

Reviewing projects

It should be based on national interest, not partisan-ism

THE BNP government has decided to review a number of "controversial" projects, some of which signed by the Awami League government during its final days. It is argued that a few of these were also signed on political not economic considerations. There was criticism of these projects and demand for review during the caretaker rule. With the political government in place the review process will now begin.

While there are concern about contracts which go against national interest there is also worry regarding wick hunting as well. Sadly, each government automatically accuses the previous government of wholesale corruption and every major deal is always up for scrutiny. In the end, the consumer is hurt because the decision isn't taken on the merit of the case but political expediency.

The party in power has stated that they will be non-partisan when they scrutinize these "controversial" projects. It has also said that they will continue the development programmes that were initiated by the Awami League. It means that this is a policy decision declaring that partisan decisions are off when dealing with development and economic issues. This is welcomed.

The entire matter certainly goes beyond a few contracts. They relate to the governance system that needs to be installed and put into action. In a country where many decisions are taken to satisfy political friends, the reason to be cautious is all the more necessary. Since both the AL and the BNP have in the past taken such decisions, the matter worries many.

What we need is a regulatory body and a system that operates beyond partisan political interest. The culture of neutrally assessing economic issues is probably the most critical need today. The economy managers will have to operate on the basis of national interest. If that process requires legal support, it should be provided.

Continuity is critical to the smooth functioning of the economy. Neither the commercial nor the consumer interest should be subservient to partisan decision making. One hopes that the present government can set an example by taking decisions which benefit the people and not punish the political opponent and in the process punish the consumer.

Changing global situation

Govt needs to focus on them on an urgent basis

THESE are worrying times for Bangladesh. Events at the national level in the post election world and the impact of the international situation on the country are being acutely felt.

First is the problem of the fall out from the attack on Afghanistan. There is protest against the bombing in many parts of the world, especially where there is a sizeable Muslim population. Pressure on our governments to take some sort of a position on the issue is also rising. While people are against terrorism, they are also against the bombing. One hopes that the street protests don't go out of control as many fear.

As the US led coalition moves towards exercising more military options including ground troops deployment, South Asia will become even more uncertain. Worse, they may actually be generating an environment where covert violent activities against its governments will become a distinct possibility. It may so happen that South Asian countries may have to deal with forces that they have never done before.

The global situation makes the economic future even more uncertain for all. This isn't just about loss of markets, declining demand for exports and fall of remittance. It may mean fall in development aid as well. Obviously, as a country with low strategic interest, Bangladesh will see a fall.

Attacks on minorities is another distressing fact that has to be confronted squarely. Reports are too many and too dreadful to allow hiding behind excuses and complacency. Its impact may be cross border as well and we could have a negative fall out which we simply don't want. Thankfully, the government has started to issue orders and the official machinery has begun to move. We hope that it isn't too late to regain the confidence of our minority community.

In such circumstances, the government must handle the political economy in a crisis management mode. If the government gets bogged down in petty political issues, Bangladesh may well face a situation it can't manage. The way out is calm and reasonable governance. Between political management and national governance, the choice has to be clearly for the latter.

The love's labour lost



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IT was blatantly businesslike when a day after the Black Tuesday Collin Powell, the US Secretary of State, rang up President Musharraf of Pakistan seeking the latter's cooperation in hunting down Osama bin-Laden, believed to be the mastermind behind the history's most audacious terrorist act last month in the United States. With Powell reportedly asking him to 'stand up and be counted' and offer in real term 'unstinted cooperation' to Washington's operation against the Taliban and Al-Qaida bases in Afghanistan, Musharraf's response could not be anything but positive pending, however, a *quid pro quo* to be worked out later. An apparently panicked Pakistan already condemned the terrorists' attack in the US and rather copiously promised cooperation in fighting international terrorism, lest it would be bracketed with Afghanistan as the US' anti-terrorist target imperiling its nuclear asset. Not quite satisfied with Pakistan's routine reaction President Bush himself chose, after Powell's exploratory telephone conversation, to talk to the Pakistani President who was sufficiently hinted that the latter's cooperation wouldn't be without a price.

It is however not for nothing that the world's most powerful nation sought Pakistan's cooperation at a time when she became almost a

pariah in US perception and watched in silent agony the US' growing courtship with India, her arch rival for last several years. It is because the road to bin Laden passes through Pakistan which is not only equipped with perfect intelligence on the US' most wanted man and his network in Afghanistan but also has the potential of being the most suitable front line state for a military action against the Taliban controlled country. So, by extending cooperation to the US in the latter's war against the bases of terrorism in Afghanistan Pakistan is justifiably entitled to extract some price.

calculation, the US is expected to bail out Musharraf with financial assistance, debt relief and rescheduling of loan etc. But she has neither time nor the inclination for pandering to Pakistan's desire on Kashmir at Delhi's expense. For the moment Pakistan's net gain is its reappearance on the US' strategic calculus where she ceased to be a factor after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. It may as well prove illusory when new and unknown sets of dynamics would be unleashed as the events in Afghanistan further unfold.

self contradiction imposed on the country inflicts Pakistan with a terrible crisis of conscience, apart from its physical fallout. As the country has chosen to take Washington's side, the enraged Islamist forces are increasingly turning against Musharraf's regime. The dilemma of Musharraf thickens as any failure or reluctance to come down heavily on the *jihadi* groups would then have Washington wield the stick. Until now the *jihadi* groups were treated as allies in the nation's struggle against India in Kashmir. Obviously the authorities in Paki-

stan will find it difficult to clamp down on them.

threat to Pakistan. Some religious groups in Hangu of NWFP have even threatened Pakistan with suicide attacks and the tribal leaders are openly calling their men to arms to defend their Taliban allies. Thousands of heavily armed men gathered in several tribal agencies recently to pledge allegiance to the hardline militia in Afghanistan.

Even as the battle is joined, Afghanistan is under aerial strikes and there are civilian casualties, the situation is surprisingly under control in Pakistan which is yet to boil up to an expected level of violence. It is

direct patronage. Pakistan in its quest for a friendly, if not a pliant, government in Kabul in order to ensure a secured Western front, strategic depth and, lately, an access to central Asian resources, went through unsavoury experience since its inception. Its latest experimentation with the Taliban who were catapulted to power largely with the help of Pakistan proved fruitful in some areas at certain level -- notwithstanding Taliban's archaic world view and extremism. The Taliban did share some of the concerns of Pakistan particularly with regard to the latter's policy in Kashmir. In spite of sharp differences between an ostensibly moderate Pakistan and highly puritan Taliban-controlled Afghanistan there was an equilibrium, an understanding and a measure of shared values between the two. All those are now in shreds after Pakistan, in a turnaround, persuaded the Taliban to capitulate before the American dictates.

The bondages thus shattered can perhaps be never restored again. Under no conceivable dispensation the Pushtuns who constitute the Taliban will ever trust its onetime benefactor.

Pakistan now is genuinely worried over the West's efforts to bring a pro-Indian Northern Alliance back to power. Pakistan not only opposed its Rabbani government for violating the terms of 1993 Islamabad Declaration it was precisely its intransigence that prompted Pakistan to look for the Taliban alternative. Although Taliban also did not always listen to Pakistan, any other dispensation in its place will create more problems for Pakistan. Once the American obsession of punishing and toppling the Taliban will be over the US will leave the mess behind for the regional countries, particularly Pakistan to be embroiled in its smouldering fire.

Brig (Retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS

PERSPECTIVES

The Talibans did share some of the concerns of Pakistan particularly with regard to the latter's policy in Kashmir. In spite of sharp differences between an ostensibly moderate Pakistan and highly puritan Taliban-controlled Afghanistan there was an equilibrium, an understanding and a measure of shared values between the two. All those are now in shreds after Pakistan, in a turnaround, persuaded the Taliban to capitulate before the American dictates.

No one knows exactly what price, if any, Pakistan has demanded for its crucial support to the US in the latter's attacks against the Taliban. Pakistan is learnt to have asked the US to play a more active role in settling the Kashmir dispute an information denied by the US when India expressed its concerns over such development. Pakistan's wish list also includes keeping India and Israel out of any coalition against Afghanistan, waiving off \$30 bn debt and lifting of US sanctions imposed after its nuclear test in 1998. Barring the last item of the wish list on which the US has already taken action none seems to be exactly aware of the US position on other expectations of Pakistan. The US is, however, traditionally liberal in offering handsome largesse to its allies. By all

But the price Pakistan will have to pay in the process is enormous. The *jihadi* organisations of Pakistan, stridently opposed to the US, have already sounded an emphatic 'no' to any government move to offer support to Washington in launching attack against Afghanistan. The Lashkar-e-Taiba, the most dreaded militant outfit now operating in Kashmir said: "It would be great treachery". Indeed, with the Pakistan government committed to the US for providing airspace for attack on Taliban and intelligence on bin-Laden and Taliban leaders, closing down all madrasas which 'serve terrorism', sealing border with Afghanistan and keeping its home-grown *jihadi* outfits under leash it is in direct confrontation with what all the country itself nurtured, promoted and upheld for years. This

primarily because the regime of President Musharraf has taken stringent security measures by taking into custody the top religious leaders and removing the generals sympathetic to Taliban to non-operational positions. The public outrage has however been brewing up with the rising casualties in Afghanistan where it is believed only to be beginning of a long drawn-out conflict. The decisive stage of war will reach in Afghanistan only with the landing of the attackers' ground troops in its treacherous terrain. It is only then the defenders' prowess and the sympathisers' anger can be fully unleashed.

Worse still is the breach of trust in its trail. The Taliban had been the creation of Pakistan from its religious seminaries and under its

the possibility of a massive attack by their Mujahideen could not be ruled out if any neighbouring country offered its ground or air base to the US forces. Whether the Taliban now at war with Anglo-American coalition forces are in a position to be a threat to any neighbouring country is open to question. But their fellow Pushtun tribesmen in the no-man's-land along a tenuous Durand line along Pak-Afghan border are already closing ranks to be on the side of the Taliban. Their posture will certainly constitute a

majority votes are the unambiguous rule of law of democracy. However, this rule works in two different ways in two different forms of government. In the presidential form, majority is a national notion, because the candidate, who gets most votes nationally, becomes the president. But in the parliamentary form, the majority vote works within the constituency -- the candidate who gets the majority within the constituency becomes the member of the parliament. It could so happen that the party which gets most votes nationally is not the one that gets most parliamentary seats. In other words, government may be formed by the party which is less popular by the national majority. So, in the parliamentary form of democracy, the national popularity may not be helpful for forming the government.

These are then three reasons for rejecting the election outcome. First, AL and its mentor intellectuals do not believe in democracy's principle of numerical equality, which means that they have little respect in people's verdict. Second, they seemingly fail to distinguish between the sovereign and its deputies. Finally, they also seem to fail to differentiate between the presidential and parliamentary forms of government, concerning the principle of majority votes.

Second, we fail to distinguish between the state and government or between the sovereign and its deputies. The state belongs to the

people, because they are its sovereign authority. Government, which is the most important organ of the state, belongs to elected politicians (people's deputies) and the salaried employees. For they are the direct beneficiaries of this institution. The sovereign benefits indirectly if these people perform their responsibilities properly. Election is a matter of the state and the sovereign. Thus, accepting the outcome of the election, in no way, implies accepting the government activities. Then government is the aftermath of the election, which means that election comes first. Since the government can be approved or admonished only on the basis of its activities, the non-acceptance of the election outcome infers two things. First, it implies prejudging the performance of the government that has not begun functioning as yet. Second, it simply means the non-acceptance of the people's verdict.

Finally, the third misconception arises from the failure of understanding the difference between the forms of government in democracy,

Parliament has been certified as fair by all observers. And BNP has won it decisively. Thus, Begum Zia and her party must be congratulated for being able to secure the confidence of voters represented by the 300 constituencies. She must also be wished to lead a smooth and stable government during the next five years. But she must be warned that if she fails to perform desirably during her tenure, she and her party will be dumped in the same way Sheikh Hasina and her AL have apparently been dumped.

Khandakar Qudrat-I Elahi, a former Associate Professor of Bangladesh Agricultural University, now lives in Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

Abide by people's verdict

KHANDAKAR QUDRAT-I ELAHI

THE caretaker system was introduced in 1991 and then formalised in 1996 to pave the way for the institutionalisation of democracy in the country. The reason was that whoever captured power, elected or self-imposed, rigged elections in their favour. In other words, the caretaker system has been established to hold fair polls to elect politicians -- who are unable to guarantee the fairness of a national election -- to manage the businesses of the state.

One of the expectations of institutionalising this system was that the participating political parties would accept the election outcome. This expectation has been proven utterly wrong. AL and BNP accept the election outcome only when they win. AL did not accept the 1991 election outcome and has repeated its legacy this year. BNP did not accept the 1996 election outcome.

President Shahabuddin described the AL and BNP policies concerning elections under the caretaker government with his acute wisdom: "Election rigging is a very bad thing if it is done by the rival candidate or party, but it is an act of patriotism if it is done by me or my party. Election is fair if I win; it is rigged if I lose, even if it is conducted by an angel (DS 07 December 1997)."

There was a great concern about the outcome of this election. This concern was founded on the election outcomes in 1991 and 1996. In those elections, no single party got absolute majority. Governments were first formed with coalitions and then stabilised through 30-women seats, which were not available for the 8th parliament. Thus, it was apprehended that the 8th parliament would be formed with feeble coalitions. But election arithmetic of coalitions decided the results in favour of the four-party alliance though AL got almost as many votes. People's wisdom can be better understood if we take AL's

reaction into consideration. AL does not accept this election outcome. Thus, we can easily imagine what could have happened if the BNP-led coalition would have won by a few seats. But there would have been no objections against the caretaker government if AL had won.

The election outcome, however, worries us in a very different way. We see BNP's landslide victory with serious suspicion. This seems both hypocritical and irrational. AL won landslide victory in 1970 and 1973. We congratulated the election results; instead of calling voters

him to the position of Bangabandhu and the father of the nation. But he used his 1973 mandate rather very badly that ultimately harmed him. Begum Zia can use this mammoth mandate for the benefit of the country and common people, and by that make a mark in the political history of the country. Or if she is unwise, she will make mistake. The choice is hers.

The election outcome is interpreted in two diametrically different ways. From the BNP's perspective, the outcome reflects the people's desire to bring about a change in public administration by getting rid

of the 'corrupt and misrule' of AL. If by the term people, BNP implies itself, then the meaning is absolutely clear. However, if the term is meant to infer its normal signification, then the usage is certainly wrong: People had little reason to think that BNP would make their life any better. For there are little differences in minds and merits between AL and BNP politicians. Then the civil and military bureaucracies, which are the *de facto* rulers, remain the same no matter which party comes to supervise them.

AL has rejected the election outcome outright, accusing that polls were 'rudely rigged'. It argues that there was a conspiracy against AL, which involves the senior members of the caretaker government and the Election Commission. It has demanded fresh polls and threatened to disrupt public life through strikes and other political means. Few people take AL's accusation seriously. For the election was fair to the extent it is possible in a land where the members of the civil society have little sense of fairness.

Thus, the main issue is to understand the principles of democracy that the AL leadership and its intellectual mentors are using to reject the outcome of the election. In this respect, Aristotle's wisdom seems most pertinent.

In his timeless classic, *The Politics*, Aristotle describes the principles of democracy as follows: "The foundation of the democratic constitution is liberty. People constantly make this statement implying that only in this constitution is there any share in liberty at all; every democracy, they say, has liberty for

its aim. 'Ruling and being ruled in turn' is one element in liberty. Then there is the democratic idea of justice as numerical equality, not equality based on merit; and when this idea of what is right prevails, the people must be sovereign, and whatever the majority decides that is final and that is justice. For, they say, there must be equality among citizens."

In Aristotle's definition, three ideas are most important -- people's sovereignty, numerical equality and the majority rule. In democracy, people are sovereign. This means that there is no superior authority in the state above the people, i.e., whatever the people decide is final. This sovereign authority of the people is founded on the principle of numerical equality. Finally, people's sovereignty is transmitted through the majority votes on the election day. This is the reason why democracy is called the political system of majority rule.

The question of acceptability of the election outcome has arisen because of three misconceptions

There may be three reasons for rejecting the election outcome by AL. First, AL and its mentor intellectuals perhaps do not believe in democracy's principle of numerical equality, which means that they have little respect in people's verdict. Second, they seemingly fail to distinguish between the sovereign and its deputies. Finally, they also seem to fail to differentiate between the presidential and parliamentary forms of government, concerning the principle of majority votes.

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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.



PHOTO: BELAL A. FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

A risky route

Although Bangladesh has done away with ferries over the Jamuna river, they still ply in many parts of the country including Chittagong. Fragile and rundown bridges have also kept ferries going. The picture shows a ramshackle ferry hauling people and transport across Karnaphulli in North Chittagong. These river crafts are dangerous to life and property especially in the absence of any proper supervision. A little care could save many and much.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

No NAM now

In view of the changed global political and 'US war' situation, the proposed NAM conference in Dhaka early next year may be postponed indefinitely, as the meet has become irrelevant now. Besides, the local economy needs closer attention.

AH
Dhaka

Farce of the century

The United Nations and its Secretary General have been awarded the Nobel Peace prize for 2001, for masterly inactivity in containing super power US, which continues to ignore the UN system with disdain.

The helplessness of the UN is appalling. Why not close down the UN system and save billions of dollars a year? It cannot help the needy or control truant members. It is of no use to the Third World. The creation of WTO is against the objectives of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Now many countries have started to boycott US and Britain goods and services, thanks to Osama bin Laden cultthe person who changed world history in the

shortest period of time: one day

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Non-academician VC

A VC must have to be a professor or retired professor of any university. I have noticed that non-academician VCs do not bother the suggestions of teachers, do not know how to run a university and try to run it like a company. Eventually, it is the life of the student which jeopardises. If possible the president may promulgate an ordinance, which disallow any non-academician to become VC. Ex-secretaries and ex-army officer must not think that they are capable to do any job such as the job of a VC.

Matin
Assitant Professor
Indira Road, Dhaka

Here we go again

It is Farj on our PM to steer the country towards the right direction, not to perform Umrah. We all know that Allah doesn't expect us to perform Hajj with our homes in disarray.

Both our leaders have a tendency to show-off their love for

religion. It didn't take very long for our new PM to prove me right. At a time when our remittances from abroad have gone down to an unhealthy level, when our level of export most importantly when there is fear of lowering foreign aid, how on earth can a newly elected leader go on a trip, no matter what the purpose may be, before she sits down to assess the severity of the country's financial situation? Not to mention allowing the immense cost associated with all her ministers going to the airport to see her off.

How unfortunate does a country have to be to get stuck with recycled leadership making same mistakes over and over again?

Anwar Babar
Dallas, Texas, e-mail

Immediate action required

I write regarding the newly appointed Home Minister's recent interview to the BBC Bengali Service on the attacks on minorities. It seemed as though Air Vice Marshall Altaf Hussain Choudhury was more concerned about defending his

party and its workers and blaming 'certain quarters' than to condemn the attacks and promise action.

The Home Minister declared that the incidents are being exaggerated by certain groups or parties. According to him, the situation is not as bad as it is being made out to be. I feel that every single attack on minorities is shameful for our nation and undermines the communal harmony of which we are so proud.

Apportioning blame and responsibility on others marks a return to the negative politics of old and is not consistent with the prime minister's pledge to rise above party politics in an effort to end terrorism.

Shameran Abed, on e-mail

Future of Bangladesh

Our leaders always talk about building a happy and prosperous Bangladesh. We have heard the same thing from these political parties in different format and wordings. After thirty years of independence we still face the same problems as they were before. Furthermore, violence, crime and corruption have become more prevalent. With all these, I cannot but be pessimistic about the future of Bangladesh. Is there any optimist there except the political leaders?

Towhid Salam
Los Angeles, California, on e-mail

Election results and AL

The election is over! The BNP has received the mandate of the nation to guide it for the next five years.

Given the situations prevailing in the country before and during the election time, the election was fair. Both national and international observers and monitors have spoken highly of the conduct of the Caretaker Government and the Election Commission.

In a democratic system when the electorate at the pole overwhelmingly rejects a ruling party, an honourable thing for the chairperson of the party is to resign. The Awami League chief should follow this tradition of the Westminster-style democracy we are trying to establish in our country, and let the younger people lead the Awami League.

Dr. Mominul Hoque
USA, on e-mail