

Dialogue Now

Even before the dust over the municipal polls has settled, there is renewed unease over the upcoming elections to the Upazila Parishads (UZ). According to reports, the next round of political manoeuvrings are likely to take place in May when the UZs go to polls for the first time since they were abolished in 1991. Current indications suggest that opposition parties, which fared pretty badly in their ill-advised attempt to disrupt the municipal polls, may continue in the agitational mode. Till date, they have remained rigid in their position that, unless the Chief Election Commissioner resigned and results of municipal polls were annulled, they would boycott elections to city corporations and the UZs. The government, on the other hand, is yet to take any initiative to defuse the tension.

Politics appears to be stuck in a no-man's-land, where neither the government nor the opposition can claim to have a decisive edge over the other. The municipal polls experience has shown that the opposition cannot hope to make any headway through its current tactics of poll boycott and haras. On the other hand, the government's rigid stance on dialogue has left possibilities of further strife wide open. Under such circumstances, any opposition decision to boycott and resist elections to the UZs would be self-defeating. But a government refusal to engage the opposition in a dialogue would run counter to its own interests. The question now is, how to persuade the opposition to abandon its current tactics and take full part in the electoral process.

This paper believes that the government bears the prime responsibility to bring the opposition back into the fold. The opposition is still licking its wounds after the hartal debacle of Feb 23-25, but the government needs to be pragmatic rather than euphoric. The last thing the government — and the country — needs to see is an opposition pushed against the wall. Rather than push them into a corner, the government needs to open an avenue through which the opposition can return to normal, electoral politics without appearing to do a volte-face. The ruling party now needs to follow up its success with conciliatory overtures to the opposition, and engage in a meaningful dialogue with an open agenda. The opposition would also be well-advised to respond to such overtures without setting any preconditions. The country badly needs a sustained period of political peace and social harmony.

The Nigerian Watershed

Saturday's landmark presidential election in Nigeria bared to round off the return of democracy in a country emasculated by 15-year military rule has all but put retired General Olusegun Obasanjo in power. Latest counting of ballots showed that the former military ruler who quit power 20 years ago has captured 60 per cent of the popular vote and is set to stage a civilian comeback now. His rival, former finance minister Olu Falae, has accused the Obasanjo camp of rigging the vote and vowed to contest the poll result. Some controversy, though not on a very strident note, also rages over his being a liveried man who is stepping into civilian shoes.

As far as the fairness of the presidential election goes, independent poll watchers, including former US president Jimmy Carter have had little reason to complain about the proceedings. As a matter of fact, the general impression is that: (a) stray incidents of vote manipulation having been attributed to both sides they actually tended to cancel each other out; and (b) such 'irregularities' were of a nature that could not have affected the overall results. One has to wait and see how Falae converts his threat of 'contesting the electoral outcome' into an action but his discordant note could be played on by interested quarters in the military at a future date. For, Nigeria is a country where the long legacy of military rule has been traditionally compounded by ethno-centric mistrust between regions.

In all fairness to Obasanjo's reincarnation under a civilian mantle it must be said that democracy with an elected retired general at the helm is better than no democracy at all. Moreover, with his antecedents of a former general and military ruler he perhaps stands a better chance than anyone to stave off military take-over.

Nigerians would do well to remember that the applecart of democracy's restoration in their country was upset at least twice in a shattering manner: A democratically elected government was ousted in a military coup in 1983 and this was followed by the 1993 debacle in which opposition leader Moshood Abiola's convincing electoral victory was nullified. The world would greatly appreciate if this country of great natural potential is firmly set on a democratic path.

Lead-free Fuel

The decision of the government to import lead-free petroleum from July 1, though belated, is certainly praiseworthy. We have written for the umpteenth time against the dangers of leaded petrol and the health hazards posed by the two-stroke three-wheelers all over the country which uses it plentifully. But we are yet to see a comprehensive policy of the government to deal with the offenders firmly and ensure import, supply and use of petroleum products devoid of poisonous properties. We have heard a chorus of disapproval from various organisations and government departments publicising their pious wishes against pollutions by motor fuel but the main issue of belling the cat had somehow drowned in the cacophony. Experts had consistently maintained that a negligible amount (around 50 paisa per litre) will be required to make the petrol lead-free while others had underscored the need for recommissioning of the Eastern Refinery unit that could produce poison free fuel for motorised vehicles.

With these options available to the authorities for rendering the environment free of noxious gases why do we need so much time to go for these? Another pending issue before the government relates to banning the import of two-stroke engine. Now they are only discouraging import of such killer machines by raising the duty and taxes. We suggest that a definite time-table be set and followed stringently by the authorities concerned to rid the country of these contraptions. The decision to make catalytic converters mandatory for buses, trucks and other vehicles' will be as good as its implementation.

A Tall Order, but a Solid Progress is Necessary

A lot can be accomplished even within the existing environment. What is important is to identify the existing opportunities and scope and take advantage of those in moving forward with the needed action in each particular case. But that ideal should be kept in sharp focus and the construction of an appropriate pathway to that end must be the central guiding principle of the national agenda.

policy directions, there must be adequate policy and programme flexibility so that the heterogeneous aspects of different categories and enterprise types can be given due attention.

Under the prevailing circumstances, small enterprises are, by and large, relatively more relevant and important in Bangladesh, but medium enterprises also have an important role to play. It is perhaps in order to make it clear that enterprises we are talking of include not only manufacturing units but also trade, finance, and other types of businesses and services. A small enterprise is one that employs fewer than 50 workers; the category excludes cottage units which cover household-based units operated mainly with family labour. A medium enterprise is one that employs between 50 and 99 workers, while a large enterprise is defined to have 100 or more workers. An enterprise having fewer than 50 workers but a capital intensity higher than the existing medium enterprise average but lower than the large enterprise average will be considered a medium enterprise, while an enterprise having fewer than 100 workers but a capital intensity higher than the existing large enterprise average will be considered a large enterprise. [These definitions are according to the New Industrial Policy expected to be in place soon].

The important role that small enterprises can play in the economy of Bangladesh has been officially recognised in successive plan documents and relevant policy pronouncements up to the present time, and not only since Liberation but in fact since the early 1950s (i.e. since early Pakistan days). However, there has been limited progress in relation to the potential-to-date. This has been so because of lack of active policy support on the one hand, and lack of entrepreneurial tradition and adequacy on the other. It seems that a convergence of the realisation on the part of the government that the SMEs

should be given active policy and regulatory support and the interest shown by the private sector to participate more actively in the enterprise development activities is now evolving.

However, a robust conducive environment is yet to emerge. But it is noticed that along with the increased awareness on the part of the government and the private sector in the country, currently there are several major initiatives, involving different donors in certain cases, to help SME promotion in Bangladesh.

One such initiative is that of the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) which has in cooperation with the Bangladesh Ummayan Parishad (BUP) carried out a study of enterprises in Bangladesh with a view to de-

veloping a package programme for promoting such enterprises. The sample was drawn from different parts of the country and covered a wide range of products and services. Based on the findings as to what the critical obstacles are and how may the existing and potential small entrepreneurs access the required facilities and services, a private sector service-centre based methodology is now being finalised for possible implementation, perhaps on a pilot scale initially.

The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) has also been focusing its attention on SME development in the country. Apart from its advocacy activity through national seminars and proposals put up to the government, about two weeks ago it organised an international seminar jointly with Japan Small Business Corporation. Japan-

Bangladesh Joint Committee for Commercial and Economic Cooperation, and the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry with the purpose of learning from the Japanese SME sector experiences and mobilising Japanese assistance towards addressing the problems faced by SMEs in Bangladesh.

The recommendations and understandings reached are promising and, if both sides follow them through to logical conclusions, significant results concerning the promotion of SMEs in Bangladesh can be expected.

Another important initiative

is the USAID funded JOBS (Job Opportunities and Business Support) Programme which is seeking to help promote SMEs through obstacles identification studies and practical assistance and advocacy measures

liberalisation. The National Association of Small and Cottage Industries, Bangladesh (NASCIB) is also seeking to develop effective ways and means to play its part in the promotion of small enterprises in the country. There are surely other initiatives and ongoing programmes, but the ones mentioned above suffice to substantiate the point that there is currently a heightened emphasis on SMEs in Bangladesh.

The question now is: are all

these initiatives going to generate a momentum for SME development in Bangladesh, with particular emphasis on small enterprises.

But space doesn't permit going into that today. I shall therefore do that in the next piece.

Let me conclude today by mentioning that the key areas needing attention include: supply and demand side information, finance and credit, skill development, technology, and market development. These and other services should be available adequately in the country, perhaps in the public and private sectors combined, to be utilised by the SMEs on the basis of their requirements. Access to infrastructures such as transport facilities, electricity, gas, water, and telecommunication is another area to look into. In the wake of economic liberalisation, there are certain specific problems faced by different SMEs, which need to be identified and resolved. Currently, policy implementation on the part of the state and adherence to the terms and conditions of finance and facilities received by the entrepreneurs suffer from serious lacunae which will also need to be addressed. The overall approach should be one that would ensure access to the required services by SMEs located or to be set up anywhere in the country, particularly in places outside of Dhaka and other cities. Next time, I shall try to review the present situation concerning these and other relevant issues and indicate my thinking as to how to go about addressing the problems faced.

sure recipe for perpetual backwardness and chaos, as that ideal cannot be wished into existence: it is in fact an ideal to move towards by working on all fronts. Every change/improvement/reorganisation is not on the critical path of one another. Hence, a lot can be accomplished even within the existing environment. What is important is to identify the existing opportunities and scope and take advantage of those in moving forward with the needed action in each particular case. But that ideal should be kept in sharp focus and the construction of an appropriate pathway to that end must be the central guiding principle of the national agenda.

I intend to write in some detail on the approach and measures for SME development in Bangladesh, with particular emphasis on small enterprises.

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Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Khaliquzzaman Ahmad

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towards removing them. The Daily Star and JOBS organised a roundtable conference about two weeks ago on obstacles to small and medium enterprise development in Bangladesh. It provided an opportunity for an exchange of views among policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. Such exchanges of views should be helpful towards proper identification and solution of the problems faced. The Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Cooperation (BSCIC) is also putting increased emphasis on how best it can direct its efforts towards small enterprise development.

It seems necessary that an in-depth analysis be carried out of the functions and functioning of the BSCIC in relation to small enterprise development to prepare recommendations for appropriately revamping/redesigning its small enterprise-related role and functions in the wake of economic

A Rich is a Poor or a Poor is a Poor

Look out for the real poor, the little baby in a slum somewhere crying out for help or the freedom fighter who is too ashamed to ask for financial help for his treatment, and make the best use of People's Money.

Bangladesh during the 1971 independence war.

Of course, one might ask which would be considered genuine and which not, and to that I will come later.

I must now mention the staggering amount doled out to 1,088 of the "poor" between July, 1996 and January, 1999, as mentioned in the *Sangbad* newspaper which the minister put at Taka 35 million (729,000 US dollars).

The beneficiaries include, fearfully mentioning as I am not very good at litigation, the wife of Law and Justice Minister Abdurrahman Chaser, National Professor Nurul Islam, Awami League president Kamruzzaman, Chairman of the Fisheries Development Corporation Golam Murtaza, secretaries Ismail Hossain, Ahrab Ahmed, Chairman of the Power Development Board Nooruddin Mahmud Kamal and director general at the Relief and Rehabilitation Ministry M. Abdul Jabbar (thrice), university teachers and many others.

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The conversations after the news was published were funny.

rather than a matter taken seriously as I had thought.

One executive with a multinational put it this way: "What is the big ha, ha, about the dole? It is not bribe, but dole." He added: "Isn't dole better when many take bribes for all good or bad reasons?" he asked.

Then a businessman took the queues. "Look, I never knew there is such a fund and good thing that they took it and it became news. We can now all seek the dole because you're really do not have to be the real, real poor."

"Whom do you call poor in Bangladesh?" asked a western visitor. "I have seen the people in the streets, in the *busies* and those who come begging when your car stops at a traffic light. Are they the one or is there another kind?"

But she was overwhelmed with the Bangladesh life and the social parties she has been going round. "It is really warm and beyond my imagination ... such rich people when you keep

on saying Bangladesh is so poor."

The host was candid and said, "Look, I can have millions stashed away but I can dress with the worst ones in my wardrobe while meeting personalities from whom I am seeking help. That convinces a lot. Then I have a car, but I decide to visit the important personality in a baby taxi, no rickshaw is better. Luck can strike."

"Then you attire in your best when you have a business; 'an coming to settle a deal to tell them you are rich, not poor please, very rich. It might work."

So, he added: "It is not difficult to become poor or rich when you want to and all you need is your brain, connections and of course first hand knowledge where you can get such dole. Just because you are ignorant does not mean everyone will be so."

We all agreed and apologised for our ignorance, but pondered how would we feel if our names

were published in the national dailies as we traveled by air-conditioned vehicles. Maybe, that is a different matter.

Coming back to defining "poor" in the context of Bangladesh, I thought it was a very difficult task because nobody keeps track of anybody's bank account, and even if we tried to do so there could be one real account here and numerous others stashed away somewhere else. And everyone cannot have the means always ready to support their medical needs. I understand. I mean the PEOPLE understand. Indeed people of this land are very "understanding".

Tell them nicely and they accept it, not because they always believe what is being said but because they feel too humiliated to disagree.

Since the government doled out — maybe the previous ones, too doled out the same way — the authorities should publish the category of being "poor" or "gorib" and how one can get it even having the means for such treatments as it is the duty of the state to ensure that the rich and the fared live longer.

Those seeking a taka in the streets or languishing in "busies" (slums) still have little chance unless the press highlights and makes it a case for the facility.

For me, I am glad to have the information and the precedence of people who have got the dole because, God forbid, if I get sick I know I have a ready dole waiting for me. Although the task of getting that dole might not be as easy as those in the published list, but it is a BIG reassurance for PEOPLE like me.

The bottomline is, look out for the real poor, the little baby in a slum somewhere crying out for help or the freedom fighter who is too ashamed to ask for financial help for his treatment, and make the best use of People's Money.

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.

AL and BNP, please unite to save the country

Sir, I make an unusual appeal, hoping against hope, after reading two items in two different dailies. One is in the DS written by A Special Correspondent on the South West's Terror and the other one by Mr. Kaiser Ahmed in the daily *Sangbad* on KAFCO. The two contexts are completely different, but both vital to the short and long-term interest of the country.

Not only if you love the country, but also if you have no subversive mentality you should unite in these causes. Have your egos, love for strike or false sense of superiority but also think about the posterity. If you fall now the future generation will remember you with total contempt.

A Frustrated Reader

Lips that launched a thousand Tomahawks

Sir, I was going through the Time magazine, Feb 22, 1999 and I saw a letter which says

that like Helen of Troy "The face that launched a thousand ships" lips of Monica Lewinsky launched a thousand tomahawks. I think the comparison is wrong.

A thousand tomahawks were launched to forget the lips. This is what will go down in history.

Yamalik USA

Dreams coming true

Sir, The headline may prompt in mind of dreams coming true to have a happy, prosperous, hortal, pollution, corruption free Bangladesh. I guess these are too big dreams to come true. As a student of Dhaka University (DU) I thought it will be better to have small dreams which may come true in reality.

A few days ago I saw DU's arts faculty getting painted. I felt so glad watching our pride, our prestige standing into a new look that it made me feel we get happy with so little things but yet those things are so hard to get. I along with many other students hope this is the first step of the authority as there