

Political culture shows cynical individualism

Serious questions deserve honest answers

BANGLADESH is in a deep crisis. Many are now speaking out on the issue and the conclusions make for grim reading. Clearly, failure in governance is determining the trajectory of a tragedy.

Perhaps the most hopeful period in recent times, the 1991 uprising which led to the dispelling of a military backed regime by a conglomeration of civil society and political activists, generated the highest level of expectation.

However, events have proven the results to be sternly negative. The ushering in of the civilian dominated political structure proved that a switch in the colour of the ruler's uniform has little to do with the quality of governance. The fundamental problem may lie elsewhere including in the nature and health of the state. But that is again defined by the political paradigms of the governance process. Such have been the views of speakers at recent lectures organized by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). Both are think-tanks where the issues of governance and the political economy of managing the state are often deliberated.

The chasm between the political governors and the governed has increased with every passing year. Almost everyone agrees that the failure of the major political parties to agree on basic approaches to political culture is where the problem lies. Unless the two contenders can decide how that can be managed, mere focus on good governance will not be enough.

The nature of the crisis has also been discussed at the Millennium Celebration Lecture organized by the BIDS. Prof. Rehman Sobhan has argued that society has become so fragmented that even class formations have become difficult because people are so individualized. In lay terms, the people as individuals have no stake in the state. Prof. Sobhan who has been part of the construction of the state from birth and an analyst of what he has had a hand in creating is best endowed to comment on this.

His analysis leaves us with a great deal of unease because the lack of class formations and the weakness of the state are issues that aren't usually discussed at the policy making levels. Part of the reason is because the development partners aren't involved in the political economy of the state but delivery of project objectives. While development concepts like empowerment and governance are part of a system that has whittled away at the notion of political economy, the language of 'development' is certainly stronger.

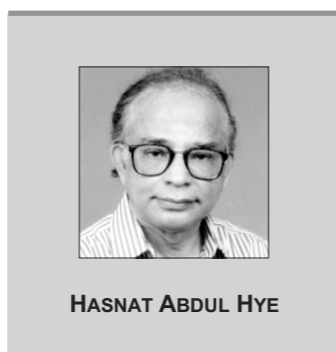
The donor-technocrat who spoke at the CPD was probably disappointed because he saw that donor prescriptions aren't enough to ensure development if political structures aren't also robust. Clearly, both need to be strengthened.

Yet the riddle isn't answered because Bangladesh remains at the peak of its misery and every year things do grow worse. Prof. Sobhan's discovery of the absence of any "class" will be theoretically challenged but clearly the people have lost confidence even in corporate constructs and are going all for themselves which may have been interpreted as such.

Many will also ask if Bangladesh as a state has a history of ever been strong at all. The many political experiments, from one-party rule to martial law regimes, have failed to salvage the state's capacity to manage the task. Perhaps the post-1991 scenario looks so dismal because it has failed after people had gained power to form popular governments.

However, the political parties have shown that they are more keen to fight each other than build a state through public policies. It is their failure to build a politics of social tolerance and political cohesiveness that is forcing many to challenge the very ideas, which propelled the history of Bangladesh. Serious questions are being asked and serious responses will have to be made.

IMF's mission possible



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THERE were two news published on the same day, one about Bangladesh and the other concerning Argentina. In both the IMF was the prima donna occupying the centre stage. When the IMF makes news in relation to member-countries their economies are invariably in dire straits. Bangladesh and Argentina do not belong to the same economic league and their current financial crisis have different nuances. But both need the IMF to bail them out. The IMF's response has been predictably harsh and familiar. It is the seemingly insensitive and standardized prescriptions to restore the economy to health that exasperate the countries in need of help. Not infrequently, more than the ailment the regimen of treatment appears more discomfiting and even painful. Bangladesh and Argentina are experiencing or about to experience the same.

According to newspaper reports Argentina traded verbal blows with the IMF accusing it of being incoherent and rude in saying that the country needed to adopt a viable economic plan before seeking aid. Argentina authorities were particularly outraged over a letter in which the IMF ruled out talks until the country adopted a coherent economic plan. Earlier the IMF had halted a crucial disbursement of US\$1.2 billion. While tightening the noose around Argentina's economy the IMF made it plain that there would be no negotiation before a fairly comprehensive plan for the medium term was adopted.

On the other side of the globe, in Bangladesh a visiting IMF team concluded its weeklong mission without committing any support. Earlier the government of Bangladesh had requested for a compensatory financing facility to overcome the current balance of payment problem. The IMF indicated that the amount of fund provided would depend on the extent of reform the government could commit to implement in the short to medium term. More specifically, loan would hinge on the quality of government policy,

magnitude public debt ballooned in both the countries in a spree of financial profligacy. With election in view the last elected government in Bangladesh passed a huge deficit budget unabashedly. Monetary policy was in a shambles with prudent use of foreign exchange given scant attention. This allowed a major balance of payment crisis to build up and finally exploded. Public sector expenditures, far from being reined in, spiraled upward uncontrolled. Except in foreign trade, all other economic reform programmes

which might also have been made earlier as part of the overall reform programme. The problem is that in times of crisis the adoption of reform measures become even more painful and hence unpopular. Sometimes they are also unrealistic in the short term. No wonder, countries seeking the IMF assistance snivel and balk at the conditionalities.

There is no doubt that for some of the economic ills arising out of financial mismanagement Bangladesh is at fault (as is Argentina and

action.

While acknowledging this, it should also be pointed out that the IMF has also a role and some responsibility in this regard. The IMF office in Dhaka is supposed to collect relevant data and monitor key economic indicators. Their advice and cautioning to the government has to be based on such regular surveillance and monitoring. In its absence the IMF can be said to be performing its task only halfheartedly and inadequately. In

formulated by it for the purpose. The news about the anomaly in data collection by different government agencies detected by the IMF indicate that standardised procedure for regular monitoring have not yet been introduced at the initiative of the IMF. Nor is there any visible public record about regular advice and caution being issued by the IMF to the government. If this activity becomes routine there would be no need for successive missions to visit the country for fact finding and analysis. Nor would it be necessary to prescribe the rescue measures in a package and at one go. Reform in a democratic polity should be a continuous process and not in the form of "shock therapy." In the case of Bangladesh this may have been underplayed so far.

To help Bangladesh manage the current economic crisis the IMF should take a pragmatic approach. No two countries are the same and the same prescription should not be made lest the cure becomes more intolerable than the ailment. Of course, Bangladesh has to commit itself to reform measures that are urgently required and long overdue. The successful liberalisation of the trade regime carried out in early nineties even at some cost demonstrates the country's ability and willingness to implement reform programmes. The beginning of a new government being the most opportune time for such measures the 'mission' that IMF may have on the drawing board is quite 'possible'. For the IMF, this means "containing conditions to what is necessary to get the macro-economy back on an even keel and to get financial and other key markets working properly". These are the words of Stanley Fisher, the former Deputy Managing Director of the IMF. The title of his article published in the weekly *Newsweek* (December 2001) was "What we have learned in the IMF". Those lessons should neither be forgotten nor ignored.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

To help Bangladesh manage the current economic crisis the IMF should take a pragmatic approach. No two countries are the same and the same prescription should not be made lest the cure becomes more intolerable than the ailment. Of course, Bangladesh has to commit itself to reform measures that are urgently required and long overdue.

improvement in areas like macro economic management, addressing continuous financial hemorrhage in state-owned enterprises, expenditures control, accountability and transparency of public sector expenditures. In response to the plea from Bangladeshi side the IMF pointed out that it was difficult to assess the extent of impact of the worldwide recession on the country's exports because of anomalies of data provided by different government agencies. At the end of the inconclusive discussion it was decided that another technical mission would come in February to assess the institutional capacity for monitoring and reporting government expenditures. Though couched in different terms the approach of the IMF to the financial crisis in Bangladesh and Argentina have in essence been the same. It has minced no words to express dissatisfaction and presented the conditionalities in no uncertain terms.

Bangladesh and Argentina are in dire financial straits because of mismanagement by their past governments. Though of differing

were either put on the back-burner or moved at snail's pace. On the face of it, the IMF has reasons to be unhappy.

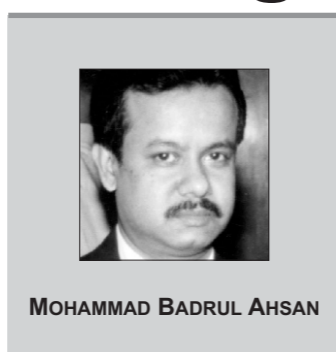
All countries, big and small, that find themselves in financial crisis produce the same background and environment for the emergence of crisis. These are constituted incrementally and piecemeal by individual ministries working under their own perception of priority. With such centrifugal forces at work, monitoring of economic trends through various indicators hardly works effectively and timely. As long as there is no major crisis knocking at the door danger signal by a central agency like Central Bank or Planning Commission is not flagged seriously. The absence of a high-powered central co-ordinating mechanism exacerbates this problem. It is only when a full blown crisis strikes that the government as a collectivity becomes alert and active. But by then considerable damage may have been caused to the economy making restoration of normalcy difficult and painful. It is in this backdrop that the IMF recommends drastic actions, some of

to a greater extent). But Bangladesh is also a victim of external development particularly in the sphere of trade. The country depends overwhelmingly (75 per cent of exports) on export of garments. This has been hit hard by the current recession in world economy, particularly in the USA. A major blow to this sector was received when the biggest export market, America, gave duty and quota free facilities to the African and Caribbean Countries (APC). This group under the Lome convention already enjoys similar facility in the European Union. The drastic fall in demand for garments and an uneven playing field following the preferential treatment given to APC countries will affect the foreign exchange earning capacity of Bangladesh even more seriously in the near future. But whatever the external causes the present financial crisis of Bangladesh also stem from lack of or inadequate economic management for which no excuse is strong enough to avoid responsibility. First and foremost has been the failure to monitor the economic indicators regularly for taking timely corrective

recent years the IMF is reported to have taken over this surveillance and monitoring role in some countries with greater urgency to prevent economic crisis from taking place. The emphasis has increasingly been on crisis prevention because once the crisis breaks out it becomes difficult to control. In pursuance of this strategy the IMF has sharpened its surveillance of national policies making reporting more regular and rigorous. Global standards and codes of conduct for presentation of economic statistics, introduction of accounting standards and procedure for supervision of banking system now set benchmarks for good policy making. Reports on the observance of these standards are being published by the IMF particularly for countries considered vulnerable to economic crisis. In this capacity the IMF can help member-countries to avoid or at least mitigate the intensity of crisis.

In the case of Bangladesh it is not known if the IMF has been monitoring economic trends using global standards and codes of conduct

Falling in love



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF you have ever fallen in love, you know it is a term of contradiction. You fall in love when your mind actually soars in the air, when everything about you wants to break loose and shoot into the sky. Love turns minds into gas balloons as senses and feelings so against the gravity of logic. Falling in love means rising in effect, a special sensation that lifts one's heart, already intoxicated with the bliss of heaven.

Love is synesthesia, a stimulus of the heart that enervates all five senses. The flowers are more fragrant, the sun shines brighter, the moon looks more refulgent, the wind blows gentler, the food tastes better, songs are sweeter and smile becomes laughter. Initially a lover loses his sleep and appetite, and his heart goes through bouts of euphoria and depression as he tries to read his loved one like Morse code. Her every glance, smile, word, smirk, gesture and sound turns the world for him as he wobbles between the signs of her approval and denial, his mind riding on the

seesaw of felicity and frustration in the garden of her flirtations.

A lover is perhaps the loneliest person on earth until he is sure that there is also love for him in the other heart. He hangs in the balance between a basket case and a lucky star, his wretchedness coming close only to infatuation when an unrequited lover chooses to walk alone on the path of his passion like a recluse enjoying a game of solitaire. But a lover who is awaiting response will sweat in the winter and shiver in the summer, heaving deep sighs

her with all his life; his body congealed cell by cell by the desire to hold her hands. Lust sits like a thorn in the flesh, but love's pain invades both flesh and blood.

What happens to the mind of a lover when he engages in the emotional trapeze of love? Erich Fromm writes in *The Art of Loving* that an attractive girl is the prize of love for a man, and an attractive man is the prize of love for a woman. What the word attractive means, is a nice package of qualities which are popular and sought after in the

dated in the consummation of marriage. But the process can also backfire if the intimacy loses its miraculous character and the antagonism, disappointments, and mutual boredom between lovers kill the initial excitement of their mutual attraction. In that case, love which starts with a bang ends with a whimper, because what they had mistaken for intensity of love was in effect the intensity of infatuation, which proved nothing but the intensity of their preceding loneliness.

Yet Samuel Butler, the English

exceptions. They died together because one could not live without another. For them the valency of love had reached an equality, which would have made the living of one meaningless after the death of the other.

Lord Byron argues that man's love is of man's life a thing apart, but it is woman's whole existence. Because a woman in her first passion loves her lover, and in all the others all she loves is love. People often fall in love with love itself, and then turn that passion into an obses-

the woman who embodies the womanhood that lights his fire. Chandidasa is said to have gone fishing for a eighteen years because his fire for Rajakini had burned for that long.

It is common belief that a woman would express her love of the five things to express her love of her lover, make her hair in front of her lover, ask him about her dress or make-up, die to talk to him, light up in the face to see him, and share her secrets with him. A man would do most of the same things except make his hair or ask her about his make-up. But he would do something even more absurd to show his feelings. Majnu used to hug and caress Laily's dog in the earnest expression of his mad love for her.

To think of it, love is the greatest mystery between man and woman. One English novelist categorized love as nothing but a system for getting someone to call you darling after sex. According to an Urdu poet, love is a flame that cannot be ignited if one tries, but difficult to extinguish once ignited. Somewhere in the dense heart of that mystery, animal instincts of human beings climb to beatific heights.

If you have fallen in love, you would know how it works. If you have not, don't despair. The snares of love pervade this world, and you never know when you might walk into one.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

To think of it, love is the greatest mystery between man and woman. One English novelist categorized love as nothing but a system for getting someone to call you darling after sex. According to an Urdu poet, love is a flame that cannot be ignited if one tries, but difficult to extinguish once ignited. Somewhere in the dense heart of that mystery, animal instincts of human beings climb to beatific heights.

from time as if to release the storm of dejection that keeps brewing inside his desperate heart.

This lover will speak to himself, break into tears, lose his temper, grow impatient, neglect his studies, ignore friends, and eat without choice. His mind is thoroughly focused on the behavior of the other person, while he still dresses himself attractively and brushes his hair as if these are the only two things, which could save his love. English poet Charles Swinburne writes that no thorn goes as deep as rose's and love is crueler than lust. He covets

personality market. Two persons thus fall in love when they feel they have found the best objects available on the market, considering the limitations of their own exchange value. According to Fromm, human love relations follow the same pattern of exchange which governs the commodity and the labor markets.

Love begins to work when attraction leads to intimacy, and that intimacy creates a passionate sense of belonging to one another. Thus step by step love pushes them towards companionship, the finality of which is confirmed and consoli-

novelist and sometime sheep farmer, would say that it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Love is a risky business, an investment in the sensibilities of one heart that depends on those of another heart for its return. Oliver Goldsmith writes that friendship is a disinterested commerce between equals, and love is an abject intercourse between tyrants and slaves. There is hardly any equilibrium in the transaction of love, one heart putting its stake more or less than another Romeo and Juliette were amongst the few

sion that controls their lives. In *Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet Ovid invented a sculptor named Pygmalion who made an ivory statue representing his ideal of womanhood and then fell in love with his own creation.

In fact, falling in love comes after one has first risen in his obsession. A man sees a woman, and he feels attracted to her because he likes the way she looks or talks. He then begins to rise in her charm, and falling in love comes when his mind is overwhelmed by its power. That is when he truly begins his quest for

OPINION

The issue of gas export

ANISUR RAHMAN SINHA

OF late with the assumption of office by the new government, the debate on gas utilization has again resurfaced although this is an issue that has been persisting for years and successive governments have failed to reach a clear cut decision as to how best to utilize/exploit this resource for the uplift of the economy of the country.

In my view one should look at the issue in a very logical manner with the national interest in focus. Nature has bestowed us with a hidden treasure underneath the ground which needs to be tapped and brought above the ground for maximizing its use to increase the purchasing power of the masses, which in turn will activate demand for goods and services that will encourage investors to invest in enterprises to meet this demand. All this will increase our GDP, which is the crying need of the hour, while there will be plenty of job opportunities for our work force.

The issue of gas export to India is now a very hot subject which is being widely covered in newspapers, seminars, talk shows, print

media etc. The sad part of this episode is that there is not much talk about alternative use of gas in Bangladesh except to export it to India at least this is the impression of our donor friends and donor agencies. This is an issue which has been live for a decade, but the two successive democratically elected governments which were in power seemed to have been apathetic to this vital issue of national interest. Major donor institutions backed by the oil and gas lobby have created a situation whereby the present government might succumb to take a decision which may go against the interest of the country. It is therefore vital that we must not take a decision under any pressure. I feel now the time has come to assist the government in creating an environment to bring together the broad section of the society who can contribute with their knowledge, experience, technical expertise and participate in a meaningful debate which will ultimately culminate in reaching a decision which would be of best interest to the country. The formation of the two Committees recently by the government to look at the total gas reserves and alternative uses is a

step in the right direction.

Whilst the debate is currently centered around how much reserve we have, how many years' stock we have to keep for the future, and such other matters, this debate in my view should have centered around identifying uses of gas as a primary raw material, and adding value to it and maximizing its utility. No serious effort has been directed to this end by any of the two governments who governed the country over the last decade. It is also sad to note that not many people have raised this issue of value addition to this primary product -- natural gas. On the contrary, certain sections of our society maybe with their own self-interest agenda have advocated strongly for gas export to India in tune with the multinational oil and gas companies totally ignoring the national interest.

Like in the colonial days when our country was exploited to grow indigo (neel) to serve the textile industries of the colonial rulers which prospered at our cost and to the great detriment of human health and environmental degradation of our country and people not much has changed when we

are still thinking of giving away our valued raw material without looking at the potential of adding value to this valuable asset.

The proposition to export gas through pipeline to India will totally eliminate our opportunity to explore possibilities of setting up "gas based" industries and would throw us back economically a few more years when we are seeking to uplift ourselves through exploitation of our own resources. For our own benefit -- examples are may -- we just have to look at Indonesia and Malaysia.

India, I am sure, will not utilize this imported gas for cooking, they have master plans which have been drawn up by the oil and gas multinationals, so why can't they do the same for us? With this imported gas from us, India will set up industries which will be directly competing with us in the international market place.

For this natural resource to remain unutilized/unexploited is not for the benefit of the country, rather this is a God given opportunity for us to tap the resource and put it to the benefit of our people. The government therefore has a big responsibility to initiate such measures.

I am fully aware that oil and gas exploration is a heavily capital intensive business and such companies need to be paid in foreign currency -- this is being placed as a major argument in favour of gas export. We can resolve this issue by setting up such gas based industries which would replace imports and provide inputs to products that are being exported or can be exported. At the same time we could encourage our citizens abroad to mobilize their savings in investing in high yielding bonds guaranteed by the government. This method has been successfully practised by many countries. For this, appropriate policies need to be formulated based on sound economically viable "gas based" industries.

I would therefore urge upon the government to declare the "gas based" industries as a "thrust" sector immediately and formulate appropriate policies so that potential investors both at home and abroad feel encouraged to participate in such ventures and thereby move the nation forward to reach its cherished goal of moving out of the shackles of poverty.

The 100-day achievements

A HUSNAIN

THE new regime's best achievement lies (buried?) in the suppression of the mean, dark and ugly polytheneized diaphanous receptacle used in daily marketing by the groceries and vendors in the bazaar. It clicked because it was sudden and the government publicity campaign was highly pressurized; and the police could not do otherwise than implement the decision, sending fear waves through the shopkeepers of Tk 500 on-the-spot fines.

The police misguided the dispensers and users. Only 20 micron small black bags were banned in the first phase, but bags of all sizes and weights disappeared from the market overnight, without giving time for flooding the market with enough varieties of substitutes. I had to engage (a pensioned male) in some baby-carrying gestures and ungainly postures, managing puerously a number of thongas (paper bags), looking desperately for a three to five taka handbag (with handle).

In the developed countries, brown paper bags are practical, as these have to be carried a short distance to the waiting car in the car park. Here there are no one-stop shops for the middle class. Well necessity is the mother of invention, and soon the youth handicraft centres may come out with a large variety of cheap hanging bags for

free distribution by the sellers of sundry goods.

This is the time for the jute industry to revive (including exports) and for the local paper recycling factories in the country to come out with cheaper shopping materials. Polybags were cheap enough for one-time use. Multiple use would entail maintenance for the owner, costing more time than cash.

The second dubious achievement was the enforcement of a grey regulation to ban public vehicles 20 or more years old. Here also no advance notice was served for fear of reprisal by the spoilt unions and political parties. Some technical questions remain unanswered. How complete overhaul of engine every few years is classified? Such an engine should be acceptable for a few years. The other components which sustain normal wear and tear are replaced on regular basis (suspensions, brake linings, carburettor needle, contact points, spark plugs, tie-rods, etc) through preventive maintenance. The average life of such consumable components is well known. But the government regulation did not touch on these definitions. Smoke is a visible evidence, but the ruling is vague. The other enemy of smoke are the adulterated fuel and lubricants. There is silence on this front, and hardly any prosecution. Related issues have to be tagged together for overall effect

and decision. A 100-day policy does not mean knee-jerk decisions. Too many committees spoil the broth. Dhaka has yet to experience integrated governance.

No new official measures are effective unless the monitoring and regulatory wings work in tandem. The police and the inspectors are tardy, and the sense of duty is perverted. Then there is the law's delay, like a spanner in the wheel. The background has to be smoothed out first, before releasing the balloons at the opening ceremonies. We have a few things to learn, but more concepts to de-learn.

The style of governance is not changing. The mindset of the leaders need updating in this IT age, where procrastination means things go out of control quickly. The rate of change has increased, but the rate of decision-making is unchanged. Besides, the political instability has resulted in non-consensus in many areas, creating non-cooperation. Politicisation of the labour unions is another bug -- the official strictness cannot be enforced. The intellectuals are not neutral, and therefore cannot influence bipartisan politics. It is all a merry-go-round revolving in the wrong direction.

To get the true picture of governance, one should stay for a few days in Dhaka metropolis. Mirror image and reflection do portray real-time situations.