

Punishment given before court judgement?

Amend the law to ensure press freedom

THE image of an Editor handcuffed and in the hospital has just become the most apt comment on what is seriously wrong regarding media and the process of law enforcement. The fact that the Editor of Daily Shikol (Chains) of Kushtia was interned on a defamation suit filed by the local administration against whom an allegation was printed in his paper causes serious concern regarding justice dispensation. This is plain and simple a display of administrative arrogance and attempted intimidation of the media. While we are debating the meaning of "*tathyo santras*" (information terrorist), it's only fair to pay attention to the new breed called "*amla santras*" (bureaucrat terrorist). It's the responsibility of the government to end this tyranny.

Shakhawat ibne Moyeen Chowdhury, the Editor of Shikol, drew the ire of the local administration after reporting on their alleged corrupt practices. A warrant was issued by late evening of April 2 and he was arrested by midnight, according to media reports. An ailing man, his condition dipped and he was removed to the hospital with the handcuff firmly on his wrist, a sign that the state was unhappy with him. He has now been released on bail.

In a country where it takes more than five years for the murder of children to reach a meaningful trying stage, the swift work of the law enforcement agencies in this case has taken many by surprise. Most would agree that this was possible because the head of the district administration took a keen interest in the matter and ensured swift internment of the Editor.

The Editor was treated as a criminal of the *santras* variety though the authorities have presented a singularly dismal performance in taking on *samajik santras*. The issue in this matter was defamation and one wonders if the rough treatment was at all necessary or not.

The issue of press defamation as part of the CrPC was discussed and finalised for deletion during the days of the caretaker government which held the October 1 elections. The matter remaining unresolved to this day has continued to provide opportunities for causing distress and harassment of media practitioners.

The laws need to be amended immediately and the government must signal to the people that they are not in favour of such treatment of any person whatsoever. It seems pending court's determination whether the matter in question really constituted criminal defamation, the complainant has already exacted his 'revenge' on the accused. While justice may be delayed and even denied once in a while, 'punishment' seems to wait for none.

We demand immediate annulment of the law and thereby strengthening of the hands of free press.

Prodigal ministers

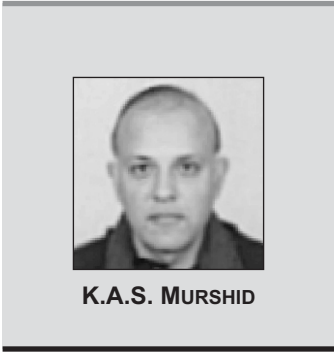
Such wastage should be stopped at once

PRODIGALITY of some members of our jumbo-sized cabinet belies the fact that the country is passing through an economic crunch. A rather bleak growth outlook, inauspicious investment scenario and, more importantly, donor conditionalities for further development assistance have seemingly had very little impact on their extravagance. On the contrary, their spending spree appears constantly on the rise, putting more strain on the already-overburdened public exchequer. According to a Prothom Alo report, the government counts more than 1.5 million taka every month in additional expenditure on transport for the ministers.

Each member of the 60-member cabinet is entitled to an official transport plus a daily fuel allocation of 20 litres. However, for some ministers, at least 30 of them, as the front-page report of the Bengali daily says, are not happy with the transport arrangement. They take undue advantage of their positions to use vehicles attached to different departments and directorates under their respective ministries. Some ministers don't even use the official transport. They draw the fuel allowance nevertheless and keep the cars for use of their families.

As a means to cope with the economic crunch, the finance and planning minister repeatedly called for downsizing the government and slashing its expenditure besides mobilising internal resources. Extravagance of some of his cabinet colleagues certainly weakens his position. Why would people believe that the economy is on a fragile footing when some ministers and their cronies get more than they are entitled to? These ministers have certainly set a bad precedent. Their prodigality not only puts a dent on the government's image but also raises a big question mark over their sense of ethics and morality. The prime minister should look into this matter and rein in her prodigal ministers.

So now it's poverty reduction, is it?



THE ordinary man in the street (or should I say person?) must be pretty confused today. If it is of any consolation, it is likely that many experts are equally confused as well. I am of course talking about development fads (paradigms, as some prefer to say). Thus we have seen the rise of GDP per capita as the be all of development in the 1960s and 1970s soon to be followed by redistribution with growth, when it suddenly dawned on us that equity couldn't wait indefinitely. Unfortunately we are still waiting for sustained growth per capita to catch up with us while equity considerations remain in the back-burner. Academics followed by the rest of the orthodox development community however moved rapidly on to usher in the era of poverty alleviation and food security, a product of at least two decades of academic research on 'poverty and inequality' with contributions from the likes of Amartya Sen and Joan Robinson. While the quest for food security appears to have been

temporarily halted in the face of the dramatic performance of the agricultural sector in Bangladesh, the only thing that has happened to the poverty paradigm is a further 'shift in the discourse'. Thus, it is no longer politically correct to talk about 'poverty alleviation'; we are now determined to *reduce* poverty. Good idea! But then while we are at it why not just eliminate (or should I say eradicate) it altogether? It would definitely

My second question to myself was, did it matter? I guess it does matter if you are going to make grand speeches. I doubt, however, if it matters very much to those living below the poverty line. My remaining two questions are a bit more complicated but still deserve discussion.

What is the way out? Are we any wiser today than we were a decade ago? Or even two decades ago?

hoods, development of the non-farm economy, access to infrastructure (roads) and energy, human rights, governance, local government and social mobilization, not to speak of macro-economic and trade reforms. The menu is truly diverse and each and every item deserves an honourable mention. One ought to note, however, that much of the recipe is borrowed and the experience of other countries is not unambiguous.

programme). However, the documentation MUST be clear: each and every project must be able to demonstrate a clear and direct poverty reduction impact, preferably suitably quantified. In the meantime, one understands that project managers belonging to multilaterals are still evaluated on the amount of loans disbursed rather than on the extent to which their projects have reduced poverty.

let alone implement? If the experts find themselves a bit stretched one must assume that the government is left without a clue.

As an undergraduate in the early 1970s, we were faced with the 'stages of growth' -- a deterministic vision of developing countries climbing slowly but surely towards higher stages of development as the twin problems of a low savings rate and a foreign exchange constraint are solved, agriculture is overtaken by manufacturing, and dramatic shifts occur in the structure of the economy to ultimately resemble modern day Europe or Japan. It seems that most countries quickly reached the second or the take-off stage but unfortunately tended to get stuck there. Looking back over the past three decades, much of South Asia remains decidedly, still at the take-off stage, still waiting for deliverance.

The best thing for the government to do is to take charge of the development agenda and enforce its own vision. Before that it has to develop one. One hopes that the Poverty Reduction Strategy that is currently being developed by local experts will move us in that direction. I only wish it had not been externally inspired, indeed demanded.

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

The best thing for the government to do is to take charge of the development agenda and enforce its own vision. Before that it has to develop one. One hopes that the Poverty Reduction Strategy that is currently being developed by local experts will move us in that direction. I only wish it had not been externally inspired, indeed demanded.

save us from yet another round of intense, semi-academic agony over the need for a further paradigm shift. At the same time it would be immensely comforting in the thought that at least we have our goals set correctly!

One may well ask, what actually caused the change in the rhetoric? Does it matter? Isn't it much more important to find ways in which a given country can move itself out of poverty? What have we learned so far? I have no idea what caused the change in the rhetoric. I guess it must have seemed a more appropriate thing to say in grand speeches made by important people. After all, the word 'alleviation' sounds so bland, so non-sexy -- 'reduction' at least is suggestive of a more proactive, a more aggressive approach.

Couple of things have in fact emerged quite clearly from the development woodwork: micro credit and rural, community based institutions -- both of which have caused a silent revolution in the countryside. It should be noted that these outcomes evolved out of Bangladesh's own development practice, conducted by indigenous agents of change (even if funded and sustained by external money). Many a development expert would also want to introduce other development lessons: education is now ubiquitous, sharing pride of place with health. In particular, education and health status of women and girls are apparently the best way forward towards poverty reduction. There are other potent candidates: (environmentally) sustainable liveli-

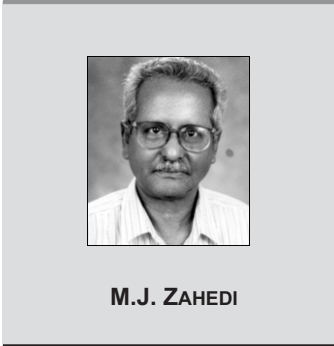
Frequently, it seems to be a matter of faith or of one's assertive powers when it comes to attaching priorities. Then there is the classical chicken and egg problem, which cannot, I suspect, be so easily assumed away: does poverty reduction follow or precede education? Or roads? Or better health?

How have donors been affected by this paradigm shift? There is almost a cacophany of agreement these days about all of the above -- so that must be helpful. Since the menu is large enough everyone can jump in to choose their own piece of the action.. Those with more resources will of course have a much larger portfolio than smaller bilaterals who will then try to adopt a 'strategic' approach (i.e. piggy back ride on somebody else's

The 'overarching' pursuit of poverty reduction can lead to ridiculous situations. Just think, for example, of a gas pipeline project for export to country X. If you want a loan you may have to prove that the majority of the direct beneficiaries are the poorest of the poor! I can just imagine the plight of the bewildered poverty analyst! Similarly, in a road investment project, approval would depend critically on the poverty impact, proof of which is likely to require considerable powers of imagination.

What pray is the government to do then? To what end should it direct its meagre resources? Where does it turn for advice and guidance? How useful is it to work from the large development menu discussed above? How does one begin to plan,

Musharraf plan invites criticism



IN A SPEECH that was being eagerly awaited by the people, President General Pervez Musharraf outlined his plans for general elections as well as his own election as the head of state. The latter will be over before the first week of May and the former in October. But he ruled out any role in the government for both the self-exiled former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif, although he said he was not against their parties the PPP and the PML(N), respectively. He did not have any problems with either party. Naturally, the mainstream political parties have taken strong exception to the president's comments and remarks on the parties. They also rejected his version of democracy, which they said would kill federal parliamentary democracy.

PML(N) rejected Musharraf's arguments saying that he was trying to grab power for an indefinite period by saying that his illegal steps were realistic. The General has no right to oust Benazir and Nawaz from politics, only the people have the right to decide their political fate, it said. It even warned that

its councilors and 'Nazims' who would support the referendum, would be subjected to disciplinary action. It said the General's arguments for remaining in power even after the October polls was a violation of the constitution. He condemned leaders of PML(QA), Imran Khan, Farooq Leghari and Maulana Tahirul Qadri who, he said, wanted to grab power through the backdoor. Finally, a statement said that it would oppose an unconstitu-

to defy the referendum. They cannot either block it or convince voters not to vote for Musharraf. If at all, the opposition parties may choose to boycott the referendum. This may send a message to the world indicating that Musharraf does not have popular support. Second, they may declare the referendum day as a protest day and hold rallies etc. condemning it. Third, they may mobilize voters to say 'no'. They may also call on their men in local

Musharraf. Some of those, like joint electorate and women and technocrats' representation, have already been implemented).

Once Gen. Musharraf gets the mandate to continue as President, he could be in a stronger position to ensure the continuity of his policies in future and would like to hold positive and constructive negotiations with political parties, political pundits think. Although most religious ele-

decision to revive joint electorate, which they said had revived dignity and equality for the country's minorities. Representatives and leaders of Christians, Parsis and Hindus have spoken in favour of Gen. Musharraf and his policies.

Naturally the speech attracted editorial comments from all the newspapers in the country. The editorials, mostly commendatory, made critical comments on certain aspects of the General's plan.

continuity in power to ensure the sustainability of the work done.

The *Nation* is the only English daily to record 'differences on certain important issues' raised in the speech. First, it said that the type of system Musharraf wants to bring to replace the old one does not conform to the vision of Pakistan as defined by the father of the nation (Mr Jinnah). He did not even contemplate giving the army any role in governance. Secondly, Musharraf's 'unhappiness' with the independent Press is not a good omen for democracy, it said. Thirdly, Gen. Musharraf's statement that like an elected parliament he too can amend the constitution is bound to have extremely adverse impact on the federation. Fourthly, the newspaper also opposed the quasi-presidential system that emerges from the description the President gave of his intentions. Finally, the editorial asked where are the checks and balances 'we have been hearing about?' It also questioned the proposed NSC's role.

Finally, it said Gen. Musharraf insists that he is not disturbing the continuity and is only making minor improvements. But the facts lead to a different conclusion. By making the army a stakeholder in political power through the NSC, reducing powers of the parliament, prime minister and cabinet and increasing those of the President, he is actually changing the basic structure of the constitution, which the Supreme Court specifically forbade him from doing. Concluding, it 'respectfully' requested the President to revise his decisions.

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LETTER FROM KARACHI

Although most religious elements, mainly the organized ones, have opposed the Musharraf plan, some have supported it... One religious leader said that the referendum was another step towards revival of democracy in the country...All the minorities in the country too assured President Musharraf their fullest support in the forthcoming referendum... They specially lauded the decision to revive joint electorate, which they said had revived dignity and equality for the country's minorities...The speech attracted editorial comments from all the newspapers in the country... critical comments on certain aspects of the General's plan.

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The religious parties too reacted strongly against the Musharraf plan, which they said was a plan to destroy democracy and the constitution as earlier military leaders (Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and Ziaul Huq) had done. They said they would resist the plan. The PPP however did not immediately react officially but the vice chairman of the party said that his party opposed holding of referendum for election of the President as there is no such provision in the constitution. The PPP would abide by the ARD (Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy).

Political pundits, however, say that the opposition is not in position

governments not to support the referendum.

But these options are not good enough to force General Musharraf to change his intentions which, according to his constitutional experts, is the proper way to become head of state for the next five years. The other crucial factor is that people are fed up with policies of political governments and want a change. Most people think that Musharraf has improved economy, law and order, besides freeing the country from coercive tactics of 'jehadi' forces. Therefore the silent majority, dissatisfied with political leadership, would support him. (It is noteworthy that several policies of the PPP are similar to those of

ments, mainly the organized ones, have opposed the Musharraf plan, some have supported it. A delegation of *ulema* and *mashaikh* belonging to all schools of thought called on the General the other day and assured him that they and their followers are fully behind him. They said that there was a need to continue these policies. One religious leader said that the referendum was another step towards revival of democracy in the country.

All the minorities in the country too assured President Musharraf their fullest support in the forthcoming referendum. He met with 44 representatives of all minorities as part of the ongoing consultative process. They specially lauded the

Dawn held the very concept of the referendum as a clear violation of the constitution. It pointed out that the proposed referendum will elect as head of state a person who is a serving General which, it said, was against the constitution, which prohibits a person already holding an office of profit in the government from contesting a presidential election. The *News* referred to the measures taken by the Musharraf regime and said these were urgently needed to change the direction the country was moving in and could only have been managed by a person who was ready to take risks. Given the achievements of his regime, the editorial said, the President did make a strong case for

Commentary

Where are our leaders leading us to?

Part 3: Taliban in Bangladesh

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

THE FEER piece has triggered a widespread debate in Bangladesh as to the nature and extent of fundamentalism in the country and whether or not there is any link between our Islamic parties and global terrorism. We think the subject needs to be brought into the open, and discussed thoroughly in a free and objective manner. But here again we are confronted with the same problem that is afflicting the discussion of every serious issue in Bangladesh. Like in so many other cases this has also become embroiled in partisan politics with the two rivals espousing two opposite versions without any regard to facts.

In making this recent debate partisan the Awami League has played a very damaging role. In an effort to depict the BNP-Jamaat government as fundamentalists to the West the AL started saying, from the outset, that this government contained Taliban elements, pointing to the two Jamaat ministers in the cabinet. To justify its stance it recalled some rallies held in Dhaka more than a year ago where pro-Taliban slogans were chanted. It

also cited the Jamaat's attempt to raise funds for the victims of the US war against Afghanistan as evidence of the party's fundamentalist character. A senior AL leader and a former minister wrote in a signed article that there was Taliban network and Al-Qaeda pockets in Bangladesh without providing any evidence to support such a damaging claim. We think such a position of the leading opposition party was extremely damaging to our national interest.

The Awami League has also been unthinking at best or extremely mischievous at worst, in its use of the word "terrorists" in describing what is going on here today. When the AL says that the "BNP and alliance government has made Bangladesh into a terrorist country", it is basically referring to the law and order situation which consists of heinous and despicable crimes that we report everyday. By themselves they are eminently condemnable and are so condemned by us everyday. But internationally "terrorism" has acquired a specific meaning after the destruction of the WTC and more so after the US launched its war on Afghanistan. When we read

the international press and their use of the word "terror" and "terrorists" we can clearly see that these words are being used to specifically refer to activities of the Al-Qaeda, the Taliban or such groups whose aim is to attack the US and its interests. When we say, "Bangladesh has become a terrorist country under this government", we can easily imagine all the alarm bells ringing in the Western capitals, especially Washington. We think that we in the press have also been guilty of not distinguishing between what is going on here and using the word "terrorism" to describe them. Our use of the word "terror" or "terrorism" comes from the translation of the Bangla word "*santrash*". Normally such a translation would not have mattered much. But after September 11, and especially when the West has given it a very special meaning, we must become more circumspect in using the word "terrorist". This may have also added to the Western media perception of events in Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshis are a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious people, the majority of whom are Muslims. We are a deeply religious

people but with an equally strong attachment for our culture and language. We also have a deeply entrenched tradition of religious tolerance. Yes, there have been occasional clashes because of religion but they were the outbursts of the moment, or a reaction to something happening in some other parts of the world.

To the question whether we are becoming a fundamentalist country, our reply is a definite no. It is our firm view that our cultural and intellectual heritage will never allow us to become so. We are proud Bengalis and, those of us who are Muslims are deeply proud of our religion, as are other co-religionists proud of theirs. Our respect for other's religion comes from our respect for our own and as such the tolerance we exhibit is deeply rooted in our psyche and is not an expression of an acquired behaviour.

Throughout our turbulent history we have very firmly clung to both our heritages. Within the undivided India we took the side of partition with a view to protecting our religious heritage. After 1947 when, within the Pakistani state structure, we saw our Bengali heritage being

threatened, we at once launched a struggle to protect it and continued throughout the Pakistan period.

The point we are making here is that as a people we are extremely proud of both our heritages - the Bengali and the Islamic. On occasions one gets expressed more than the other, as the national and international occasion necessitates. The plight of the Palestinians has touched us deeply and we continue to feel an inner rage at the sight of an unarmed and unprotected population being decimated by a brutal state machinery.

There are of course those among us who are more attached to religion and would like to see our country be ruled by the Islamic *shariah*. On the contrary there are those who would like to see the influence of religion fade, as Lenin had said, "with the coming of electricity". But for the vast majority it is in both the worlds of Bengali and Islam where they would like to live. For them both are important and both must be preserved without any compromise.

Ironically, both the secularists and the religionists have made the same mistake of underestimating our deep attachment for both. Each

though that the other was dispensable and worked towards that end creating a schism that was fundamentally unnatural, historically unjustified and psychologically debilitating. It is our view that much of our cultural and religious debate is centred on this misperception of the two groups.

As we have said in our last commentary, that one FEER or Wall Street Journal article cannot damage Bangladesh unless we do it ourselves. Herein lies our challenge. The world knows us and respects us for being a moderate, open, tolerant, multicultural and multiethnic, Muslim-majority State. In the world of extremes we have been able to carve a niche for ourselves as an oasis of moderation. However, there is no denying the fact that there are streaks (some may say streams, and still others flood) of intolerance - which is contrary to our basic ethos - growing within us. We must also admit that there is a strong, insensitive, unthinking and brute majoritarian thrust in our society that leads us to ignore the plights and concerns of the minorities. Sometimes this thrust comes in the name of culture

and sometimes in the name of religion. The example of the former is the way we treated the Chakmas, the Garos, the Khasis and other ethnic groups. The example of the latter is our treatment of the Hindus, the Christians and the Buddhists. To put it bluntly both our religious and ethnic minority groups have been marginalised from the mainstream society.

Our unthinking majoritarianism prevents us from examining the minority issues in an objective manner. In fact, it is difficult to hold a scientific and factual discussion on these topics without temper flying and irrelevant issues clouding the debate. This same thrust prevents us from acknowledging that there are groups among us who are exploiting the deep religiosity of our people for their narrow political ends and who want to impose their obscurantism on us.

The challenge of the moment is to prove the FEER prognosis to be totally baseless. This we must do through action and not propaganda, public relations exercise or banning. A point of great satisfaction for us, and one that gives us a legitimate sense of pride and confidence in

ourselves is the fact that we were able to pass the Gujarat carnage without any incident here. It is to the credit of the government (for its timely and effective action) but greater credit to the common men who really came together as a people irrespective of ethnicity or religion. It is our duty to build on this. We have to strengthen those aspects of our society and culture for which the world respects us - that is multi-culturalism, multi-ethnicity and multi-religiousness, openness, tolerance and democracy - all within a Muslim-majority population. This is the real challenge before our two biggest political parties. With variance in degrees both the BNP and the AL represent the aforementioned fundamental ethos. Their narrow party rivalry has prevented them from realising this fundamental fact. Electoral alliances notwithstanding, these parties must work together to strengthen the real Bangladesh, as outlined above. Will the two leaders take the nation in this direction? We know the FEER article is wrong. Let's prove it to the world.

(Concluding part: *What the nation demands from the leaders, soon.*)