

Gains from Seattle

It is customary to evaluate the success of an international conference on the basis of an agreement reached or a declaration of commitments made at the end of it. In those conventional terms, the WTO ministerial conference at Seattle would look to be a 'failure' and that is how the newspapers have also headlined its outcome. True, it could not take off in the midst of stormy demonstrations by young activist groups seeking a fair trade order, so that it had to draw a blank as far as the agenda on the table were concerned.

Even so, it is our clear impression that never before in the history of global trade negotiations has there been such a blinding of public opinion with the WTO agenda. This happened by virtue of the young generation's articulate presence and protestation around the venue of the meet. They were determined to ventilate their grievances to the negotiators about the latter's decisions that only perpetuated poverty, joblessness and environmental degradation. Their contention was writ large on the slogan they never ceased to use: "free trade is not fair trade." In a cast-iron argument they asserted that most trade or technology-related steps taken by the affluent favoured the multinational corporations who are governed by profit motive leading to the marginalisation of the common man and that of environmental concerns. The merger of companies, prompted by cost-cutting consideration, which is but an expression of profit motive, has resulted in the slashing of jobs.

So, this is how we would like to catalogue the benefits of the Seattle experience. One, the rich-poor dialogue has been brought into the realm of public debate with a pressure being exerted for democratising the process of global trade negotiations from now onwards. Two, we should be able to cry a halt to the practice of taking the 'intractable issues' out of the plenaries and pushing them into an exclusive shell of the rich countries for deciding a course of action on them. Finally, the social concerns that were highlighted by the protest groups need to be addressed under the watchful eyes of activists who, mind you, have tasted a glory in the dissemination of ideas not to relent from it.

The developing countries, however, cannot rest on the oars of the demonstrators' success. They need to keep vigil over what happens in the changed ambience.

Remembering Suhrawardy

THE nation, particularly the party Late HS Suhrawardy floated with Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Awami League (formerly Awami Muslim League) observed his 36th death anniversary yesterday, somewhat ritually it seemed. But we believe his legacy deserved a much deeper and wider remembrance.

Late H S Suhrawardy was a colourful personality with a brilliant mind, logical, decisive and analytical, both as a lawyer and political leader. His razor-sharp argument in court was a treat to watch; but more than that, as a politician he left his indelible imprint on people's mind. He played a major part in the protection of the Muslims of Bengal from the swords of communal forces as Chief Minister of Bengal in 1946. He launched a party in 1949 to oppose the Muslim League in the then East Pakistan. A true democrat, late Suhrawardy was instrumental in presenting Pakistan with a Constitution after nine years of its existence in 1956 which accepted Bangla as a state language along with Urdu. He was then the law minister. Later in the same year he was elected the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Driven by logic and fair-play Suhrawardy championed democratic norms and institutions. He was a staunch believer in constitutional politics. The party he had helped found in 1949 split in 1956 at the Kagmari conference and the two stalwarts parted ways. Sheikh Mujib later took on the mantle of the party and marched forward with the torch of democracy in this part of the globe till he led his people to the liberation of Bangladesh.

But what has happened to the party they left behind? Do we see democratic practices inside the largest and the oldest party of the country, or for that matter in the principal opposition party in the country?

Are the democratic values practised when it comes to election to various party tiers and committees? It seems that all the good things that were loved and upheld by the founders of Awami League are history now for the present-day leaders.

Unless the leaders are willing to honour their heroes, the ordinary people can hardly be blamed for losing their way in the absence of true heroes of whom Shaheed Suhrawardy is certainly one.

AAPP's Step Forward

THE Executive Council of the Association of Asian Parliaments for Peace (AAPP) on Saturday decided to set up a permanent secretariat for the parliamentarians' forum in Dhaka. This augurs well. The very birth of this new organisation was certainly a welcome step; for it could deepen and strengthen the ties among Asian nations. But by deciding to have a permanent secretariat for the AAPP now we have really opted to make it work. Let it not be a decor piece with cushy jobs offered to a fortunate few.

The AAPP has a big responsibility in seeing that parliaments across Asia become bastions of democracy through interactions from time to time. This certainly is a relevant point to stress, because over the years it has been a practice in some countries to adopt positions for the sake of temporary advantages while disregarding the long-term interest of democracy. Partnership, of course, has a significant role to play here. The urgent necessity of the moment is not only peace and harmony among nations but also bridging gaps in the understanding of what democracy and public welfare are all about. We wish AAPP all success and hope that Dhaka will give it a productive start.

WHILE the world at large is heading fast towards democratic governance, with many of us suspicion still lingers large on the proclivity of such an order in providing faster economic reforms and higher economic growth. The growing scepticism closely related to the present-day context of the LDCs and largely aired by the so-called "undemocratic" administrations appear to follow from the fact that the theme of pluralism enshrined in a democratic setup usually delays the decision-making processes and implementation schedules pertaining to socio-economic development of a country, in a fashion quite unseen in an autocratic regime. It is further alleged that, under democracy, the existence of various pressure groups tends to vie for a grip on policy outcomes and thus leaves very little room for quick decisions and actions. As a result, many of the policies and programmes tailored for higher economic growth and social development are, more often than not, either axed or shelved for distant future under democracy than under autocracy. However, despite volleys of such criticisms people, including those even of the poorest countries of the world, breed a love for democracy in their bones.

It is often stipulated that in East Asia, reforms came first and then arrived democracy so that the then autocratic rulers could carefully suppress any resistance, whatsoever, arising out of the painful processes. As these countries grew in terms of higher per capita income and better longevity of people, democracy peeped as the most delicious chocolate to chew.

Far from inhibiting growth, democracy in the real sense of the term and not of the type what Bangladeshis, Pakistanis or even Indians are presented with at the moment, is poised to deliver the goods. If democracy lands on our soils with its original form, growth and development cannot be far behind. And then discipline and democracy would not be mutually exclusive events.

Thus growth-led democracy is what appears to happen in the case of East Asia and to some extent it is in the offing in some other countries including China. But in Eastern Europe, former Soviet Union or say, in Bangladesh, democracy seems to have arrived first to welcome reforms so much so that the resistance appears too tough for a nascent democratic regime to swallow. In consequence, most of the reforms requiring to promote rapid economic growth tend to remain half-hearted producing half-baked results. On this score alone, the authoritarianism has a strong popular appeal: "No free speech but the train runs on time."

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, one of the world's most successful economic policy makers (who, in fact, set the tone for today's Singapore) is reported to have told a Filipino audience in 1992: "I do not believe that democracy necessarily leads to development. I believe that what a country needs to develop is discipline more than democracy. The exuberance of democracy leads to indiscipline and disorderly conduct which are inimical to development."

The above mentioned observations by Mr. Lee could, perhaps, be duly applauded by those who are basically (or partially) democracy-averse. But ironically, in recent times, the themes are reported to have been picked up by some of the western "democracy-lovers" too. They tend to view that the

success stories of East Asian Tigers came out of the carrots of autocratic regimes prevailing in those countries rather than out of the groves of democracy. Stretching the argument a little bit further, the opponents of democracy also tend to cite the success story of China (a country with highest growth rate and least democracy in the world). In a similar fashion, the growth rate of Pakistan (a case of infant democracy) is compared with India (a case of adult democracy) or that of to-day's

industries it could concentrate on policies likely to create new jobs and new wealth growth (or democracy and economic efficiency).

Cross country empirical evidence tends to show that the above observations are not true or at best these are half-truths. The proponents of democracy-led development and growth try to cite the examples of Africa, Cuba and North Korea. If authoritarian regimes are friendly to higher growth and development, then why are

rights is also needed if there is to be any lasting commitment to security of property and enforcement of contracts".

Second, a benevolent dictator, it is argued, may pursue right economic policies and ensure higher economic growth. But what he fails to do is to guarantee the credibility and sustainability of the reforms ushered by him "partly because he can suspend them at a moment's notice and partly because when he dies or steps down, he may be replaced by a non-benevolent dictator". Not that democracy in such cases can offer cast-iron guarantees but it is plausible to believe that, over time, "democracy entrenches economic freedom, making them more stable and more credible. In this way political freedom makes a contribution in its own right to economic growth".

Third, the dead-weight loss of resource allocation or corruption, malpractice and nepotism in the society is reported to be on a higher side under autocracy than under democracy. Why? Because, democracy foregoes freedom of press and media, Parliamentary committees etc. where there is a perceived threat from public upheaval. But autocrats do not care for these and as such mushroom growth of these vices are alleged. Thus democracy minimizes resource wastage and nepotism while autocracy tends to load them up.

Fourth, compare the rev-

erse-raising objectives of an autocrat and a democrat. The former is likely to be a revenue-maximizer with very little care for the subjects' left over income. The latter would care for his slice as well as for the distribution of the slice so regenerated. The difference comes from the fact that the former is going to be in power whether his subjects like his policies or not but the latter will have to face his voters after a fixed term. On this account, democracy seems to have an edge over autocracy: tax proceeds are shared with voters and the incentive to grab plenty is muted. There are many instances like the above wherein democracy could be projected more productive than undemocratic governments.

Is democracy a deterrent to or generator of growth and development? Based on cross country analysis, available studies tend to find very little justification to support the view that democratic governments are worse than non-democratic ones. The research is reported to be inconclusive and 'yes' or 'no' differences are also reported to be statistically insecure. What is clearly brought to the fore is the fact that "dictatorships lack the economic strengths of stable democracy". Far from inhibiting growth, democracy in the real sense of the term and not of the type what Bangladeshis, Pakistanis or even Indians are presented with at the moment, is poised to deliver the goods. If democracy lands on our soils with its original form, growth and development cannot be far behind. And then discipline and democracy would not be mutually exclusive events.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



Bangladesh is compared with its erstwhile autocratic periods.

In all of these cases, the haste and fervour with which the undemocratic regimes run economic management, despite the gloss, are vigorously highlighted. Robert Wade of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, while describing Taiwan's political regime and its contribution to economic growth, argued that, "Taiwan's government was able to intervene intelligently in economic management partly because it was spared popular pressure to intervene unintelligently ... instead of giving jobs to doomed

these countries are yet to reach a respectable height in terms of per capita income and Human Development Index? According to this school of thought, there are at least four occasions in which democracy edges out autocracy. First, the greatest virtue of democracy is believed to be the security of property rights which hardly persists under autocracy. Security of property rights is, as one author puts it, "more firmly anchored under democracy than under autocratic rules ... regard for individual rights is necessary for lasting democracy and that regard for exactly the same

Strengthening Edifice of Democracy in Southeast Asia

A fresh mandate certainly gives Mahathir a stronger base to rule the country. This also reinforces the widely held belief and impression that in an era of democracy, people's mandate is crucial to govern, and Mahathir deserves appreciation for the massive mandate he has won.

Indonesia has chosen a new president and a vice-president ending the Suharto era. Strongman General Suharto quit the scene last year facing the pro-democracy unrest but his handpicked vice-president B.J. Habibie, who succeeded him, by and large retained the era of his former boss till Abdurrahman Wahid became the president. Along with Wahid, Meghwati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the nation's first president charismatic Ahmed Sukarno, was elected as the vice-president. She had contested Wahid for the top post but lost. Then in a spirit of remarkable reconciliation accepted the second position because of both national interest and her warm personal rapport with Wahid.

But more recently, it is the Malaysian elections and the triumphal return of prime minister Mahathir Mohamad to power once again with a two-thirds majority that has been the talk among the international and particularly Asian watchers.

Defying the current of change that has swept out many of the old leaders of Asia, the 73-year-old Mahathir has entrenched himself as Asia's longest-serving head of the government. He has been in power

for last twenty years and is now to serve the fifth term. While the previous elections were somewhat of a cakewalk for him as the ineffective opponents failed to mount much opposition to the rule by his multi-party coalition, the elections this time were bitterly contested in the sense that these took place in the aftermath of a political unrest triggered by the sacking of his former key aide Anwar Ibrahim, who is now in jail. Anwar, once a deputy prime minister, was considered Mahathir's heir, but they fell apart last year as Anwar was dismissed on a variety of charges. Anwar called it a "political and personal vendetta".

There were street demonstrations in the country particularly in capital Kuala Lumpur which were one of the most severe since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957. The national elections against this backdrop — and amidst a much-talked-about

trial of Anwar Ibrahim that has had unprecedent media hype — were subject of attention all over the world. The virulent campaign against the prime minister and his ruling coalition by the opposition and especially Anwar's wife Azizah helped the polls look different from the previous balloting. Still, an experienced politician and able administrator as Mahathir who has established himself over the long period that he is at the helm, performed remarkably by winning two-thirds majority in parliament.

True, the opposition is also considerably improved its tally, but the ruling coalition headed by the prime minister has largely maintained the sway, and this is particularly significant in the given situation which was adverse on several counts.

When Mahathir announced snap polls on November 10 and called off a planned trip to Dur-

ban to attend the Commonwealth heads of government meeting (CHOGM), the development took many unawares. But serious watchers were not totally surprised because Mahathir was expected to ward off the growing criticisms by his opponents by nullifying their vociferous attacks. The prime minister, after getting himself embroiled in the Anwar episode, was somewhat on a slippery ground mainly because the dismissed deputy prime minister and his supporters wanted to cash in on slow but declining popularity of the government.

The prime minister is also in debilitating health and Anwar and the other opposition felt that a severe jerk at this stage could seriously affect the government and its head which could eventually lead to their disaster in the next polls. Faced with a sinking economy and worst political crisis in the decades caused by Anwar's dismissal, Mahathir himself was not possibly confident of repeating a good performance in the elections in spite of the fact that the win was never in doubt. But he has no doubt shown a "magic touch" by securing two-thirds majority under these circumstances.

The elections in Malaysia and return of Mahathir will help strengthen democratic values in the sense that a leader, found himself at crossroads, has gone back to the people. A fresh mandate ahead of the tenure will certainly give him and the coalition a stronger base to rule the country. This also reinforces the widely held belief and impression that in an era of democracy, people's mandate is crucial to govern, and Mahathir deserves appreciation for the early polls and the massive mandate he has won.

To the Editor...

"WTO vs Activists: Showdown in Seattle"

Sir, I would like to congratulate Naeem Mohaiemen on contributing the article WTO vs Activists: Showdown in Seattle, where he comprehensively describes the dangers that the World Trade Organization poses towards the world, especially the least developed countries.

In Bangladesh the ready made garments (RMG) industry accounts for three-fourths of the nation's export earnings. Most of the garments are sold in markets in America and Europe. The recent display of activism by labour rights groups in Seattle, coupled with President Clinton's reaction of sympathy to their cause, should be taken as a signal that those markets are in danger of being closed to Bangladesh unless the working conditions of garment workers here are dramatically improved soon. I hope that the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) will recognise this signal and make a sincere effort to co-operate with garment workers to make those improvements. I say this because I worry about the fate of the industry which I truly believe can pull Bangladesh out of its poverty.

Luke Meisner
Gulshan, Dhaka

ical catastrophe it may create in the future. Who is right or wrong in this issue should only be decided by appropriate unbiased studies not by party favours.

Mohammed Selim
2935 Crown Canyon Ct
Reno, Nevada 89512, USA

Right and wrong

Sir, I am not quite sure, at this point, who is right and who is wrong. I, however, believe that Bangladesh and India, both countries have got to work together to promote bilateral ties, especially in the field of trade and commerce.

Shah
90 Eastdale Ave #611
Toronto M4C5A2
Canada

"Tragic death of 2 cadet college boys"

Sir, After reading the news Tragic death of 2 cadet college boys, published in The Daily Star on Nov 22, I became sad and I express my condolences for the two young souls. I am an ex-cadet from Mirzapur Cadet College (MCC) and in my six years of cadet life, I have experienced a lot of different things. Among them, some are pleasant, some are very unpleasant. Cadet Colleges are educational institutions, not a military academy. These institutions are, to a great extent, the best educational institutions, not because these have the best teachers, but they select the best boys/girls.

Perhaps there are some experts among us who can throw some light.

Touhidul Islam
USA

enrolling there, everything changes. They have to remain alert all the time. If something goes wrong, the cadets are severely punished. Fear of punishment makes them disengaged from their main purpose — education and discipline".

This is very tragic that two cadets had to die. It would not have happened if the instructors were properly trained. From my experience, I can say these instructors are not at all qualified for treating 12 or 13 year-olds. When I was in the college, I had to confront with our instructors several times. Some cadets had to go for daily PT and pained, even they were very ill. They were afraid to report about their sickness. Even if they did, they were accused of lying.

I think the government should take some step to modernise these institutions and ban those obsolete methods of punishing students.

Zulfikar Ali
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
USA

Profit in the name of welfare?

Sir, I never understood (nor do I now), what is a Non-Governmental Organisation. From layperson's perspective, it sounds somewhat akin to a Non-Profit Organisation in US lingo. If that is the case then, how/why are NGOs permitted to operate profit-making concerns like cellular telephone networks etc?

Perhaps there are some experts among us who can throw some light.

Touhidul Islam
USA

Land fee for
Transhipment

Sir, Since India is our neighbouring state and helped us during the 1971 War, I do not think we should make a big deal about transhipment of Indian goods through our land. However, if we are only profiting Tk. 2,000 per year from this deal, I think the government should look into it and see how much India is saving by using our land. To me, they will be saving a lot. Therefore, why don't we demand part of their savings as a land fee for using our land? Take 2,000 per year is not worth it to go through the politi-

banks money transaction takes place openly which everyone can see. No one would be able to tell if there is a hijacker in the crowd, observing everything. I suggest they construct booths where transaction of large sums would take place.

Zia Khundkar
Dhaka

Fake patriots

Sir, It seems the political parties in our country, in position or in opposition, are hardly conscious of the sentiments and desires of the electorate on whose mandate they stand to administer the country. Once they come in power, they just don't give a hoot about good governance and the welfare of the people. It is intriguing to note that even when thinking about contesting elections, they blatantly propagate for their own welfare and objectives as if the mandate of the electorate is of least significance. If this be the trend of our politics and democracy in this country, then there is indeed no hope.

The four chiefs of the principal opposition parties have very graciously decided to scrap SPA and make the electronic media free of state control if voted to form government and also to opt for coalition government for their own accommodation. But have they ever or will they ever talk or pledge about if and how they will improve the country's lot and create jobs for them and let them live in peace and tranquility and serve them in the way responsible governments in civilized countries do.

These objective-less and responsibility-less political parties and the people running these parties, reflect the shallowness of mind and ability to govern the country. All we hear from the ruling and the opposition party people, capitalising on the votes of