

Under the Mayor's Nose

MAFIA-style blitzkrieg by ruling party storm-troopers to land public works contracts has become the order of the day. The latest incident, however, sounds more horrific than anything we have known before by way of terrorising genuine contractors out of business. In terms of sheer blatancy there is no parallel to how a terrorist group has clinched the Dhaka City Corporation's infrastructural project for Nilkhet worth Tk nine and a half crores. First of all, the tender notice seeking offers was neither published in newspapers nor was it put up on the notice board of the relevant engineering department for public knowledge. However, some professional contractors who had the wind of it and went on to submit their quotations at the office of the Executive Engineer, Zone-V, were stopped on their track at gun point as the terrorists got themselves a walk-over to submit their own offers and have those opened in front of them leaving nothing to chance.

There was the unholy nexus at two points. In the first place, some faction leaders of Awami Jubo League and Awami Volunteers League, a former office bearer of Dhaka University Students Union and 'Seven Star' stalwarts and some other criminals struck a deal among themselves to hook and angle the contract. Secondly, they linked up with the relevant authorities at Nagarbhawan, the DCC headquarters, to ensure that the tender was not floated publicly and that they only received the schedules to be able to bid for the work and get it without any contest.

This is the story again of a known bunch of goons with ruling party linkages being in league with some Nagarbhawan executives to monopolise DCC's construction-related work orders. This is happening at the heart of where the mayor of Dhaka works. What the hell are we talking about law and order when terrorists have made the Nagarbhawan their home? There is more to it. If the terrorists could get the work by using their political clout, who can stop them from exercising it again to make us overlook shoddy, poor quality work? The quality is bound to suffer.

Moreover, this is an impingement on every citizen's constitutional right to self-promotion and flourishment through honest and diligent pursuit of his or her avocation. Businessmen and contractors have the right to equal opportunities, something which cannot be allowed to be snatched away by the machinations of a handful who have made unfair business practices their sole mantra.

Fair Deal for Women

WOMEN'S empowerment is a term that features regularly in our popular lexicon, but equally regularly, only lip service is paid to this national objective. The serious impact of this double standard is underscored by a study on women's allocation in the national budget. Conducted by the Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha, the study has exposed a shocking disparity in spending on women's development. For example, in the current fiscal year, women-related projects have been allocated a paltry 15 per cent of the total development budget, which is equal to about Tk 17,500.00 crore. Men get the rest, a whopping 75 per cent of the entire development budget. Also in this current year, some 200 development projects aimed at the 'welfare of men' have been undertaken, as against only 50 similar projects of benefit to women. We are dismayed to learn that the male bias in development is not new, for the study also shows that in the last three fiscal years, women have been allocated an average of less than 3 per cent of the amount that men have received in the respective development budgets. We are deeply perturbed by the revelation that women are being short-changed not only in the traditionally male sectors, but on their home ground as well. In the agricultural sector, there are, literally, no projects for women, presumably because women's pivotal contribution in farming is still unrecognised and regarded as an informal activity. But even in those sectors which directly relate to their welfare, women are being given short shrift. In health, population and family planning, a sector which is crucial to women and in which the dominance of pregnancy, childbirth, birth control, should elicit a lion's share of resources for women, it is shocking to learn that the national budget for 1998-99, allocated a paltry Tk 16.16 crore for women.

We would like an explanation as to how such a blatant disregard for the welfare of one half of the population has been allowed to persist. When women start off in a disadvantaged position in society, it goes without saying that drastic measures are needed to uplift women's economic and social status, and therefore, to limit spending on women-related projects is the very last thing that can be allowed. To curtail spending on projects that are directly of benefit to women, is like cutting off the flow of blood to the arteries and then asking why the person cannot breathe properly. We urge the planning and development gurus of the country to take steps immediately to rectify these mistakes. The basic issue at stake is to implement national objectives on women's empowerment - objectives that have been regularly touted as the cornerstone of our national policy, but are still half-heartedly implemented, with token resources and superficial gestures. We support a suggestion for the mainstreaming of women in decision-making positions, especially in the civil services.

Discrimination against women emerges from a mindset that must be changed. It must be understood that disparate allocations can do nothing but arrest the work of women's development. It must also be emphasised that women's development is an essential component of national development.

To the Editor ...

Consumer's billing rights

Sir, It is good news that the number of mobile phone is increasing by 125 per cent every year. As per available data, there are more than two lakh mobile phones at present with the largest stake that of Grameen Phone, of around 1.5 lakh. As a subscriber of a mobile phone, every one has the right to an intensified invoice. But it is unfortunate that the four operators are least bothered to provide this facility to their subscribers. Earlier, Grameen Phone (GP) used to provide this information on the back page of the monthly bill.

For all operators, the fixed per-minute outgoing air time charge for a regular number (with BTB connection) is Tk 4, while incoming is Tk 3 excluding 15 per cent

VAT. But the total talk time and the monthly bill always differs as the four operators follow different billing software. The air time charges also vary according to different packages offered by the operators. Most subscribers do not know that GP counts first 1 minute and next 15 seconds time slab, while AKTEL counts a 30 second time slab, City Cell 1 minute and Seba 15 seconds time slab. As per the time slab counting, if you talk for a minute and ten seconds, then GP will charge 1 minute 15 seconds, AKTEL 1 minute 30 seconds, City Cell 2 minutes and Seba 1 minute 15 seconds. It is impossible for a subscriber to count exact seconds and at the end of the month, the accumulated seconds add up.

It would be fair to inform all subscribers of the exact system of billing and charge the exact

WATCHING the Americans select their new president was about as exciting as watching the grass grow. I didn't have to watch it, yes. But the point is, this is the most powerful country in the world so one ignores it at one's peril. Hence, though I yawned a lot, muttered to myself a lot, I watched. What was I muttering about...? Well, if you ask me, it all seemed to be unnecessarily tame. Everyone said this was an unprecedented, hard-fought, bitter struggle for the presidency, but where, I ask you, was the blood and (pardon the pun) gore?

Now, if one has been weaned, as I have been, on a solid diet of things Bangladeshi, one is bound to become impatient. An election that doesn't include some degree of violence, a charge or two by riot police, a few lobes of tear gas, a discernible attempt at rigging and fixing, and a serious breakdown in communication afterwards between the two major contenders, well that is no election at all.

Mind you, the Americans did manage some degree of ballot tampering, so that was something to relate to. But still, it was like pulling teeth. Get real, Al. I kept muttering to my television set, because if you recall, vice president Gore was the one the exit polls had predicted would win in Florida, but then Bush edged ahead. How could you have allowed this to happen, Al. I muttered in disgust. Didn't you have your own people in those counting stations. I mean, if you want a result, there are ways of making it happen. If you don't know how, give us a call.

This country has special skills, still largely unrecognised, in creative electioneering, in innovative alterations of the democratic system, without actually altering it. I mean, given that democracy has come to this land of late, isn't it wonderful how well it has been adapted. That is quite a feat.

I am not boasting, but the western liberal-democratic model, as we know it, developed in a vastly different environment

Gore made the most gracious comments anyone in his shoes could have made. The time has come, he declared, to put politics behind us and unite as a nation. He was dignified, sad, and big. Big about the loss, big in his vision as an American leader, big in his generosity to his opponent, and big, ultimately, in reinforcing the significance of the American way. Bush has never been my favourite person, but one sentiment in particular that he expressed, got to me. "I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation", he said. For two weeks Gore and Bush put on the most tedious show on earth. But in the end, it was worth remembering that this was a triumph not for Bush, certainly not for Gore, but for the system.

to ours, and was subject to circumstances that are as alien to us as is the notion that killing and maiming for at the very least, coercion, blackmail and intimidation with intent to do bodily harm) are not part of the normal electoral process.

In our worldview of political contest, the end completely justifies the means. In this view, leaders are encouraged to promote their own interests, above all else. They may put their party's interests above their own, but just so long as the party accepts their leadership. There is no question of putting country before party, no question of working with one's opponents, (or be on talking terms with them) in order to forge consensus on national issues, i.e. issues that affect ordinary citizens.

As many an erudite foreign consultant has explained patiently many times, in developing countries, the democratic plan is at best set amongst starkly challenging circumstances and at worst essentially alien in design. Democracy, both in the sense of an active process of elections and in the active process of governance by an elected ruling party, envisages a political system in which the main, usually two, parties are themselves democratically run and their respective leaders democratically chosen. It assumes that the basis of political contest is to offer better national policies, what one might call an election manifesto, to the electorate.

This system also assumes a society in which resources are allocated with equity, a meritocratic

with an informed and educated electorate, a civil society with the knowledge to make intelligent choices, a public authority that acts with neutrality and through legal channels to protect the weak, and curb excesses by the powerful, and an impartial and at the same time, influential media, and especially in a land where many cannot read or write, an impartial electronic media all of which, as the erudite consultant will explain, countries like this one do not, as

would be such a long-drawn, demanding exercise. It would divert all the energies of the leaders, and to what purpose? It would ultimately go against the interests of the leaders. If the people in general were genuinely empowered and could one day make responsible choices, thus exercising pressure on their leaders, why, the result could be almost as tedious as this wretched American way.

No, much safer to keep to the norm. Which is not to say that

especially when applied in tandem with the long and unaccountable arm of the law. At the same time, there is absolutely no need to go through with any promised reforms, of the electronic media and of the bureaucracy, for example. Instead, it is an excellent idea to turn parliament into a mockery of a house, encouraging opponents to leave in a huff, and making sure telephone calls imploring them to return are never received or answered. Everyone agrees that this is a great way to play the game, even the opponents who have left in a huff. For them, the normal, parliamentary democratic system is too dull and monotonous. Like wallflowers waiting to be asked, their decision is to sit out the dance because the music isn't of their choice.

In this and other ingenious ways, the rules of the democratic game can be amended so that it is of little benefit to the people, but works exceedingly well for the leaders. In this game, there is constant finger-pointing, a wide variety of accusations, healthy doses of paranoia, lively diversions such as rallies, hartals, aspersions of all kinds, about character, about acts of commission and omission in the recent past, and of course, and through it all, the leaders who are supposed to lead, won't sit down and discuss their problems.

Compared to this home-grown scheme of democracy, the recent American electoral experience was bound to be difficult to appreciate. It was non-violent, dependent on the rule of law, and ultimately, unsatisfactory because both candidates were

still talking to one another.

I must admit, though, that the last part did get me, almost. I was sitting there, yawning through another ruling by another court, and groaning to myself, when suddenly, I heard Al Gore speak. His words woke me up. First of all, he accepted his loss even though it was by, well, like literally one electoral vote. That was like saying the difference between one candidate and another is equal to the population of Gulshan Circle One. Furthermore, he accepted defeat although he knew very well that it was a Republican-heavy Federal Supreme Court that said so. No more ballots, no more arguments, enough already. Bush is the winner.

Gore made the most gracious comments anyone in his shoes could have made, not just here, in this land, but in many other parts of the world. The time has come, he declared, to put politics behind us and unite as a nation. (Or words to that effect, read the transcript if you missed the speech). I thought, well that sounds like a cliché, he can't mean it of course. But Gore continued. He was dignified, sad, and big. My word, he was big. Big about the loss, big in his vision as an American leader, big in his generosity to his opponent, and big, ultimately, in reinforcing the significance of the American way.

Bush has never been my favourite person, (he's the kind of American who will probably wonder if Bangladesh is a curry place on Adams Morgan) but one sentiment in particular that he expressed, got to me. "I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation", he said. Cynics may say that he doesn't have an opinion. Perhaps. But the sentiment, and his emphasis on the word 'serve', made an impact on me.

For two weeks Gore and Bush put on the most tedious show on earth. But in the end, it was worth remembering that this was a triumph not for Bush, certainly not for Gore, but for the system. The American way.

The American Way



IF YOU ASK ME

Almas Zakiuddin

yet, possess.

So what might be done to strengthen democracy? Create conditions conducive to the democratic system, says the consultant. Reform the civil service, insist on transparency and democracy within political parties, reinforce the powers and efficiency of the legal system, clean up the law enforcement agencies, establish a stronger media, a more equitable social system, a more effective educational and health base for the people...

How predictable. Trust these foreign consultants to make suggestions whose impact might completely alter the balance of power in this country. Reform

democracy ought to be rejected outright, for that would be foolish. Foreign consultants must be humoured. Keep the model in place, but alter it to suit special requirements. Okay, so killing and maiming are definitely not an option. But the system can be made much more creative.

For instance, since the party in power cannot be trusted to hold fair elections, the interim caretaker system is a great alternative. This might defeat the essential basis of democracy, but never mind, as long as it gets results. Then, of course, there are many creative acts that add spice to the mix acts with special powers, or acts that claim to ensure public safety, for instance. These are pretty handy to have around,

Law is supposed to take its own course. But the brutal truth is that in Bangladesh like in some other developing nations law is sometimes made to deflect its course by political interference. The Bangladesh murder case is a such glaring example. Instead of usual application of law to apprehend the assassins, a black law (Indemnity Ordinance) was enacted to protect them by the beneficiaries of that holocaust of August 15 night. When AL was inducted to power in 1996 after long 21 years it repealed that black law and started the trial of that case. It took the party more than four years to obtain this split verdict by the High Court.

The Awami League government's tenure has a time-limit of less than seven months more. The party waits with bated breath to see the culmination of the trial process of the Bangabandhu

murder case by that time. But the split verdict has split disaster to upset its plan. It has simply lingered the process of trial by adding another stage to its already existing multi-layered court proceedings. The execution of the killers of Mujib is a chief agenda of the party. If it materialises the AL could get high mental satisfaction as well as rich dividends for the approaching general election of 2001.

There is no guarantee that the AL will be re-elected. The party apprehends that if the BNP or the four-party alliance is catapulted to power the apple-cart will be upset. There is no doubt that the higher judiciary has the capacity and credibility to bring the Bangabandhu murder case to a just and lawful conclusion. But, if the present opposition comes to power the government lawyers may be briefed to pull the string in quite reverse order to shelve, if not nullify, the court proceedings. Above all there will remain the presidential clemency to fall back on. So goes the AL fidgety taking to the streets sometimes oblivious of the fact that the court is not supposed to accommodate street sentiments beyond law and evidence.

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Why the Split Verdict Ails the AL?

by A R Shamsul Islam

The Awami League government's tenure has a time-limit of less than seven months more. There is no guarantee that the AL will be re-elected. The party apprehends that if the BNP or the four-party alliance is catapulted to power the apple-cart will be upset. So goes the AL fidgety taking to the streets sometimes oblivious of the fact that the court is not supposed to accommodate street sentiments beyond law and evidence.

tion will not stop unless touching the terminal point in the Supreme Court, the highest echelon of judiciary.

The murder of the founding Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is as much shocking as its aftermath that legally barred the trial of this carnage by passing an illegal act

the infamous Indemnity Ordinance. On the fateful night of August 15, 1975 the then President of the Republic of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with all the members of his family including his 10-year-old son Russel was shot dead by some disgruntled army officers, of course secretly aided by some influential and powerful quarters. And ironically, though not very unexpectedly, the Indemnity Ordinance was first put into effect by succeeding President Mushatque Ahmed and subsequently incorporated in the constitution as an amendment by General Ziaur Rahman. This is a rare example of how a bad law is created to prevent a good law of the land from coming into operation obviously to protect the self confessed assassins.

Even when the Bangabandhu murder case was revived after long 21 years through the scrapping of the Indemnity Ordinance by the present Awami League government having successfully blood challenges made by the vested quarters in the higher judiciary, the court proceedings were far from being smooth. The trial court announced verdict on November 8, 1998. While hearing Death Reference Justice Amirul Kabir felt embarrassed on April 10, 2000. A stick procession led by some ministers was brought out on April 18 demanding expeditious trial. Another High Court

Bench comprising Justice Ruhul Amin and Justice Abdul Matin also expressed embarrassment to hear the case on June 28, 2000.

The street agitations launched by the Awami men reflect their sentiments to hang the killers of Bangabandhu. The split verdict of the High Court in which one judge acquitted five accused has massively hurt them. They have jumped on the streets with all attendant evils like blockade, vehicles smashing, arson etc to rock their voice against acquittal of any accused.

Court judgements do not always reflect the hopes of the people. They reflect how the cases are filed, documents arranged, evidences testified and laws interpreted. They more reflect the truth about our antiquated, defective code of law and mode of trial than the truth of cases. Practically judges dispense law.

Law is supposed to take its own course. But the brutal truth is that in Bangladesh like in some other developing nations law is sometimes made to deflect its course by political interference.

The Bangladesh murder case is a such glaring example. Instead of usual application of law to apprehend the assassins, a black law (Indemnity Ordinance) was enacted to protect them by the beneficiaries of that holocaust of August 15 night. When AL was inducted to power in 1996 after long 21 years it repealed that black law and started the trial of that case. It took the party more than four years to obtain this split verdict by the High Court.

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OPINION

ON August 12, Taka was devalued by 6 per cent pushing up the exchange rate from Tk 51 to Tk 54 per dollar. By now some writeups have appeared in the press expressing reaction to the devaluation. There are bound to be reactions for and against but, in the context of our economy and trade, objectivity should prevail. Nevertheless, both positive and negative reactions are in order. As such the reaction expressed by Mr Hasnat Abdul Hye in his article, 'Devaluing Devaluation' as appeared in The Daily Star on 18th August, 2000 is negative. Let us examine how, although it is late.

It has been argued by the author that since export ratio to GDP is small, and 60 per cent of export is performed by RMG sector against back-to-back L/C involving no foreign exchange transaction, devaluation would not increase export. This argument does not bear much logic. It is correct that Export-GDP ratio is small but to increase this ratio, positive measures, including

devaluation, if necessary, should be taken. It cannot be said that because country's export is relatively small, corrective measures should not be taken to increase export.

It is also not correct that foreign exchange transaction does not take place in back-to-back LC (BTB LC). The only difference between BTB LC and normal LC is that a BTB LC is opened against a master LC on the expectation that the liability of the BTB LC will be paid out of export proceeds from the master LC, and a normal LC is opened without such specific source of payment of the relative LC liabilities. All other things are common between a BTB LC and normal LC. Both BTB LC and normal LC may be at sight or on deferred payment basis, and it is absolutely common that foreign exchange transactions take place both for BTB LC and normal LC.

It has been argued by Mr Hye that devaluation will not create any positive impact on the remaining 40 per cent export.

That the change in export because of devaluation will depend on price elasticity of demand, and because our traditional export items like jute, jute goods, leather, tea, frozen fish, etc are price inelastic, export will not increase. His argument should be acceptable if Bangladesh were the only country to supply traditional export items but that is not the case. Bangladesh does not have a single export item, in which it enjoys monopoly in the world market. Total demand in the world market for our traditional export items may be price inelastic, but because of overvaluation of currency, our exports can be in competitive and may lose the market to our competitors. At that point, devaluation may save this situation.

The author argues that import-GDP ratio is higher than export-GDP ratio and also that because most of the import items are price-inelastic, devaluation will put serious pressure on our country's Current Account. He has mentioned food, petroleum products, medicine, machinery and spare parts as our major

Discussing Devaluation

Muhammad Abul Kalam

effect of massive devaluation by our neighbouring Asian countries. Most of the local industries cannot compete in the home market because of devaluation-induced abnormally low prices offered by those countries.

He has mentioned that the currency has been devalued at a big margin. Big or small is a relative term. Following are the rates of devaluation of some Asian countries with whom we compete in export and local markets:

Countries	1996 (April) Per US\$	2000 (Nov) Per US\$	Value bst Per cent
Indonesia (Rupiah)	2,340	9,280	74.78
Philippines (Peso)	26.22	49.40	46.92
Thailand (Baht)	25.25	43.64	42.14
Pakistan (Rupee)	34.49	56.30	38.73
Malaysia (Ringgit)	2.54	3.80	33.15
Sri Lanka (Rupee)	53.70	80.01	32.88
India (Rupee)	34.46	46.62	26.08
Bangladesh (Taka)	41.16	54.00	23.77

Source: Asiaweek 5th April '96 and 17th Nov 2000

PETROLEUM PRODUCTS: These are mainly required as fuel for the automobiles. Here, the price elasticity of demand will come in force, and the foreign exchange burden should not be at the ratio of 6 per cent devaluation for eradication of marginal users and efficient fuel management for automobiles.

MEDICINES: More than 80 per cent of required medicines are locally produced and a situation without devaluation will just invite cheap foreign imports from China and India, and local factories will have no alternative, but to close down.

MACHINERY AND SPARE PARTS: Effect of 6 per cent devaluation should be compensated by efficient use of the machinery and production system, and in some cases, labour will substitute the machines. In Bangladesh, substitution rate between labour and machines is very significant because of cheap labour. As such, this should not create any inflationary pressure on the home market.

The author rather ignored the conditions of the local industries, which are suffering from the

robust export, but the countrywide figures in respect of export and currency value as mentioned below do not support that:

Countries	Currency Value per US Dollar	Export 12 Months
	1996 (April) (Nov)	1996 (April) (Nov)
Pakistan (Rupee)	34.49 56.30	7.8 8.5
Sri Lanka (Rupee)	53.70 80.01	3.6 4.7
India (Rupee)	34.46 46.62	29.9 39.9
Bangladesh (Taka)	41.16 54.00	3.5 5.5

Source: Asiaweek 5th April '96 and 17th Nov 2000

cost, there will be no meaning of increasing production or quality. When goods cannot be profitably traded in official channel, irregular and illegal trade starts.

The author is correct to the extent that Hundies are more attractive because of convenience, speed etc, but the most important considerable is that the beneficiary of the hundi gets better exchange rate. So, if the official exchange rate is better because of devaluation, people will be less fascinated to be involved in risky hundi transaction.

It has to be backed by efficiency throughout the economy. Devaluation should be a part of comprehensive economic programme intended to stimulate the economy, mainly the export sector. Devaluation should also be a part of a long-term macro-monetary plan with clear and openly declared goals. In other words, the government and the central bank should design multi-year plan, stating clearly how much they are going to devalue the currency over and above the inflation target. Valuation of devaluation calls for proper judgement and analysis with prime facts and figures. In compliance with the pre-conditions, one may appreciate the last devaluation and which may come in future. Actual value will depend on many unforeseen economic and political variables in and outside the country. Devaluation of Taka should be aimed at valuation of Taka at least at 1996-level in comparison to its competing currencies to sustain and accelerate the country's export and overall economic growth.