

Municipal Polls

Elections to local bodies in urban areas have been a positive element in the governance of Bangladesh, which has ensured continuation of democracy at this critical level of social organisation.

Recent experiences suggest that elected local bodies such as city corporations and municipalities are hamstrung by various factors, particularly the over-bearing role and influence of the central government.

These are things that need to be reformed, if democratisation of local governance is to have real impact on the lives of the people they serve.

Another factor has now entered the poll scenario. The main opposition party BNP has stated that it may not go to city corporation polls under the incumbent Chief Election Commissioner.

Code for Teachers

It is a matter of irony that university teachers who should be the epitome of impeccable behaviour find themselves receiving a suggestion that it is time they were subjected to a code of conduct.

All these only go to show a marked deterioration in the academic atmosphere at the highest seat of learning in the country. As if gun-running on the campus, violent feuding within student wings of national political parties, viciously polarised politics among the teacher community, decline of parental control over students were not enough as incongruities, some teachers' morally degrading alleged sexual exploits had teacher-student relationship hit the lowest ebb.

We endorse the idea of a code of conduct for university teachers; not as a body of regulatory rules as such, but as a reference-point, much the same way that some famous universities abroad deemed it fit to have.

Escapes Nawaz Sharif

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif escaped a violent attempt on his life in Lahore Sunday. The bridge on way to Sharif's home village in Punjab was devastated by a timing device killing four persons.

Pakistan has been passing through a bizarre political situation since Sharif's Muslim League swept through the last general elections. The landslide victory at the polls that shattered the main opposition of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party has emboldened Nawaz Sharif to assume sweeping powers in the name of containing violence and corruption and speedy disposal of justice.

We urge all concerned in Pakistan to show restraint and resort to political means in confronting an opponent rather than trying to force matters through sinister methods of violence.

Globalisation: The South's Prospects

If globalisation were to work for the developing countries, upon which it is enjoined on the argument that it is to their benefit, the advanced countries should be more forthcoming than hitherto to work towards establishing an equitable world system.

HUMANITY has achieved phenomenal, revolutionary progress in all fields of human endeavour, particularly over the past 50 years or so.

The western countries shape their international trade relations as well as their stance and posture in international organisations in accordance with their own strategic and commercial interests.

Obviously, this is a globalisation of which the dynamics are stacked against the interests of the developing countries. Then, there are the multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational corporations (TNCs) originating in the West which hold a large deal of the cards in international business, industry and finance.

which is precisely what their basic mission is as business operations.

Surely, they cannot be faulted for pursuing their legitimate mission. But, the strategies they employ in pursuing that mission and the attitude they adopt regarding social responsibilities give rise to controversies.

The issues to contend with include MNC and TNC attitude toward and willingness to accommodate the host country's short and long run interests, whether the MNCs bring in funds from outside or raise funds from local capital markets, whether or not they use internal pricing mechanisms (over-pricing when importing from its branches in other countries and under-pricing when exporting to other country branches) to reduce the taxable corporate income, whether they are interested in exploiting cheap labour and natural resources in host countries without regard to the consequent social and environmental costs imposed, and whether or not polluting industries are being relocated in the developing countries.

Much, of course, depends on the host country's ability to articulate its interests and negotiate terms on that basis; but these are precisely the tasks the developing countries are often ill-equipped to handle, not only because of technical capacity limitation but also because of corruption on both sides.

South, having opted for and pursuing global integration, has failed to gain much. Even the economies of the East and South-east Asian tigers are now shattered.

It is therefore essential that while offering incentives and facilities to MNCs and TNCs and entering into contracts with them in respect of particular industries, contractual terms are carefully formulated and appropriate regulatory provisions are put in place and applied strictly, keeping in sharp focus the interests of the country.

Studies have shown that country after country of the

drawal of funds. Preoccupied with being 'tigers', these countries failed to equip themselves with strong banking institutions and good corporate governance under effective regulatory systems.

There is a lot to learn from the East and South-east Asian experiences — from the way these countries achieved phenomenal economic growth over the past two decades or more and the reasons behind their present currency crisis and economic turmoil.

Today's swadeshi is a demand by privileged sections of Indian capital for protection against risk-taking. Even Mr George Fernandes has joined the bandwagon by demanding a soft drinks made by MNCs.

implemented.

One must therefore ask which globalisation it is that a country is pursuing? Who globalises or integrates with whom? Who gains, who loses? What are the underlying strengths and weaknesses of a globalising developing country to face developments such as those encountered by the East and South-east Asian countries.

The pathway to an integration into the global system for a developing country, defined by the currently ruling paradigm of economic reforms, contains both opportunities and dangers. In order for Bangladesh to make the most of the opportunities and to put in place necessary safeguards against the dangers, it is imperative that the reform process in Bangladesh is reshaped by

building into it the realities on the ground (high levels of poverty and unemployment, severe environmental degradation, low level of human capability development; agriculture and potential industries requiring support for progress, and in cases even for survival; etc).

Also, if globalisation were to work for the developing countries, upon which it is enjoined on the argument that it is to their benefit, the advanced countries should be more forthcoming than hitherto to work towards establishing an equitable world system.

Otherwise, i.e. under the business-as-usual scenario in terms of the currently ruling paradigm, the future of the global order cannot but be a mirror image of the present, only worse. The scenario, depicting as it does increasing inequity and contradictions between developed countries on the one hand and developing countries on the other, with the latter at the wrong end, cannot be morally and ethically justified.

The message is loud and clear in both global and national contexts — which is to mend ways or face the inevitable consequences alluded to above.



Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

companies such that the Government of Bangladesh would buy the share of gas allocated to a company at international prices to be paid in foreign currency (US dollars) are subject to serious question from the point of view of Bangladesh's interests.

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VHP Runs Amok

Sangh Parivar: The Crisis Within

by Praful Bidwai

Any dispassionate assessment of the BJP's record must acknowledge failures and flaws on all fronts: law and order; relations with the states; the economy; education and culture; Jammu and Kashmir; investigation into corruption; infringement of minority rights; and nuclearisation, which has vitiated our security environment.

VHP president Ashok Singhal was rightly and roundly condemned when he fanatically called the award of the Nobel to Prof Amartya Sen a "Christian conspiracy". This is the ranting of a lunatic. It represents the mindset of sections of the sangh parivar which genuinely believe that people like Prof Sen and Mother Theresa have no loyalty to India because they are not practising Hindus.

There is a second aspect to Mr Singhal's statement. That is his fear that Prof Sen's advocacy of universal access to education and healthcare will lead to India being "flushed with foreign funds for their ultimate use for religious conversion." This logic is staggering. What Mr Singhal is saying is that Christian missionaries and foreign funds alone can generate universalisation of education — so profound is Hindutva's commitment to educating this "Hindu" nation.

Mr Singhal also thinks it is dangerous to educate the masses. They will aspire to become full human beings in their own right; they might even embrace modernist-liberal views. This idea too enjoys some currency among sections

of the elite — which is one reason for our shamefully meagre commitment to education. India is set to become, according to UNICEF, the world's most illiterate country 20 years from now. So what Mr Singhal is vocalising is the interest that some advocates of Hindutva have in perpetuating illiteracy, poverty, low wages and subjugation. Mr Singhal's statements represent a heightening of the venomous character of Hindu-communal propaganda.

This is part of a larger phenomenon: frustration and deep divisions within the sangh parivar, especially between the RSS and the BJP. Evidence for this comes from the RSS's Nagpur chintan baithak — the first such meeting in 11 years — which reprimanded the BJP for jettisoning swadeshi, and warned it of loss of RSS support. Mr K.C. Sudarshan, formally RSS Number Three, but effectively perhaps its

most important leader, did not stop there. He named the Insurance Regulatory Authority and Patents Bills as among the causes of the RSS's unhappiness with the BJP. The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, as if on cue, launched a blitzkrieg promoting certain domestic business groups — e.g. the manufacturer of a particularly toxic brand of detergent — through price half-page newspaper advertisements. The SJM next month Swadeshi Mela next month. True to type, it has roped in the Khadi & Village Industries Commission.

This represents serious misuse of the official machinery to partisan political ends. Swadeshi is strongly opposed not just to multinational capital and globalisation — against which it is perfectly legitimate to have reservations — but to competition and efficiency. It represents not the cause of autonomy and self-reliance, but servility to capital. Swadeshi

favours protection for inefficient industries, wants retrograde labour practices, and practises tax evasion in the name of small-scale industry promotion. Gandhi's swadeshi was anti-imperialist. He wanted to protect poor workers and artisans.

Today's swadeshi is a demand by privileged sections of Indian capital for protection against risk-taking. Even Mr George Fernandes has joined the bandwagon by demanding a soft drinks made by MNCs. The swadeshi lobby is not about to give up. Or else, the sangh's student wing would not have adopted an explicitly swadeshi platform. One should then expect more, not less, friction between the RSS-SJM-ABVP and economic "liberalisers" in the government. However, the parivar's tensions are by no means confined to economic issues.

The BJP is itself riven with deep divisions — between Mr L.K. Advani and Mr Vajpayee; between Mr Murli Manohar Joshi and Ms Uma Bharati; between warring factions in every state, especially U.P.; be-

tween those who oppose the CTBT, and the "pragmatists" who want to sign it, regardless of merit. Such differences have grown to gigantic proportions because the BJP is shrinking. When the party was growing, they could be accommodated. Now they can't. Any dispassionate assessment of the BJP's record must acknowledge failures and flaws on all fronts: law and order; relations with the states; the economy; education and culture; Jammu and Kashmir; investigation into corruption; infringement of minority rights; and nuclearisation, which has vitiated our security environment. The RSS is frustrated at the damage this is causing to the parivar's image. After all, this is the first time that the BJP is wielding power at the Centre (barring the inglorious 13 days in 1996). Getting discredited now could gravely affect its electoral performance.

The latest India Today poll forecasts that the BJP plus allies will only win 130 seats (down from 252) in an early election, while the Congress would win 305. BJP rule has

been largely purposeless as far as the RSS is concerned except for aggressive Hindutva in education, exercise of the nuclear option, and placing of loyalists in key positions. The RSS is not happy with the Cabinet induction of Messrs Jaswant Singh and Pramod Mahajan, whose appointment it had vetoed in March. An angry RSS is therefore putting up the VHP to create trouble for the BJP by launching anti-minority programmes. The RSS may not pose an immediate threat to the Vajpayee government. It can, theoretically, support another party, as it did (the Congress) in 1984. But today, it has few options. The Congress is on the upswing. Its orientation inhibits it from embracing soft-Hindutva.

So the likely outcome of the parivar tussle is a stalemate, with the BJP in disarray. This presents an ideal opportunity for the Congress to differentiate itself sharply from the BJP. For instance, it could have mobilised large numbers in Gujarat in defence of the Christians. It could have outlined a strongly pro-poor and anti-privatisation economic policy.

However, it did little. The Congress has moved towards secularism. But it still remains wedded to neo-liberal economics. This must change if it is to emerge as a credible, serious, alternative to the BJP.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Power generation policy switch

Sir, Under pressure from the UN and international aid agencies the negatively famous PDB, the electrical power arm of the state, is switching its stance and are now canvassing for small localised power generating stations (press report), to introduce decentralisation of the existing power generation system, to take the strain off the inadequate and poor transmission network. Why the idea is a decade or two late? The local power loops were proposed in the press from time to time by different individuals or groups, but the official response was zero.

There is another side of the coin, the hidden side. WB and other vesting agencies are withholding funding of projects through PDB as its systems loss too high, and the necessary clean-up reforms are being delayed time and again on flimsy pretexts. The new partners would be the private sector, already allowed restricted entry into the power generation field, after much haggling and delays, and non-transparent deals. To make hay, locate where the sun shines. The anticipatory approach is good, if it is in public interest.

The change of stance by PDB for the concept 'small is beautiful' is to be studied carefully, for vested implications. The concept is not being questioned, but the alliance of PDB in the future projects with other working partners. Bangladesh is overflooded with vested interests in every nook and corner, and the public exchequer is carrying the burden.

Personnel and structural overhauling are badly required in several departments of the government who are not delivering the services at acceptable efficiency, where vested groups have been nesting for years. Such pockets of negative influence could not be uprooted by successive regimes.

Together with structural reforms, a wholesale transfer of personnel might bring about some changes in outlook and output, as taking time to grow new bad roots. One cannot clap with one hand. The government may not do business, but offer facilities — a mantra we have been hearing for some time.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

"A paradox indeed"

Sir, I would like to thank Mr Abu Imran for his letter under the above caption published on 20.12.98. He mentioned some contrasting news published in the print media. For example policemen taking bribe. Our rather selfish yet respected MPs of all parties being in consensus as regards enhancing the salary of the Hon'ble President and Monwara Begum's 'polythene blanket' to protect her from the cold, etc.

Mr Imran rightly commented: "The question now is that when the elected lawmakers have appreciated a just and reasonable measure, what effective measures have they taken to protect the long overdue interest and right of the helpless Anwara and many

such Anwara's? If not, then do they think that Anwara's problem is outside their scope of consideration? If so, do we have to take that the representatives are elected by the people but not to serve the people?"

We sadly find no answer to these pertinent questions from our MPs. That is why we are subjected to "Elected people's responsibility ceases as soon as the poor persons have been coaxed into casting their votes."

Mr Imran suggested the remedy to this paradox that we are to elect the right kind of people with whom the interests of all are supposed to be served equally. But again question arises how can we be able to elect good politicians? The money, muscles and arms have played significant roles even in the fair elections of 1991 and 1996!

M A S Molla Member, BAAS, Dhaka

Introduce PIs

Sir, We should promote further the private investigation system like that of private security business now being found in our country. Like western countries private investigation system may be organised to help assist the police force to detect the crimes and the criminals. With the dog squad in our police force, private investigation system would be very helpful to make the society crime-free.

As the media and the information technology are now in progress, it would be good for us to innovate private investigation bureau in Bangladesh to assist our police force to get positive results for maintenance of law and order in the country.

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OPINION

1998: The Year That Was

A Husnain

Bangladesh, positive: remained where it was, therefore stable in some far-fetched way. It is a difficult job with strings of liabilities and negative situations piling up on this poor country with rich imagination, and expectation beyond the confines of changing budgets. The 'stability' is polarised. Neutrality is short supply worldwide.

In Dhaka, political polarisation was taking place by the end of the year, for obvious reasons, because things were not working the way it should. Former President Ershad is back on the active list, backing the Opposition. His negative qualities are many (as a political leader), but he has some exclusive assets which strangely seem to work with the Bengalee psyche, when needed, either way. He is the most experienced politician in the country, having managed the ebullient Bengalees for nine long years through a regime at once 'autocratic' or otherwise. Those who 'dismiss' him do so at some stage of national peril, because he is not alone, remembering that he 'helped' thousands of small VIPs during his regime, who would also like to make their presence felt (it is not politics, it is human nature).

The party is power achieved its major goal, namely, the legal proceedings of the prosecution of the assassins of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The political mileage out of these court judgments have to be watched, carefully.

The main opposition party is hartal-oriented (the world hartal is becoming an English word, patronised by 120 million). This is supposed to be the only way for the street to get actively involved in a passive manner. Some pundits predict that we are seeing the last phase of hartals as a politi-

cal weapon, and this tool will be phased out during the next century, as political wisdom dawns on the populace.

There are reasons for this type of prediction. People like to improve their lot doing business. The country was on the point of taking off economically in the mid-'90s (ignoring the speed of the transformation), but perhaps heavenly forces decreed otherwise, as the masses and the leaders were not clean enough in a disciplined way. The infra-structure cannot come before the structure, as some higher ups had imagined. More than once we have faced this cart-before-the-horse situation. It is for the experts to analyse this syndrome.

The age of changes has started, and will speed up during the initial decades of 1999 (equivalent to number one), on the global count. International diplomacy has acquired a new tool by the nickname of Monica missile. The dubious credit goes to the current president of the United States of America. The Iraqis are experiencing showers from the heavens during the holy month of Ramadan, and the other Muslim brethren are counting the beads.

The world of Islam is passing through a critical phase of looking at ways of uniting and presenting one solid front. It is for survival, not for show. The problems in the Islamic countries are similar to that in other third world countries; or coming closer, what the DCC (Dhaka City Corp) is faced with: too much garbage awaiting quick disposal. Unfortunately, new and high technology has not focused on the garbage problem, political, social, municipal, surplus weapons of war, and so forth.

Regional cohesion is drifting apart in practically all regions of the world. In South Asia, the two big neighbours have sharpened their big common wound (Kashmir), and fabricated solutions (nuclear) bigger than the problem (the right to self-determination, as could be gathered after 50 years of debate). The human mind is a peculiar product or entity; cannot come up with the right solution at the right time.

This is easily confirmed by the cycles in the global and regional financial markets. The tides of recession are changing, and will never come up to the previous comfortable marks. Time and tide wait for none, and this universal truth has to be accepted, the earlier the better for reconstruction. The new emerging countries are passing through the birth pangs, and the old and mighty are desperately seeking the status quo ante. The bitter backlashes have to be faced.

It looks like that the 21st century is for Asia; and accumulated surplus prosperity is shifting from the West to the East, like it or not. Perhaps the 22nd century is for Africa. The CIS region, one of the cradles of civilisation is stirring after centuries of slumber; while Hebron, the oldest city in the world, is taking hard knocks, perhaps unnecessarily. Some of the old values of life are surfacing again. The twins (of the EW) have to meet, for peaceful coexistence.

The greatest human motivation is the struggle for survival. The next powerful incentive is to try to be a bit comfortable. The earlier the coming changes are accepted, the more is the contribution towards the establishment of more peaceful conditions for coexistence. The ultimate target is empathy, not sympathy.