

Housing for the Less Moneyed

Finally it seems the government has hit upon a housing plan that sounds sensible with its involvement of foreign private capital and a thrust upon the requirement of the limited income groups.

Public sector housing in our country has traditionally been confined to providing roofs over the heads of employees belonging to government, autonomous and semi-autonomous organisations. Operating on shoe-string budgets governments could hardly afford building complexes for any segment of the private citizenry. Through the HBFC and NCBs house-building loans were, of course, given to private citizens on behalf of the government. But these could only cater to the needs of the well-to-do with a profit motive, especially in the area of multi-storied housing projects. Then came swarms of real estate builders most of whom operated on a highly commercial concoction of land procured from the owner by parting a certain number of flats of the proposed high-rise to him or her, personal equity pool and borrowing from the bank. Their housing projects and development schemes ancillary thereto have all been the handmaiden of the elite, by the elite and for the elite. The low and limited income groups have completely been ignored so far in our housing plans and visions.

Therefore, it comes as a breath of fresh air that the government has decided to allow foreign investors to construct housing complexes for the low and middle income brackets on the outskirts of the city. There can be entirely foreign capital-based straightforward housing enclaves like the 30,000-flat construction project Malaysia has offered to build on joint ventures with our Housing Directorate and, better still, with our private sector in an orchestrated bid to provide modern housing to the average urban or suburban dweller. This will connect well with the vision for a developmental dispersal we keep to take the loads off the metropolitan areas.

The Works Ministry and RAJUK need to get focused on the foreign investment-driven massive housing project, something that Malaysia, China, and nearer home Sri Lanka and Thailand have already tried out with significant success in alleviating their urban housing problems.

We need to sound warnings in five areas in order that benefit can be optimised from such projects: One, because the flats will be low-cost they must not be substandard; two, the flat-related ownership and transfer rules must be intelligible and unambiguous; three, there has to be proper management and maintenance of structures that will have some common facilities; four, a code for living in flats will be welcome in view of the ad hocism that has always characterised it. Last but not the least, such housing complexes need to be connected with the broader facilities of marketing, transport, education, et al.

Revamp Security at ZIA

Suspension of some Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) officials and employees following the death of a stowaway in the wheel carriage of a British Airways aircraft bears, in our view, a positive message — the people at the helm are concerned over the recurrent security leakage at ZIA. We appreciate the CAAB move and hope that their efforts towards plugging security leakage at the airport will not end here. In our country, it often happens that, inquiries lose way once the hue and cry upon revelation of gross irregularities die down. As the citizen loses interest and flow of newspaper reports comes down to a trickle, the inquisitors, it seems, find a pretext not to progress further. The end result is, more often than not, a premature end of the affair. The flaw remains only to surface with the loss of one life or two. It must stop before such indifference leads to deaths of hundreds on an aircraft. The authorities should weigh the report and the suggestions set forth by the probe committee into Saturday's death of a young man in the wheel carriage, and take measures accordingly.

There have been allegations of an organised group within the airport officialdom abetting in such breaches of security. Unemployed and unfortunate people like Junaid or Mahbub who died in Jeddah in a similar fashion are talked into it with the lure of a secured and solvent future overseas. Desperate and thus gullible, they take the risk. These allegations should not be brushed aside, no matter how ludicrous they may sound to some people. Until and unless the authorities eliminate such possibilities, the matter would some day lead to a disaster. We hope the authorities realise this more than anybody else and would do everything in their power to stave off another mishap like that.

Voter ID Card

The Secretary of the Election Commission has made a very important announcement at a workshop of the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB). According to him the EC will supply identity cards to each of the roughly 57 million voters of the country by June this year. This is great news for the voters of the country and also for the political parties. The future of this important project lay in doubt so many times that people almost lost hope of getting the ID Cards at all. The plans for printing and supplying ID Cards were shelved for lack of funds and logistic support that were needed to launch and complete such a gigantic task successfully. We compliment the Election Commission for going ahead with the project despite impediments. But what we do not understand is the announcement of such a big news from a workshop as exclusive as that of the PIB. The EC secretary said there could be 14 uses of this card other than voting but did not elaborate. Basically we would request the EC to take the people into confidence by briefing the Press elaborately on the ID card project so that its implementation which depends on public cooperation can receive a fillip. They can make judicious use of the electronic media to this effect.

ID cards can be a real safeguard against spurious and false voting. It can also minimise the chances of 'polls rigging' — a complaint which is so commonly heard whenever a candidate or a party loses an election. A big question can also be raised as to the distribution of so many cards in the next six months. Here also a clear announcement by the CEC will be highly appreciated.

Nepal and Bangladesh A Decade of Parliamentary Democracy

ANepal style split seems to have taken place within the Jatiya Party, as it happened within the pro-panchayat Rashtriya Panchayat Party of Nepal, Ershad and Anwar Husain Manju emerging as the Surya Bahadur Thapa and Lok Bahadur Chand of Bangladesh; who in which role being of the least importance!

EVER since the 1994 general elections in Nepal, the country's politics has hardly seen a dull moment. The 205-member House of Representatives, as the Lower House of the Parliament is called, has produced six coalition governments in four years, in varying permutations and combinations of political parties and personalities. The latest in this game of political musical chairs is the government formed by Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress, in coalition with the United Marxist-Leninist Party. Prime Minister Koirala had also headed the preceding government, in coalition with the other Communist faction in the parliament, that calls itself merely the Marxist-Leninist Party (not United). He had to resign when that communist faction withdrew its support and he consequently lost his majority in the parliament. However, it did not need the Prime Minister too much of time and effort to enlist the support of the eager and ready present coalition partners. Ideological differences, if any, between these two communist factions are not certainly visible to the naked political eyes! The name of the game is to be in power.

Though geographically Nepal and Bangladesh possess very different physical features, pervasive poverty in both the countries present many common problems. More than half the population in both the countries live below the poverty line. The annual per capita income in Nepal and Bangladesh is 225 US dollars and 283 US dollars, the percentage of literacy 27 per cent and 38 per cent and average life expectancy 57 years and 58 years, respectively. In the list of developing countries, Nepal and Bangladesh occupy positions very near the bottom.

There is a commonality between the two countries in political developments as well. Both the countries got rid of autocratic regimes in the beginning of this decade to set up parliamentary form of governments. General elections took place in both the countries in 1991. A very large number of political parties participated in the election with only a few succeeding in gaining an entry into their respective parliaments. Since then, however, politics in the two countries has not quite evolved in an identical manner.

Thanks to the 30 reserved women's seats in our parliament, the BNP in 1991 and the Awami League in 1996 were able to achieve absolute majority. Basically, they have taken their turn in running the government in a manner, in which the role of the parliament has been kept marginal. As a result, democratic practices and institutions have not developed. It is this more than anything else that has encouraged the culture of hartial and violence in our polity.

Nepal's experience with parliamentary democracy has been somewhat different. In 1991 elections in that country, the Nepal Congress got an absolute majority in the 205-seat parliament, by capturing 113 seats. The party had played a leading role in bringing down the Panchayat Raj and the people had high hopes on that party. But they were soon to be disappointed. Soon after the formation of the government the three powerful leaders of the

party, Ganesh Mansingh, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and the Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, fell out with each other, for reasons more personal than political. The infighting within the party took such a bad turn that in 1994, the Vote of Thanks to the King's speech in the Parliament was defeated, as 36 members of the ruling Congress party abstained from the voting. As a result, the Prime Minister resigned and on his advice, the King dissolved the Parliament. The opposition went to the Court challenging the royal decision. The Court however turned down the appeal.

Elections were then held in 1994 and this time no party succeeded in attaining an overall majority. In fact, the outgoing party in power, the Congress party, with its 89 seats came second to the Communist party, which mustered 91 seats. The Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), the protagonists of the Panchayat Raj (Jatiya party of Nepal) was in the fortunate position of holding the balance of power with 20 seats — a situation it subsequently exploited to the hilt. Out of the remaining five seats, three were held by the supposedly pro-Indian Goodwill Party and the other two went to Independents, who proved themselves ever ready to join any party trying to form the government!

In other words the 1994 elections threw up a coalition situation; as a result of which Nepal has had six governments in the last four years. In this political free for all, all the parties have participated at one time or the other. And in the process two parties viz. the Communist party and the RPP have got bifurcated, both more or less down the middle. Nepal's constitution allows the bifurcation of a party provided 40 per cent parliamentary members of a party so wish. Those who have adorned the prime ministerial chair in the last four years are, Manmohan Adhikari of the undivided Communist party, Sherbadra Deuba and Girija Prasad Koirala of the Congress (the latter, altogether three times. In fact the former confided to me with refreshing candour, last March in Kathmandu, that being only 52 years of age, he had more time than the 72-year-old Koirala and could therefore afford to be patient!). Suryabhadur Thapa and Lokbahadur Chand, the two leaders of the two factions of the RPP. A comparable situation in the Bangladesh scenario would be like both Ershad and Anwar Hussain Manju becoming prime minister, in their turn, with the Jatiya Party holding the balance of power between AL and the BNP. Credit be to the bargaining power of Chand and Thapa that all the 20 MP's were able to occupy ministerial chairs at one time or another! In fact, a vast majority in the 205-seat parliament have succeeded in their effort in gathering ministerial experience and the parliament still has some life left, with the elections expected in the spring. So may be, good luck to the rest of the MP's!

In Nepal, frequent changes of government have led to an increase in corruption in the

administration that is clearly hurting the socioeconomic progress of the country. A mood of disenchantment and pessimism prevails among the people. That may have contributed to the escalating guerrilla activities in the countryside. This is causing some concern to the authorities.

However the coalition situation in the parliament has some positive aspects as well. As the political drama keeps on unfolding, with the parliament being the amphitheatre, apart from the guerrilla activities in

the countryside, there is not much political violence in the streets. Governments have changed and new coalitions have been forged in gay abandon, but these have been peacefully done, following the constitutional rules of the game. This has lent some maturity to the political behaviour pattern. Amidst all the chaos and confusion of politics, democracy has survived and there has not been any constitutional crisis. And this is something to be noted about a country that has had five constitutions in the last fifty years, the one of 1991 being the last and the first truly democratic one. Then, the judiciary has performed a constructive role in certain difficult and delicate situations and has earned popular confidence. Lastly, the Nepalese monarch has played a valuable role staying clear of politics and has, in times of crises and uncertainties, performed his constitutional duties with diligence and imagination. This has made King Birendra personally popular and has enhanced the prestige of the constitutional monarchy as a stabilizing institution.

In Bangladesh governments have remained stable, since 1991, in the parliamentary sense, in as much as there has not been any change of government in between the elections. It is mainly because of the 30 reserved women's seats in the parliament. In the winner take all system of voting, they are indirectly elected by the members of the parliament. As a result, to start with, the largest party in the parliament has a comparative advantage over the other parties. By trading with a smaller party, some of the women's seats that the party did not actually need for its parliamentary majority, the BNP in 1991 and the AL in 1996, were able to establish comfortable majority in the parliament. The BNP did it in 1991, with the Jamaat, with giving away to two women's seats, and likewise, the AL followed in 1996, by surrendering three seats to the Jatiya Party. Another feature of this system is that having elected the women MPs, the large party gathers absolute majority and does not

need of 11 more seats for an overall majority, before the election of the 30 women MPs. With the help of the Jamaat, which then held 18 seats in the parliament, it secured that majority and was thus able to elect its own nominees as women MPs. However, it gave 2 of those seats to the Jamaat in the process, against the ruling AL. In the process a Nepal style split seems to have taken place within the Jatiya Party, as it happened within the pro-panchayat Rashtriya Panchayat Party of Nepal, Ershad and Anwar Hussain Manju emerging as the Surya Bahadur Thapa and Lok Bahadur Chand of Bangladesh; who in which role being of the least importance!

Therefore, but for the 30 reserved women's seats, we would not have been spared a coalition situation both in the 1991 and the current 1996 parliament, as neither the BNP nor the AL had an overall majority

in our constitution there is of course a provision against MPs' changing party loyalties. Articles 70(1) of our constitution says, "a person elected as a

member of parliament at an election at which he was nominated as a candidate by a political party, shall vacate his seat if he resigns from that party or votes in parliament against that party." We have, however, in the present AL-led government, Jatiya Party and BNP members, against the wishes of their respective parties. In the Parliament, the Speaker has accepted the situation by interpreting the above quoted provision of the constitution literally, maintaining that the minister concerned (Manju of JP and the two junior ministers of the BNP) have neither resigned from their respective parties nor have they voted against those in the parliament. However, the opinion of the Chief Election Commissioner was not sought in the matter. The question was referred to the High Court, which has opined that the decision of the Chief Election Commissioner should have been sought. An appeal by the government against this opinion is now pending with the Appellate Division.

The recent 'to be or not to be' Khaleq situation has indeed dramatically revealed that the culture of changing parties has firm roots in our politics, although at times we may attempt to do so in an inimitable local style, without any apparent results. However, with all our sympathies for poor Mr. Khaleq's predicament, one has to point out that the list of turncoat politicians, who have been successful in the past, of achieving ministerial positions and above, by changing party colours, is fairly long and impressive. Future parliaments may indeed call for the formation of coalition governments.

It is therefore imperative that we are clear in our interpretation of the constitutional provision against changing parties or party loyalties, by the members of the parliament. Otherwise this could clearly be a source of recurring political uncertainties.

OPINION

Dhaka-Calcutta Bus Route: Why is BNP So Perturbed?

A H Jaffar Ullah writes from New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

The government of Sheikh Hasina had decided to give its blessings to open a direct bus service from Dhaka to Calcutta some time this year. However, true to the nature of being the main opposition party, the BNP has recently showered its misgivings to this undertaking. So far, Khaleda Zia has given some economic reasons whose genuineness remains to be elucidated by the economists.

The main opposition party of Bangladesh literally uses the word 'opposition' to oppose everything the present administration of Bangladesh proposes for the nation. In the US and elsewhere in the developed nations the opposition party plays a very important role in the legislative body to shape agenda and bills that come in the floor for discussion. But that mode of operation has no place in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, the opposition politicians love to hit the street in a hurry, whenever they agree to disagree with the ruling party. I would be curious to know how many days the opposition politicians of Bangladesh had attended the national assembly. It may very well be a quotable statistic as to the number of days the BNP parliamentary members had gone to the street to show their resentment versus the days they remained confined to the four walls of Sangshad Bhavan. Like the little school children, who are dying to get outside the classroom when the final bell rings, the opposition politicians of Bangladesh also want to be in the street. They forgot one thing — that their constituency had elected them to attend the legislative session so that they may vote on important issues, and carry out important parliamentary functions.

Sometimes I wonder whether these elected politicians understand the job description of a parliamentary member. Wouldn't it be nice to put all the MPs to a school where the erudite professor of governmental studies may explain to them in detail the functions they are supposed to carry out as a member of an elite body. They should be quizzed thoroughly before a certificate of completion is to be awarded to them. Without the

certification, they will not be permitted to attend the inaugural ceremony let alone attend the real session.

Getting back to the main topic, let me ask this blunt question — why is Begum Khaleda Zia so incensed by the prospect of a direct bus line from Dhaka to Calcutta? Is it really a bad idea to open direct bus line from Dhaka to Calcutta? She may like the idea of being in isolation. But should Bangladesh go into some kind of self-imposed isolation? How about shutting down all the air links to outside world? No air service to Calcutta, New Delhi, London, Persian Gulf States, Tokyo, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, or any other destination in the globe! Would she be happy?

I think if Khaleda Zia and her lieutenants believe in isolation then we should seriously debate the issue, but just to say no bus service to Calcutta is a preposterous suggestion. She is really worried about the sari industries of Bangladesh. Her veiled threat focused on one thing — the consumer will go to Calcutta by busloads and bring back too much consumer products, mostly saris, and would cripple Bangladesh's vital industries. Is there any substance in it?

Western Bangladesh has long borders with West Bengal running north to south. Does she know how many saris are crossing borders everyday? The cross-border trade had been going on for the last fifty years right under the watchful eyes of our border patrol. Did she ever complain about it? What did she do to stop that while she was the Prime Minister for five long years?

Besides, it is not a difficult task to restrict inflow of Indian merchandise by bus if the BNP policy-makers should understand this very succinctly. We now live in a world where the motto is — sink or swim. Bangladesh has to learn how to swim in the free trade market, otherwise she will sink down very fast. Our textile industry has to improve the quality of their output; otherwise, saris and other fabric materials will enter Bangladesh through legitimate or hidden routes. By shutting down the bus route between Dhaka and Calcutta, we cannot improve the quality of Bangladesh's textile materials.

On the cultural front all I have to say that Bombay's movie industry and satellite TV channels had already done an irreparable damage to the cultural milieu of Bangladesh. Opening the bus route between Dhaka and Calcutta cannot make the matter worse.

All in all, Begum Zia had

found an imaginary evil in the proposed bus route between Dhaka and Calcutta. In keeping up with her past tradition, she is now opposing this benign venture too. Too often, she had cried 'wolf.' (Remember? CHT treaty was a bad thing for the country!) if she continues crying 'wolf,' then soon no one would listen to her pleas.

Let me now enumerate the other reasons why Begum Khaleda Zia and her party are opposed to this idea of direct bus route from Dhaka to Calcutta. Are they afraid of import-

"The Breach of Our Discontent"

Abu Imran

The article on the captioned subject (DS, 27.12.98) is in reference. The writer deserves thanks for covering the unfortunate and condemnable recent US-UK attack on helpless Iraq on imaginary excuses.

It is funny that US and UK had attacked Iraq because the former possesses Iraq as its prototype of western way of life and forgives her husband. Even if Iraq has the weapons, why US-UK should be bothered? Are they the police-nations of the world? If they think so, then why don't they punish other nations as well who have the same weapons?

They are not doing so because they are partisan in attitude and follow double-standardism. And unfortunately the UN, the largest world body, has been failing in its duty to protect the global interest and as such its status has become sort of a toothless tiger as observed by the writer.

one billion Muslims the world over — four billion people.

So there is little scope for him to escape punishment both here and hereafter. Not only the above but justice demands that US-UK-UN should make good the loss in terms of observation made by the writer.

Besides, the unilateral US-UK action against Iraq has opened a good scope for other UN member countries to rally round Russia to form a counter balancing force like the one that existed prior to disintegration of the USSR and emergence of the CIS.

This time, the Muslim world hopefully will be stronger because of the changed global situation and an increased number of Muslim countries, cessation of inter-, intra-hostility etc. And the resultant effect, it is foreseen, would be a weaker US-UK alliance and ultimately they will lose.

To the Editor...

They should be stopped!

Sir, I planned for shopping for the coming Eid-ul-Fitr and went to the market on Friday last.

After crossing the Science Laboratory my car could not go. I did not mind, as I knew that people would be there for their Eid shopping. I told my driver to park the car at a safe place where I can find him after shopping. I did not have too much time for shopping. So I planned for 3 hours but failed to complete after spending 6 hours. I could have been finished within my expectations, but the reason I failed is the crowd!

I do not mind if there is crowd because I am not the only person to go for shopping. Women are not crowd for women. I know it sounds strange. Let me clear it. Being a woman I can walk along with another woman without any hesitation, but what about the men who go to the market to harass the ladies by pushing them and touching their bodies?

I have come to the conclusion that those persons had nothing to do in the market but pushing the ladies. Especially in the markets for sari. Men have nothing to do with sari.

I believe some men want to accompany their wives or some may buy it on their own to surprise their wives but what about the others? They go to the market to tease and harass the ladies by being harassed or there may be a team to monitor the activities of those persons and immediately hand them over to police.

Don't you think they should be stopped? If no-one stops them, they will start abusing girls sexually in public. During