

Palliative Won't Do

The stock market situation has been bafflingly ironic. If the bubble had not taken a corrective turn and continued to thrive on market distortion the prudential interests of the small investors would have come to harm while the foreign portfolio investments in the IPOs itched for capital flight. The massive soaking up of funds in stocks trading away from normal economic activities in the substantive sectors had heightened to a point where worries deepened as far as the balance of payments situation and the wider macro-economic implications went.

On the other hand, the small investors' burgeoning interest in the capital market has been the most positive development to have occurred in our sluggish economy deserving to be sustained. And it is they who have now grown restive about and wary of the price slides which are being otherwise regarded as values settling down to their real indices. The small investors' association believes that insider trading and syndicated deals have been largely responsible for the price manipulations.

Amidst acrimony and differing perceptions we have seen how trading in the DSE came to a standstill since last Sunday.

Against this backdrop, the government now plans to set up two vigilance committees comprising representatives from the FBCCI, DSE, CSE, SEC and the Finance Ministry to monitor the market and review the circuit-breaker operations. While welcoming the move we note that this goes to meet only one of the six-point suggestion the FBCCI has made to the government on the basis of consultations it had with the authorities of the two stock exchanges, economists and persons knowledgeable in stock market matter. Actually, the recommendations that put emphasis on transparency in the stock market operations need to be implemented on a priority basis to restore public confidence in the share market.

The essential lessons would have to be drawn from a scooping investigation into the alleged market manipulations. Rather than just 'collecting information' we urge a deeper probe into the affairs.

Gender Equality

In her speech at the Begum Rokeya Award giving function at the Osmani Memorial Hall, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina underscored the need for sincere co-operation of all to liberate women from their confinement in hearths and homes. She expressed her optimism that women, given the chance, can creditably perform their duties outside of their homes and equally contribute to the nation-building endeavour alongside men. So far as women's potential is concerned, question-marks no longer hang on it. If anything is to blame, it is the lack of opportunities for them in our predominantly patriarchal society.

So when the prime minister calls for everyone's initiative from their respective stations of life, we interpret this as a step towards creating a congenial atmosphere for all — including women — so as to make the most of their talents. Creation of ideal conditions for the flourishing of everyone's natural talent is, however, a tall order. Yet, we need to pinpoint where exactly lies the gross form of discrimination. In this connection can we refer to one most vital area which, when addressed properly, can accomplish a social miracle.

The area we have in our minds is education. A few government programmes taken up recently to gear up girls' education are no doubt praise-worthy. But giving a waiver in terms of tuition fees to the girls is not enough. Bringing all children of schoolgoing age under the universal primary education programme is important, but even more important is to give them quality education and retain them for schooling in the next phase. Otherwise, it is meaningless to cry hoarse that we have made education free for girl students up to class VIII or XII. Education for both men and women can really change the stereo-typed perception about men-women relations in a social set-up. Can we take up the challenge?

DC's Ordeal

In the eyes of muggers and robbers everyone who possesses or carries valuables is a target. It hardly matters whether he is a most vulnerable citizen or a powerful civil servant. However anti-social or hateful their acts may be, at times they too can drive home a message or two — quite revealing in nature. One such incident was the attack on the deputy commissioner of Naogaon on Sunday night while he was returning from Dhaka.

We condemn the attack but do not miss the underlying truth that the high officials apparently out of the thieves' or dacoits' reach are not as secure as they seem to be. With guards to protect them from the harm's way, if the lawmen or the top executives become vulnerable to elements who waylay people what hope do common people have to protect themselves? The first-hand experience the DC has undergone would forcefully bring this realization to him.

The DC has stood on an equal footing with the common run, thanks to the dacoity. We do not plead for other officials to go through the same harrowing experience but do hope that they would feel the agony through empathy and make a vow to eliminate the curse from our soil.

THE final accountability being that rendered by the masses at the polls, should not the public expect the political parties to themselves filter their candidates through a pre-electoral weeding process to ensure that they pass measure at various levels leading to the anvil of the Ehtasah (Accountability) Ordinance? The recurrent failure to carry out accountability has brought a once vibrant economic engine, fuelled by a dynamic people resplendent in hope to its knees, the last three years at the hands of a band of looters who would put virtues to shame. Not that any thief has ever accepted guilt to quote renowned columnist Ardesheer Cowasjee 'which thief will give you a receipt?' without being faced by incontrovertible evidence but seldom has there been such high robbery and then a brazen display of shameless feigning of benign innocence as by the members of the universally un-lamented late government of Ms Benazir Bhutto. Unfortunately that is their benign right under the laws of the land unless they are brought to justice. We have to studiously guard against a rush of judgment. As columnists and journalists, except for investigative journalists like Ardesheer Cowasjee, Kamran Khan Kaleem Omar, etc we have seldom access to hard evidence, we simply articulate the mass perception.

In doing so we fall into the Catch 22 trap of a kangaroo courts in so far as we mix truths and half truths that feed on each other mixing these such that the palate of the population becomes anxious and hungry to apportion blame. A responsibility devolves upon us to verify the accuracy of what we put down in print, more so because in our haste to lay accusations and see the looters brought to justice we may be unknowingly playing into their hands of being hastily levelled accusations run the risk of being shown to be without depth.

And substance, it is more difficult to cast doubt on hard evidence obtained more deliberately. Some of us are also guilty of letting our own personal bitterness and frustrations get the better of our own judgment, in effect we attempt to project as the truth to what we would like to believe is the truth.

Going by the measure of mass perception alone our former PM's spouse was the biggest crook — ever grace this fair country but in all fairness till such evidence is forthcoming that can be laid out in a court of law, a smoking gun so to say, what is available is at best prima-facie evidence, though one daresays pretty conclusive in the face of his miraculous 'rags to riches' story with no fact to back up his sudden enrichment, not even his meager tax payments, a 'businessman' without an office except for the gilded room in the PM's House. Whatever the provocation and howsoever big the temptation for his accountability, we have to stay strictly within the rule of law i.e. the evidence must be able to stand up in a court of law as well as in the court of public opinion. The yardstick of public perception alone could also find some people in the PML (N) guilty of misdemeanor.

Here lies the crux of the problem, do our leaders have the courage of conviction to stand up to the mass perception if they believe the individual to be innocent or will their will falter at the altar of political pragmatism? Ms Benazir stonewalled the fact of her husband being a crook yet political animal that she is, discretion dictated that she keep quiet away from the immediate political process, albeit for reasons of his being in jail, to quote a PPP (HZ) nomenclature. In effect she has

by default given in to the court of public opinion instead of trying to brazen it out as she used to do e.g. to quote her in the interview with BBC's David Frost asked her about corruption among her inner circle. 'Corruption? What corruption? Because she knows that all that is laid out against Zardari is true. A stand must be based on principles but in the greater public interest there is room for compromise? Except for 1993 when in a supreme display of personal sacrifice Mian Nawaz Sharif relinquished power to avoid harm from coming to the State, our major political leaders have hardly ever risen to the level of special responsibility

and commitment that comes out of standing on principles. On the other hand, the few leaders with principles that we have had have got a short shrift from this nation i.e. all except the Quaid. A frustrating example for all of us is that of Air Marshal (Retd) Asghar Khan, a man who has always suffered at the polls because he has not allowed his principles to be eroded by pragmatism. If political parties carry out pre-electoral self-accountability, an enormous burden will be taken off the mechanism of the Ehtasah process and the responsibility thereof for its lack of success will be squarely on the shoulders of our top politicians i.e. if they are prepared to

verse self-accountability, hard-core PPP members down the line are deserting in droves to other factions, mainly to the PPP (Shaheed Bhutto) headed by Mir Murtaza's widow, Ghinwa Bhutto. The exodus of the have-nots has left the PPP (BZ) saddled mostly with crooks. To expect her to do any cleansing of Zardari's 'Knights of the Crooked Table' would be as futile as asking for the moon. To bridge a looming credibility gap and stem the political rot, Benazir has brought out of medicinal mothballs and pressed into service her half-senile half-demented mother as Rehuma (Patron) of her faction of PPP. The poor old lady, hardly knows what's happening around

SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY

The Decontamination Process

One must not deny that Mian Sahib seems to be serious about his 'decontamination programme' but setting different standards for broadly similar situations would not only amount to sheer hypocrisy, it may invite reaction from his intending supporters.

take the consequences as a matter of principle. Obviously the cleansing process done by the political parties will be more attuned to the reaction of the public rather any scientific process of enquiry. To his credit Mian Nawaz Sharif seems to be serious about self-accountability insofar as he has stated his intention to carefully process intending applicants for PML (N) tickets, even asking for complaints from the general public.

Imran Khan's Tehrik-i-Insaf (T) has already shown that whatever the political strength of the candidates, unless his/her credentials are clear they will not contest on T's party ticket. As a measure of re-

her but at least may have the satisfaction (in her brief flashes of sanity) at being put back on the pedestal from which she was cast by her 'born-nagain' daughter a few years ago. This is the same pragmatic political entity who no hesitates in supping with the devil, her lining up with arch-enemy President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in 1993. Zardari's lucky friends may well end up as an offering on the sacrificial table of Ms Benazir's frustrated ambitions for her future. By the noises emanating from his father, Hakim Ali Zardari, so may Zardari!

One expects self-accountability will be carried out by the PML (N) as announced by Mian Sahib. He may face a Hobson's Choice with respect to his brother, Mian Shahbaz Sharif. According to senior PML (N) leaders with plenty of credibility and not given to blind worship Shahbaz is not only a vastly misunderstood man but very wrongly crucified by public opinion. It is a devil and deep sea situation, to voluntarily withdraw Shahbaz's name would be to accept the onus of guilt as per the public perception as a fait accompli and thus condemn him without benefit of enquiry and trial, not to do so would arouse the cynicism of the masses as to Mian Sahib's commitment to self-accountability. He has had his share of scrutiny under the microscope by a whole lot of agencies over the past three years. On the other hand among Mian Sahib's close compatriots, Syed Ghous Ali Shah's shenanigans as Chief Minister of Sindh in the mid-80s are extremely well known to Karachiites and can be well documented even a decade or so later. If Shahbaz Sharif deserves a fair chance, should

Shah Sahib be thrown to the wolves without real evidence being presented? The catch-22 is that given the awesome public knowledge about Ghous Ali Shah, would Mian Sahib risk public cynicism allowing him to enter the electoral hustings under the PML (N) colours?

One must not deny that Mian Sahib seems to be serious about his 'decontamination programme' but setting different standards for broadly similar situations would not only amount to sheer hypocrisy, it may invite reaction from his intending supporters.

Gen Babar had been single-mindedly pursuing the Sharif family for sometime, taking help of international private investigative agencies to sort out complex details of real estate, financial transactions, etc abroad but the results were less than satisfactory for the prosecutors employed by the then ruling government or were they on 'go slow' instructions from Asif Zardari? In all fairness the fact remains that not a single charge could be brought against the Sharif family. The existing reports must be taken over by the Ehtasah Commission and if the reports are negative then the benefit of doubt should go to them.

To its credit the Caretaker Government has tightened controls across the board in election laws to prevent corruption pre and post polls the government that follows will be a product of this cleansing process. While a few rascals will still manage to slip through the accountability net, the fundamental responsibility of the major political leaders is to ensure unscrupulous, dishonest politicians never take part in the electoral process.

While decontamination must not become an exercise in self-exorcism, a singular commitment of self ensuring clean credentials will be the acid test of political leadership.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

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OPINION

Political Legacy — Denial of Proletariat Interest

by Abdul Latif Molla

IN national politics anywhere in the world, a person who possesses the quality to sway public opinion, who knows how to command the nerves of the people, who has the ability to anticipate accurately the effects of a certain course of action on the public and who knows the sleight of winning and holding public esteem and affection is a great asset. He is the charismatic leader of the people and the pivotal point of them in times of crisis and is the right person who can be trusted to obtain all out spontaneous co-operation of the people for any planned metamorphosis. Such person commands the highest virtue for holding the highest public offices in any country. But unfortunately it appears to be different in Bangladesh. Though genesis of Bangladesh cherish a glorious liberation war with spontaneous participation of its people yet it could not get rid of the legacy of the vicious past in unbridling its political leadership.

As the history of democratic leadership of this part of the world does not go beyond the fog end of the British rule, we easily find that two elements i.e. wealth and western education were the principal criteria for political leadership not much of it influenced by the masses in general. Almost all the political leaders even of lesser lights in political firmament in British India had one thing in common that either they were wealthy or had western education.

Though their common goal was to emancipate the motherland from the British subjugation yet we may not straightaway dismiss their aim to bring the people under the subjugation of the wealthy and western educated elite of indigenous origin. Meticulous observation provides ample evidence that efforts were seldom made to rear up the leadership of common people rather they were reared in different ways. Their right to leadership was based on a whim of the ruling class, a whim which was wilyly denied an aim to keep the venues open and clear for exploiting them anyway.

The trend continued to prevail and explicitly enhanced after independence in the then new republic of Pakistan. In order to get oneself recruited in a political party the incumbent inevitably needed comparable wealth, rich family background and western education degrees. Common people with no mentionable wealth, poor family background, inadequate educational degrees virtually had no access in a political party. Even if they managed an entry in a party, never they were nominated for any election. The tradition was perpetually implemented in civil and military bureaucracy. Even if any one of a common family extraordinary qualified for civil or military bureaucracy, efforts were made to reject him on family background instead of encouragement. Common people of East Pakistan suffered a huge disparity and remained highly backward as a corollary of this policy.

The painful tragedy was that the politicians did not make any attempts to identify themselves with the people but started identifying with the bureaucrats instead. Thus recruitment in political institutions mainly came from two elite sources. First was from the rich group of people who en-

joyed coercive authority on the poor people by dint of their wealth. Secondly, it was through the prestigious Services Selection Boards and the Public Service Commission. Of course there was an exceptional source but it was the weakest group through election process which was never free, fair and fully participated by the people. This group, the politicians par excellence mostly succumbed to the coercion of the traditional group. As a result none remained in the governance of the country from among the masses to secure their rights. Whatsoever was decided and done by those politicians, the common masses had to bow down to that either willingly or unwillingly.

After emergence of Bangladesh through a bloody liberation war participated by all and sundry, it was expected that the political scenario would undergo massive vicissitudes through mass public awareness and political leaders would also emerge from amongst them as their representatives. Those leaders would have their heads wrapped by the unclean napkins of the peasants and feet firmly planted in their muddy paddy fields. The traditional elite group, the arrogant bureaucracy and the educated erudites would yield at the common people with nascent respect and not arrogance. But it did not materialise due to the old mechanism of representation process prepared by the old vested group. So what we see today is the same old wine in a new bottle.

Of course it will be a great injustice if we do not mention here with respect that the architect of Bangladesh, the exceptional great leader of this land, the father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had a clear vision in this regard. We remember his bold utterance, "The world today is divided into two groups — the exploiters and the exploited. I am with the exploited." He endeavoured to mould the politics of this country in that light and direction. But unfortunately he was left alone as he was immediately intercepted, surrounded and finally killed brutally by those vested groups who did not want their authoritarian and paternal flint to escape from their grips. This group was not content with the emergent representative politics of the masses as they were not ready to forego the pursuit of power which yielded loaves for them at the cost of the masses. One thing which these groups of people whether in politics or profession, business or government share among themselves is a set of common interest and common enemy.

So we perceived that the valiant freedom fighters of that group also cringed to their original affinity immediately after the brutal killing of the great leader. Here also it may be an other injustice if we do not mention the sacrifice of the hero of the liberation war, Quader Siddiqui and others in revolt against the group but their resistance could not inhibit the recapturing of the bare politics of the country by that group.

Since then the politics of Bangladesh has again plunged into original patriarchal

swoop, driven aloof from the masses. Seen in this light the apparent (democratic?) struggle between the government and the opposition parties may be allegorically construed as a struggle obviously for bread and butter between the two groups of the same origin, all of them combining together behind the screen against the proletariat interest.

Conspicuously it is evident that supports for both the government and the opposition reach them from varnities, colleges, bars and bureaucrats. It does not touch the masses who have remained largely unaffected by the political changes in the country. And probably no leader in Bangladesh can claim a mass following nor is there a movement involving the masses. In that sense, the pre-independent movement of the Awami League can be termed as a mass movement in its spirit, participated by the entire population or they understood the reasons for it.

Hitherto political parties in Bangladesh appear to be mainly constituted by the old vested groups and an added recipe i.e. the touts and the so called cadres. The parties are urban based having very feeble presence in the rural society. Speculatively the touts are the strength in rural areas and cadres in urban areas. The results, the rural masses are not politically conscious even after quarter century of gaining freedom and they are kept helpfully aloof from representation in the politics of the country.

There exists an unpalatable gap between the politicians and the masses. Even today there is a strong notion prevalent in the rural as well as urban masses that politics is a business of dishonest, corrupt and moneyed people who can spend lavishly and earn unfairly. Good people keep themselves aloof from this unfair business. So they are reluctant to turn up for voting whenever there is an election.

This provides an advantage to the stronger parties to resort to rigging, false voting and adopting all sorts of unfair means to bring out their candidates victorious with the helplessness or support of the polling authorities. Those touts and cadres play the vital role in the vicious process. Though we attach significant importance to 1991 and 1996 general elections under non-party governments yet there is no luck for the masses as the candidates were from the same groups. So the masses remain always unserved this or that whatsoever.

These politicians keep their heads firmly wrapped in the clean, bureaucratic headgear and simply desire their feet to be lightly placed in the peasants' paddy fields. The bureaucracy represents the most educated the most powerful and the most organised group of men. This group never changes its authoritarian attitude and behaviour towards the common people of the country. An official however big or petty usually stands in superior — inferior relationship with the people. He thinks he belongs to a privileged class and if he meets ordinary people on equal terms it will lower his prestige. Controlled and guided by this group

these politicians cannot come out of their clutches and prefer to abandon public interest in order to protect their identical interest of exploitation. Seen in this light there appears to be nothing absurd when threats come with impunity from a flamboyant political tycoon to conflagrate the entire country in anticipation of filing corruption cases against his leader and appropriate actions are avoided against the officials for rampant corruption, misbehaviour with the members of the public with disfigure to duties and misuse of public properties. These appear to be reciprocal good gestures.

The power of the bureaucracy to influence the character of the government is greatly augmented by foreign aid and influence. Foreign aid not only deterred the social adjustment which would otherwise been forced upon different groups in adversity, it also opened the doors of political irresponsibility. After all, most of the power, the weapon by which the people can control the rulers is their votes and taxes. But if the government far from depending on the people for funds, procures, scarce food for them, this weapon loses its effectiveness. Besides, the channel of distribution of aid created a vested interest in foreign aid and permitted a much greater say to the aid giving agencies in the internal affairs of the country.

But the politicians wink at and show a compromising attitude towards all these factors as they are more in the trousers of the vested quarters than of the masses. They remain sojourners in their own country only to see the streams of developments through their highly coloured glasses. They speak the same language and their personal authoritarian behaviour notwithstanding, understand the language of democracy. They can speak its idioms and deliver fine talks on it but never understand the language of the masses. This might not happen if the leaders were of the status of the one described in the first paragraph. They would really represent the masses in the state functions.

It will thus be seen that somehow or other such is the milieu of our society that words and concepts so pleasing to the ears and so fair in our minds turn so bitter in the political context of our time. Democracy, fair elections, streams of development, social justice, and all other lofty talks seemingly tend to conceal the naked pursuit of power of minority and its attempts to perpetuate its holds over the masses and never to alleviate their hard lots.

We heard about stringent actions against the corrupts and the culprits in the past but never saw practically that properties gained through corrupt practices by the culprits were ever confiscated or persons taken to task for the heinous offences. We hear now also the corrupts will have to face the law but fear that ultimately legal actions may not be enforced on them as they belong to the same class. These sweet talks may act as lullabies to put us in deeper sleep for the protection of the singers' own cronies. We may see only in the dreams the fruits of independence, streams of developments and rights of democracy at our broken doors as we saw in the past also. After all a prince is a prince by hook or crook, by any means fair or unfair.

To the Editor...

The brutality at the Zoo

Sir, The caged animals that were already living helplessly in an unfriendly atmosphere have been killed by the people supposed to fondle and feed them. These unfortunate creatures, made to leave their abode, were living with men in a designed cage to amuse the on-lookers. I fail to understand how a man can become beastly towards a beast forgetting his own nature. The animals were brought in with 100 per cent guarantee of security of their lives. The keepers have failed to protect their lives rather have done an unpardonable crime.

There are many small zoos in other districts as well. I don't know whether the message of unfortunate deaths at Dhaka Zoo has reached other animals out there. The animals are not safe in the jungle now because of the hunters. Here in the cages, too, they have been poisoned to death. This type of crime will not only tarnish the image of a nation but will — and should — enrage the environmentalist and animal rights activists.

Let there be a thorough investigation about the matter. The nation must know the motives of the killing. The criminals should be punished without mercy. In the meantime, I would request the authority concerned to protect the lives of all other animals presently living in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Rangpur and in other small zoos of the country.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury
Dy. General Manager
Sonali Bank, Head Office
Dhaka

Tiger skin

Sir, The police investigation is proceeding on the mysterious deaths of the Royal Bengal Tigers at Dhaka Zoo.

One point is not being reported, who is the price of a 'protected' tiger (Royal) skin in the international market? Several lakh taka. Where these skins have gone?

Our society has reached a stage where supervisors are required to supervise supervisors. Who supervises the top-most supervisor? This is not the 'age of credibility'!

Let us first have consensus in administration, before we try to convince the public on political consensus. Set your house in order first.

A Zabr
Dhaka

Politics of today

Sir, It is a matter of regret to understand from the present political practices of our country's prime movers that we are now too much concerned about the happenings of the past. History of a nation is always a golden treasure which should enable a government in power to lead a nation in a better situation. But the present practices of our politicians are not in favour of a stage which are likely to give birth to problems instead of making any improvement. It can in other words be said that we are not in a position to look ahead.

I would like to give a ready reference of Vietnam in this regard. The people of that country fought for many years their sufferings and losses are endless and immeasurable. They do not have time to look behind as they want development. As a result, people from all over the world are rushing there to invest. Billions of dollars are be-

ing invested there by top multinational companies. Days are not too far when we shall find that Vietnam is not much behind than many developed countries of the present world. It is true that political situation in Vietnam is far more stable than ours, but why can't we try to do so instead of running after each other and avoiding the current back-biting tendency?

This matter needs to be given serious attention both by the government and the opposition.

Motius Samad Chowdhury
ABC House, Banani, Dhaka

Right to veto

Sir, Under all norms of International Law, a country, which is in default of payment of UN membership fee for years, not only loses its right to be member of the UN Security Council, but also to exercise its veto power.

Abu M Faiz
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Where is the spirit?

Sir, By virtue of our genetic engineering we are becoming able to be acquainted with newer and newer evil genes responsible for our disabling diseases. But what about the gene concerned with our social disease manifested by corruption, terrorism, idleness and so, poverty? Yes, it is not surprising that a new gene has taken its birth in our chromosome which is responsible for our moral decay.

We have crossed a long time — twenty-five years — after our independence and are celebrating now the Silver Jubilee of our Liberation War. I feel proud about it but not with utmost satisfaction. We failed to keep the spirit alive of the then pro-Liberation attitude in our deeds and thoughts or to show due respect toward honesty, sincerity and patriotism. Instead of that anti-liberation and anti-progress evil forces are in force and that trend has also brought about a change at our genetic level (mutation) which over the past years has become so matured that it can cripple our thoughts and senses. A social cancer which has crippled in following our independence is still being nourished and strengthened by our own ill-thoughts and inhuman practices.

But we can do something about it, and I believe, there are still some possibilities to save the nation as well as our future generations form ill effects.

Most important target of all efforts should be our children, because their fresh and tender minds are more capable of receiving a new concept and they are free from the black paws of existing social disease. We should try to let them be educated in the light of our glorious history. In this way, a gradual positive change is expected to take place making us able to get rid of the polluted thought in the future.

Recent pledges made by our new government are very encouraging. Various programmes of the ongoing festival must help put some positive effects on ourselves and will develop our insight to some extent which is the prerequisite for any further development. Though it is a matter of time and sacrifice to reach the goal, I'm hopeful and request everybody to unite and take oath to be what we want to be during the Silver Jubilee celebrations.

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