

## Under the Mayor's Nose

AFIA-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 blarney there is no parallel to how a terrorist group has clinched the Dhaka City Corporation's infrastructural project for Nilkhel 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 Jibto 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 Nagarbhaban, 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 Nagarbhaban 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 Nagarbhaban 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 flourish 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 Pratidin 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, everyone 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

WATCHING the Americans select their new president was 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 lots 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 engineering, 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 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 meritocracy, 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

# The American Way

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

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 curvy 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 option. 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.

## 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,

## 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.**

Tie 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 Mujib 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 Mushtaque Ahmed and subse-

quently 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 stood 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 judgments 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 Bangabandhu 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 brought 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 spelled 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 shelf, 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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## Discussing Devaluation

Muhammad Abul Kalam

import items. Here, one should consider mainly three things (1) country's expenditure on these items from local and import sources. (2) whether these items are truly price inelastic and (3) what will be the rate of substitution because of devaluation. An item-wise analysis as given below should clarify the matter:

**FOOD:** Our main expenditure is on rice, wheat, edible oil, meat, fish, vegetables, eggs and spices. Most of these items are locally produced and because of present Free Trade Policy, these can be imported without any restriction. If Taka is not devalued at par with currencies of other countries, the local market will be flooded with cheap imports specially from neighbouring countries, local producers will lose their job and business, and net foreign exchange burden on this account will be more than ever.

**PETROLEUM PRODUCTS:** These are mainly required as fuel for the automobiles. Here, the price elasticity of demand 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 uncompetitive and may lose the market to our competitors. At that point, devaluation will be more than ever.

**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 pressure on the market competition.

**Consumer's billing rights**

Devaluation will be expensive. As such, it will be wise for an authority to devalue the currency to reduce the smuggling as much as possible. The author has suggested to increase the quantity and quality of goods without mentioning the cost, which is a vital point. In fact, there is a cost competition between official trade and unofficial trade. If more goods are produced and quality is levelled up, without restricting

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.

**Countries** **1996 (April) Per US\$** **2000 (Nov) Per US\$** **Value lost (Percent)** **1996 (April) Billion Dollar** **2000 (Nov) Billion Dollar** **Increased (Percent)**

Pakistan (Rupee)	34.49	56.30	38.73	7.8	8.5	8.97
Sri Lanka (Rupee)	53.70	80.01	32.88	3.6	4.7	30.55
India (Rupee)	34.46	46.62	26.08	29.9	39.9	33.44
Bangladesh (Taka)	41.16	54.00	23.77	3.5	5.5	57.14

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

He has commented on devaluation concerning alignment of exchange rate with India to avoid smuggling. But none of the countries' currency is a floating one. Both are pegged to US dollar. As such, pure equilibrium never happens. It is a calculative judgement to devalue or revalue the currency. If the currency of a country remains overvalued its goods will be expensive for export and vice versa. If any country's currency remains officially overvalued, the unofficial exchange rate below the official exchange rate based on purchasing power parity (PPP). Goods, in that case, will be less traded in the official channel as it becomes expensive.

Mr Hye has not shown relevance to our devaluation with that of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Many of our prime export items are common with theirs. So, if currencies of those countries are devalued, our currency should be logically devalued at par to face the market competition. According to him, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, have robust export sector. Export growth and currency value should be the main indicators of