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Cry a Halt to Polythene Invasion

The invasive polybags and plastic containers are swamping our lives and threatening to make a complete rout of existence in a way that only ostriches can ignore. Yet, unfortunately, there is no dearth of knowledgeable sinners turning a blind eye to the rapidly descending bio-degradable catastrophe on us. They know where it is hurting us, unsparingly everybody at that, the privileged and the poor alike, the menace being no respecter of social positions. Still a hands-on policy remains a far cry buckling as the government is under lobby pressures not to act as effectively and swiftly as being warranted by the menace.

There are a total of 272 factories producing and marketing 816 tonnes of polythene goods every day. The annual production figure is mind-boggling at that dreadful daily rate, not to mention the sea of them left strewn from previous years. Even if we put a ban on setting up any new factory as seems to have been decided upon by the Environment Ministry, how does it help remedy the situation when so many factories remain in business? Yes, we have no other option but to either delicense the 272 factories or re-adjust them to alternative uses under a crash programme. To be realistic, it cannot be a question of phasing these out within a time frame because such a policy would be discriminatory against the ones which are dispensed with before the others are. Our suggestion is let it be a bold, transparent and comprehensive surgical operation equally applicable to all but definitely under a rehabilitative programme that does not hold them to financial losses.

The government unfortunately is still in a planning stage when its counterparts elsewhere find themselves in the thick of activism against the menace. Our government is wrong in adopting an unduly gradualist approach to ridding ourselves of polythene with a target date set at or before 2002 AD.

Although we are no believers in a target date which keep shifting with backlogs mounting, yet we would have accepted this one, momentarily slurring over the pressing nature of the problem, if the environment ministry had come out with a concrete and orchestrated programme of actions. Regrettably, this does not seem to be the case, so that we urge the government to bring forward the deadline pressure by two years at least and take the plunge rightaway to reflect its sincerity of purpose.

The environment ministry wants to solve the problem by raising tariff on the raw materials and consequently increasing the price of polybags and plastic containers with the ultimate result of curbing their use. This is rather myopic, even self-defeating because it could give a handle of profitability and sustenance to the polythene industrialists.

We are lucky to be a jute-producing country, others who are not as fortunate are replacing polythene anyway. Why can't we, with so much of natural wrapping material around us?

Basically, we would like a thorough scientific study made into the whole range of negative impact of polythene on our health, habitat and economy so that educated and irresistibly motivated remedial actions can follow.

Why Stable Government in India Remains Elusive

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

It must be frustrating experience for India's President when he had to deal with 42 parties in India's parliament. It seemed that the opposition parties had no concerted effort, no plan and nothing at all. It appeared that a few "little politicians" wanted to grab anything they could for themselves in the name of democracy.

President Kочeril Raman Narayanan of India dissolved the lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha) on 26th April and called for a fresh general election in the country. It is the third general election in three years in India. An Indian government was last for five years but it could not remain this time more than 13 months. It appears that the people of India became a hostage to their self-interested politicians. Is it democracy at work in India in its worst form?

It is intriguing to see that the leaders of the parties which were responsible for the collapse of Vajpayee government on 17th April could not agree to form an alternative government because of their perceived personal interests and rivalries. A few of the leaders seemed to act in cross purposes. It must be frustrating experience for India's President when he had to deal with 42 parties in India's parliament. It seemed that the opposition parties had no concerted effort, no plan and nothing at all. It appeared that a few "little politicians" wanted to grab anything they could for themselves in the name of democracy. No wonder the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle did not approve democracy as a form of government.

India is known as the largest democratic country in the world but the installation of five governments in three years, one could say, make a mockery of the democratic system. While some may argue that frequent unscheduled elections were ultimate expression of democracy, the effect, in practice, appears to be the reverse. The business sector becomes uncertain, foreign investments fall and as a result the economic performance is not up to its mark. The common people tend to suffer because the wobbly government is not able to pursue and implement its policy and programme. India can ill afford the instability of the government when it has geared itself in economic reforms to achieve growth and development.

A question that arises is: why can't a government be stable in New Delhi in recent times? There are several possible reasons. I think the main reason is that the political parties in India have lost their credibility in the eyes of the people. It appears that the people have resigned themselves to the antics of the politicians.

The Congress Party initially ruled India for 30 years at a stretch from 1947-1977. In 1977 it lost power to Janata government. Although the Congress Party returned to power in 1980 under the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi, the influence of the party gradually diminished after her assassination. The Congress party was defeated in

an election in 1989. However, it could form a government in 1991, although it failed to win an outright majority in the Lok Sabha.

In 1995 the Congress performed poorly in state elections losing seats to the Hindu Nationalist Party (Bharatiya Janata Party-BJP). The real political furor was generated in early 1996 by far-reaching corruption investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation under the direction of the Supreme Court. The corruption allegations, though affecting all of the parties, tarnished Congress most of all in 1996-97. The Congress Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had to resign and the Congress party performed poorly in elections in April, 1996. The election brought three unstable governments in New Delhi during this period (BJP-led government lasted only 13 days) and another fresh election in February, March in 1998 saw the Vajpayee-led BJP coalition government which just collapsed this month.

Decline of Congress party and rise of Hindu nationalism

The Congress represented the broad spectrum of the community. It was seen to embrace a certain set of values which gave Indian society its character, determined its institutions and priorities. In speaking of Indian society under the Congress party, I am speaking of the values of a secular, pluralist, multi-religious and ethnically diverse nation. However the party could not continue to play the role cherished by its followers. One may argue that the Congress party emphasised individual rights rather than the rights of groups and maintained order by the exercise of hierarchies of power. The minorities and the disadvantaged sections of community became disillusioned with the party as they found no improvement in their day to day lives. Basic necessities of life, such as, safe drinking water, access to primary healthcare and shelter are being deprived to the poor people. Gross disparities in



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material wealth led to frustration and bitterness of the common people and as a result they voted other political parties.

Although India has democratic institutions, the government lacked transparency which gave rise to nepotism and corruption. Those who questioned the government's action were sidelined. The Bofors corruption case is still pending against the Gandhi family. A few former Ministers including the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao were put on trial for corruption. The reputation of politicians took a battering in the eyes of the public. The Muslims began to leave the Congress party when the 464-year old Babri mosque was demolished by the followers of BJP in 1992 while the Congress was in power. The scheduled castes were also not happy with the Congress leaders.

India is a vast country with almost 970 million people. Differences exist in the various regions and so also are the regional issues. While the Congress Party was losing ground, the Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) and other regional parties were on the rise exploiting Hindu nationalism and regionalism. New Delhi's centralised control did not satisfy the regional leaders. The Union

government in New Delhi appeared to fail to identify the regional issues affecting the common people. Diversion of waters from inter-state rivers, deprivation of certain regions from financial resources and lop-sided priorities of programmes led to the rise of regional parties with a set of agendas which attracted the people of the regions. Revival of Hindu nationalism and regionalism became the order of the day and these parties defeated the Congress party in state and national elections.

It is the rise and success of the regional parties in '90s and their splinter groups which prevented Congress party or any other all-India party to gain a majority in the Lok Sabha and as a result a coalition government is required to be formed at the centre. Often one or two regional parties with a few members in the Lok Sabha continue to wreck the stability of the coalition government. It may be recalled that Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with only 5 members in the Lok Sabha decided the fate of the Vajpayee government on 17 April last. The question is: can the tide of the regional parties be stemmed by all-India parties, such as the Congress party? If not, the fragility of the coalition government will be at the mercy of the regional parties.

Another factor appears to be that the younger generation of Indian voters are not loyal to their parties. Gone are the days when the earlier generation of voters invariably supported the parties irrespective of their performance. The loyalty of party-voters was taken for granted. In the modern days the loyalty of the voters is volatile and the proportion of undecided voters has increased considerably. This appears to be a global phenomenon in the democratic world and India is no exception. Furthermore the rigid party discipline appears to be another set back in parliamentary democracy. The party political leaders had held firm grips on their parliamentarians. As a result the backbenchers followed strictly the party lines without murmur or constructive debate. Backbencher-power was dwindled to such an extent that they became politically impotent. The effect was that not a single mind or vote was changed because the party discipline held sway on all issues.

Besides the erosion of integrity of political parties, the overly-regulated financial and investment sectors did not help the government in the alleviation of poverty. India lagged behind China and the South East Asian nations in economic growth. For example, the per capita GNP in India is around \$330.00 as against about \$1866.00 in China. Reforms were slow to kick-start the industrial growth and only in early '90s India started to dismantle the protection policy in economic sectors. However many had hoped for a new liberalisation process for its double-digit economic growth but because of the instability in New Delhi the reforms slowed down. Furthermore the rising fiscal budget deficit (which reached 6.1 per cent of GDP this year) was an added constraint. The poverty alleviation programmes were not given priority and resources were directed towards building military ca-

pability including nuclear weapons and missiles. The common people were hit by taxes and inflation (about 8 per cent this year). On the whole the poor people did not escape poverty under the successive governments in New Delhi.

Will the holding of fresh election solve the problem? The sceptics think that it will not. The election is likely to be held some time in June at the earliest and if the past is anything to go by, the election is likely to bring a splintered Parliament again. Some critics take a view that President Narayanan made a political misjudgment in asking the Vajpayee government for a vote of confidence till he was satisfied that the opposition groups would be able to form an alternative government. Then this political mess would not have occurred. The holding of election is an expensive proposition with 600 million voters. There is a view that the resources could have been diverted to the poverty alleviation programmes rather than on untimely and unnecessary elections.

Where do we go from here?

If the power of the regional parties cannot be thwarted, a few political analysts think that constitutional reform is the only way out of this stalemate. With the changed circumstances, one needs to have a hard look at the constitutional framework of the country. India's constitution should not be seen as a sacred cow. There should be serious debate in the community on this issue and the major parties should not be allowed to conduct the debate only. A radical view prevails in some quarters that India needs to change from the parliamentary to the presidential system of government similar to that of the USA. The President would be directly elected by the people of India for a fixed time period and that will provide stability in New Delhi. One could argue that until the change in the constitutional framework, whatever may be its form, occurs the Indian people are likely to be thrown into the arms of "self-serving" political leaders.

India's instability affects the region as a whole including Bangladesh. The sooner the political stability is restored the better it will be for the peace and security of the region or the constitution can be amended so that a confidence motion may be tabled in the Lok Sabha against the government when it has been in power for a period of at least two and half years. The friends of India, I hope, will not be let down by the Indian leaders at the next election.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

OPINION

Brick Lane Bombing and Overt Racism in Britain

Dr. A. H. Jaffor Ullah writes from New Orleans

The Brixton or Brick Lane bombing would not be happening if English would have followed a principle of full racial integration in all over British Isles. Until and unless that happens, the future does not bode well for immigrants or their kids in Great Britain. The British politicians, policymakers, intellectuals, academicians, and civic leaders should all ask one question - when should the country go for full racial integration in terms of housings, jobs, commerce, and education?

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The news of a car bomb blasting at the heart of Brick Lane district in East London, which is heavily populated with the people from Bangladesh, is a grim reminder that racism is very much alive and at work in Great Britain. London's deputy police commissioner Mr. Alan Fray had characterized the Saturday bombing (April 24) as a race crime when he said, "I am linking crimes and I am looking at this as a race crime."

This is not the first bomb that has exploded in recent days in ethnic communities in Britain. Little more than a week ago, a crudely made device had exploded in Brixton that is home to another ethnic Briton - the West Indies Black population. It does not come as a surprise that a white supremacist group who identified itself as 'Combat 18' took responsibility for the Brick Lane blast. We read in the newspaper that three more racist groups had laid their claims on Brixton bombing.

Racism is nothing new to Great Britain. In the eighties we have too often heard the stories of 'Skin Heads' who used to terrorize immigrants from South Asian countries. But then eighties were a difficult time for British. Not only economy was anemic during Margaret Thatcher's day, the inflation was high and the English pound, the currency, was weak too.

Under that scenario the British youths had hard time securing jobs. These street kids surmised that all the economic malaise of their country was due to an influx of immigrants from the Third World countries. But

employed. We all thought that racial violence would abate under the present-day economic condition. But guess how wrong we were!

Mind you that Great Britain had a sloppy record when it comes to racism. The neighboring Irish people had often suffered in the hands of British. Too many demeaning Irish jokes abound in the pubs of England.

How many minority kids could attend the choicest public schools and English colleges like Oxford and Cambridge? You can count the minority students in those schools and colleges by finger. How many kids from immigrant background could climb the ladder in the corporate world and governmental jobs. Not many. Contrary to what the

might change the demography in the urban areas of the country in years to come. The Conservative British MP Enoch Powell from Birmingham was smart enough to know in the mid-sixties that racial integration would have to take place in the foreseeable future. Being a racist he objected to the liberal policy of the British government and he sug-

pared to placid nineties. Thanks heaven that Enoch Powell's idea was just a pipe dream for the conservative people of British Isles.

The news of East London's Brick Lane bombing did not come as a surprise to me. Even today, one can see that immigrants and their offspring who are bona fide British subjects are leading a life that could aptly be described as best - a life of second class citizen. The question that should be asked is: why Bengalis, Punjabis, Sikhs, and others from South Asia live in dilapidated housings in urban areas? It seems as if suburbs and country sides of England are exclusively reserved for the gentries. This trend has to change. The upper and middle class of England should open their neighborhood to successful immigrants. In America if anyone can afford a house in a decent neighborhood, he or she could buy the house irrespective of their ethnic origin.

The well-to-do British gentries should first set the example of racial integration. The rest of the society will surely then follow their lead. The present housing situation in England is very pathetic considering the fact that a good many immigrants from our part of the world can only afford to live in urban slums or in government subsidized flats known as Council's Housing. Even a low IQ racist street thug knows where to find ethnic Asians.

The Brixton or Brick Lane bombing would not be happening if English would have followed a principle of full racial integration in all over British Isles. Until and unless that happens the future does not bode well for immigrants or their kids in Great Britain. The British politicians, policymakers, intellectuals, academicians, and civic leaders should all ask one question - when should the country go for full racial integration in terms of housings, jobs, commerce, and education?

gested at one time that the immigrants should be given ample money once and then shipped away to their country of origin. I remember very well in the sixties and early seventies that a certain cross section of British subjects was very receptive to Enoch Powell's idea of 'ethnic cleansing' in British Isles. But then sixties and seventies were a turbulent time as com-



Friday Mailbox

Save the Usmany Udyan

Sir, Dhaka city is already the most polluted metropolis in the world today. Every breath we take introduces an assortment of the most toxic agents in our body. Even those who live in a canned and conditioned atmosphere have no escape or immunity from them. Not only we are curtailing our meagre life expectancy with every inhalation but our nascent generations are also growing up in a poisonous environment that is most pernicious for their vulnerable physique. An alarming number of them are going to grow up physically and mentally handicapped.

We all know that green bodies of a city act like a respiratory organ of a living body. Each green tree is a natural refinery and waste processing unit of the atmosphere. Trees are also excellent regulators of temperature and humidity. They draw wet clouds like magnets and facilitates rainfall. That we are suffering from more and more excruciatingly hot and sultry summers with every passing year, grimly brings home the truth about our failing respiratory system.

And now we are going to witness a cold-blooded homicide of yet another major green body of this polluted metropolis in the name of facelift. Usmany Udyan is the only substantial green body near to that labyrinth of brick, mortar and people call "Old Dhaka". Admittedly the park is a den of nefarious and anti-social activities. As a matter of fact no self-respecting well-citizen ever wishes to take a stroll there. But the 11,000 trees that mutely spectates human desecration and degeneration, are not anti-social. Each of them renders more service to the community than any single denizen of the city. Now the death knell is tolling for those trees as a magnificent edifice of human folly is to replace them. The question is what grand purpose necessitates the destruction of those trees? We are told a modern conference centre is needed in the city so that it can host the NAM Summit of the year 2001.

First of all, do we really need a new conference centre? About 20 years back Dhaka hosted a general summit, using the newly-built parliament building as the conference centre. Why can't we use it again? After all this grand architectural masterpiece gives little service to the hapless nation.

Secondly why hosting NAM meeting is so important for us? I think it is crystal clear that no number of gaudy pageantry is going to improve the image of our misgoverned mendicant nation unless we demonstrate solid achievements in nation building, before the world community. Moreover, the NAM movement is one of the most comically redundant grouping of nations to come out of long, cold war. Each and every country of this self-proclaimed non-aligned group, courted one or both of the superpowers unabashedly. With the end of the cold war even the facade of its rationale has crumbled apart. It was a gathering for jaw-jaw and little else. It has no tangible economic or political agenda. It only served as a circus stage where democratic despots strutted about for boosting their egomania, so that they can pretend to be political giants of the globe. Our poor nation is not going to find any gains or riches for the exhausted national coffer in return from this extravaganza costing billions of Taka that are sorely needed in every direction.

We must not sit still now! The citizens of Dhaka must mobilise irrespective of political inclination. The civil society must assert itself now without any covert or overt political sponsorship. The destruction of those trees of Usmany Udyan are going to affect each and every one of us, from the pavement to the pent-

house. We must stop this suicidal folly before it's too late. The axe man is on the door-step!
Shaifur Rahman
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Dhaka

JU employees' demand

Sir, Recently officers and employees of Jahangirnagar University observed a 72 hour strike demanding separate and more liberal rules for their wards willing to get admitted in the university. They are demanding for 10 seats each of 24 departments for their wards and also that the pass marks to be fixed at 30 which is at present 35. And why do they seek this undue privilege? Their simple reply is - they serve the university.

When a general student cannot get admitted after securing over 65 to 70 per cent marks in the admission test, the wards of teachers, officers and employees are being enrolled by securing only 35 marks in the same admission test and still they demand more!

This is absolutely unfair. Are there any such opportunity Medical College, BUET and other such institutions? Teachers, officers and employees of these institutions are also serving the university.

All of them are serving the nation in their own way and position. So, there should be an equal opportunity for all candidates. If the authorities concerned of an established university start to admit these sort of demands, who knows may be one day the civil servants might also start demanding separate rules in the BCS examinations for their wards!

Pradip Kumar Deb
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Chance round

Sir, The first instinct on any default, mess-ups, anomalies or gross violations of laid down rules and regulations by neglect or otherwise in our government service is to make few OSD, transfer a bulk.

This is usually followed by lobbying at various quarters which goes round and round till the issues fade out from public mind, the same persons occupy their chairs once again and government is a little set to take on the upcoming issue.

I suppose the government may enforce something else at least to portray a decent intention.

Tanzia Choudhury
Chittagong

"Wise Words in Political Wilderness?"

Sir, I would like to thank Mr Mahfuz Anam for his timely warning for the good of the nation which came out in the form of commentary under the above heading in the DS dated April 19, 1999.

It is most unfortunate to see that we are corrupt people in thoughts and deeds. As a result, we have no compassion for others. Unless we change our negative attitude we would remain as backward country depending on the donations of the rich countries for our survival. So, for the future generation let us hope that the party in power and the party in opposition would work hand in hand to create a new kind of democratic values and a society without corruption and insecurity.

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Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.