

A Great Day Wearing Thin

Yesterday was December 6. Does that ring a bell in your mind, dear reader? If it doesn't, the major political parties of the country are to be faulted. Not you. This day seven years back Ershad who personified an abominable non-participatory political dispensation, fell. It was supposed that with him autocracy also fell, as a matter of course. It didn't quite. An elected government, born of the mass upsurge that defenestrated Ershad, retained much of the Ershad style of governance and the democratic institutions, in the wilderness for two decades, continued to languish.

BNP did go for Ershad's scalp, including its insupportable prevention of JP meetings. Ershad was kept behind the bars but not all his crimes were researched and committed to book to charge the man for all his misdeeds. A wee little window was kept open and that came handy when a kind of horsetrading ensued at the beginning of '96 change.

AL beat its adversaries in this mindless game and neutralised Ershad by all that is now becoming clear. Getting him out of the jail to begin with and then letting him go abroad occasionally. And Ershad is crisscrossing the country weeping over the woes of the common man. What is AL getting out of compromising its enviable position of being the strongest exponent of civil government and opponent against rule by fiat by the uniformed ones from the barracks? Ershad is not really a force and he was never one. Going Ershad-friendly is perhaps in keeping with AL's becoming Jamaat-friendly to dislodge BNP — and part of AL's realpolitik. But it has robbed AL of its moral strength to hold high and further the glory of December 6.

December 6 brings into a very clear outline the kind of political opportunism and expediency that the nation has been successively subjected to. BNP let murderers escape, AL is proving benign to one who had made a virtue of corruption and throw the nation into abysses of ignominy.

December 6 is also the day for lamentation over a great national loss — the Three-party Outline on Governance that toppled Ershad. Short of harking back to it meaningfully, our march towards democracy cannot be sustained and truly rewarding.

From Ottawa with Hope

We congratulate the 125 countries that have signed the anti-land mine treaty. Sponsored by the UN and hosted by Canada it was not only a very appreciable gesture to address one of the sources for humanity's sufferings but also a great way to pay tribute to the people who have been instrumental in motivating the world opinion behind it, Lady Diana and Jody William the Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist being the two readily referable stellar figures. We hope the countries that have pledged allegiance to the treaty will get all the nations following them soon by pursuing the implementation part of the treaty with affirmative action.

We do not see why countries with any concern for crime against innocent humanity should not support the effort to ban anti-personnel mine. Most of the 100 million mines buried around the world that are reported to be maiming or killing 26000 people every year have little to do with direct military interest or purpose. It is only to guard against the imagined advancement of foes that these booby-traps are used and, for all practical purposes, it is the innocent civilians who are caught unawares by these hidden mortal threats.

We believe more than the written pledge to the treaty of 125 countries a solid purpose this occasion has served is to expose the inherent hypocrisy of superpowers like the US on humanitarian issues. Agreement in Ottawa has alienated this group of big and powerful and exposed their so-called commitment to humanity's cause. The insensitivity may cause people to ask: what right a country that is so dodgy about such a vital issue has to assume the role of a moral guardian?

The Cold War phase probably saw the maximum deployment of these buried agents of death with both the US and defunct USSR caught in a race for surrogate expansionism around the world. But the end of Cold War and the changed reality in global power balance have not paved the way for a no against this scourge. The necessity of military assistance for holding sway in a divided world may have gone but commercialism wields the sceptre with authority. We criticise this mindless worship of Mammon and urge the superpowers to break free from the chains of commercialism or else stop moral posturing.

Lanka Could Take the Cue

The 14-year-long ethnic war in Sri Lanka is proving to be not only visceral but also an inflicter of heavy casualties. In the worst battle since the government security forces launched a campaign in May to establish a road link to the northern Tamil stronghold of Jaffna, 300 soldiers died and 400 were injured on both sides on Friday. The casualty figures for the seven months of this strategic encounter show 700 government securitymen killed as against 2500 Tamil rebels dead. The attritional and mutilatory impact on a small Sri Lankan population can be gauged by the fact that 50 thousand people died and countless were crippled since the ethnic war began in 1983.

The world that keeps extolling the many virtues of the Sri Lankan society — their literacy, star-studded presence in world bodies, tourist attraction and cricketing prowess — is terribly upset now by the aggravating turn of events in the island country.

There cannot be a military solution to a political problem. Perhaps President Kumaratunga could take a leaf out of Sheikh Hasina's book of CHT peace accord in negotiating a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There are some similarities in the two situations, even though the present Sri Lankan perspective fumes with quite some bellicosity.

Why should the Sri Lankan government choose to be at the receiving end of accusations that her military have been violating human rights?

DEMOCRACY has been accepted as the best form of government in spite of its many defects and shortcomings. It is so because there is, in this modern civilisation, no other alternative to democracy. Democracy pre-supposes election of public representatives and election, if it is not free and fair, becomes simply a farce. That is why great concern is expressed as to how election can be made free and fair and whether the existing electoral laws call for reform. It has been rightly pointed out by one of the speakers here that our Constitution provides for an independent authority, namely the Election Commission, for performing all functions including preparation of electoral rolls, delimitation of constituencies and conduct of actual poll. Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners must be persons with high moral integrity and character and should be appointed on the basis of some form of consensus or at least on consultation with the main political parties.

They are at present appointed theoretically by the President, but in fact, under the provisions of the Constitution by the government of the day. Election Commission is an independent body, but it functions through persons most of whom are officers and employees of the government. This cannot be helped because Election Commission cannot employ a vast number of officers and employees to hold election and do other related work. In a democracy, particularly in parliamentary form of government, the Opposition must work in close cooperation with the Government; but this cooperation is totally absent in our country and instead of mutual understanding and harmonious relation, we find bitter animosity between them. This reflects necessarily on all matters of state including conduct of elections from top to bottom.

Allegations are there that the elections are rigged by various nefarious means including use of muscle, terrorism, black money and dishonest practices of election personnel who are mostly government servants. If people or a large part of it have no confidence in the government itself, the election results are not accepted. Election rigging is a very bad thing if it is

done by the rival candidate or party; but it is an act of patriotism if it is done by me or my party. Election is fair if it is rigged if I lose, even if it is conducted by an Angel. If this is the political philosophy of our leadership, then I am afraid, nobody can save democracy.

Vast majority of the people including the voters are mere helpless spectators having no power to stand up against the handful miscreants engaged, financed and armed by political parties. Some suggestions have been offered here which deserve consideration to help the Election Commission. Advisory Committees consisting of representatives of main political parties and respectable citizens may be formed at all levels, such as, for each polling station. To help maintain peaceful condition during election, local bodies, like Union Parishads, Thana Parishads (if any) and Pouroshavas may be held collectively responsible and if there is any disturbance in their areas, these bodies may be dissolved.

Thoughts on Electoral Reforms

Political Attitude should be Harmonious

by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed

Political parties should change their attitude to each other and must not regard the rivals as enemy of the state, of the country and the people.

For this purpose legislative provisions may be made. This method was successfully applied in the 1991 February elections. There 18 Union Parishads, out of 4400 Union Parishads of the country were dissolved instantaneously. This was one of the reasons for the fair and free elections that year. As to government officers engaged in election duties, such as the Deputy Commissioners, TNOs, Police Heads may also be held collectively responsible for any disturbance in their respective areas during election day. Even every village, mahalas and pouroushava-wards may be given similar collective responsibility on pain of heavy collective fine if any disturbance takes place there. Overall responsibility is of course of the Election Commission's. For efficient discharge of its functions, it should be given special power and authority including power of suspension of all government, semi-government officers engaged in election duties. This was also done in 1991 elections.

But the root of all the trouble lies in the political parties themselves. To win election they must seek support of the people and not of the mastans and students. They must not enlist as their members the owners of black money, such as, bank loan-defaulters and; for the purpose of election the law may be amended so that default in the payment of any loan-installment shall render the loanee a defaulter and therefore disqualified for seeking election; the existing provision for rescheduling of installment-payment shall not apply to their case. Voters' Identity Cards should also be introduced; in that connection some progress was made two years ago. Election expenditure-limit must be enforced and for that purpose daily-expenditure account must be submitted every day; non-compliance of this provision should result in automatic cancellation of the candidature.

For quick disposal of election cases, special forums may be created without going to the ordinary Civil Courts which are already overburdened. Eminent personalities and retired Judges may act as Chairmen of such Tribunals which should consist of representatives of both contesting parties. Simple procedure for trial of election cases should be adopted and a short period for disposal of such cases should be fixed by law to avoid unnecessary delay. Any party adopting dilatory tactics should be given exemplary punishment by making him disqualified for several years and by imposing heavy amount of fine.

Above all, political parties should change their attitude to each other and must not regard the rivals as enemy of the state, of the country and the people. Nor should they regard themselves as the only patriots branding rival parties as villain and traitors. Political parties must learn from the past and forget its bitterness; they must look forward and concentrate on the existing problems; they must believe in peaceful coexistence and give up the present politics of crushing the other parties, which is impossible in this civilised world today.

The writer is the President of Bangladesh. This is an abridged version of his speech delivered at a seminar held yesterday at the Supreme Court Lawn.

Issues That Trouble the Region

The third conclusion is that economic openness, liberalisation, globalisation and trade and financial sector reforms are no guarantee that the economy will automatically be stable and growing at a fast rate.

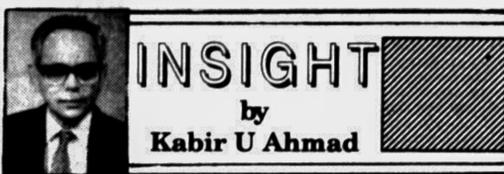
LAST week, the attention was focused on the roots of current troubles in the economies of Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea, some of the major East and South East Asian tiger countries. There are important lessons to be learnt from these experiences. But before drawing these lessons, it would be useful to pay attention to the experiences of Thailand, another open, liberalised and fast growing economy of that same league, which is geographically closer to Bangladesh. The outline of a paper presented by Mr. C. Sussangkarn, President, Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation, in the ADB seminar in Delhi gave a vivid description of the Thai situation. The average growth rate in the period from 1970 to 1995 was a steady 5.1 per cent.

In terms of real GDP per capita, it was 19,905 (baht) in 1970 which grew to 68,545 (baht) measured at 1995 prices which shows that the per capita growth was three and a half times that of 1970. With a heavy emphasis on export-led growth, the country's exports grew from 22,140 (baht) to 1,389,300 (baht) during the same period registering an average rate of growth of about 23.7 per cent per year. The share of agriculture declined from 27.02 per cent in 1970 to 10.30 per cent in 1995 while that of industry grew from 25.18 per cent to 42.26 per cent in the same period. The average rate of population growth decreased from about 2.5 per cent in 1960-70 to 1.3 per cent in 1990-95. The gross primary enrollment ratio for male increased from 82 per cent in 1965 to 100 per cent in 1980 while that of female children grew from 74 per cent to 97 per cent in the same period. The poverty incidence rate, which is the most critical indicator of development benefits to the mass of population in the society, declined from 57.0 per cent in 1962 to 6.4 per cent in 1994.

All these indicate that the

Thailand economy has made a remarkable progress over the last 30 years or so. The key factor in this scenario, as emphasised by the author, was the attention given to the development of Human Resources, quite apart from other conventional factors like investment, saving, private enterprise, and export growth etc. The key aspects of the Human Resource development were: good basic education, highly educated elite, on-the-job training, female labour participation, and entrepreneurs. Its carefully chosen strategies were: education and skill development, world leadership in high value tropical agricultural products, promotion of private sector, and the utilisation of comparative advantages to promote industry and services.

The aims of these strategies were to promote sustainable industrial exports and turning Thailand into a major economic centre in the region. One can safely say that Thailand has nearly achieved these objectives. But one paradoxical situation with these data was to see that while poverty incidence was shown to be substantially reduced, as mentioned above, the overall income distribution trend got worse over the years. One of his tables of data showed that while the poorest 40 per cent of the population had 16.5 per cent, the middle 40 per cent had 33.7 per cent and the richest 20 per cent had 49.8 per cent of national income in 1992, the same groups had 11.26 per cent, 31.51 per cent and 57.23 per cent respectively in 1994. Another phenomenon of the Thai development pattern was the very high migration of rural poor into the urban areas to participate in the development activities and the consequent emergence of some mega cities in the



INSIGHT by Kabir U Ahmad

country with all its adverse effects on the urban facilities.

But the main question that troubles everyone now is: where has Thailand gone wrong for it to be in such a financial debacle over the last couple of months? The same question is relevant to all the troubled East and South East Asian countries also. In view of the shortage of space, it would be appropriate to deal with this issue in a general manner. Incidentally, this issue also dominated the ADB seminar in Delhi.

Where Have These Tiger Economies Gone Wrong?

On the surface, all these economies were doing well in terms of high growth rates, comfortable foreign reserves, stable exchange rates, low inflation rates and respectable revenue surplus etc., until about two years ago. But underneath these stable macro indicators lay the violent trouble spots which broke through the appearance of calm surface. Corruption was rampant in all these economies and so was political manipulations of their economies. Presidents or prime ministers had their cronies who were at the head of various big industrial conglomerates, banks and financial institutions to whom banks, at the behest of the political leaders, lent colossal amounts of loans for businesses. These banks and

industrial conglomerates, in their turn, financed their political party bosses at their election times without any qualm. Recently, these have been well documented in The Economist of London in its October and November issues.

However, all these countries borrowed heavily from outside at the going rates of interest to finance their industries, big housing and office complexes and tourist centres etc. The real rates of return of some of these industries were utterly low and sometimes negative while the vast real estates became oversupplied. Such oversupply of real estates, which were used as collateral for bank loans, led to a sharp fall in their prices. Thus the banks were lumped with huge portfolios of bad or non-performing loans. Thailand accumulated about 20 per cent, Indonesia about 17 per cent, South Korea about 15 per cent, Malaysia about 16 per cent, and the Philippines about 13 per cent of their total bank loans in such bad debts. These figures are not static, they increase as time passes because interest burdens of a given amount of loan increases with time. The central banks tried to rescue these commercial banks for a while but in the process it itself got into trouble with excess money creation.

Some of these state-owned and commercial banks were supposed to go bust, but were

kept floating by capital injection. But the shares of these banks and other financial institutions as well as the loss-making industries were going down in their respective stock markets. Therefore, the over-borrowing, over-capacity in real estates and non-competitive industries led to banking crises which led to stock market crashes. Corruption at the top and political determination of financial resource allocation through these institutions for the benefit of their cronies eventually led to the inevitable debacles in all these economies. Side by side, the accumulated foreign reserves vanished in a short time in repaying the foreign loans taken over time. The economies were in desperate states.

Now it is said to see how all these countries are, almost beggared, the IMF for greater amounts of rescuing loans. What they have been given so far, which is, based on IMF's own hard-nosed calculations. Whether these are sufficient for their rescue or not, one conclusion is very obvious. And that is, all these former tiger economies are in for a period of shock therapy treatment by the IMF. These countries will have to go through a period of austerity by way of swallowing high taxes, tight money, high interest rates, cut in government expenditures, especially welfare expenditures for the poor and excessive expenditures on luxuries. There cannot be two words about the slow down of these economies in the next few years which will certainly pull down the rates of growth of the industrialised countries also since the former were the major buyers of products of the latter group of countries.

Some Concluding Observations

The first conclusion that one has to draw is that no matter what amounts of foreign reserves a country may have, and what apparent macro indicators may look like, if the basic economic fundamentals are not right and their dynamic outcomes are not going to maintain a balance, no one can save the economy from an impending disaster. The economy will

have to go through a period of hardship. The second conclusion is that the political manipulation or control of the economy and corrupt practices through their cronies placed in high positions of government-owned industries, banks and other financial institutions are a sure recipe for economic disaster. The third conclusion is that economic openness, liberalisation, globalisation and trade and financial sector reforms are no guarantee that the economy will automatically be stable and growing at a fast rate. In addition to all these measures, economic policies will have to be continuously re-designed, monitored and skillfully managed all the time.

There is no time for long sleep or hibernation for the economic policy makers as well as for the people responsible for policy implementations. A constant vigilance and correction of policies are necessary to manage and guide the economy in the right directions. Finally, this writer believes, and also discussed in the ADB seminar, that there is a need for drawing a sharp line between foreign direct investment and the short-term portfolio investment in the secondary market. Foreign direct investments in industries certainly benefit both investors and the recipient countries provided the terms of such investments are to the best interests of both. But short-term capital flows, which come to take advantage of the stock prices in the secondary market, behave like guerrilla warriors in the financial markets in the sense that they make quick bucks and get out as soon as possible without rendering any benefits to the recipient country.

These investors accentuate the upward moving stock prices when they invest and depress the downside of stock prices when they sell to get out of the country. Such accentuation of the rise and fall of the secondary share prices due to inflows and outflows of short-term capital does considerable damage to the real sector of the economy. One can state it in a technical language by saying that such investments are not par to optimal and hence some internal measures should be adopted to moderate these flows.

This is the second of a two-part article on recently concluded ADB regional seminar.

To the Editor...

Street politics

Sir, A letter was published in The Daily Star on 17.10.97 captioned "The opposition and the public". The writer expressed sorrow as to why tax-payers' money be spent on election when the opposition threatens to go on the street instead of the Parliament which they think their alma mater.

The writer is very much justified to think so. Because going on the street is apparent is the sole authority of the opposition as we have seen in 1995 and 1996 and of course now. But wonder is that the position is also ringing the bell to take to the street when we see a writing on a big banner in Bengali, "Hasina has nothing to fear. To take to the street we still rear."

Does it mean that the street is more important than the Parliament to both the position and the opposition?

Nur Hossain 151, Bangshal Road Dhaka-1100.

Land of communal harmony

Sir, An age-old belief with a generalised impression prevails in and outside Bangladesh that we are a nation of a long-listed odds and fallings. We admit that being an LDC and due to several obvious reasons we are being beleaguered by natural calamities, political instability, poverty, corruption, hunger and the like. And thereby we are always being undermined by the developed nations and their different multi-lateral aid agencies.

Yes, indeed it is a fact that we still remain far behind in several sectors from our neighbours and other developing countries. Well then, I have the humble intention to remind the all concerned at home and abroad that, in spite of so many

fallings and strains, it is the only country which is the most ideal place in the world for the peaceful coexistence of every citizens irrespective of caste, creed and religion. We can distinctly pride ourselves that citizens here belonging to any religion can independently and spontaneously enjoy their every rights including the peaceful observance of their religious festival at any time at any where within this soil.

Md Muhibul Abrar Choudhury Chittagong.

Example of punctuality

Sir, Chief guests or special guests in a function take it as their prerogative to come late and keep lesser mortals waiting for them. Ministers and senior bureaucrats feel let-down if they come ahead of others. In several functions foreign participants were found to express surprise at such lack of sensitivity on the part of important people.

Prime minister Sheikh Hasina set a different type of example in the convocation of the BUET. The academic procession with the PM entered the arena on the dot.

The attitude should start to change with this example. After all the PM is a really busy person.

M.A. Haq (By e-mail) Dhaka

NAC shouldn't nag

Sir, The special supplement on World AIDS Day of 1st December, 1997 caught my attention. Hopefully, unlike many other celebrations and commemorations, this one will not be forgotten as soon as the Day is over. For indeed, nearly all predisposing factors exist in

Bangladesh even though present known incidence and prevalence of HIV and AIDS are well below the alarm level. Indeed, we might be sitting over a smouldering volcano underneath. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is congratulated for formulating a national Programme of Action. It is time to act and not wait for an explosive epidemic to catch us unprepared.

One point in this year's message by the Chairman of the Technical Committee of NAC needs some qualification. While the message contains valuable information drawn from various global studies on mother-to-child transmission of HIV, it also states that "most studies indicate that babies run a 1 in 7 risk of being infected with HIV through breastfeeding". The veracity of this information is not questioned. But the likely impact on many lay minds is of serious concern. Such statistical information is perhaps more appropriate in scientific or technical journals.

But as public information, and particularly in the context of Bangladesh situation at the present time, it is more likely to create popular opinion against breastfeeding. This is particularly true when there is campaign to promote and protect breastfeeding practice in Bangladesh because it is the most cost-effective way of preventing infections in infancy and childhood which otherwise would have caused many more deaths.

The benefits of breastfeeding far outweigh the risk of HIV transmission in Bangladesh in the present epidemiological status of HIV.

Furthermore, information obtained from epidemiological studies, conducted in Bangladesh is more relevant than global summaries which can mislead and misinform even technically qualified read-

ers. Considering the number of homeless and street children in Bangladesh, the protection of these children from sexually transmitted disease will have much higher impact.

When the national HIV programme is still in its very early stage, to highlight, even inadvertently, a peripheral issue like maternal transmission through breast feeding does not add strength but could distract attention.

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Culture in the capital

Sir, Our dearest Bangladesh is the second largest of all Muslim countries in the world. From this view Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is an attraction to the Muslim world. Even it is a great to know that Dhaka is called the city of mosques. But the culture of Dhaka city has reached to such a position where Dhaka is failed to be known as Muslim metropolis.

If we go to any shopping centre in the afternoon, we will see that a great number of young ladies even middle-aged females and teen-aged girls are not properly clad as they should do.

Nowadays in the name of being free among friends or neighbours in Dhaka city, many resort to recreational acts of western culture. But we should bear in mind that human being is not any instrument that can be kept anywhere or anyway. I think the dwellers of Dhaka city should stretch their hands to set up a fine culture.

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OPINION

Rickshaw-free Motijheel

Almas Zakiuddin

The tersely worded decision to "make the Motijheel area rickshaw-free" by the Task Force on easing traffic jams in the city needs to be carefully examined. On the face of it, the solution to ban rickshaws appears to be a good one. Certainly, the removal of vehicles whose pace is far slower than that of motorised vehicles will eliminate the various conflicting levels of speed on our roads. These conflicting levels of speed undoubtedly create problems, causing bottlenecks and much aggravation to those who are faster, or slower, than others.

But it is not a good idea to banish rickshaws without thinking clearly about the consequences. What is going to occupy the space presumably vacated by the rickshaws? Cars, buses, auto-rickshaws, no doubt. Vehicles which emit harmful fumes, make a lot of noise, polluting our atmosphere and our ears. Why are we so easily agreeable to the increased presence of motorised vehicles?

Rickshaws do not pollute the air. They take up less space than cars. They do not gobble up energy, then spew out their waste into our lungs and eyes. They are silent for the most part, save for the ringing of their bells which, if you really come to think of it, pales in comparison to the cacophony of horns from motorised vehicles of all shapes and sizes which attack our ears!

Most important of all, rickshaws are the only means of livelihood for hundreds of thousands of people. What gives us, people who own and ride in cars and who, presumably make up the Task Force, the right to deprive these people of employment, just because we cannot all fit into the same small space?

No, what would work far more effectively would be to banish motorised vehicles from Motijheel. Why not establish a designated parking area, on the outskirts of Motijheel, where, for a daily fee, cars and other vehicles can be parked in safety? People can hop on to rickshaws from this point onwards. Taking a rickshaw into, within and on their way out of Motijheel could be an invigorating experience. It would be accompanied by far less noise, for sure.

We could all breathe in cleaner air. Pedestrians would be much, much happier. And for car owners, temporarily forced to abandon their vehicles, their would be the assurance that eventually, they could return to the comfort of their vehicles for the rest of the journey home.