

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

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Fragmented Democracy Won't Work

Twenty-eight years may not be too long a time in the life of a nation, but if we have misspent much of it, then there is a genuine ground for frustration over having lagged behind by those many years. This is one of the two time-management criteria we would like to use today in our brief stock-taking exercise of where precisely do we stand at this moment. The other criterion which is more material to our present conditions and, in effect, more proactive than dusting and leafing through the past records can be presented in a question form: are we getting better or worse day by day? The answer to this question is: we are being worse off with each passing day, and that is where the trend breeds trepidations.

The supreme irony is, we are adept in restoring a lost system but cannot make it function the way it should have been. Even though the revival was at a great cost and we were profusely self-congratulatory about it, our new-found euphoria took very little time evaporating. In the process, we have managed to entirely forget that it is a popular upsurge which had basically helped to bring down a regressive system and that those who led the people into a crescendo of protests and aspirations naturally owed a duty to them. When in 1990 autocracy was given the burial it deserved ushering democracy back into the country after long nine years expectations ran high among all manner of people that we had grown wiser not to trifle with the working of the lost-and-found democracy.

But these began to be belied even before the ink dried out on the charter of understanding the political alliances had scripted to come under a common platform and clear the mess after autocracy will have been demolished.

Be it the commitment to annul the Special Powers Act or grant autonomy to the audio-visual media or separate the judiciary from the executive, two successive elected governments since the fall of autocracy have failed to deliver on any one of those crucial pledges. On the one hand, the nation has been denied of an institutionalised democracy as a result of renegeing on those commitments, while on the other, a counter-productive political culture has come into play. So, this is a double tragedy we face today.

Ours is basically a history of unlearning lessons that were drummed so many times into our ears. At this critical juncture it is the degeneration of political culture that is our cardinal concern. Party is being placed above the nation and its interest is overriding that of the nation. This is the biggest body-blow to national politics to-date. As a result, what we see around us is a pernicious mix of confrontation, polarisation and lawlessness. Democracy is rendered badly fragmented and incomplete. The question is how soon are we going to roll back the trend to revitalise our almost moribund democracy.

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Reminiscing March 26, 1971

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

HERE comes a time in everyone's life that defines a turning point in one's life. You tend to remember that moment, that event until the day you die. You ask an American of my generation to tell you such a defining moment of his or her life, he or she will most likely answer by saying that November 22, 1963, was that day when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald. However, to a Russian the defining moment could very well be the day when USSR successfully launched the world's first artificial satellite into the outer space on October 4, 1957. For my father's generation that defining moment could have been the day Bengal was separated into two parts solely based on religion on that fatal day of August 14, 1947.

For my generation that defining moment finally arrived on a tenebrous day on March 26, 1971. If you would ask any Bengali from Bangladesh who is now 38 years and above where he or she was on that day, he or she will be able to answer you in some detail. Well, my kinsmen brought me to America about 560 days earlier to March 26, 1971. Thus, I was far removed from the epicenter of Bangladesh movement. Somehow, however, I was able to connect mentally to what was going on in Dhaka and elsewhere in occupied Bangladesh during those tumultuous days. The western news agencies did a superlative job informing the rest of the world the unfolding events especially after the historic speech of Sheikh Mujib at Ramna Race Course on March 7. From television news and newspaper stories, we knew that there was an impasse in transfer of power to the Bengali who had won the general election of December 10, 1970. But little did I know how Pakistani army generals as Yahya Khan, Hamid Khan, Gul Hassan, Tikka Khan, A.A. Nizam, Rao Farman Ali, Mitha, Rahim Khan and scores of Brigadiers were secretly meeting in Rawalpindi Concourse to draw the blueprint of Bangladeshi genocide. To unleash an unprecedented reign of terror, Pakistani military was transferring thousands of army men round the clock from the garrisons of West Pakistan to Dhaka and Chittagong by commercial airlines (PIA) and sea vessels. These generals even told their enlisted men that East Pakistanis were becoming Hindus; soon they will join India. Thus, it is up to them to secure the integrity of this nation emancipated by Quaid-e-Azam. The future of Jinnah's Pakistan rests in their hands.

Sitting far away from East Pakistan little did I know the resolve of the Pakistani military. Nevertheless, when the final blow came in the midnight of March 26, 1971, I was 700 miles away from my campus in Ohio. I was in Daytona Beach, Florida with a group of American students to get away from the harsh Midwestern winter weather. It was an inter-session break. We just arrived to Atlantic coast of Florida two days ago. Cold winter

rain shower drenched us in Daytona Beach. We decided to move inland to Sarasota, which is on the Gulf Coast, to get away from Atlantic rain showers. I did not hear any significant news about the political impasse in the radio, although I heard in the radio that Pakistani military President M. Aja Yahya was in Dhaka trying to break the impasse. The press reports emanating from Dhaka were trying to convey that message to the rest of the world. In reality, however, Pakistani military was busily building up a force of 90,000 men to quell the 'rebellion' in the breakaway province. They were not ready in the first or second week of March. So, to buyout the time they had to bring the spoiler politician from Sindh (Z.A. Bhutto) and his partner in crime - General Yahya to Dhaka telling rest of the world that they are making progress as a sinister plot to wipe out 3 million Bengalis was to unfold.

Later we learned that both Brigadier Mazumdar and Sheikh Mujib were arrested immediately before March 26 and shipped to West Pakistan. The course of Bangladesh liberation war would have been a different one if Brigadier Mazumdar could be there in Chittagong in control of Bengal regiment. The other consequence of this would have been on Major Zia's career in future Bangladesh army. With senior officer as Brigadier Mazumdar sidelined by Pakistani army, the career of certain junior officers (Ziaur Rahman and Khaled Mosharraf in particular) took a sharp upward move right after December 16, 1971. I do not know whether Brigadier Mazumdar is aware that his absence from Chittagong during 1971 changed the course of Bangladesh history. Newly formed Bangladesh army needed veteran officers like Brigadier Mazumdar to keep the aspiring future generals in check. History is the silent observer of what did go wrong in Bangladesh army. The young nation paid a very dear price for the restlessness of a few rogue officers.

While different thoughts were rushing through my mind (like whether my family members in Dhaka were okay or not), my American college friends stepped in to cheer me up. Rodney said: 'We should celebrate the declaration of independence of Bangla Desh. What do you say, Jaffor?' I replied, 'I'm afraid Rodney, the human cost would be too great to establish Bangladesh. The civil war just got started and who knows how long this will continue.'

I forcefully took the main section of the newspaper and could not believe my eyes seeing the headline in big bold three inches lettering. It said: 'Rebel leader declares Bangla Desh. Army took control of capital.' What I gleaned from the report was following: On behalf of Sheikh Mujib, the rebel leader, radio announcements were made from 'Independent Bangladesh Radio' asking people to resist Pakistani army aggression. Dhaka city was under the control of Pakistani army and there was loss of lives in the hours of March 26.

The news report mentioned the wholesale desertion of Bengali soldiers from Bengal Regiment of

Our Economic Development Strategy: Hopes and Realities

by Md. Anisur Rahman

SOME recent events make one wonder as to who amongst us may, for abnormal reasons, not survive to see another Independence Day, or whether there will be an environment all for us to celebrate another Independence Day. The country is in a state of total lawlessness; terrorist-type killings and attempts on the lives of leading intellectual and cultural figures of the country who had significant roles in the liberation war have started and more are said to be in the list; fundamentalist forces are declaring in open meetings attended by thousands their plan to take over the guardianship of society by extra-legal means. Government seems impotent to deal with these forces; the party in power as well as the major opposition parties all have exposed themselves in the fond company of terrorists openly wielding fierce arms in public view; none other than the country's President is repeatedly warning of the implications of the close relation of the ruling and opposition parties with 'godfathers', but with little effect.

It is in this scenario that I have been asked by BIUSS to talk on 'Bangladesh's Economic Development Strategy: Hopes and Realities' in an Independence Day lecture. I must confess I am not rushing this opportunity even for personal security reasons, and would have liked to talk on music instead in which I have some proven proficiency. However, as my friend Raman Sobhan once said in a gathering, we are in the 'departure lounge' in any case, so what is really

the **hopes with which we started**: The hopes with which we started were embodied in our dream of 'Sonar Bangla'. This was interpreted by the Father of the Nation in terms of smiles in the faces of the 'dukhi' ('happless') people of the land. If wealth could not immediately be brought to the door of these dukhi people, at least differences in wealth and incomes in the society would not offend one's sense of modesty. One may recall that a central motivation of the struggle for independence was the rejection of economic **disparities**. The rejection was operationally aimed at that time at disparities between the then East and West Pakistan, but the underlying social value must have embraced the question of internal relations in our own society as well if this was indeed, a value for us. And this value was, indeed, embodied in no uncertain terms in the constitution of independent Bangladesh calling for the construction of an **egalitarian** socialist society.

The betrayal: The betrayal started within a few months after independence, it was soon clear, what way the 'development strategy' was moving. As early as in (17-18) October 1972 I wrote in the *Dhaka Sangbad*: The lavish display of ostentatious consumption that one sees in the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong after a war that spilled so much blood and was so painful is an expression of deep contempt and insult to the poverty of Bangladesh and to the sacrifice of Bangladeshi in the liberation war... The corruption, antisocial and unruly activities that are being seen everywhere today is the result of disillusionment on the part of the wider populace of the country about the leadership being given by the educated and 'bhada' shamai of the country... In this situation making the rule of law and disciplines tougher will not be a fundamental solution of cor-

ruption and lawlessness; on the contrary this will suppress discontent and raise the possibility of its swelling up. Disciplined social and economic progress in independent Bangladesh will not be possible until its social and economic system will appear just to its wider population.

This never appeared so. Instead, a very transparent strategy of increasing inequalities and privileges for a chosen few was taken. The wider populace of the country were invited not to ask anything from the government for 'three years' while privileges and incomes of an elite class were meanwhile allowed to be augmented beyond proportions, and ostentatious consumption by this class became a cruel mockery of the state of economic suffering of a vast majority of war-devastated people.

There was hardly a development strategy except to increase inequalities in the country and perhaps to expect that economic growth would somehow result from this whose benefits would trickle down to the broader populace. The Planning Commission's recommendations toward land reform were not even allowed to be discussed in the Cabinet nor released for public debate. And nationalization of industries was done irresponsibly, ignoring clear recommendations of all concerned quarters for efficient management of these industries as if to deliberately make them fail.

The 'development strategy' of increasing inequalities was followed with increasing commitment by each succeeding government, resulting in economic and social inequalities reaching the astronomical heights that they have reached today. And it seemed that rampant corruption was encouraged by all these governments as if as part of a strategy to distribute favours to their political allies and clientele to consolidate their power.

The collapse of East European socialism was picked up as an open excuse to move toward an uncontrolled market economy and gradual abdication from the government's responsibility to provide any guardianship of the economy to promote social objectives. Socialism was redefined in the constitution as 'economic and social justice' making this promise, which had been flagged so colourfully in the independence struggle, totally superfluous; however, no development strategy even to promote social justice of any vintage was visible. A process of reckless privatization of industries now started as a patronage distribution strategy without any concern even for the credibility of the bidders are viable entrepreneurs. The policy of irresponsible management of state owned industries continued. And there was never any concern for serious agrarian reform to create the foundation of an indigenous and organic process of industrial development.

I do not think that Bangladesh should have followed any particular model of socialism and, indeed, no particular brand of socialism was articulated as a part of the aspirations of the people through our independence struggle. However, independently of the constitutional mandate for socialism and notwithstanding the collapse of East European socialism, a development strategy for Bangladesh should have followed its own imperatives and the need to catch up fast with the modern world as a nation. Socialism or not, an all-out national movement to attain universal literacy in a few years (say 5 years or so) should have been a first priority in a development strategy for Bangladesh, whether one liked it or not, in general it was socialist countries

more than the non-socialist breed which have given such priority in their development agenda.

Twenty eight years after independence we are predominantly an illiterate nation counting every year by how many tiny percentage points we have advanced in this direction, whereas without much by way of imaginative effort we could have left this question behind us more than twenty years back. We should have addressed the agrarian (including fisheries) question hand in hand to sought to eliminate rentier income from this sector to ensure that real producers get the bulk of the fruits of their efforts to be able to turn themselves into entrepreneurs for agrarian and thereafter for rural industries development. The human/ physical resource ratio of the country make it imperative in any case that as much of the physical resources of the land be shared both for consumption (e.g. cooperative housing) as well as for production, rather than inviting a deadly tug-of-war for these resources and hijacking them with killing firearms in hand. We should have moved toward decentralization of urbanization in the country, not only to avoid the mad scramble for residential and transport space as well as for life-supporting oxygen in Dhaka but more importantly as part of a development strategy to bring a host of vital services within easy access for the world-entrepreneurs in the countryside, as well as consumer services for the population in the countryside. The latter includes very importantly quality medical care and education, which require the residence of qualified doctors and teachers who look for modern living facilities for them and for their families. Many other elements of a serious development strategy could be suggested, and of course, debated. But the powers that be never showed a serious interest even in debating what should be the priorities in a serious development strategy for the nation. And the quality of the debate that go on in the parliament do not give the impression that our leaders have the capability at all to debate these kind of questions.

Instead, the policy makers surrendered to the 'donors' who move around the world offering 'development assistance' conditional on accepting their prescription by way of a development strategy. The prescription today is a 'tsarism' by the name of 'structural adjustment policy' (SAP), supposed to be the magic pill for health and prosperity for all nations irrespective of the stages of their development, their people's values, cultures and their aspirations, the state of maturity of their would-be private entrepreneurs, etc. Curiously, the SAP has not included any agrarian reform which the earlier guardians of these donor quarters had prescribed for Japan and South Korea resulting in spectacular development.

The phenomenal growth of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh since its independence is an eloquent testimony to this observation; it is not easily conceivable that this growth would have found the required space had the promise of independence to the dukhi people of the land for an egalitarian society if not for early alleviation of their poverty been fulfilled or even approached with credible commitment from the society's leaders.

Dreaming about a development strategy: The nation seems to be moving toward a condition of total anarchy if not possible eruption. This movement may not be arrested unless a development strategy is taken which appears just to the people. This means reversing the trend of inequalities in the society in a convincing and visible way, monitoring this every year in public view and taking corrective measures if the trend threatens to be negative. This is very different from the current thinking and monitoring of development terms of growth with 'poverty alleviation'; as I have been saying and writing repeatedly, bringing more people only above the 'poverty line' which is drawn at an absurdly low level of income, and allowing rent seekers to appropriate the rest of the nation's surpluses to become multi-millionaires and constitute a very perverse sense of 'social justice'. This is not going to convince anyone of the

credibility of social justice pronouncements of the strategists except the multi-millionaires themselves and those who expect to be able to run up behind them. Having come as far as we have come in the wrong direction, development needs to be assessed now in terms of growth with inequality alleviation rather than with poverty alleviation. This is not only because of the gross injustice in the distribution calculus but also because one's sense of poverty itself is relative and the subjective index moves up with the display of wealth and ostentatious consumption notwithstanding where the economists of the national and international establishments put the 'objective' index. And a strategy of growth with inequality alleviation may in fact give us higher growth itself insofar as resources will be channelled toward producer classes from rentier classes who have so far given us little growth.

But this is admittedly daydreaming for neither our present leaderships nor our foreign 'friends' would entertain such a strategy; present leaderships because they themselves are part of the rentier class in the society, and the foreign 'friends' because this would cause shrinkage of the market for their investors to exploit. A 'revolution' of some sort would be needed to change the development strategy in this direction. I can imagine that the broader populace of the country will welcome this, to whom the current brand of 'western democracy' is a contradiction in the whole scenario; contradiction between the broader society and the élites, and contradiction between the internally divided élites and the foreign interests seeking opportunities to exploit the economy and the labor of the country's élites.

Ironically, the quarter which is most favoured by this dual contradiction is that of the religious fundamentalists. These quarters find it possible to reach the people more easily because of their acute sense of deprivation, and can point the finger at both the élites within the society as well as their foreign collaborators as obstacles to the fulfillment of the people's aspirations and call for a mobilization along religious lines against this unholy alliance. The phenomenal growth of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh since its independence is an eloquent testimony to this observation; it is not easily conceivable that this growth would have found the required space had the promise of independence to the dukhi people of the land for an egalitarian society if not for early alleviation of their poverty been fulfilled or even approached with credible commitment from the society's leaders.

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credibility of social justice, that would reduce the financial losses allegedly suffered by Biman in this route. Please, increase the fare.

Aref Sohel Rahman
Road#5, Block-1
Banani Model Town
Dhaka-1213.

Friday Mailbox

Smokeless cigarette

Sir, As reported by AP from Brisbane, a smokeless and cancer-free cigarette could be available in the market within three years. The Australian developer of the cigarette claimed that the new cigarette would enable the smokers to inhale nicotine without having to light up thereby eliminating the carcinogenic element of traditional cigarette.

Well, my question is whether smoking cigarettes made from tobacco with or without smoke are at all good for health. The active element in tobacco is 'nicotine' — a soothing and tranquilising agent. Whether nicotine causes cancer needs further biochemical and medical research but there is no doubt that nicotine does damage to the organs. It has been scientifically proven that nicotine causes serious harm to the heart and arteries.

Hence, smokeless cigarettes should not be taken as a boon because it might be found more dangerous than the traditional cigarettes. So it is wise to quit smoking of cigarettes in any form because 'nicotine in tobacco is injurious to heart'.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Senseless circular

Sir, Recently, every private high schools and colleges of the country received two contradictory circulars from the Education Ministry. According to the circulars, if any school/college fails to show 50 per cent positive result then that school/college will not get teacher's salary and government will delete the affiliation. Authority has given another circular. According to that they want to see copying free exam halls. OK, we appreciate it, but how can we implement it? It is impossible. Most of the students of intermediate and degree levels are very weak in English for lack of good teachers. According to one survey every year 80 per cent students fail in English. Our primary foundation is also not good. But still government is demanding these almost impossible circulars to be fulfilled.

It is very tough to bring 50 per cent positive result. It is also tough to abolish copying from the examination hall. We also don't understand why government schools and colleges did not receive these circulars. These wrong decisions may put negative impact on education. We are already facing many anomalies. Teachers are helping students in the examination hall directly or indirectly. Actually private schools and colleges are hostage of these two circulars. We request the authorities concern to withdraw these senseless circulars and save all our schools and colleges.

Md Nurul Islam
Amena Villa
House No. 03, Kalikoir, Gazipur.

Dhaka-N'York-Dhaka route

Sir, We frequently travel by Biman to USA. It makes us proud to use our national flag carrier. The service aboard the aircraft is nice on most occasions. But the handling of Biman passengers by Alitalia at the JFK needs improvement.

While the passengers from Dhaka pay US\$ 1300 or more for a return ticket, the passengers from USA pay as low as US\$ 900. This is not logical at all. The aircraft is almost always full with passengers from Dhaka and Delhi. So Biman does not have to encourage passengers purchasing ticket in USA to fly Biman through so low a fare. Those lucky persons should pay

Mahmudul Huq Khan
Princeton, NJ, USA.

Helpless nation

Sir, I was very much moved to read the commentary 'Two killings, two leaders and a helpless nation' by Mahfuz Anam in the DS. He has rightly compared the two killings during the recent hartal — one of a student, named Sajal and the other of a rickshaw puller by the AL and BNP activists respectively. The way these haven't been questioned is rather questioned as unfair doctoring on the ball. Why is the finger pointing always at one direction? Who is going to speak out? Who needs the big brothers when major revenues are earned from the games played in the subcontinent? Besides, three out of the last four World Cup winners are from the subcontinent.

Zobeda Mahmood Khan
Shugandha R/A
Chittagong.

Views