

## Where is the Light at the End of the Tunnel?

So now there is hartal on Monday. The purpose is to resist submission of papers for the Chittagong City Corporation elections. Our politics has entered a dark tunnel, and we don't see any light at its end. The opposition is demanding early elections, and is threatening a general close down of economic and civic life — meaning continuous hartals — if it does not have its way. The ruling party is all but nonchalant about all this.

It makes public postures about talks, while merrily going about its own way of harassing, intimidating and otherwise doing everything to debilitate the opposition, including piling up a mountain of police cases against a selected number of them. All this, on the one hand, is distancing the two sides more and more, and on the other, creating a great sense of frustration among the general public. Hence our question, where is the light at the end of this dark political tunnel, and it is getting darker by the day.

Our first question is to the opposition. Only a year and half is left — at the maximum — for the next election, which will be held under a caretaker government. Is that too long a wait for the next election? Has it been calculated what turmoil will have to be created, what harm will have to be done to the economy, civic life and normal affairs of the country to force the government to cut short its due term? There could perhaps be some justification if the wait was for several years.

For the government our question is related to its sincerity about holding a dialogue with the opposition. We doubt its genuineness. If not, then why the PM, or the ruling party Secretary General, does not write officially to their respective counterparts inviting the opposite side for talks? Leaving aside creating an atmosphere for talks, the air is being polluted with personal attacks and police oppression and legal harassment. Does the ruling party really believe that it can carry on a genuine and acceptable democratic political process by ignoring the opposition?

We urge both sides, especially the government, to understand that the path they are following leads only to a dead end with horrendous consequences for the country and its people. As political leaders you don't have the right to behave in such a manner. Change before we lose further opportunity to catch up with the rest of the world. Please show us some light at the end of this tunnel.

## Victuals Vigil

SINCE the government imposed a ban on import of vetch, a toxic grain which can damage human tissues and eye-sight if consumed regularly, nearly two months back, the issue seems to have been pushed to the back-burner. Despite our specific suggestions in one of our editorials (*Probe Needed*; October 18, 1999) to "withdraw the stock from the market ... and finally take action against those officials who cleared the importation and the businessmen who did it," the government hasn't made any move in this direction that we know of. During the prime minister's recent visit to Australia the issue was raised and the Australian Trade Minister Mark Vale also talked of a joint probe. On the ground, nothing concrete seems to have taken place. The proposal of Pulse Australia, an association of producers of pulse and vetch Down Under, for formation of a panel of experts drawn from Australia and Bangladesh to test different varieties of pulse and vetch certainly comes as a testimony to the unfinished work.

With the holy month of Ramadan likely to increase the consumer demand for lentil and pulse, many fear that some unscrupulous traders might off-load the stock already imported in powdered form, either in the name of *baslon* (pulverised lentil/corn used to prepare some iftar items) or as an admixture to the same. We would like to believe that the government might have anticipated such a perfidious ploy and duly taken guard against it. Otherwise, as we have said before, the very purpose of banning import of vetch would be defeated.

At this point of time, we urge the authority to take a two-pronged measure. First, they should launch a crash programme to find out whether there is any stock of vetch in the market and, if found, destroy it. Secondly, it should immediately review and speed up implementation of Pulse Australia's proposal, thereby eliminating the woeful prospect of vetch sneaking into our market some way or the other. Besides, punishment for the dishonest officials and the unscrupulous traders should by no means slip out of the plan.

## Still Playing Football!

THE much-hyped rehabilitation programme for the evicted sex workers of Tanbari and Nimgali has reportedly failed to achieve any result. The rehabilitation package worth taka 2 crore was announced by the Prime Minister in August last. The Social Welfare Directorate has so far been allocated Tk 1.55 crore of which Tk 30 lac has been spent for, nobody knows, how many of the 3,500 evictees there are. The presence of only 120 persons in government-run shelters at Kashimpur and Pubail is quite unsatisfactory. On the government's part, this surely is an explicit instance of an unplanned approach. And also, some financial irregularities, if not outright misappropriation, have been alleged.

A statement by the Social Welfare Secretary on an ongoing 10-crore-taka UNDP project is worth quoting: "The UNDP-allocated fund in Narayanpur will be spent in a different way. At present, as suggested by the organisation, we are running a survey on floating sex workers. At the same time, we are trying to better the living standard of these women." Now, there is an apparent lack of decision in rehabilitating the ill-fated lot. Actually, nobody seems to be taking up the issue seriously. Also, there is hardly any coordination between non-government organisations, working for these people, and the government. We urge all concerned to put their heads together and come forward with a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the floating sex workers as a mandatory undertaking.

It is, perhaps, a forgone conclusion that politics of a country has impact (positive or negative) on the economy of that particular country. To give more credence to this notion, it is generally hypothesized that political stability is *sine qua non* for economic growth and development of any country, be it small or big. Differentiated political environments in different countries, arguably, tend to result in varying economic performances among them. For example, liberals generally deem democracy as the apostle of faster economic growth while others (partly convinced by the role of dictatorship in East Asian countries) tend to praise authoritarian regimes on that count. Few years back, the *Economist* dealt with the issue of measuring the price of politics and submitted some interesting observations for the consumption of the readers.

At the very outset, it needs to be established that, as far as economists are concerned, they are yet to come up with a definitive answer to the apparent causality between politics and economics. Traditional growth theorists, for example, considers total output as a function of capital, labour and the state of the technology. The famous law of diminishing return should enable a poorer country to reap more benefits from the additional capital given a higher re-

turn on additional capital in that country. As a result, poorer countries should grow faster to bridge the gap between the LDCs and the DCs. However, if one compares the growth rates between Bolivia and Malaysia between 1965 and 1995, one stands surprised with the evidence of missed convergence of economic growth. In 1995 Bolivia had a per capita GDP of US\$ 745 compared to Malaysia's US\$ 870 (a difference of roughly 15 per cent.) But now Malaysians, reportedly, are roughly four times as rich as the Bolivians. The most pertinent question is: how could that happen? There are a variety of factors adduced for the emergence of such a yawning gap and political differences are tipped as the most important. "Slow growth may be the result of insecure property rights, which make people reluctant to invest, or lack of respect for the rule of law. Which makes citizens wary of doing business with strangers."

General comments on the political factors constraining growth generally abound. But the most important challenge that economists seem to face is

to pin down the specific political factor, which is relevant to economics. In other words, among a set of available political factors affecting economy only few could have direct correlation with economics and were formidable to do the exercise. One popular approach has been to equate economic growth performance with the nature of political regimes (either democratic or autocratic.) Which are

suits either way." The researches, of course, admitted that such an outcome was not unexpected given the way democracy was measured. In most cases, the measurement of democracy was based on an index that concentrates heavily on the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. These factors, they argue, may be less important than the stability of a regime and the confi-

definitional determinants. 11 other studies banked on "instability indices". The instability indices were based, for example, on the number of mishaps that tend to shake a country's political regime, e.g. number of coups, revolutions and political assassinations. This time, the "instability index" so constructed observed that the rate of economic growth is negatively correlated with the number of disturbing events. But the relationship between growth and stability was not found to be strong (and hence expectations still loomed large for a better indicator.)

In the search for a better indicator, economists then turned on to the "political credibility index". The political factors that mattered most to business were taken up as the explanatory variables. A sample of entrepreneurs from 28 developing countries were asked two general questions: (i) whether they had to cope with unexpected changes in laws or policies that could easily affect their business and (ii) whether strict adherence to announced policies were expected by them.

To face the above mentioned

friendly to higher growth? The *Economist* quoted survey results from three Swiss economists who completed 16 empirical studies on the above mentioned nexus. Three of them find a negative correlation (i.e. the more democratic a country, the lower its growth rate), three find a positive one and ten find no conclusive re-

dence that inventors have in mind in the political environment. We, the Bangladeshis should also bear in mind that a fair and transparent electoral process has very little to lure investors. Rather we should emphasise stability of political environment.

To face the above mentioned

## Need for Political Reforms and Reconciliation

by Aabed Rahman

**B**ANGLADESH, once a country known for golden fibre, is now one of the 48 LDCs. A country now is better known for its floods, poverty and, in particular, "hartal" tantamount to political instability.

Whenever I talk to people from better off section of our society, most of them being educated living both at home and abroad, they express their severe frustrations on the manner the country is being run and on the prevailing socio-economic and political situation.

According to them, there is no hope for this country to survive the way it could have been. I do not blame them; they have reasons to be frustrated.

I personally also share some of their views; but certainly not all. True, compared to a small land we have a large population. With result-oriented human resource development and pragmatic employment policy, we can turn this huge population from burden into fortune by training them as skilled or semi-skilled manpower.

With liberalisation and globalisation, time may come soon when there would be free movement of persons across the world under the GATS Agreement. And certainly, receiving countries would prefer skilled or semi-skilled manpower to unskilled labours. Apart from jute and other export products like garments, frozen fish, tea etc., Bangladesh is also the 5th largest rice producer in the world heralding her determination in being self-sufficient in food production.

Many multi-nationals are now also eyeing on her natural gas reserve. More importantly, Bangladesh has got some unique characteristics. We are a homogenous society; have social and religious harmony, our society is not divided on caste and ethnic lines.

We had a land reform after the independence, though in a small scale, that had also played a positive role in building such a society. This uniqueness, if put in proper perspective, can prosper this now poor country at least into a middle-income country within a short period.

In contrast, many neighbouring countries are sharply divided on caste and ethnic lines; have communal agitation and restlessness. Yet, these countries are doing much better in economic domain for the fact

that they have some other important uniqueness. Politicians in these countries firmly believe in democracy and transfer of power in democratic way.

They have institutions to enforce rule of law and to keep democracy strengthening and in view of the present political context of our country, perhaps the most important ways these countries differ from ours is that they have an autonomous, free, fair and effective Election Commission. Where is our Problem?

Certainly our people are not responsible for country's dismal performance in economic and social sphere. Our politicians have miserably failed to move the country forward. The good part of them, however, is that they have consensus on major policies on economic and social sectors. But they didn't act so. The continuation of the same economic policy by all the three successive governments

destroying the economy and keeping the people hostage to their act designed only to grab power.

A section of so-called corrupt bureaucrats and so-called intelligentsia and academia takes full advantage of the lack of vision, ignorance and incompetence of the political leadership. I heard a number of politicians saying that though bureaucrats are equally responsible for any specific corruption, it is only the politicians who pay the price and sometimes have to go to jail. Only advantage for the politicians is that unlike general convicts, they have to spend a brief time there. The state machinery has always been active to free them as early as possible through clemency. A country like ours perhaps cannot do without these politicians. Perhaps we cannot also do without their accomplice bureaucrats. This is reflected in the appointments

interested aimed primarily to grab power or to stick to power by any means. In fact frustrations of the opposition parties come from their staying out of power leading to resorting to economy destroying policies and tactics to oust the Government in power even if elected in free and fair democratic elections.

What is needed now is to find out ways to lessen or remove completely the frustrations of our politicians mainly for not being in power or to shorten the opposition political parties' stay out of power. This is perhaps the real problem and biggest challenge our country is now facing and that is also the threat to our still nascent democracy. How to get everybody on board? We need to devise some democratic and legal ways to make all of them party to the Government and involve in the overall development process of the country. In that following options may be con-

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could have been a very important tool for economic development in the country, provided there were no economy-destroying policies and tactics of the opposition political parties, say hartal. This suicidal policy started in 80s for a great cause — to restore democracy and to stop unconstitutional means to grab power. The fact that when democracy was established, this policy and tactic continued, then for another great cause — holding general elections under a Caretaker Government.

Even after that too was established, the same policy is still continuing at an unabated pace. Nobody knows where it would drag the whole nation finally. More importantly, all the three parties during their respective tenure in power called this policy harmful for the nation citing economic statistics. Unfortunately, all of them resorted and are still resorting to the same policy. This clearly indicates bankruptcy of our political parties and leaders within a short period.

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of many nationally known corrupt and disputed bureaucrats to many important posts by successive governments.

We must admit these bureaucrats' great manoeuvring capability and potentials in being friends with all governments. Truth seems to be that the more a bureaucrat is disputed closer he is to the successive governments. The unfortunate part is that our politicians tend to forget that these bureaucrats never hesitated to make the politicians scapegoat for the misdeeds they did jointly. The simple reason for this is that our politicians are heavily dependent on almost all issues on the bureaucracy. That is why the need for quality politicians.

Unfortunately, our politicians have miserably failed to identify who are the real stumble block to making a corruption-free society and to the development of the country. Is that the people, or the politicians or the bureaucracy?

The real enemy of the society and the nation is to be exposed. One thing is clear to the people of the country that the so-called concern of the politicians is not genuinely for the country and for the people; but mainly for their own party in-

sidement of its programmes and electoral promises. On the other hand, the opposition would be busy in introspection to their failure and try to re-vamp their parties through organizational work and can start preparing for the next elections. Staying out of power for four years time may not appear too long for the opposition.

Making Provision for Proportional Representation in the Parliament: On many occasions our opposition political parties now and in the past have claimed that they have more popular percentage of votes than the ruling party or coalition. Therefore, they may agree to the idea of proportional representation that is working well in many countries. This is another viable option that can also be tried by our political parties. Based on the popular vote each party receives, their number of seats can be determined. The present kind of po-

litical crisis in our country cannot, however, be resolved fully through this system.

Holding Local Government Elections under Caretaker Government: The so-called demand for holding Upazila and other local government elections under the caretaker government needs to be thoroughly examined for practical reasons. Under the present circumstances, all these elections are to be held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections. A caretaker government cannot be formed when there is already an elected government. On the other hand, simultaneous holding of Upazila or any local government elections with the general elections can be harmful for the political parties. Local issues and compulsions and winning spree of the candidates for the local elections can lead to cross voting for rival party's candidates for the parliament elections.

Shortening the Life of the Parliament: Perhaps we can also shorten the life of the Parliament from 5 to 4 years like in the USA and the UK. Since the time is relatively short, the party in power would try to concentrate more on imple-

mentation of its programmes and electoral promises. On the other hand, the opposition would be busy in introspection to their failure and try to re-vamp their parties through organizational work and can start preparing for the next elections. Staying out of power for four years time may not appear too long for the opposition.

Let people decide on those issues at an appropriate time. Let history make its own judgment in its own impartial way. Meanwhile, our politicians should reconcile among themselves, curtail their mental and physical gap and work together for the economic and social emancipation of the millions of the poor of this unfortunate country. What this country needs most is "participatory development" — a comparatively new concept. We need to ensure that there is a full participation of the whole political system in our overall development process. By accommodating the whole political system in such a meaningful way and for positive purpose, perhaps we can meet challenges posed by actions of various political parties now in the country. As our politicians chant slogan, "Country is bigger than the party" and "Party is bigger than the person" they should believe in their own ideals and conviction and put the country's interest ahead of that of person and party.

## To the Editor...

**Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.**

### Remembering Prof. Abdur Razzak

Sir, With a heavy heart I read the news of Professor Abdur Razzak's death on November 28. I will remember Razzak Chacha, as I called him all my life, for the kindness of his heart, for his passion for good food, for his easy laughter and for his love of books.

Prof. Razzak studied Political Science at Dhaka University in the Nineteen Twenties. The Master's programme was graded at that time on one's performance in a written exam and a Viva Voce. Naturally shy, Razzak Chacha did not perform as well as he would have wished on the verbal examination, however, by dint of a brilliant performance on the written questions he earned a first class degree—an extremely rare result for a Muslim student at that time. Subsequently he joined the political Science Department of Dhaka University, with which he remained affiliated for much of the rest of his life.

In the Nineteen Thirties, he travelled to England where he worked on his Doctoral Research with the great Political Scientist Harold Laski. Despondent after his advisor's death, Prof. Razzak abandoned his research work. His return trip from England including his

had been reduced to two heavy tomes which could only be read with a magnifying glass. He was thrilled that the dictionary not only contained the definitions for words, but also their first published usage. Such pedantic, bookish interests are perhaps not unknown among academic bibliophiles in the West, but in the context of a man from Bangladesh of his time and background, it represents a truly unusual and wonderful approach to life.

It was his passion for the written word that I believe enabled Prof. Razzak to inspire several generations of academics and intellectuals who came in contact with him, often by visiting him at his home at Dhaka University. Quiet, unassuming, extremely well read, always encouraging, he managed to inspire many of the intelligent young people he came in contact with. Polite to a fault and lacking condescension or sarcasm, he often formed deep friendship with these young professionals and academics. It was his ability to nurture many of the thinking men and women across several generations, within a broadly liberal intellectual tradition, that was, I believe, his greatest contribution to Bangladeshi society.

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**The politicians**  
Sir, The politicians are all what we want. But, what are the alternatives? Interim Government is NOT a solution. It is exactly what it says, "Interim." It cannot be prolonged, like 10 years, many suggest. It is

formed with a very specific mandate—such as conduct elections, and run the day-to-day government in the process. Important long-lasting issues are in limbo, and the country is devoid of stability needed for businesses to thrive and foreign investments to come in.

The only other alternative is perhaps military rule, which Pakistan reverts to every few years. Are our memories so short? Have we not seen enough of that from Ayub through Ershad? Without elaborating, the results are always worse. But the worst is, the people have no chance. When they become corrupt, inefficient and anti-people, which eventually they always turn out to be after a few "fix-it-all" glittering years (as we are now seeing in Pakistan), the people are stuck. Destructive means than the only resort to get rid of them.

The people of Bangladesh have had little chance to practice democracy since the British Raj. Due to prolonged periods under military rule during Pakistan, followed by two successive military rules under Zia and Ershad, the people have not had a chance to learn to exercise their political rights. That is wrong! Literacy in India was not better than that of ours. Besides, Bengalis have been politically conscious for a long time. Most "people's movements" during the British Raj started from Bengal. We did pretty well during the early part of Pakistan when we still had democracy, e.g., the 1952 Language Movement. The next big people's movement to demand equal share of central power resulted in a destructive war in 1971. What was different then? Yahya Khan then was leading a military government.

Thus, we will make mistakes, and learn in the process. Eventually we will make it. Omar Huda  
Granada Hills, California

**Mosquito**