

Early election looks certain

Polls in June should meet everyone's expectations

DURING her meeting with President Shahabuddin Ahmed on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha, the Leader of the Opposition expressed her view that elections should be held next May. This follows the Prime Minister's own offer made earlier of holding elections anytime that the opposition asks for. The official response of the ruling party to Khaleda Zia's view will of course have to wait the return of Sheikh Hasina tomorrow, after performing Hajj. However it can be easily predicted that the May schedule is not realistic. The earliest that we can expect the elections is in June. For that to happen Sheikh Hasina's government will have to hand over power to the caretaker government sometimes in the very near future.

If the exact date still remains uncertain, what now seems almost certain is that we will have elections earlier than the normal schedule, which would have been within 90 days after July 23 when the term of the present government would have expired. We think Sheikh Hasina's offer of holding elections whenever the opposition wanted was an extremely astute political move which took much of the wind out of the opposition's claim that the government was trying to cling to power even after losing public confidence, a claim the opposition miserably failed to prove. We are aware that most of the ministers in Sheikh Hasina's cabinet are opposed to their leader's view about early elections. They want the government to continue till the very last day of the tenure. Publicly their argument is that any early date for elections would make the opposition claim that they have been able to 'force' the government to quit. Why should we let Khaleda Zia dictate when to hold elections, they say. But the real reason, we think, is that as the future of many of these ministers is uncertain they want to enjoy the ministerial benefits as long as they can. We think that the PM's position is far wiser and politically beneficial for the country, as it would avoid months of predictable civil strife greatly disrupting the civic and the economic life of the nation.

It is our expectation that the PM will not succumb to the views of her ministers and follow her own thinking and go for early elections as she is publicly promise-bound to do. All things considered, we suggest June to be the ideal month for polls, especially because we have conducted polls in June before, and July would take us into heavy monsoon. In this regard immediate talks, at the senior leadership level, should be held between the two sides. The opposition's attitude of having nothing to do with the government and yet making all sorts of demands which only the government can fulfil, is not constructive. In fact in addition to the exact dates of the election there are a whole range of other issues that the two sides must resolve through extensive talks between themselves. We also think that the two sides should start sitting with the Election Commission and deciding on measures to ensure that the polls are free and fair, especially on how to contain the spread of arms among the criminals and to reign in the mastaans that both sides have in plenty.

We think the PM's offer of elections "anytime" the opposition wants, followed by Leader of the Opposition's naming the month of May for holding it, has helped us to move forward from the confrontational politics that was beginning to engulf us. We call upon the opposition NOT to subject the people to any more hartals. At the same time we also call upon the government NOT to oppress the opposition through its law enforcing agencies. Please remember election is about FREEDOM and not TERRORISM. Any attempt to coerce the voters defeats the fundamental aim of free expression of the will of the electorate. We have seen too many coerced elections, and our people will know how to respond to it. Let this be a warning to any political party planning to use violence in the coming election.

Budget as social engineering : Fashioning a 'casino democracy'?

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

MR Yashwant Sinha has proved fourth time unlucky in the stockmarket. Within two days of industry euphorically rating his budget nine on a 1-to-10 scale, the Sensex collapsed. Admittedly, this was due to manipulation by a bear cartel. But the fact that such cartels operate with impunity shows that the "investment climate" is driven by unhealthy speculation.

Mr Sinha's "dream budget" will produce and strengthen India's "casino capitalism". As a piece of social engineering, i.e. changing distribution of power and balance of class forces, it is especially pernicious.

It is useful to see what the budget is not, rather than what it is. It is an attempt at neither fiscal consolidation nor addressing the economy's big problems: fall in savings rates, industrial slowdown, and a grave agricultural crisis.

Indeed, the budget will further distort government finances. Already, the revenue deficit (difference between the government's current income and spending on itself) has reached 3.6 percent of GDP, or double that of the "crisis year", 1990-91. Irrespective of ideologies, sensible economists agree that the real danger signal is not the fiscal, but revenue, deficit.

This should be zero.

The projected deficit for 2001-02 is 3.2 percent almost double the Centre's spending on health, education and social security. Thus, the government's profligacy is costing the public more than twice the social services it is entitled to.

The government has cut its productive expenditure in the infrastructure and social services by about Rs. 13,000 crores. This will

The token increase of Rs. 500 crores in the Rural Infrastructure Fund will help nobody. Last year, actual sanctions from this were under 30 percent. Mr Sinha has further weakened the Public Distribution System by passing on the burden of food procurement to the states. Already, there has been a 50 to 70 percent decrease in offtake.

The budget transfers incomes from the poor to the rich in other

percent are active shareholders. The budget will greatly strengthen this pro-Big Business minority.

This will consolidate India's own perverse version of a "property-owning" or "share-holding" democracy. India's affluent minority has never had it better. In the government sector, it has doubled its income through the Fourth and Fifth Pay Commissions. In the private sector, it has benefited from removal

poor Indians cannot develop their human potential.

Under the new budget, prices of cars, two-wheelers, colour TVs, air-conditioners and refrigerators, as well as soft drinks, etc., will fall further. But many mass-consumption items like footwear, electric bulbs, toothbrushes, cheap watches and many cloth varieties will become dearer. So will vanaspatty 25 percent. The "hum-

evolved over one hundred years to give the people elementary rights and a modicum of job security.

Mr Sinha has wreaked vengeance upon public sector undertakings (PSUs) too. Raising Rs. 12,000 crores by privatising them will mean underselling a la BALCO. The new dogma, that all non-defence-related PSUs must be privatised, is senseless.

The budget is unlikely to produce faster growth. Next year's nominal growth assumes six percent inflation. Currently, it is 8.5 percent. If oil prices don't decrease substantially, all revenue projections will go awry.

Low interest on pension funds will lead to a fall in the savings rate from the current 21 percent. (The rate was 24 to 25 percent a decade ago). This is bound to depress GDP growth. Ultimately, the budget will promote sleaze, speculation and sweated labour.

India's elite wants an East Asian growth rate. This can't materialise on a tax base that is one-third the South Korean level, and a savings rate that is 10 percentage points lower than Malaysia's. The elite's obsession--high growth which bypasses the people--will remain a mirage.

The larger agenda here is to dismantle all protective legislation

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damage private investment too.

Mr Sinha's "success" in maintaining the fiscal deficit (5.1 percent) lies largely in these cuts, and partly in accounting tricks and in higher-than-expected dividends from the much-maligned public sector.

Mr Sinha has increased subsidies, but cut income taxes by Rs. 5,500 crores. This will further distort the economy in which direct taxes total a minuscule 3.3 percent of GDP. India is one of the world's most mis-taxed and least-taxed economies. Less than 20 million Indians pay income tax.

In agriculture, Mr Sinha has failed to raise public investment

ways too. It abolishes capital gains taxes for new equity issues, raises the ceiling for foreign investment in Indian companies to 49 percent, and halves taxes on dividends. This will boost speculative "hot money" or slush funds.

The budget cuts interest on bank deposits, provident funds and pensions by a sharp 1.5 percent. This will push millions of working class and lower middle class people towards either dis-saving or speculative stockmarket investment.

About 40 percent of Indians deposit their savings in banks and the post office or pension/provident funds. By contrast, only about five

of managerial remuneration ceilings. The hiatus between the minority and the vast majority has widened.

The consumption of the top five percent of the population has burgeoned. Over the past decade, the number of cars sold has trebled, as has the output of colour TV sets, air-conditioners and refrigerators partly due to lower taxes.

By contrast, food prices have increased two-and-a-half times. Rising costs are putting shelter, education and healthcare beyond the vast majority's reach. According to the UN Development Programme, 53 percent of income-

Farewell, Sir Donald Bradman! Thanks for the memories

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

WE cannot let Sir Donald Bradman pass away without a heartfelt tribute. During the Second World War, Charles de Gaulle used to boast, "I am France!" Sir Don never believed that he was "Mr. Australia," although just about everyone else did. These days, knighthoods and Lordships for entertainment personalities are so common (Sir Paul McCartney, Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber, Sir Elton John, Sir Anthony Hopkins and Sir Sean Connery, to name a few). In 1949, when Britain had much more clout, and knighthoods for sports personalities were rare, such honours meant so much more. Sir Don enjoyed his knighthood as much as he did his accomplishments on the cricket field.

And what accomplishments they were! The present generation has a tendency to overvalue current sports heroes. The writer has watched Michael Jordan's entire professional basketball career (1984-98), and has no hesitation in saying that he is the greatest basketball player ever. But to claim that he is the best Sportsman of the Twentieth Century, as some in the media have done, is a stretch. Reluctantly, we agree that in their prime, Muhammad Ali would have beaten the "Brown Bomber" Joe Louis, and therefore can be considered the "greatest" heavyweight boxer of all time. More reluctantly, we have conceded that Carl Lewis (9 Olympics gold medals) is a better Olympian than Jesse Owens (4 gold medals) was. Although we have tremendous affection for our home grown subcontinental cricket heroes such as, Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Javed Miandad and Imran Khan, not in our wildest dreams would we claim that they, or

anyone else for that matter, come close to Sir Donald Bradman. To paraphrase Muhammad Ali in the context of his own Greatestness: "If anyone does so (dreams), he should wake up and apologize!"

As we were growing up in Bangladesh in the late 1950's and 1960's, the name Bradman stood not only for excellence, but also for the unattainable. Over fifty years after his retirement, and now his death, his records are as unapproachable as they ever were. No one was the least bit surprised with former South African President Nelson Mandela's first question to an Australian visitor after his release from 27 years in prison: "Is Sir Donald Bradman still alive?" As the Pakistani cricket team was visiting Australia in 1964, like all the touring teams they went to pay their respects to Bradman. Bradman told Hanif Mohammad: "I always wanted to meet the man who broke my First Class record (452 not out). (Hanif scored 499 run out against Bhawalpur in 1959. Hanif's record has since been smashed by Brian Lara who has taken it to an astronomical level). I must say in my defence that I was only warming up when the captain declared the innings closed!"

Such wry and rustic humour was typical of Sir Don Bradman. Who can forget Bradman's immortal comment that he had seen better batsman than himself; the only

trouble was that they kept on getting out! This reminds me of a strange statement I heard in England from a commentator. "If Mike B. could only face fast bowling, he would have been a great batsman!" Everyone had a story to tell about Bradman. During those interminable time gaps between balls in a cricket match, which commentators like John Arlott filled with colourful anecdotes, I heard an old time reporter reminisce. In a test in England, Bradman was off to a slow start. The reporter started typing his report with, "So Bradman can stifle?" When he looked up from his typewriter, Bradman had crossed 50 in less than an hour!

His propensity to get on with it is what made Bradman so special. He did not believe in wasting time. He realized that although every ball may have held potential runs bonanza, every ball could also potentially spell the batsman's doom. After all, Bradman, too, was clean bowled for a duck in his final test innings! Sir Don was a proof that great things can come in small packages. At 5 feet 7 inches, Sir Don, compactly built, exhibited lightning foot speed. With his foot speed, Bradman turned the hungry bowler's fury against the bowler.

If you ask an American what comes to his mind when "Cricket" is mentioned, the likely answer is: "a bug that makes annoying noise!" It was therefore a pleasant surprise to

LETTER FROM AMERICA

"In a career from 1928 to 1948, playing against British Commonwealth national teams, Bradman's winning scores, and rare failures, interrupted news broadcasts in Australia, made banner headlines, delayed business and government meetings, and set spectators and experts searching for words of praise worthy of his skills. So it was for his death, especially in other cricket strongholds like India, Sri Lanka, New Zealand and the Caribbean."



see *The New York Times* publish a full obituary of Sir Donald Bradman on February 27, complete with a photograph of the Don with a receding hairline, in action in 1948. For a neutral perspective, let us read (some excerpts) along. "In a career from 1928 to 1948, playing against British Commonwealth national teams, Bradman's winning scores, and rare failures, interrupted news broadcasts in Australia, made banner headlines, delayed business and government meetings, and set spectators and experts searching for words of praise worthy of his skills. So it was for his death, especially in other cricket strongholds like India, Sri Lanka, New Zealand and the Caribbean."

"Australia idolized Bradman as a hero. In the 1930's, with the country in deep economic depression and still grieving 60,000 killed in World War I, Bradman's achievements were cause for national pride. He was a batting Champion in High School at 12 and on the national team at 20, subsequently recording scores and averages in 52 international games not previously achieved in almost a century of world cricket or in the half-century since his last innings, in London in 1948. King George VI knighted him in 1949 for services to cricket. Among world cricketers, Bradman had a career average of 99.94 runs per innings, a level 30 runs higher than his nearest rival even today."

"In a recent book, 'The Best of the Best,' Charles Davis, a Melbourne sports statistician, rated stars from different sports by measuring champions who were so far ahead of their rivals that they were in a class of their own, and then comparing those margins. By Mr. Davis's calculations, Bradman led the order of career-long achievements with a 4.4 rating, followed by soccer's Pele (3.7), baseball's Ty Cobb (3.6), golf's Jack Nicklaus (3.4), basketball's Michael Jordan (3.4), and (American) football's Joe Montana (3.1)."

"Mr. Davis calculated that for Cobb to have matched Bradman in dominance, he would have required a career batting average of 0.392. Cobb's career average was 0.366. He says that to achieve the superiority of Bradman, Nicklaus would have needed 25 major golf titles (he had 18), and Jordan would have needed to average 43 points a game (he averaged 32)."

"Bradman's prowess was obvious even to Americans. In 1932, when Bradman was in his prime, John Kieran wrote in the *New York Times*: "Babe Ruth once knocked 60 home runs in a season. What's that to Daring Don Bradman, the ring-tailed wallaby of the cricket crease! He scored 452 runs (not out) in an afternoon." The article continued, "He simply keeps hitting and running until some sensible person in the stands suggests a spot of tea."

Bradman makes strange bedfellows. The writer disagrees with just about everything V. S. Naipaul says or does; but he agrees with Sir Vidhiadhar on one point: that Sir Donald Bradman is the Greatest! Farewell Sir Don and thanks for the memories.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Ear end, ear out



PHOTO: AZIZ AMIRUL, UTTARA

The ear 'doctor' is a common feature. He pushes sharp, non-sterile metal implements into the human ear, often after dipping the objects into hydrogen peroxide! It is little wonder that hundreds of people lose their hearing each year, after undergoing such 'cleaning' operations. We need a law to prohibit such dangerous practices. The public should beware and shun all such dubious 'treatments'.

Outrageous!

It is simply outrageous that a doctor, who is trained to try to save human lives as much as he/she can, goes around the streets with proven killers? I refer to the incident involving the ruling party MP Iqbal who was photographed with armed men in a procession on hartal day last month.

How can a doctor consort with people like this? What society are we living in? This is indeed the result of lack of accountability and punishment for those who commit wrongs.

A distressed doctor

Dhaka.

Australian view

I very much resent and strongly discard your pointless idea of highlighting a news item in that Australian citizens in Bangladesh have been 'cautioned' by their High Commission to avoid visiting the Chittagong Hill Tracts and to be on guard while moving about in other places of the country as the place is not safe, mugging and looting are rampant, the ladies insecure, and so on. This so-called 'cautioning' is not only in case of the Australians, but also for all other foreign citizens living here as 'cautioned' by their respective Missions from time to time, specifically at a time of political agitation. These are practiced as a regular 'security measure' for their own citizens anywhere in the world. Wonder why this had found such a special space in your daily! In any case, it is hard to stomach everything that the Australian H.C said. Is this just because Bangladesh unfortunately happens to be an aid receiving country? Granted, that we have a law and order situation, but then any country in this world has traversed through such phases in the past. Some 'civilized' countries in this world still have plenty of social problems that are passed off as being 'okay', while impoverished countries often get the label of being 'unsafe', or 'insecure'. It might be true that stray incidents take place, but we still demonstrate a great deal of respect for people from other countries. By far this is still a quite safe country in this current restive world!

Shah Mushtaque Ahmed
7/3, Lake Circus, NorthDhanmandi Dhaka.

Arrogance and mistrust

Many thanks to Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan, MP for his article "The (dead?) Seventh Parliament : Why and How Not.," (January 30) He commented "We threw away the Fifth Parliament by our arrogance. We are now throwing our Seventh Parliament by mistrust."

One is tempted to ask who threw away the Fifth Parliament and why? If my memory does not fail me, I must recall that the then prime minister Mrs. Khaleda Zia held the post of the Leader of the House but seldom performed her duty. So we saw the Fifth Parliament first abandoned by the Leader of the House herself and after about three years by the then Opposition. Did the Opposition boycott the Fifth Parliament out of 'arrogance'? Or was it because they realized their inability to conduct a fair election without a caretaker government? Who is throwing away the Seventh Parliament by mistrust? 'Distrust' of the incumbent Speaker is the main reason for throwing away the Seventh Parliament. The other cause of the 'fall' of the Seventh Parliament is the PM's absolute non-recognition of the Opposition as a political party.

the causes of our failure to run the administration, judiciary, education, health, enterprises, communications and so on.

Mahbubar Rahman
Bagerhat

Moral values

I think the present government has lost its moral right to run the country. Improvement of law and order is not possible under this government because it is allowing terrorism and violence. HM Iqbal must think that he will be promoted in the party otherwise how could he contemplate going out in broad daylight with armed men?

Those who are not living in Bangladesh worry about our loved ones. We would like to see immediate action against HM Iqbal and a statement from the government explaining why this incident was allowed to happen? Is there anyone in the ruling party who has some sense of morality?

Jasim Khan
Chicago USA

Deer for sale

It is simply abhorrent to learn from your news report (March 4) that anyone would think of selling the rare spotted deer for sacrifice during Eid! As a nation, we have become callous and selfish so much so that we have forgotten the beauty and splendour of our natural habitat and the creatures who have given this land its serenity and richness.

I would sincerely hope that those responsible are severely punished!

Nature lover
Dhaka