keeping with the democratic spirit and practice, are destined to be within the public reach. Unfortunately that process has been badly hampered here due to massive backlog. According to a report published in The Daily Star recently, the pile of unpublished reports on JS sessions is on a course of unabated rise whereas the date of proceedings publications available in the market should not logically go back beyond three months.

Apparently, everything is going smoothly except the printing department of the Parliamentary Secretariat. The Reporting Section has updated its supply to the next in the chain by an installment as late as on July 23 this year. In contrast, the output of the Printing Section is antediluvian. Literally, there has not been any improvement in the performance of the Printing Section since the time of that great deluge in 1988.

The reason given is not only untenable but also ludicrous. When so much money is being splashed on regularly for different face-lifting operations it beats one's imagination how a section of the National Parliament can escape the touch of even a semblance of development. The fact that the section of the parliament responsible for public cognisance of all the actions of the legislators is so far removed from contemporaneity makes a mockery of our calls and claims of accountability and transparency. The Printing Section of the Parliamentary Secretariat should be revived up to get rid of the backlog not for its archival value but for nurturing the basic tenet of democracy which is accountability. No cost is too great when accountability is at stake in a parliamentary system especially in the days when desktop publishing is so quick and cheap.

A Timely Warning

People living in districts of Khulna Division have been warned of detection of 'some highly contaminating agents in the water of the region' and have been warned that people should consume water only after boiling it and disinfecting it with chlorine or bleaching powder. We record our appreciation of the action by the Khulna Divisional authority of the Directorate of Environment — specially in the backdrop of no such warning being issued by similar authorities in Dhaka Division which is at present being visited by floods worse than in Khulna.

We are aware that people here have long been continuously urged to boil water before using it. The problem with such endless urgings is people start forgetting its seriousness. And if no warning has been sounded on contamination found in Dhaka water, what should that mean? Perhaps no one has looked for it or there is contamination here also but concerned people have not thought the fact should be shared with the people. Or, which is very unlikely, there is indeed no contamination in Dhaka water.

We have reasons to suspect Dhaka water. For quite some time, from long before the floods, WASA water coming out of taps was soiled and dirty and even a little stinking. Consumers knew why this was so. One reason, unknown to many, is large-scale pilferage of water through sinking tubewells into the WASA mains. Indeed for divergent reasons Dhaka water was not potable and the flood has added a new dimension to the danger.

There has not been any expression of urgency here and people all of whom are consumers of WASA or open water, have been as about complacent as they have always been about dependability of water in Dhaka City in particular and the districts of the division in general. This should change forthwith. Let Khulna be an example to us all.

A Human Tragedy

Seventy-four people including nine women and six minors were stopped in their bid to enter Bangladesh by the airport officials last Thursday. Armed with Bangladeshi passports that were later found out to be illegal, they made their abortive attempt to return to their claimed motherland from Pakistan in a routine flight of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). It is clear that we have a case of serial push-in on our hand. Living in Pakistan for a period of time ranging from five to twelve years and mostly engaged in odd jobs in Karachi and its outskirts, these people, majority of whom hail from Noakhali and Chittagang, tried to retrace their footsteps in the land of their birth. Whatever reason inspired them once to renounce Bangladesh has apparently boomeranged. It must have been a desperate situation for them. Otherwise why they would take the twin risks of buying illegal travel document at such an exorbitant price? Reportedly, brokers in Pakistan charged 18,000 in local currency for one passport and that too not good enough to hoodwink the officials. According to the detained and prospective push-back candidates almost all the Bangalees who have chosen Pakistan as the country of their domicile have to put up with persecution of various kind at different levels.

It is only imaginable what hardship and sufferings these detained people are undergoing now and will have to undergo until they are put on board of the next available aircraft bound for Pakistan. And nobody knows what is in store for them there. We feel instead of passive and irresponsible allowance of human shuttling, the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh should have meaningful discussions over the matter immediately. Meanwhile we can only hope that the airport officials will desist themselves from adding any new, intensifying ingredient to this human tragedy.

FINANCE Minister SAMS Kibria placed the national budget in the Jatiya Sangsad recently. The presentation of a budget is an annual phenomenon but it usually contains short and long-term economic agenda of the party in power.

Having been enthroned to power after long 21 years Awami League government with aroused a lot of interest in the public mind. The enthusiasm and interests so hovered were more ignited by the fact that Mr Kibria's budget upholds the spirit of a free market economy while the earlier ones of the same party in the 1970s upheld command economy philosophy. The shift in emphasis clearly underscores the fact that the present government took the on-going global and domestic changes in due cognizance.

The budget postulates an estimated revenue receipt of Tk 17,120 crore which is a rise by 10 per cent over the revised estimates of Tk 15,512 crore (1995-96). No fresh taxes were imposed and the additional resources are likely to be generated by streamlining tax administration, extending the VAT net and enacting other administrative reforms. Imposition of fresh taxes shall, perhaps, have to be shelved in the wake of economic hardships that preceded the political turmoil in the recent past and also given the fact that a lot of existing new tax avenues remain underexploited in a regime of pressures from vested interest groups and inefficiency in tax administration. The budget 1996-97 projected a revenue

expenditure of Tk 12,103 crore thus leaving a revenue surplus of Tk 5017 crore. It is a surplus budget and the rationale of a surplus budget should be sought in a situation of growing price hike, dwindling bank liquidity and other economic imperatives. However, the revenue-GDP ratio at 11.9 per cent in 1996-97 visibly seems to mark no change from the earlier one. The projected budget deficit at 5.7 per cent against 6.3 per cent of the previous one also highlights the government's intention to contain budgetary deficit.

The government has fixed the GDP growth rate at 5.5 per cent for the fiscal 1996-97. This compares with the last year's target growth rate of 6.1 per cent and the achieved growth rate of 4.7 per cent. One can recall that the GDP growth rate was 4.4 per cent in the year 1994-95 and 4.2 per cent in 1993-94. Achievement of a growth rate of 4.7 per cent in the face of long political crisis is, in fact, encouraging. The most important conclusion that one can possibly draw from this performance are: a growth rate of 5-6 per cent in Bangladesh is not unattainable (i) if given that political stability can be ensured and (ii) economic policies are tuned in the right direction. The performance also implies, perhaps, that economic agents continue to rearrange their activities, and time schedules in crisis. However, to achieve a growth rate

of 7 per cent as wished by the Finance Minister, more aggressive drives are needed and we hope that the government would not fail to bring forth necessary policy changes to attain that projected robust growth rate.

In the budget speech, the Finance Minister gave a brief account of what is happening in the agricultural sector. The emphasis on agricultural sector, especially, by the commitment of placing Tk 100 crore for the formation of a special agricultural subsidy fund is a welcome move. This vital sector that provides more than one-third of GDP and two thirds of employment in rural areas has been showing no sign of dynamism in recent years. A sense of complacency hovering around food self-sufficiency, perhaps, detracted away a lot of policy makers' attention from this sector in addition, the commitments to lower duties on agricultural inputs and spare parts should also encourage farmers to increase production. However, block allocations have always positive and negative sides. While the formation

of the fund is a welcome decision, the absence of any hint on the ways the fund would be utilized might keep us finger-crossed. For example, a part of the subsidy would be reaped by farmers in terms of interest rate subsidy from banks. Quite obviously in such a situation, only land owning households are likely to benefit from such subsidy leaving behind the marginal and landless households. Second, recent empirical evidence tend to point out

that rural non-farm activities have been growing over time and these non-farm activities could make useful dent to rural poverty. Does the Finance Minister have to say anything on this new path towards poverty alleviation? It is heartening to note that in the ADP, allocations have increased for agriculture, education and health sectors. Education sector also witnessed a rise in revenue expenditure. However, in the absence of any appropriate education policy for the nation, such additional budgetary allocations would only satisfy the quantitative needs while the qualitative changes would hardly take place. To raise the quality of

education in this country and to make it competitive, substantial changes need to be made in the curriculum and the government should move fast to that direction. The defence expenditure constitutes 18 per cent of the revenue budget and shows an increase over the previous year. The education expenditure also constitutes 18 per cent of the revenue budget and as noted earlier, shows increase in allocation. If we are correct in recollections the Awami League, while in opposition, demanded threadbare discussions on defence expenditure in the parliament. We also want that our defence forces should be modernised, well equipped and well organised. Over the years, the defence sector has been earning a respect due chunk of foreign exchange. It would, therefore, be in the best interest of the nation that excepting state or defence secrets, all initiatives relating to the defence sector should be brought to public notice. The nation needs to know the justification of additional expenses on guns rather than on the butter.

The Finance Minister reported that the losing state sector enterprises swallow 2-3 per cent of the GDP. It seems that the government is willing to give a chance to this sector so that they can survive by raising their efficiency levels. Divestiture is ruled out for the moment. We think that the government should immediately come out with two lists of

losing state sector enterprises: (i) the curables and (ii) the non-curables. The non-curables ones should immediately be closed down and handed over to interested parties. There is no justification in spilling time, energy and resources on these ailing units with one leg in the grave. About the curables, the government should come up with some targets. For example, if the current amount of loss of the state sector is, say, Tk 1000 crore the next year's budget should aim at reaching a figure if say, Tk 600 crore or so. Unless the targets are set and are supported to be reported in the parliament, there is very little chance of witnessing their improvements. We should remember, however, that the overall efficiency of state sectors is closely related to the over all state of efficiency in other public sectors. Therefore, attempts to improve the efficiency of public manufacturing units keeping the efficiency level in government administration as it might turn out to be futile.

By and large, the national budget 1996-97 seems to be all right. It sounds friendly to the avowed policy of growth with justice. But everything from pin to plane depends on the availability of good governance. The legal system, the administrative set up and the law and order situation are going to dictate the fate of the targets in the budget. The GDP growth rate is not projected on a high side. It is to be noted that people are ensured of normal activities, the economy every should generate a growth rate of 5-6 per cent.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



clear decisions have to be taken, that the armed cadres of all the major political parties can have no place in a democratic society committed with the establishment of rule of law. Such political cadres must be dismantled forthwith and the society and the educational institutions be cleared of arms and masts. A decision at the highest level of both the government and the opposition needs to be taken and publicly announced. Both side must make this commitment in public and, accordingly, issue directives to be implemented within deadline announced. The law-enforcing agencies must comply with these directives and submit a report of compliance within a specified period.

The upholding of the rule of law requires that its exercise and enforcement must be seen to be totally neutral, impartial and effective.

Let us not forget that the successive authoritarian regimes have used the law-enforcing agencies not in an impartial or neutral manner but in a partisan way to safeguard their personal, group or narrow party interests. The said agencies also did not only fail to carry out their lawful duties but they themselves became callous and even corrupt, since they saw that those at the helm of affairs themselves did not respect the law and used the laws arbitrarily.

There could not be established any rule of law if there was in practice one law for the ruling party, another for the opposition and yet another for the common men. We have seen disgraceful examples in the past as to how who committed murders and terrorised the students in the campus could remain entirely above the law quite 'beyond the reach' of the law-enforcement agencies. This must end right none. There has to be uniform application of law to deal with all those who possess illegal arms, who inflict terror and violence in the campus and outside — without paying any regard to their party applications, if any.

If rule of law is really and genuinely to be restored, it is very much essential that its application is seen to be free from any partisan expediency or any other suspicious or harmful purpose such as, in matters of granting bail, withdrawal of cases pending in various courts or in freeing certain convicts to meet, believably, such purposes. If it is perceived that certain special persons or VIPs were extended special privileges under the guise of parole, bail etc. in defiance of all previous practices, then there can be no credibility whatsoever as regards the impartial and neutral application of laws and the establishment of rule of law may remain a far cry.

It is essential, therefore, that there should be respect for the national consensus

which demands that the rule of law, in its true sense, be restored, and there should be no discrimination between one person and another with regard to the application of law. All discriminatory practices must be guarded against and scrupulously avoided. The laws must be seen to be applied equally and impartially.

The constitutional office of Ombudsman should immediately be made operational by appointing as Ombudsman a person having integrity and enjoying public confidence so that any arbitrary exercise of power by the administration or by the law-enforcement agencies can be impartially and promptly detected and corrective measures can also be taken promptly. In view of the widespread complaints and allegations about corruption and abuse of power by the police and other such agencies, provision of a special Ombudsman for the police (as in Canada) also be taken under can serious consideration.

If these and other necessary measures are not adopted immediately, mere lip service to contain violence and lawlessness will achieve no result. Lawlessness, anarchy and violence have spread so widely in the society and corruption is so deeply entrenched in the law-enforcing agencies that effective emergency measures are needed to deal with the grave disease. There is no time to loose or waste. Let the workshop that was held the other day over the vital issue of law and order be considered different from thousands of other workshops that had been held earlier where many pledges were made, recommendations and resolutions were adopted, with no visible result whatsoever. For this to be different or effective, it requires effort, sincere and continuous. The issue of violence and lawlessness is too serious to be disposed of by just holding one such workshop, and adopting lots of recommendations. There must be immediate action, and visible action to deal with this vital issue.

It should be remembered, once again, that there must be political commitment, political decision and elimination of criminals from the political arena first, if something real is meant to be. The writer is a practising lawyer and media correspondent.

For Establishment of Rule of Law

by Ranesh Maitra

In dealing with the crimes and criminals, a meaningful action programme needs to be immediately in place.

A meaningful action requires that all of us should be frank and honest and, in particular, the major political parties and the national leadership — both in the government and in the opposition — must be sincere and committed to take meaningful and effective steps as needed by the society.

NO doubt, there is complete unanimity over the question that highest priority should be given to the improvement of law and order. The terrible state of affairs in this sector is quite evident from the continuing violence at different places of the country and also in the universities and other educational institutions which, in the last few weeks resulted in sine die closure or closure for a long period of Chittagong Medical College, Barisal Medical College, Dhaka Medical College, Salimullah Medical College and Jahangirnagar University.

The daring activities of the armed masts in broad daylight in the cities as well as in the countryside still continue to be a daily occurrence. Conscious sections of our people long since identified violence and terrorism as the principal threat — both to the consolidation of democracy as well as to economic progress and development. An essential part of democracy is rule of law which assures all protection — the law which includes protection of life and property, right to personal security and right to pursue livelihood. No economic progress or development is possible, however essential that might be, unless those who want to invest and engage in economic activities are assured of peace and stability.

We had expected that the fifth Parliament which was constituted following a decade long grim but successful battle against Ershad's autocratic regime that let loose armed masts and terrorists in every sphere of life including the political arena, educational campus leading to loss of so many promising sons of the soil, would take a meaningful step towards eradication of the law-

lessness but the dream of the people was, unfortunately, not fulfilled during its five-year term.

Now that a new Parliament has begun its sojourn, it has become imperative to restore rule of law as a matter of highest national priority and ensure effective steps to deal with illegal arms, violence and terrorism. Mere rhetoric or utterance of good words stressing the need for ending violence and terrorism and establishing rule of law will not ease the situation. It is commendable that a workshop was convened on this burning issue but it was equally frustrating that no opposition party was there to contribute their considered views. It is, however, hoped that an effective dialogue with all the political parties would soon be arranged in all sincerity over this vital national issue.

In dealing with the crimes and criminals, a meaningful action programme needs to be immediately in place. A meaningful action requires that all of us should be frank and honest and, in particular, the major political parties and the national leadership — both in the government and in the opposition — must be sincere and committed to take meaningful and effective steps as needed by the society. Violence and terrorism in the society, specially in the educational institutions, cannot be dealt with simply by expressing a pious wish. Necessity demands that

To the Editor...

Occupation of footpath for residence and godown by T&T and City Corporation

Sir, Believe it or not the footpath bordering the eastward of Drug Control Directorate in Sector Bagicha along with the portion of the main road is under occupation by the City Corporation for more than two years for storage of their road-repairing equipments and sleeping accommodation of contractors labour. Being encouraged by the T&T also under the banner of 'lying underground cable for digital telephone' has occupied the remaining portion of footpath along with the portion of the main road for the purpose of housing probably the contractors workers and storages of material. The T&T has also constructed a number of closed tinsheds on both side of the road which apparently provides sleeping accommodation at night. T&T has further worsened the situation by haphazardly storing the empty women cable wheels on the road.

The entrance of the Dhaka Divisional Commissioner Secretariat complex is on the opposite side of this area which houses many other government offices. During office hours haphazard parking of rickshaws and scooters on this entrance and the T&T-Corporation haves give rise to an unwanted traffic jam is caused.

It is irony that in the Commissioner building complex, there are at least two official with the rank and status of secretary to the government and several official with the status of additional secretaries and joint secretaries are passing through this area every day. But apparently nobody could spare even a minute to initiate

an action to remove this trouble some occupation of footpath and roadside.

A further straw on the camel's back a twenty-feet container has been stored right on the roadside in the area and apparently it seems to be a permanent arrangements that has further worsened the mobility on this road. Apart from these tea stall, shops, carpet repairing shops etc., on the rest of the footpath in the area are compelling the poor passersby to go right through the middle of the road risking their lives every moment.

Since this occupation is going on for years, can somebody explain whether this is the order of the day and there is nothing wrong in it?

A K Khan, Suarimbagh, Dhaka

Do not waste time

Sir, This letter refers to the TV coverage of the National Assembly proceedings on the evening of 25th July, '96. The elected MPs are expected to conduct the affairs of the nation in an orderly manner and as the Assembly does not run indefinitely, there is the time factor. Bangladesh has so many problems and so many issues which need the attention of the august body that one wonders how our MPs waste the valuable time. It also appears that some of the MPs are unable to distinguish the platform from where they are speaking.

The MPs must realise that the Assembly is not the political platform of the street but the highest legislative body of the nation. Whatever delivered in a mass meeting cannot be delivered in the Assembly simply because they are from different parties. When this distinction is forgotten, unproductive deliberations occur. The MPs must also realise that

More articles on environment and economics

Sir, As a regular reader of The Daily Star, I would like to congratulate you for your weekend magazine that I am enjoying very much. Can we have more articles on Environment and Economics? The column by Chintito is very interesting. And the Write to Mita page is truly worth reading. Please, don't stop it.

Probir Kumar Kundu, Bangladesh Bank Sujhlet

Corruption

Sir, The minister in charge of Industries and Commerce has again challenged the former government in respect of corruption in distribution of relief materials from prime minister's fund while speaking at the Jatiya Sangsad. He further said that he would resign if he cannot prove that BNP distributed relief goods among party cadres and relations alone.

Similar challenge came from him in the Fifth Jatiya Sangsad in respect of corrupt practices of agriculture minister in distributing urga fertilizer.

The Delhi chief metropolitan magistrate has just summoned the former prime minister of India Narasimha Rao to appear in the court in connection with corruption case within two months of his premiership loss. Under the above backdrop it would be fair, justified and correct to summon those ministers, BNP executives and others before the court and punish them as per the law existing.

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Government of National Consensus

M R Khan

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed's claim that she heads a government of 'National Consensus' has evoked a great deal of discussion. When asked by the press to comment on the issue, one of her Cabinet colleagues, Minister of Communications Anwar Hossain Manju, who is an MP from the Jatiya Party cited the present government of South Africa as an example. He said that such a government was not without precedent.

However, I feel that this analogy is inappropriate since South Africa, unlike Bangladesh, has a presidential form of government. The point is significant since the constitutional doctrine of individual and collective responsibility applies only to the parliamentary form of government. Indeed, this distinctive feature of ministerial responsibility lends parliamentary government accountability and was the underlying reason behind the 12th Amendment of our Constitution.

Included within the doctrine of ministerial responsibility is the duty of the Cabinet to present, at least publicly, a uniform front regarding government policy, though a degree of flexibility may be allowed in its application. Should the duty be breached it is the convention that either relevant minister or, in exceptional cases, the government will resign. An application of the doctrine was seen during the Khaleda Zia government when Barrister Nazmul Huda tendered his resignation from the Cabinet following public disagreement over the caretaker government issue.

In the context of our constitutional system, the duty to conform with party and, where relevant, government policy extends to private members of the JS as well, because of rules against floor-crossing and voting against one's party line. Now, the prime minister has contrasted her government of 'National Consensus' with a coalition government. The distinction has been highlighted

Government of National Consensus

M R Khan

by the decision of the Jatiya Party to identify itself as an opposition party despite having one of their ranks in the Cabinet. The question that occurs to me is: what will happen if the Jatiya Party decides to actually oppose the Awami League on a particular issue? Will Mr. Manju have to resign? After all, in such a situation he will find himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place. On the one hand there will be his duties under the doctrine of ministerial responsibility and on the other, there will be his constitutional obligation to conform to his party's stance. I would request our legal experts to clarify the point lest we find ourselves in future in yet another constitutional quagmire.

Legality aside, one may also inquire about the political relevance of a government of 'National Consensus' in Bangladesh today. Historically, governments similar to the one being advertised have been seen only when a nation was confronting a national crisis e.g. the War Cabinet of Churchill. While it is true that we are not living in the best of times, I feel it would be taking things a bit too far if we claim that we are in the midst of a national crisis. Rather, it would be better for our political development if a tradition of constructive opposition in the Parliament is allowed to take root (though whether the BNP is actually willing to play such a role is another question; the signs so far are not encouraging).

Nevertheless, I do believe that there is a place for national consensus in our politics based on specific issues. For example, both the Awami League and the BNP are committed to market economics and want to attract foreign investment. Thus, there is room for agreement in this most vital area of our national development. However, for such a consensus to arise both the Awami League and the BNP should, for once, rise above narrow partisan interests and consider the greater interest of the country.