

State of the economy: Heading straight to south?

M SHAMSUL HAQUE

FOR the last two weeks the western world and most of the other nations have been placed on a war footing following the attack by terrorists and complete destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and part of the Pentagon complex on September 11. Despite such a stimulating development, oil prices in the international market fell significantly on September 24 and 25. This is a clear indication that the uncertainty over worldwide recession in the coming years is over. The US economy, expected to perform better in the next quarter and pull other nations along, is to face recession despite strong measures taken by the government. Expectation of all concerned particularly the consumers have withered away with the attack on the US by terrorists suspected to have been led by Saudi dissident and millionaire Osama bin Laden. Although Bangladesh is far away from Afghanistan where attacks by the coalition forces is imminent, we are going to hold election to the eighth parliament today amidst heightened tensions somewhat similar to preparations for battles to decide the fate of the country. This paper is an attempt to highlight some recent comments by our two former finance ministers and focus on the hard choices to be faced by the next government in management of the economy in the coming years in the face of the unfolding gloomy scenario in the world economy. We must start the dialogue immediately while some benefits of the caretaker governments are still there.

Recently the American Chamber in Bangladesh (AmCham) invited Mr. M Saifur Rahman and Mr. Shah AMS Kibria, two former finance ministers, to speak before its members. It was not known why they were invited before the general election. Perhaps they were invited to give some signals about changes in economic and financial policies to be adopted by their parties, if one of them was elected. Mr. Rahman

efficiency in resource allocation and utilisation must be ensured if we do not want poverty to increase further and create more anarchic conditions in the country. Without greater participation of the private sector in management of the economy it will be extremely difficult to tide over the impending financial crisis

expressed more than usual concern of the deteriorating economic condition of the country as manifest in dwindling forex reserves, falling export earnings in the first quarter of the current fiscal year and falling demand for the RMG sector. These facts and concerns about them were expressed by others, including this writer in an article in this paper titled 'The economy is not out of danger zone in August'. He said it would be difficult to manage the economy given the state in which it was left by the last AL government. As reports in the print media indicate Mr. Kibria avoided saying anything on matters of the economy. He raised objections on the performance of the caretaker government (CTG) in the meeting as he has been harping the same tune almost from day one of the CTG. He also said his party would like to change the concept of CTG if they are elected again, as it did not perform what they considered as neutrally. Did the AmCham members hope to hear such political comments? What have they gained by arranging the talk? Perhaps a fresh dose of unfavourable business environment in the coming years. The latest developments arising out of the terrorists attack on major US installations are going to exacerbate the financial crisis. Some people of course did not see the threat that way and even said large reserve might be wasteful. Mr. Kibria did not say anything about it.

Why the CTG has become so much of a subject of criticism by one party? They have done some thing close to a miracle by so few people and within such a short time.

Besides preparing the nation for the election the CTG has cleared many unfinished tasks left by the past governments, such as reclaiming the river Buriganga from the encroachers, recovered 72 acres of land for Bangladesh Railways from unauthorised occupants, obtained possession of J-block at Baridhara for RAJUK, starting a circular bus service covering the central part of Dhaka city and introducing BRTC buses on Dhaka-Narayanganj route. These vexing problems have been agitating public minds for a very long time and people in general were relieved for these actions by the CTG. Needless to mention that earlier the CTG reviewed some of the hurriedly done contracts by the AL government and deferred payment on some of the purchases to stop further decrease in the level of forex reserve. It is unfortunate that Mr. Kibria shifted his focus on changing the concept of CTG that has been widely acclaimed by many quarters. His volt-face reaction seems to support the contention of former prime minister Begum Zia when she said it would be difficult to find so-called neutral persons to run CTG. As things stand if the CTG continues to be discredited by major parties as it has been this time then it would be really difficult to find people who would like to join CTG to avoid all that goes with it.

Anyway what can be said about the gloomy economic future of this poor country? In a nutshell it will require lots of belt tightening by the newly elected government given the world scenario of dwindling foreign aid and lost export earnings. Some

of the steps may be as follows.

Public sector expenses will have to be reduced to avoid further increase in cumulative fiscal deficits left by the last government. The CTG managed to run affairs of the state including holding the national election with a cabinet of ten members only. It would be advisable if the size of the next cabinet could be limited to twenty members rather than forty plus of the last government.

Payments on some of the major contracts made by the last government will have to be further deferred and some of them may even be cancelled with losses to avoid failure to make final payment as foreign exchange shortages will continue to persist for the next two years at the least. Import of luxury items should be strongly discouraged.

Major construction of buildings by the public sector should be stopped and the private sector should be encouraged to do that as it has already established itself in the house building and financing markets.

Loss making public enterprises should be privatised over next three years after paying due compensation to workers and employees.

Public investment to facilitate participation of the private sector in agriculture, agro-business and small-scale industries should be increased to increase employment in rural areas.

The private sector may be encouraged to invest in the utility sector such as power, gas, telephone and water supply with project aid from donors.

That is, efficiency in resource allocation and utilisation must be ensured if we do not want poverty to increase further and create more anarchic conditions in the country. Without greater participation of the private sector in management of the economy it will be extremely difficult to tide over the impending financial crisis given the accumulated problems left behind by the past regime.

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Bureaucracy-media relations in Bangladesh

S M REZWAN-UL-ALAM

NAPOLEON once said that four hostile newspapers were more to be feared than a thousand bayonets. Media scholars agree that the media's coverage of the Watergate scandal forced American President Richard Nixon to resign the presidency. This clearly testifies that the media enjoys enormous political power. Noted American Media scholar William L. Rivers observed that the American media had acquired the authority and sometimes even the power of a "shadow government".

Writers and journalists generally agree that the pen is mightier than the sword. However, not all rulers hold similar views. Slatin Egyptian President Anwar Sadat once commented: "Everything in this world, even freedom, must be curtailed."

Civil servants in many countries have strong reservations about the power of media and the status they enjoy in the society. Many of them consider that an unfettered and uncontrolled press can be real danger to the survival of a nation. Many officials sincerely believe that the media should extend unconditional support whatever the government proposes. Many government officials have an elitist attitude towards the media. They argue that a largely untrained press and a mostly illiterate population can only combine to make the path to a stable nation more difficult.

On the other hand, media personnel generally believe that bureaucrats, by nature, are distrustful of public exposure of government activities. In fact, the journalists think that the government has a tendency, urged on by the bureaucracy, to cloak its activities in secrecy and evasion. Indeed, our Evidence Act (specially Section 123/124), Official Secrets Act of 1923, Government Servants Conduct Rules (Rule 19) along with

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a host of other laws need to be reviewed and scrutinized in the light of open governance, right to information and in the light of constitutional commitments.

In spite of having a huge population, the media in Bangladesh are often accused of failing "in their primary function of keeping their readers well informed." (Far Eastern Economic Review, 18 September 1986). A survey by the Press Information Department in 1983 showed that 56 per cent of respondents believed that local newspapers failed to perform their watchdog function by objecting information. Also, 61 per cent believed newspapers carried misinformation. Another study in the same year further revealed that over 40 per cent of respondents believed newspapers were not neutral in their attitude and the news published was not objective. Raman's survey (1981) also found that about 60 per cent believed that the Bangladesh press did not reflect a true image of society.

While there are diverse views about the overall performance of the press, journalists as professionals seem to have gained a considerable confidence of the public. A

study in 1997 by Dr. Saad Andaleeb, Associate Professor of Marketing at Pennsylvania State University, found that journalists and doctors earned highest praise from the general public than politicians and police. Out of 17 traits examined, journalists scored the highest ratings in the categories of sincerity, competence, hard working, dependable, knowledge, dedication, patriotism, courteousness, honesty, friendly, trustworthy and service-oriented.

There is ample academic research on government-media relations. These studies are however represent a confrontational picture, focusing mainly on the theoretical aspects. Former journalist-turned academic Altschull, J. Herbert's classic work on role of the news media in human affairs provides an insight into the patron-client relations between the government and the media. A new model on "collaboration-opposition-collaboration" developed by this writer has justifiably explained the nature of relations between the military government and the media in Bangladesh.

Regrettably, there is a lack of specific study in Bangladesh on the

civil servants' attitude towards the media. A recent American study found that government officials named the media as a prime culprit in public distrust of government. Conducted by Pew Research Center in association with the National Journal, the survey found that government leaders were highly critical of the media's portrayal of their institution. Fully 77 per cent of those in Congress rate the media's coverage of the House and Senate negatively, while 66 per cent of presidential appointees and 73 per cent of senior executives give the media similarly poor ratings for its coverage of federal departments and agencies.

Throughout the world, the concept "good governance" has become a prime parameter in judging how well a country is being run. Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen proclaimed that press freedom is an integral component of development. Since civil servants are considered as "change agents" for development, it is, therefore, necessary that they hold a positive attitude towards the media.

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Excess in matters of religion

WING COMMANDER A. M. M. ENAYAT ULLAH (RETIRED)

THE Prophet (SM) knew that a person filled with excessive and misguided enthusiasm about matters of religion would never be in the best interest of Islam. In fact, fanaticism may take the Muslims backwards to the age of 'zahiliyah' (ignorance and ruthlessness). In this write-up references are made to A.Yusuf Ali's 'THE HOLY QURAN, Text, Translation and Commentary' (1934). Sahih Hadith and Syed Ameer Ali's 'THE SPIRIT OF ISLAM'. A Yusuf Ali's Arab descent accounts for his mastery in Arabic idioms; and his training as an officer in the Indian Civil Service accounts for his command over English language. This book has been acknowledged as the best English Translation with text and commentaries all over the world, including Saudi Arabia. In fact, mostly based on this book, Saudi government has published an English version of the Holy Quran in 1987 AD. Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928) Bar-at-Law, was a Fellow of Calcutta University and Professor of Law in Presidency College and Tagore law Professor. He was Chief Justice Calcutta High Court for 14 years. In 1909 he was the first Indian to be a Justice in the Privy Council. He was a renowned thinker, historian and authority in Islamic Studies, particularly History and Law. About excess the Holy Quran, 5:80 (Maida) reads, "Say: O People of the Book! Exceed not in your religion, the bounds (of what is proper), trespassing beyond the truth.....". A Yusuf Ali comments, "Excess, as opposed to moderation and reason, is the simplest test by which a hypocrite or a selfish man who trades on religion, is known from a sincere, pious and truly religious man. Excess means that truth is sometimes concealed or trampled upon....". Ibid-Note 785

Excess in Matters of Prayer or

Salat: Once a man said to Muhammad (SA), "I keep away from the morning prayers because so and so (Imam) prolongs it too much". The Prophet (Pbuh) became so furious that he was never seen in that temple before. He said, "O People! some of you make others detest prayers....." the Imams should "shorten prayers, as behind them are the weak, the old and the needy", Sahih Bokhari-704. Once Sura Al-Baqara, containing 286 'Ayats' was recited by an Imam during prayer, and a man left the prayer. The news reached the Prophet (pbuh), and he told the concerned Imam, "You are putting the people to trial" and repeated it thrice (or said something similar) and asked him to recite medium Suras (SB 701-710 and 868). It may be recalled that Allah decreed fifty prayers (Salat) a day, but Musa (SA) advised Muhammad (SA) who appealed to Allah twice to reduce the number, as it would be impossible for the believers to offer 50 prayers a day. As a result, Allah reduced to five a day. Full text of this Hadith is in SB-349. Parts of this Hadith are in SB 1636 and 3342. Readers may appreciate that the believers have been saved from extreme excess at the instance of Muhammad (SA). Indeed, it was an exceptional example of reasoning and moderation in matters of religion to prevent detest.

Excess in Matters of Reciting the Holy Quran without understanding: Once Muhammad (SA) said to some one "among the off-spring of this man will be some who will recite the Holy Quran, but the Quran will not reach beyond their throats, (i.e. they will recite like parrots and will not understand it nor act on it).....". SB-3344. Allah says that the Holy Quran was revealed in Arabic so that the Arabs could understand it (and learn wisdom), 43:3 (Az-Zukhruf). Allah meant 'understanding the underlying meaning' as mentioned in the last part of Sura 3:7 (Al-Imran) which reads,

If Bangladesh follows the Jabrites and resigns to the baseless and false concept of pre-destiny then she will fall as easy prey, because Hitler's Germany has not been the only country promoting 'Lebensraum.' It has an appeal in some South Asian nation too, whose leaders believe that they have the moral right to inherit the empire left by the British Raj.

"... and none will grasp the message except the men of understanding". 55:5 (Ar-Rahman) reads, "The Sun and moon follow courses (exactly) computed". Indeed, it is one thing to be able to read the script, and it is another to understand the underlying meanings. How can the general public understand the underlying meanings if these are not explained to them by the well educated people and trained Imams? The Imams must have at least the basic knowledge of astronomy and other subjects which have been mentioned in the Book many times.

Disrespecting the Verses regarding Rest and Tranquility: 6:96 (Al-Anam) reads, "... He makes the night for rest and tranquility.....". Instead of appealing to the members of public, so that people do not make noise, blow horns, operate noisy machines or play music loudly in and around residential areas, some people arrange religious functions i.e. 'Waaz & Nasihat Mehflis', 'Zikr', or 'telawat-e-Quran' and use loudspeakers during the hours of rest and tranquility. In Ramadan, such activities increase. Although such religious functions are known to be held with good intentions, they appear to be contrary to the verse 6:96 and 4:171, resulting in excess and detest. 4:171 (Nisaa) reads, "O people of the Book! commit no excesses in your religion.....". Second part of 6:96 emphasises that reckoning of time by mankind is one of the benefits of creating the Sun and the Moon, and placing them in their respective orbits. But it is a matter of great regret that some people ignore that the Moon has orbit and that man can precisely calculate the time of Moon-set, Moon-rise, lunar months, eclipse and many other things. Without scientific knowledge about several aspects of the Moon and its motion, man would not be able to land on the Moon itself in 1969.

Fatalism Versus reasoning by Jabrites and Mutazilites: Arabs, during the pre-Islamic age of 'Zahiliyah' (ignorance & ruthlessness) were stern fatalists. General idea among those people, in the words of Syed Amir Ali was, "Man was but a sport in the hands of fate"; The Spirit of Islam, p-403. They believed in pre-destination, and that man could not change it, as if he is under compulsion (Jabr) by Allah or that Allah automated man like robots. "Thus the doctrine of 'Jabr' converted God into an unjust Master", Ibid-411. Syed Amir Ali continues, "The uncompromising fatalism of the 'Jabrites' occasioned among the thinking classes revolt.....". Ibid-413. As a matter of fact, the Holy Quran itself condemns such (robotic) ideas, and motivated the "men of understanding" through several verses that man is himself responsible for his deeds. Probably, there would be no need of the Day of Judgement if man's deeds were pre-ordained or pre-destined. The intellectuals' revolt shook up the Arab society of antiquity and made place for a new doctrine of reasoning and rationalisation by the Mutazilites (desenters). This doctrine evolved itself further by interpreting the Quranic verses

with due consideration to many Arabic Idioms. For instance, literal meaning of 'fair' is bird, but in some verses it means fate/pre-destination/omen as in the case of 17:13 (Bani Israel) Note . 2187.A. Yusuf Ali's Transliteration of this verse is "Every body's bird we have fastened on his neck". With due consideration to Arabic idiom, bird is interpreted here as fate, meaning that man can control his fate, or his fate will follow him. Abdullah Yusuf Ali comments, the Arabs like the Romans, sought to read the mysteries of human fate from the flights of birds. And many of us in our own days seek to read our future fortunes by different superstitions". Thus verse 17:13 (Bani Israel) will mean that man is responsible for his own deeds". Verse 36:19 (Yasin) is translated as "your evil omens are with yourselves....". It was the Mutazilite concept that drove the Arab Muslims to search for knowledge in different places of the world with more enlightened approach to the Holy Quran and Sunnah, and by interpreting the verses in their true perspective. Philip K. Hitti writes in his book History of the Arabs, "... for the Arabs not only assimilated the ancient lore of Persia and the classic heritage of Greece but adapted both to their own peculiar needs and ways of thinking. In medicine and philosophy their independent work was less conspicuous than alchemy, astronomy, mathematics and geography. In law, theology, philology and linguistics as Arabs and Muslims they carried on original thinking and research",

p- 363. "Thus the Arab Muslims, in one hand had miraculous success... due to their application of military technique adapted to.... the use of cavalry and camelry which the Romans never mastered"; Ibid 143. On the other hand they largely contributed "..... in the awakening of the Western world and in setting it on the road towards its modern renaissance", Ibid-4. "Distinguished scholars, prominent physicists, mathematicians, historians all the world of intellect in fact, including the Caliphs, belonged to the Mutazilite school", Spirit of Islam p-415

Denial of Worldly Benefits: Once George Bernard Shaw said that the greatest curse of poverty is that it can make a man so hopeless that he loses the very urge to free himself from the grip of poverty because he develops some kind of contentment with it. In some societies, where it is even worse, people are told and brain-washed continuously to believe that this mortal life is nothing; and that one should pray for spiritual salvation under guardianship of priests and 'Purohitis', 'Pirs', 'Aulias' and 'Darvesh', come what may to his frail body of skin-clad bones, wrapped by an excuse of clothing, and lying on his back on the hard ground of this earth, looking upwards in closed eyes for God's mercy. For him, he is told, few futile years on this meaningless(?) world can act as equity for eternity in the seven heavens, only under spiritual guardianship. On the other hand Allah says in 2:164 (Al-Baqara) "Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in

the alteration of night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to a earth that is dead; the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth; - (here) indeed are signs for people that are wise". Any body who says that the mortal world is meaningless, actually defies the Quranic verses.

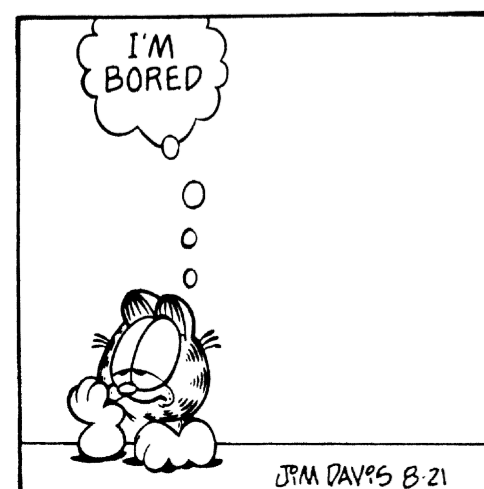
People's fate vs People's War: Bangladesh Chapter: The politico-economic factors, together with the moral strength derived from the creator, manifested itself as peoples power to wage a war of the War of Independence. This happened when the people of the then East Pakistan realised after years of exploitation, under religious fanaticism and Jabrite fatalism. Indeed, the people were taken for granted, as if they accepted their socio-economic life to have been predestined by Allah. Soon the people of Bangladesh learnt from their mistakes and realised that behind religious fanaticism and Jabrite fatalism, induced by the vested interest, lay their real motive concealed. Such concepts manifested "excess" in matters of religion. Eventually, it had to wither away. Thus once again, in the history, "the uncompromising fatalism of Jabrias, occasioned among the thinking classes a revolt.....". This time it was in Bangladesh. The War of Independence infused a tremendous urge to shape up their own destiny. They became Mutazilites. As long as they remain so in future, they will survive and prosper. But they will go backwards and may even cease to exist if they become Jabrites again and revert back to the concept of predestiny. Then the vested interest will say that Bangladesh's

predestiny is to be sucked in to the 'Black Hole' of the neighborhood. Indeed, one should always remember the Quranic verses, "your evil omens are with yourselves..."; and "what you call omens arise from your own ill deeds". However, a new kind of predestination theory is being talked about by some vested interest from geopolitical point of view. People who talk about it and try to apply the concept of geopolitics in the sub-continent may be reminded of Sir. Halford J. Mackinder, the 'Father of Geopolitics' who wrote "GEOGRAPHICAL PIVOT OF HISTORY" in 1904, meaning a completely different thing than what the pseudo intellectuals think. They just pick-up new terminologies to add to their vocabulary, making meanings too literal to convey the actual thoughts of authors.

Mackinder's "Heart land" concept of history was conveniently misinterpreted to justify "Lebensraum", first by the intellectual German General Karl Haushofer, who influenced Adolf Hitler when he was in prison and writing Mein Kampf. "Lebensraum" was his political philosophy, meaning Germany's need to annex others' territories in East Europe to command Europe, because Germany was pre-destined (?) to survive and rule the world as the fittest race (?) on earth. He however, overlooked Mackinder's warning that a power while being able to 'strike on all sides can also be struck on all sides'.

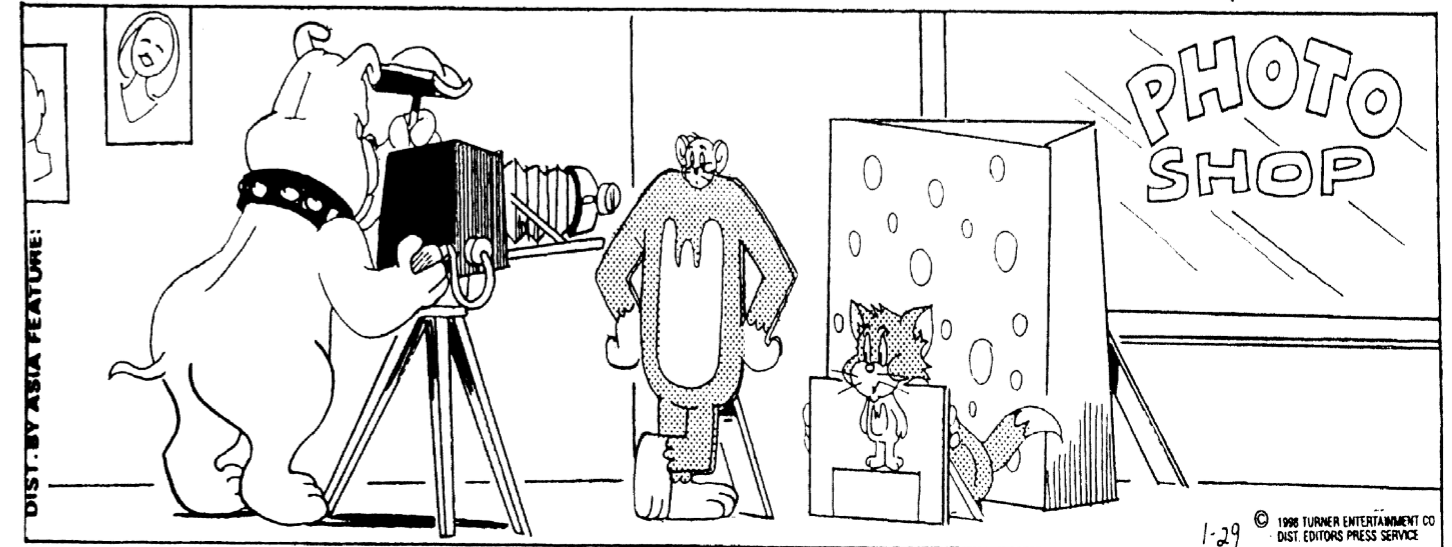
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