

Issues before 1997

This dawn must have mystified us with its freshening dew drops and the early morning cups of tea with a difference. We should have formally drawn the curtain over nostalgia of the year gone by one second past last midnight, but it somehow lingers as everyone will vouch for that. We are for shortening the length of bemoaning what we had failed to do and also for not resting on the small laurels. Gazing at the crystal-ball as a by-stander to progression of events is not our idea as well.

We are basically interested in pinpointing the issues that lie ahead for handling in 1997 against the backdrop of where these have been left off at the close of 1996 and in the light of where we think alterations in approaches are necessary, to take the country forward.

The opposition boycott of parliament casts its shadow over national politics. And since we regard the behaviour of the polity as key to socio-economic equilibrium, the spectre of de-stabilisation also looms, by the same token. The BNP may well have made some valid points as far as opposition coverage over the electronic media and its feelings of being victimised go, but whatever grievance-related justifications they have cannot legitimise their parliamentary stand-off. If they continue with it into the third session of JS then their hell-bent attitude to governance, of which they are also a part, is bound to give them an irreparable public exposure. At the other pole, the government party's handling of the opposition has left room for improvement.

Imbued with the spirit of the new year both sides should now shake hands on their critical differences that stand in the way of forging working relations between them. They are urged to come on top of this wild-goose-chase inside of the week, make the third session of JS a full-house affair and lay the brick-work for minimally tolerant and consensual politics sooner than later.

Admittedly, the present ruling party has been serious about the business of governance as the slight improvement in law and economic management seem to indicate. The Rules of Business has been altered to make the ministers effective with their portfolios. The water treaty has given a leap forward and early signs of a thaw are being read into in the CHT situation.

We have worked out a frame of agenda for the new year which is as follows: Law and order needs improving further within two months to be congenial to civic security, higher education and economic uplift. The next six months should see the installation of a remodelled local self-government system, the granting of autonomy to radio and television and establishment of an independent judiciary. By the year-end, we should have an environment in which it is the system that will be triumphant over individuals.

Message of Ijtima

The Biswa Ijtima, the second biggest Muslim congregation after Hajj, ended in Tongi with a renewed call for peace, prosperity and universal brotherhood of mankind. Attended by lakhs of Muslim devotees, the last rite of the three-day congregation was the Akheri Munajat which sought the well-being of all in the faith and a harmonious relationship with peoples of other faiths. In fact, the community spirit and the farewell address by Prophet Muhammad (SM) have been rolled together into a religious philosophy that is uniquely eastern culture's own.

The essential message is tolerance for other religions and a big 'no' to all kinds of religious bigotry and oppression. Starting in 1910, the Ijtima introduced by the Tablig Jamaat in Delhi wanted to promote this overwhelmingly predominant message of peace in Islam. Gradually, the venue has shifted to our soil and to the credit of people of this part of the sub-continent, the Ijtima has been drawing more and more devotees every year. Admittedly, however, the message of peace and harmony has not often been matched by practices in society due largely to politics that has exploited and abused religion.

The proponents of this congregation, however, foresaw a time when there would be a great divide between politics and religion. We can feel encouraged by the fact that the influence of the detractors now seems to be on the wane. The devotees are increasingly growing in number, let them be imbued with the true spirit of Islam so that we all can materialise the maxim, "love to all, malice to none" in practice. Let us also not mix religion with politics. The spiritual domain must have its distance from mundane affairs like politics. Humanity must be bolstered by the original broad visions of religions — all religions.

Undesirable

Publishers and traders of books have reiterated their demand for the withdrawal of a decision to change covers of those books meant for class VI and IX whose contents remain unchanged. The demand is quite reasonable because involved in it are crores of taka. According to the publishers' and traders' samity, lakhs of copies of 40 to 42 titles were printed last year and those books will remain unsold simply because of their covers. All have, however, agreed to change the covers of those books in which additions have been made in the interest of projecting the true history of Muktijuddha.

Now the publishers and traders have threatened to boycott the Ekushey book fair unless their demand is met. Neither the board authority nor the education ministry has so far made it public why there is need for a wholesale change of the covers. If there is a good reason behind the move, the publishers and traders cannot be blind to that. We understand that in the absence of a negotiated settlement of the issue beforehand they are now placed on a collision course. This is unacceptable.

So, we suggest that the board authority and the samity representatives sit together to find a solution satisfactory to both sides.

If it is absolutely necessary to change the covers of books, let it be done. But then the ministry must be ready to reimburse the loss — if not the whole of it at least a reasonable portion of the same. It will be better though, if the covers are not changed. But the decision has to be arrived at through negotiations and after an objective analysis of the matter.

Back to the Future, with Hope

In less than a month, the people of Pakistan are to go to the polls and while election fervour is muted because of the constant public refrain for accountability, the masses are gingerly hoping to pick up the threads of the economic aspirations lost four years ago.

crat, head and shoulders above in the traits one aspires for in a Head of State. GIK threw this nation into turmoil in the selfish attempt to elongate his Presidential rule. Leghari has risen above narrow petty political considerations for the sake of the nation and thrown his own personal future into doubt by sending the government of the party that voted him into power packing on charges of nepotism, corruption and inefficiency. While the team selected as Caretakers could have been better chosen and drawn from a wider spectrum of the intelligentsia, one cannot doubt the sincerity of this honourable, patriotic man in trying to do his best for the nation within the parameters of the Constitution with the limited resources of quality of manpower at his disposal. Encouraged by outstanding judicial activism, the President has laid the groundwork of institutionalising accountability, a recurring demand of a very frustrated (and impoverished) people of this resource-rich country. While he has been the touchstone to initiate the process, the major burden of implementing accountability will fall on the elected government-to-be. Only a sincere commitment for broad reform to curb nepotism and corruption will set the foundation of a dynamic, prosperous Pakistan in the future.

If Mian Nawaz Sharif should become PM, he will have to take a hard look at his own inner circle and set examples for the sake of accountability to emulate down the line, choosing loyalty to the State over loyalty

to individuals whenever the two are in conflict of interest. 1996 may have seen the culminating of the Benazir nightmare but of major event has not got the pride of place it should have. For the first time since our independence from British rule, we are truly on course to separating the Judiciary from the Executive. As a colonial power, it was a requirement for the British but for a democratic, independent nation such a despotic role has been an unnecessary yoke. People decry merit law because of the "Judge and Jury" syndrome i.e. in a travesty of justice those

The Deputy Commissioners hold virtual power of life and death over the rural population, aligning themselves with one or the other local faction of the feudal class and perpetuating an evil dictatorship that has no parallel in this day and age. As much as God is in Heaven, our civilian bureaucracy behaves in the countryside as akin to God on Earth. The challenge for our elected representatives is to demolish this wall of evil, incarnate and protect the masses from suffering the churlishness and idiosyncrasies that they have had to for the past five decades. While the bureaucra-

has been subjected to during the Benazir regime. Despite threats, coercion and abuse, the Chief Justice remained steadfast, in the process exposing the previous regime to be the petty criminals they were. We have had Chief Justices in the past who have stood forth against considerable odds for the cause of justice, most notably (and in the immediate past) Justice Nasim Hassan Shah, but the incumbent Chief Justice stands tall in standing up for the rule of law as per the letter and spirit of the Constitution. The future hope for this country lies in inculcating the merit system throughout the body executive, at each level in every spectrum of governance and discipline. It is necessary to keep only a minuscule quota of 10 per cent for the backward, non-developed areas. We must reward merit in exclusion to region, race, religion or any other consideration.

The touchstone of success for this poor country lies in having the best and brightest at the helm at every level of government. Without the merit system we are doomed to be like a family or a race that intermarries constantly, every reproduction reducing the quality of the human being in mind and body. Instead of being a winner, merit is not only suspect, it is a disqualifier. How can one expect those who have benefited from nepotism to countenance those with merit? Unless we can honestly reverse this process, we are doomed to remain a slave nation economically and eventually politically. The future elected government has to create a climate of excellence

that goes with a merit-oriented system. Merit being the dynamo that energises entrepreneurship who best can define the parameters of such a change and implement it in letter and spirit than a successful entrepreneur like Mian Nawaz Sharif, given that he is the most likely leader come February? As much as our democracy is imperfect without 1) a run off election between the first two candidates if someone does not get 50 per cent of the vote in the first round, 2) proportional representation (PR) to ensure that the Assemblies have a rough representation of all the people on the commensurate basis of percentage of votes cast, and 3) joint electoral so as to do away with the inordinate weightage given presently to minority representation, the people remain the best judge of what they want for the future and adult franchise is the only size way of expressing their will. The genius of the people is shortchanged in relation to democracy by our present imperfect system.

Despite the uneasy travails since Nov 5, 1996, what we have to ask ourselves is whether we are better off today than what we were 60 days ago? Since the answer is almost universally "yes", we have reason to look forward to 1997 with hope. The President has bitten the bullet at great personal cost in reviving the nation from the dumps Benazir had taken us. Posterity can eulogise him for what he has done for the sake of this country in rising to the dictates of his conscience. Unfortunately having lived in uncertainty and apprehension for so long, our people have not yet begun to believe their good luck in being rid of the previous regime or begun to believe in the hopes manifest for a future without the shenanigans of the likes of Benazir and Asif Zardari.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

who are the prosecutors also sit in judgment on whom they accuse but nobody has ever really protested the "civilian martial law" we had to endure for nearly 50 years at the hands of a civil bureaucracy that under the facade of the rule of law has left military dictatorship far behind in absolute rule. The next elected government should bring the selected executive firmly under the controls of the elected representatives. It is far better to be misruled by those chosen by the people rather than the so-called "servants of the people". Whereas it is bad enough that they are masters in the urban areas, in the countryside they are absolute monarchs.

his hold on government at all levels is far from being completely undone, their despotism is now under direct threat from an activist judiciary. The historic judgment on March 20, 1996 by the Supreme Court in what is now known as the "judges case" ensured that neither the ruling executives nor the elected representatives could in future pack the judicial benches with tainted favourites eminently malleable to their bidding.

One must commend the indomitable will of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, because it is he who has provided the backbone for the resistance to the rule of the lawless that we

Hong Kong: Upcoming New Era as Part of China

The question that has loomed large to the international observers: How would Hong Kong be run after the midnight of June 30, 1997; would it be the HK way or the Beijing way? A S M Nurunnabi writes

HONG KONG is the last remaining substantial territory of the British Empire. First occupied by the British as a trading post in 1841, the territory was ceded to Britain by the treaty of Nanking in 1842. In 1898, Hong Kong along with the area north of Kowloon and other surrounding islands formed the New Territories which were leased to Britain for 99 years. The lease will expire on 30th June, 1997, when Britain hands back Hong Kong and its adjoining areas to China.

The handing back of the colony to a sovereign state rather than giving it independence follows years of difficult negotiations between Britain and China. All British colonies were run autocratically, but in the last stages before independence and a long time before, as in India, the Caribbean and West Africa, the people were given considerable democratic rights. Not so in Hong Kong. Unusually, a curious situation existed there: while there was almost complete freedom of expression, there was no democratic political system. It became a unique example of a benevolent autocracy.

At the storm centre stands the political Governor, Chris Patten, appointed by the British government to wind up the British rule. The question that has loomed large in the eyes of international observers has

been: How would Hong Kong be run after Britain hands it back to China at midnight of June 30, 1997? Would it be the Hong Kong way or the Beijing way? China had previously pledged itself to the former by enshrining the principles of "one country, two systems" in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and in the 1990 Basic Law, the de facto constitution for what would be known as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. China had promised that the territory could keep the existing way of doing things for 50 years, a promise incorporated in the aforesaid principle.

In about six months, China's Communist government will become Hong Kong's sovereign master. In this context, several questions have arisen: Will the Communist government take a back seat and keep its promise to allow the territory a "degree of autonomy"? Or will it and its various organs act as overlords constraining the Hong Kong government's every move? There are a lot of people in Hong Kong who are wondering whether such an overlord will exist in the future. There are, however, some keen observers who express confidence and a strong faith in China's strict

implementation of the "one country, two systems" concept, under which Hong Kong would be able to run its own affairs.

From the lofty ramparts of Hong Kong-China relations, such optimism may be warranted. It is felt that the highly educated and worldly cadres in charge of Beijing's Hong Kong policy have every reason to honour their hands-off pledge. Doing so would enhance Hong Kong's economic value to China while strengthening Beijing's relations with Western countries—and with rival Taiwan.

According to some veteran observers, the strategy of not getting involved in the day-to-day affairs of Hong Kong is based on a national perspective, purely out of self-interest.

The process by which Hong Kong's first post-colonial executive was selected on December 11 last, out of four candidates in the final rounds, looked like a race and polled like a race. The choice was made by 400 local luminaries who were themselves chosen behind closed doors in Beijing. The selection procedure was set forth in the Basic Law that would govern post-1997 Hong Kong.

Out of the four contenders, Tung Chee-hwa, a refugee from

China's 1949 Communist revolution who became a shipping tycoon and pillar of the colonial order, won a crushing victory to become Hong Kong's first leader in its post-colonial era. Tung, tipped from the outset as Beijing's favourite, took 80 per cent of the votes of a China-organised committee of the 400 notables. On becoming chief executive of Hong Kong's semi-autonomous government when it returns to Chinese sovereignty on July 1, 1997 and Chris Patten, the last British governor, gone home, one of Tung's first tasks will be to oversee the appointment of a provisional legislature to replace the elected one which China plans to disband. Tung's triumph is likely to please Hong Kong's powerful business community, which had rooted for a tycoon to take charge of this economic giant of Asia.

Hong Kong's future under China, just about six months away, was underscored by the huge red podium backdrop, emblazoned with the five-starred emblem of Communist China. Those concerned with civil liberties worry about Tung's advocacy of "Chinese values" and his criticism of Hong Kong's popular and combative Democratic Party. They fear he is too comfortable with Beijing's authoritarian style. China, however, promises to uphold Hong Kong's freedom and capitalist system.

Since China has angrily de-

cidated to discard the mildly democratic reforms put in place by the last British governor, Chris Patten, after more than a decade's argument over what the formula "one country, two systems" means, the Chief Executive, C H Tung is viewed by observers as having been uncomfortably placed in the middle with the options: will he adopt the role of Beijing's loyal servant or will he defend the ways of life that make Hong Kong so different from the mainland?

Everything about Tung suggests that he will try to have it both ways. As a Shanghai native who studied in Britain, worked in the United States and ran a huge ocean fleet out of Taiwan and Hong Kong, he embodies the kind of international life on the edge that gives Hong Kong its energy. As a conservative businessman, Tung also exemplifies the Hong Kong tycoons who fear that too much rabble rousing democracy may fray the territory's lucrative ties to the mainland. To the core, Tung is regarded as a conciliator, a master of the quiet compromise — but that does not necessarily make him a pushover. Tung's respect for Chinese values — those based on personal obligations rather than individual rights — is homegrown and sincere, by all accounts. Even Tung's critics credit him with showing strength of character under

stress. In the opinion of international observers, the destiny of Hong Kong's people will be largely in the hands of the new chief executive. He will be the one to speak for their fears and aspirations — to the world and to a regime in Beijing that is not used to listening. He will be the one to stand up for Hong Kong's interests within a central government riven by the conflicting demands of powerful provinces and bureaucracies, as well as the current internal power struggle for top positions in China.

Defying British and US protests, China very recently began setting up a new legislature that will abort and replace Hong Kong's elected assembly when British rule ends on July 1. In so doing China was courting fresh accusations that it is regressing on its promises to preserve Hong Kong's democratic rights. The big questions now looming are how long the so-called provincial legislature will last, and when Hong Kong will be allowed to elect its successor. Tung Chee-hwa, the newly elected head of the Hong Kong government to take over from July 1, has promised it will last exactly one year and that a new one will be elected partially by direct balloting as soon as possible, probably during the first half of 1998. In this context, while the outgoing British governor, Chris Patten, has urged China to restrain Chinese interest groups which have been seeking to assert their influence in the territory, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, has served warning about limits on press freedom.

To the Editor...

Correction

Sir, Ain-o-Salish Kendra (ASK) would like to clarify the following information in your editorial entitled "Workers in Malaysia" published on 25 December. No member of Ain-o-Salish Kendra had gone to Malaysia under the leadership of any other organisation. We were present at the press conference held on 23 December because ASK, as a human rights organisation, has worked for the last nine years to project the problems of migrant workers and for the last two years has provided legal support to migrant workers in Malaysia and advocated for more protective policies.

Dr Hameeda Hossain  
Ain-o-Salish Kendra, Dhaka.

II

Sir, I greatly appreciate the editorial on December 25 on our High Commission in Malaysia. I would like to make a correction. Naripokkho and Ain-o-Salish Kendra did not send a monitoring team to Malaysia as was mentioned in your editorial.

Nasreen Huq  
Member, Naripokkho, Dhaka

Cost of traffic jam in Dhaka

Sir, Traffic jam in Dhaka city costs Tk 1600 million every year. Astonished? Well yes, it is true. Dhaka Integrated Transportation Survey report published by the UNDP says, the working hours lost during the time of traffic jam is equivalent to 1600 million taka each year.

We are throwing away Tk 16 billion every ten years! Isn't it a great loss? Can we let this continue?

Nadim Ahmed  
Pallabi, Mirpur, Dhaka

Guest birds

Sir, There are a few sanctuaries left in our country for those birds who by nature fly hundreds of thousands of miles away from their own land to

keep themselves alive. Usually by crossing long distances they use up their fats and become slim.

To protect them from hunters, mankind has made law; and to protect their sanctuaries for ecological reason, campaigns are being launched every year.

Centring Feni Regulator and Closure in Muhuri Irrigation Project, there is a big reservoir fit for birds. Every winter since building of the reservoir, birds from different countries take refuge. A lot of people from many regions are honest spectators of different kind of birds.

This year the picture is different since a hunter and his buddies stationing at the rest house are very often killing this innocent guests. As a result, scared by his gun shots birds have deserted this place. This hunter works with a donor agency which should be a supporter of ecological concerns.

We really feel concerned at this behaviour.

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Private sector insurance companies

Sir, It is reported that general insurance companies in the private sector are doing good business. The policy buyers are paying a high rate of premium for covering the risk of their goods and establishments. But very often they are complaining that they are not getting the actual compensation money in case of accidents and damages.

While assessing the damage, the surveyors allegedly always try to lower the compensation money on the plea of non-compliance of the required conditions. One of the owners of a cold storage told me that insulation is a part of the machinery in the cold storage. In case of any crack down or collapse in the wall of cold storage, the insulation will automatically be damaged. But the surveyor of the company is not treating the

same as 'machinery break down' and the owner is helplessly trying to make the surveyor understand it.

The buyers of the policies complained that company representatives never tell them about warranties. They buy the policies hoping that the compensation money will be paid in time of need. Not only that, it takes a lot of time to complete a case. As a result the businessmen and industrialists who claim for compensation money remain waiting for decision for months. The Controller of Insurance simply writes to dispose of the case, as and when the office receive any complain of delay. The Controller should fix a time-frame for payment in case of any accident. This should be done for the greater interest of industrialisation.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury  
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Kalabagan, Dhaka

Observance of heroic days

Sir, The Silver Jubilee of the independence was observed throughout the country with great pomp, enthusiasm and spirit. On this occasion, various political, cultural, social organisations — including Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar — arranged discussion meetings, cultural functions and other programmes highlighting the theme and facts of our Liberation War.

By attending and paying attention to some of them, we, the new generation, not only get pleasure but could also know the real history of our freedom struggle which had been either hidden or presented before us with distortions.

We feel proud that we are the progeny of a heroic people. We hope that every year our national days of heroic importance would be observed in the same befitting manner so that we can learn the real aspects of our nation and the Liberation War.

Afsana Chowdhury Emy  
S S Road, Strajaganj

OPINION

Marketing Agricultural Produce

"Taka 500m pineapples wasted annually" was a recent headline in the papers. The waste is due to the lack of storage, marketing and distribution infrastructure in the rural areas. The situation is not new; even in the other agricultural and rural-based sectors.

Later press reports indicated that the UN bodies and the foreign aid agencies are paying attention to the sector's weaknesses. The government is aware of the institutional weaknesses for many decades, but the leaking of official interest and follow-through is slow outside the metropolis. Everything is being conducted from Dhaka, hence hoary Dhaka has become the Sindbad carrying the old man on the back who refuses to come down.

The Upazila Parishad is supposed to set things right, but even this institution (formerly the Union Council) is playing the hide and seek role in our ever-changing political scenario.

While drums are beaten about higher yields and production, the marketing mechanism from the rural to the urban areas continues to be weak. This is a fundamental problem in the LDCs and DCs — the whole system does not work even tolerably well; there are too many weak chains causing bottlenecks and overall inefficiency.

It has to be realised that the huge systems loss is greater in under-taking BMRs of projects which are new and passing through the initial teething stage (BMRs are for old established systems). How many times we have to start from zero?

It is not that the planners do not know their job or the local environment, but something goes wrong somewhere in the planning, allocation, or implementation chain, retarding the pace of development in all

national sectors. There are many examples: sudden shortage of gas feeding the established or new industries; the shortage of power could not be forecast during short-term reviews; neglect of IWT and undeveloped ferry ghats; neglect of controlled expansion of the megacities; weak uncoordinated development of the rural coops; mysterious short supply of butter and milk; the amateurish running of the stock exchanges; the defaulter culture; the outmoded banking and legal systems, the over-crowding in the jails (population growth there also!).

From time to time, there have been proposals for the quick development of canning and cold-storage facilities (in new areas) for perishable agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables, dairy, and fish; but the take-off period always seems to linger into indifference. The yield rate of green vegetables in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world (even without the modernised methods), considering the soil, water and climate. A little official patronage and some private investment can work wonders in this long-neglected sector.

There is a tendency to publicise the low production cost and cheap retail prices, ignoring the mobility factor from the producer to the consumer (whether in the local or export market). Quality-control is seen only in the papers and documents. Also, the middleman has to be targeted for modernisation practices; he is a big bug.

It is hoped that the coming Upazila elections will set into motion the proper administrative machinery for integrated development of rural marketing (in and out). The farmers cannot prosper living in non-

marketing islands, cut off from the business interactions. The producers have to interface with the sellers and the market, which is not the case traditionally — exploitation has been the name of the game for generations.

The sad truth is that the agriculture sector is not attracting private investment. Rural marketing cannot be left to the public sector in the 21st century. With official encouragement of agricultural modernisation, the private sector will not feel shy. Without an attractive mechanism for the circulation of money in the rural areas, the investment-wallas will seek other pastures (having burnt the finger at the crazy stock exchange).

It is vicious circle. At the moment the government machinery is engaged in attracting foreign investment for consumers and services mainly for the urban areas. The rural coops need to be reorganised in a big way to react quickly to the market forces. The government is engaged in this exercise, but the results are not noticeable in a big way.

Reorientation is urgently needed through the announcement of high-level policy tailored to spotlight investment to benefit the rural infrastructure. This is a big virgin field, without much competition, for years to come.

More juice needs to be injected into the proposed Accelerated District Approach (ADA) of the government in cooperation with some UN agencies in Bangladesh. The WTO implications are looming before the developing countries; hence increased activities in the rural sector cannot be overemphasised for building up a solid foundation to assist the local and foreign markets, not only cost-wise, but also quality-wise.