

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali
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Of Discipline and Sacrifice

WE are into the month of abnegation and prayer. By denying ourselves food and drink before sunset we shall get a feel of what starvation means to millions in the country. Ramadan generates an empathy with the malnourished, under-nourished multitudes barely breathing on the margins of life. Apart from this churning of a fellow-feeling in the faster's mind, the importance of food dawned on his or her consciousness in a slightly different but equally significant way. It is the food we waste in surfeit throughout the rest of the year that keeps hurting our conscience as the Ramadan rolls on.

So, the moral here is this: never allow any victual to rot or be thrown into a dustbin, instead make it a point to share it — when still unharmed to health — with folks who cannot afford it. Since fasting is an antonym of gluttony, overeating is ruled out at *Iftar* and *Sehri* times. It is basically self-purification in bodily and spiritual terms that Ramadan stands for, so that austerity is to be regarded as the key element of the whole effort. In an extended sense, personal gratification better be kept at a level that does not militate against the societal interest.

So, the fundamental message of Ramadan is sacrifice for the sake of others, something which is best translated at the governmental level by an expenditure pattern oriented to the average men and women of the country rather than lining the pockets of a few. At the professional levels of doctors, engineers, teachers, policemen, industrialists and businessmen one expects that they would reflect a robust sense of social commitment.

Profiteering and extortionism have a way of exacerbating, quite ingeniously at that, during the month of Ramadan. No amount of exhortation can drum sense into the ears of those who commit such offences. Administrative vigil is called for.

It is said that nothing is possible without discipline, and no discipline is possible without sacrifice. These wise words square up with the essence of Ramadan. The holy month inculcates the spirit of discipline based on sacrifice, sacrifice of not merely earthly appetites but also of consuming personal and party egos and prejudices for the greatest good of the largest number.

Given the continual political strife that remains as our uppermost national concern today, we cannot but turn to the spirit of Ramadan, born of the twin emphases on discipline and sacrifice, for guidance through the dark tunnel we find ourselves stranded in. The path of anarchy national politics is embarked upon needs to be abandoned before all boats are burnt to national reconciliation. We have a particular suggestion for the month of Ramadan.

In deference to the spirit of *Siam* political parties have traditionally put off agitational programmes during the holy month. Our entreaty with the opposition will be that not merely they abide by the established practice but also extend the spirit in a way that they can utilise the Ramadan respite for a spade-work towards an early resolution of their differences.

Let the purity of Ramadan sentiments stimulate a genuine launching of a formal initiative by the PM for a dialogue with the opposition leader, who in her turn, imbued by the same spirit, ought to be receptive to it.

Friday Mailbox

Democratic breeze

Sir, It was indeed satisfying to read that some intellectuals have started questioning the severe government control of the independent body known as the Bangla Academy. Any 'Academy' should not be under direct or indirect political control.

Culture may flower, but not under polarised fertilizer scheming. The political leaders should have the guts to leave certain areas free from their corrosive presence. Whatever they touch, they muddle it, at least in the LDCs. Who gave them this authority? Certainly not the people, the people's representatives may kindly remember. This representation is a trust, not a license. Do we wish that our democratic engine should be run by bulldozers.

The sad thing to note is that there are no people's bodies (non-political), to criticise the politicians who misuse power and influence. What a pity our intellectuals are generally found to be polarised. It is the weakness of the citizens that we allow them such leeway. There could be other darlings of the crowds. It is very easy to compromise in principle, and join a camp, for quick and transient personal gains. The society has to demarcate the political grazing grounds. One cannot chew another's cud!

A Zabr
Dhaka.

A better tomorrow?

Sir, The rioting in Seattle, USA on the occasion of the WTO conference was a message against the cunning domination by the industrialised nations for the global trade, who use WTO as a ploy to strengthen their hold on the deprived nations in the Third World countries.

It is not surprising that Seattle is behaving like the *hartaal* sights in Dhaka. Violence and indiscipline is the voice of the millennium. We wait for the next crash of the Wall Street (Dhaka SE index has gone down from 3,500 to below 500 — a world record). There is an indirect price to pay for the heartless exploitation of billions who also hope for a better tomorrow.

A Husnain
Dhaka.

Bursting the WTO bubble

Sir, The WTO bubble had to burst at Seattle (riots), exposing the long-term secret plan of the industrialised countries to capture the global markets, and deny development of third world products (much cheaper), marketing and services. We are told what to do for them, but we cannot tell what to do for us. This dictatorial situation will last till the next collapse of the Wall Street (the other big powers are non-entities).

The problem is due to one angle or aspect of the whole issue: the only superpower is on the other side — as the US President has himself indirectly admitted after the Seattle flare-up. This attitude brings up the other point: the national and international policy-making in the developed countries are controlled by the industrial and business lobbies. The latter have not yet developed in the LDCs to have a sizeable effect on the local and external public opinion.

The produce of the DCs and LDCs are rural, agricultural, or cottage-industry oriented, with weak lobbies, weak economy, and weak governments (weak political base, resulting in sustained instability); as it is also labour intensive; which cannot compete with high speed mass

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Post-crisis Recovery in Southeast Asia

Success often breeds complacency. The early signs of rapid economic recoveries may tempt policy makers in these countries to curtail their reform efforts in the mistaken belief that with their economies on the mend the need to pursue restructuring has somehow lessened.

Central banks have significantly eased credit conditions, so interest rates have declined substantially. Lower interest rates have had two positive effects — they have made debt repayments more manageable and reduced borrowing costs. In addition, government spending in these countries has increased.

Second, the economies have remained open during this tumultuous period. No government has cut its ties to the global economy, although Malaysia did impose some controls on the flow of capital into and out of the country. Open trade and investment strategies allowed these economies to rely on exports to propel economic activity during the crisis when domestic conditions were so poor.

Third, all the affected countries are moving towards restructuring their economies. Some are moving more quickly than others, but all are making the necessary adjustments to remedy the kind of structural problems that played a part in igniting the crisis. This process will take time, especially in the area of financial system reform, but these countries currently appear to be moving in the right direction.

In a report prepared for an Asian economic outlook workshop in Manila in late November, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) raised its economic growth forecast for Asia's developing countries to 5.7 per cent this year and next. The East Asian currency crisis had pulled down growth of gross domestic product in the region in 1998 to 2.3 per cent from 6.1 per cent in 1997 and 7.4 per cent in 1996. The ADB report also mentioned that the outlook for the region had changed dramatically over the past year, leading the institution to increase its economic growth forecast for Asia, just two months after the last upward adjustment in September. This shows how many institutions and analysts have been taken by surprise by the speed and the resilience of the economic recovery.

More than two years have passed since the onset of the Asian financial crisis in July 1997. What was first perceived as a localised currency and financial crisis in Thailand soon spread to Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines and eventually much of the rest of Southeast Asia. The following year, Russia and Latin America were affected by the contagion, and international stock markets plummeted as investor confidence was shaken by the spreading crisis.

While the region continues to sort through many serious economic and social issues, most of the individual countries have begun to work through their respective economic difficulties and appear to be moving toward a recovery. There are increasing signs that economic and financial conditions are improving. Economic activity is rebounding, and financial markets are recovering from some of the heavy losses experienced over the last two years.

Economic growth in the developing Asian economies appears to be following the distinct V-shaped path of a sharp, short recession instead of a U-shaped track that would indicate a sharp downturn with little or no recovery for some time. The current and projected economic recovery is most impressive in South Korea with GDP expected to rise 9 per cent in 1999; while Indonesia remains behind the curve.

This economic resurgence has been fuelled largely by expansionary monetary and fiscal policies, the return of international capital and strong Y2K related electronic exports to the developed countries.

The general factors that have contributed to Southeast Asia's recovery can be summarised as follows. First, the economic policies pursued by the authorities have contributed greatly to the recovery.

Abdul M Ahmad
Dhaka.

The Seattle fiasco

Sir, After many hullabaloes, the inconclusive world trade talks at Seattle finally proved to be much ado about nothing. In spite of dissensions on the streets, the parties on the stage stuck to their stereotype roles based on enlightened self and group interests.

There were two-pronged attempts by the Americans to slash the huge agricultural subsidies to farmers provided by the EU countries and Japan and also to link trade deals with labour and environmental standards especially in case of developing nations. But ultimately nothing emerged from the talks and the Americans were dubbed an incompetent organiser failing to come to an agreement renewing trade talks at the start of the new century.

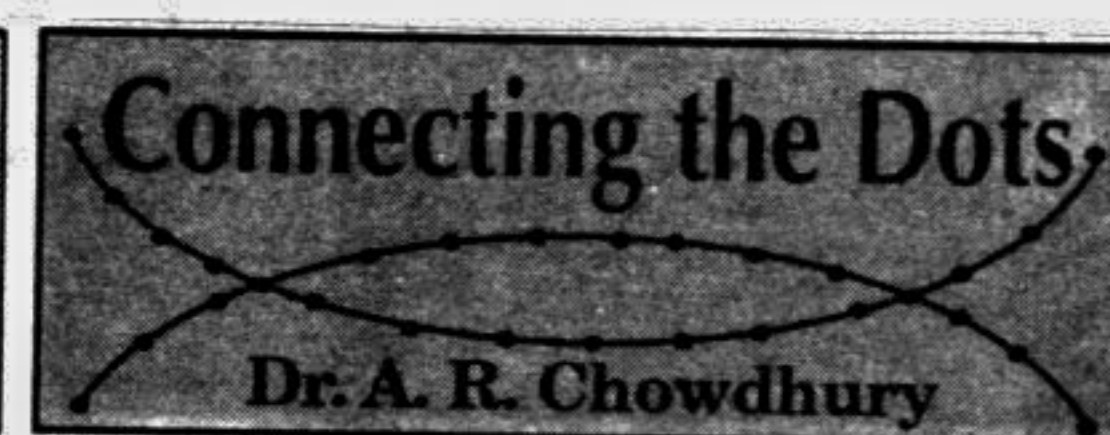
There were complaints by representatives from the developing countries that they were treated like animals, were kept out in the cold during the talks and told nothing. That probably reflects the status of Third World representatives in global dialogues at the present juncture. Especially since the end of the cold war and the capitalist transformation of Eastern Europe, the developing nations are now a marginalised lot in global exchanges. They are overwhelmed by the strength of a united capitalist front that always tend to uphold the interests of their mighty multinational business empires, their work-force and their life-styles.

Much has been said by the developed West about child labour in developing countries. But what they overlook is that it is the market forces (so extolled and sanctified by the capitalists) which determine the entry of children into the labour market. For millions of children in the Third World, work is a brutal compulsion, a question of life and death — one's very survival often hanging on that.

The advantages that the western capitalist societies acquired through their colonial rules and possessions have placed them in a driving seat in the global arena. They are now making good use of that advantage through neo-colonial ploys like controlling the global economy and regulating the flow of capital and labour throughout the world. Thus, opening up their borders for free flow of labour according to their own capitalist theory, would have been an optimal economic solution.

They are strangulating Third World labour with closed borders and instructions on who should and who should not work. In the process, they are making an attempt to treat the symptom rather than the cause, ultimately defying the very market force they hold so sacred. What a mockery!

Helal Uddin Ahmed
Editor of Bangladesh Quarterly
Dhaka.



Finally, the strength of the US economy has contributed to Asia's recovery. As the Asian countries used exports to earn money for their wounded economies, the US has been a major customer. This increase in imports of Asian goods into the US market has helped in improving the trade situation in these countries.

For better or for worse, the Asian crisis prompted investors to reassess investments in all emerging markets. It revealed a tendency among investors to treat emerging markets as an asset class, whether the markets are in Asia, the former Soviet republics or Latin America.

Perhaps the first time the Asian crisis started being considered as an emerging markets' problem rather than a regional situation was when stocks in Latin America tumbled in late 1997 after strong returns in the early part of the

year. The contagion in equity markets began when it appeared that Hong Kong's currency board regime was coming under pressure, raising concerns over the maintenance of Argentina's currency convertibility regime, which is similar to a currency board. Ultimately, neither country changed its exchange rate system.

In one sense the international crisis appears to be over because the affected Asian economies are recovering and are no longer constituting a drag on other parts of the world, at least in terms of trade flows and financial market effects.

With the important task of reviving growth and the Asian countries must now aim to make this growth sustainable. The expansionary monetary and fiscal policies that helped in the rebound cannot be kept up forever. Public sector debt has increased, and while total

debt remains low by international standards, countries must start the process of fiscal consolidation now. Also, despite excess capacity, strong economic showing may lead to inflationary pressure which would require a monetary policy response.

If policy makers in the region continue to restructure and reform their economies, the longer-term economic and financial outlooks should remain positive. The achievements so far have been impressive, but there is much more work to be done. The factors that have fueled economic resurgence may not be there two or three years down the road.

For example, declining interest rates in the region coupled with rising rates in the US and Europe could slow down capital inflows into the region. Moreover, unless the problems of non-performing loans was addressed banks would not be able to help recapitalize insolvent companies. Without a properly functioning banking system, a credit crunch is a real possibility. Finally, without corporate restructuring, excess capacity will continue and investment will suffer. Despite evidence of an eco-

nomie rebound, social indicators in these countries reveal that there has been serious social costs to the financial crisis that may take longer to work through in the region.

In each country, a significant segment of the population is living in poverty — in many cases, extreme poverty. Put simply, the financial crisis has made some of the rich less rich, has pushed many of the middle class into poverty and has made the poor in these countries poorer. It may take years for this situation to greatly improve. For instance, while analysts believe that South Korea will recover to their pre-crisis level of national income next year, Indonesia is not expected to return to a pre-crisis level for some time. In the next stage of the recovery process, policy makers in these countries must, therefore, concentrate on improving the social indicators.

Success often breeds complacency. The early signs of rapid economic recoveries may tempt policy makers in these countries to curtail their reform efforts in the mistaken belief that with their economies on the mend the need to pursue restructuring has somehow lessened.

This would be unfortunate. If the momentum for further economic reform and restructuring is lost, the potential for these countries to return to a rapid and continuous economic growth path will be greatly hampered.

One For AIDS

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

The numbers about AIDS are staggering by all means. Almost 95 per cent of the people around the world with HIV/AIDS do not know that they are infected. There has been a 100 per cent increase in the number of HIV/AIDS patients in the former Soviet Union in last two years. There are 4 million Indians living with HIV, which is higher than in any country of the world. In Bangladesh, we have every reason to feel concerned about a formidable adversary, which is elusive, rapid and adjacent.

THE observance of the World AIDS Day last week coincided with an AIDS awareness workshop, which I had attended two days earlier. The workshop was organised by the HIV/AIDS Awareness Writers' Group, a forum of journalists trying to promote knowledge and understanding of the deadly disease in collaboration with Standard Chartered Bank. What I had long perceived as a disgusting scourge, which took its toll on promiscuous men and women, surfaced in a new light as I realised that there was more to understand the disease than fear it, John Nashe, an English pamphleteer, wailed in *Summer's Last Will and Testament*. "From winter, plague and pestilence, good lord, deliver us! This winter we need to plead with ourselves for deliverance from the ignorance of the plague which threatens to wipe out a great portion of the human race."

In 1999, nearly 2.6 million people have died from AIDS all over the world. More than 50 million people have been infected with HIV since the beginning of the AIDS scare and almost 16 million have succumbed to its ravage. It is projected that another 14 million people will be infected with HIV within next 4-5 years in sub-Saharan Africa alone. As we prepare ourselves in the gathering momentum of the colliding centuries, it appears that, once

the millennium bug is successfully tackled, the biggest threat facing us will be the bug inside our own bodies.

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According to the experts who spoke at the HIV/AIDS awareness workshop, the infiltration of HIV into the country has started already. Even though more than 500 sex workers tested were found HIV negative, the infection has been found in other categories. But the real threat of HIV is not that it exists in the population but its capacity to multiply at a dizzying rate. In Bangkok, HIV infection increased from a negligible one per cent to more than seventy per cent within a few years. One more revealing information came from another guest speaker. A survey

has identified almost ten thousand male prostitutes in Dhaka city alone.

Plague and pestilence are how nature does its own periodic housecleaning. One doesn't have to be a fan of Malthus to know that decimation of human population has been an essential way to maintain equilibrium between demography and ecology. The earliest plague known was traced at least 2000 years ago when a great epidemic from AD 542 to 594 killed about half the population of the Roman Empire. The so-called Black Death, which had started in eastern Asia in the 14th century, spread to Asia Minor, Arabia, Egypt, North Africa and Europe. This pandemic had destroyed about 25 million people and over half the population of England. The last pandemic appeared in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894 and spread to Japan, India and Asia Minor, then to USA, South Africa and South America.

AIDS has been the most daunting catalyst of the twentieth century when man, pushing the frontiers of mind and intellect, fizzled before the limits of his own body. One can attribute many reasons to how HIV sneaks up on the human body. It transmits in varying degrees through blood, semen and saliva, but arrives in the immune system like the Visigoths and destroys its civilization. AIDS wastes a human body like termites waste a piece

of wood as the outer shell slowly caves in to the dissipation of inner substance. If death is the end of suffering for most patients, the suffering starts with the anticipation of death for an AIDS victim.

Thus, if we have succumbed to the tragedy of HIV already, we are yet to cope with its trauma. As the keynote speaker made his point social taboo stares death in the face of an AIDS patient, which need not be the case.

He claimed that an AIDS patient doesn't have to die of his misfortune, because its severity can be controlled if the patient is restrained in his habits and takes medication at the same time although he will never cease to be the carrier of the virus. For example, smoking would be a no-no for an AIDS patient. Just like the transportation of an explosive cargo, the AIDS patient can avoid hazard if he knows how to carry it safely. The speaker claimed that he has been successful with one or two his patients.

Which means, if prevention is better than cure in any other case, preparation is better than prevention in case of AIDS. In other words, defense is the best offense for an AIDS patient who cannot exercise any control over it once he is infected. That gives it something common with the preparation for Y2K. If the mitigation plan doesn't help, the contingency plan must

be activated. It means, while cure of AIDS seems to be futile and its prevention far-fetched, the most plausible deterrent to its devastation is to prepare for it. Those who will be fortunate not to impregnate this scourge upon themselves through promiscuity or blood transfusion and contaminated syringes must stay the course of prevention already. Those who cannot ensure prevention due to sexual or other follies must at least know how well to prepare for it until there is a cure or check for it. Anglo-Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith writes that the first blow is half the battle. Perhaps the first blow to AIDS will be dealt when we will have learned to be ready for it.

A representative from the AIDS Prevention Programme Implementation Committee in Moulvibazar told me recently that the time for that readiness has come already. Citing examples of HIV/AIDS infection amongst the Monipurs, he warned that it is not long before this scourge starts knocking on our doors. In their proposal it has been mentioned that more than 20,000 infected cases have been detected in Bangladesh. That, if true, is another staggering statistics. Robert McNamara, the former US Defense Secretary, said during the Vietnam War that statistics will not bleed either, but only kill.

OPINION

Decentralized Administration

by Akbaruddin Ahmed

Concentration of power at the center and economic disparity within regions have been the major cause for the uneven development of various areas within the sub-continent. And this has been one of the main reasons for many a dissent, skirmish even breakup within the region.

Regional groupings with religious and/or language alignments have emerged in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh, however, is a homogenous country with the majority speaking the same language. But development has not always been even across the country. Of late, in particular, Larma and his group have achieved something unheard of even a few years back in respect of autonomy and self rule in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where most of the tribal people live. Anyway, for the sake of peace, what the main party has done to calm the tribals may go down in history as a monumental achievement for AL. UNESCO has expressed its laurel in the form of a Peace Prize given to our PM, BNP, however, resented such unilateral steps taken by AL government for bringing in peace to the troubled tribal region and arming the insurgents and financially offering them their own amnesty and financial assistance for their rehabilitation.

Meanwhile Tangail-8 by-election has been farcical as reported by different quarters. The CEC is in a fix and also the government. AL should have shown its magnanimity by conducting a free and fair poll. Allowing Kader Siddiqui to win would have only enhanced the prestige of AL. It appears that AL has made him a hero. The chances of Siddiqui forming a regional political party cannot be ruled out. His target would be to get the greater Mymensingh under his control. If he can do

that and field some good candidates, then we can expect a different scenario in the next election. It would not be surprising if some more regional parties are soon announced to counter the majorities of the two major political camps. Larma with his team already has a party and all that is required is to make an announcement before the next general elections of his intentions and political ambitions. Then it is only a matter of time that each of the divisional headquarters will soon have their own political groupings and the emergence of localised parties will become a reality. These regional groupings will counter the bigger national parties and will become tough contenders for the local municipal, upazila and even the JS polls.

The countries comprising SAARC still remain as one of the poorest regions of the world with as much as a quarter of the world population within its fold. Larger countries are breaking up into more homogeneous smaller sizes on the basis of language, culture and/or religion. People around the world are becoming more conscious about their rights and responsibilities with the active participation of non-government institutions that are providing the necessary training to the masses much to the disgust and apprehension of the anti-people autocrats. The regional assemblies in India have become very powerful with substantial influence on the formation of alliances and coalition government at the centre. Regional parties have a major role in the state policy frame-work with tendencies of drifting away from the clutches of the central government controls.

It is high time that our elected representatives (MPs) of major regional areas must get a fair share in the management of the state affairs of the country to avoid being left out. There appears to be serious cracks within the major political parties as many law-makers feel left out and dejected with the autocratic handling of party policies. These unhappy lawmakers cannot contribute to the welfare of their voters they represent.

A close look at our neighbour, India, clearly shows that provinces with a pro-active social policy and keeping abreast with the trends in the global market have directed their energies in those sectors. The State of Karnataka is a case in point where it turned the entire Bangalore area into a well-respected Global IT center with a separate IT Department with a Minister and a Secretary to assist the private sector. Hyderabad is another case where the state government is encouraging overseas investors with their own state/regional incentives in respect of taxes, infrastructural facilities, banking facilities etc.

Hartal called by one party in Dhaka has a ripple effect all over the country. It is now the BNP and earlier the AL which showed the path to this destructive form of movement against the government. In a decentralised set-up, the regional governments will not allow the agitation in one area to affect another if the other area is governed well and maybe by another regional party with different plans, programmes and ideologies. Each regional administration will remain autonomous with some important areas like currency, defence and foreign affairs as common subjects administered by the central government. Regional parties will have their own election mandate and shall remain answerable to their respective constituencies and the respective region as a whole.

Bangladesh can very conveniently be divided into seven regions i.e. the present six administrative divisions and the seventh should be the greater Mymensingh. Mymensingh was the biggest district during the British period. Six new districts were carved out of this large district. Unfortunately, Mymensingh was not converted into a Division although it had the infrastructure, size and the resources. Strangely, much smaller areas like Barisal and Sylhet were given the status of Division. The primary consideration was the political pressure that was exerted by influential quarters during the BNP rule which transformed these two areas into Divisions. Creation of Divisions are meaningless without the formation of infrastructural facilities for each division including the decentralisation of administrative functions.

The much talked about administrative reforms are required to be rapidly implemented. The number of positions within the administration must be drastically curtailed. Excess staff and officers may be offered the golden hand-shake. The sooner it is done the better. On the basis of the domicile or place of birth or the permanent village/thana address of the government officials and staff, efforts should be made to send them to those areas. This will lessen the pressure on the capital Dhaka city. All officers upto the level of Joint Secretary may be transferred to the district level. A skeleton body known as the central government will remain in Dhaka with the minimum officers and staff. Additional Secretaries and Secretaries with their numbers much reduced should be allowed to operate from Dhaka. Each Division could be renamed as Region and these regions may

have their Regional Assemblies. The size of these Assemblies would be dependent on the number of districts and the population within the respective Region. The Regions with maximum autonomy and a Council of Ministers under the Chief Minister could function very effectively. The Head of the Region would be a Governor appointed by the central government. The Regions would have its own budgets, income and expenditure. Some Regions may be richer than others initially but with pragmatic policies none will remain poor for all times to come.

These important issue can be implemented only through a referendum. These matters are very basic and need a thorough study. To expect a broad based development, strategies at all levels have to be sorted out. To start the process, we should decentralize the administration without delay and all decision-making activities should be concentrated as of now at the D.C. level in districts. Of course, the position should be upgraded to that of a Joint Secretary. The involvement of the elected Members of the Parliaments and later the Assemblies will be essential on advisory capacity. The services of independent professionals from different fields should be obtained. Finally, the term of the Central government should be reduced to a maximum period of four years and the incumbent Prime Minister should not be allowed to serve for more than two terms. Political leaders, professionals and the people at large may think and find out a more suitable form of decentralised administration for the greater national interest.

The writer is a computer and financial consultant