

Talk or no talk, AL should join parliament

Chance for Sheikh Hasina to give new direction to our politics

HISTORY is made by leaders, and not by naysayers or mere copycats, especially of negative and self defeating actions. Will the AL chief choose to lead us towards a qualitative change in our politics or merely repeat the destructive politics of the past? The question becomes crucial, as the prospect of a government-opposition dialogue appears to be getting slimmer. We would like to make a definite suggestion. Irrespective of whether any dialogue is held and regardless of its outcome (if held) and regardless of how the government behaves, we think the opposition should take its rightful place in the parliament. We have stated this before and we intend to keep on repeating it for long as it takes, that the parliament is the House of the people and is not an extension of the government. The opposition's position that it will boycott the parliament as a weapon to harass, embarrass or corner the government or as a reaction to what the government does, is not acceptable simply because it does not lead us anywhere. It is the same old politics of destructiveness that gets repeated over and over again and drags the economy and the nation down further.

The point that needs to be made today is that though we have had three elections since restoration of democracy in 1991, the quality of our politics has not changed. By now we have seen both the BNP and the AL on both sides of the fence -- as the government and as the opposition. From what we have seen, we are forced to say that they look frighteningly same. They were both unprincipled, narrow minded, corrupt, intolerant and oppressive on the opposition.

People want a change from all that. We have lost a lot of energy, time and resources playing the destructive political games of the past. Hartals and parliament boycott are two specific things people want changed. Already hartal has lost its appeal and political parties are now hesitant or even afraid to use in often, if at all. Parliament boycott has also lost its effectiveness and people want to see an end to this practice. We agree with the AL and its chief that the government and the BNP have been very oppressive on the opposition. We have condemned the government's behaviour and will do so again if need arises. But all this does not justify parliament boycott. In fact more the oppression, more vocal should AL's presence be inside the parliament. We now await the right leadership from Sheikh Hasina. Hence our expectation that she will read the people's mood and respond accordingly. We think she has an historic opportunity to turn our politics around and give it a constructive direction, government's behaviour notwithstanding.

After all that talk, the ADP is a bloated one

It's always politics that dominates development

POLITICS continues to cast its long shadow on development decisions and the ADP budget to be, much bigger than once promised, is a good example. Despite the Finance Minister's promise to keep it small, it appears he ultimately had to cave in to political pressures. A minister isn't just an administrative being, he is also a politician. And as the Finance Minister he also carries the burden of other people's political necessities. The result is a typical big budget unlike promised to be delivered.

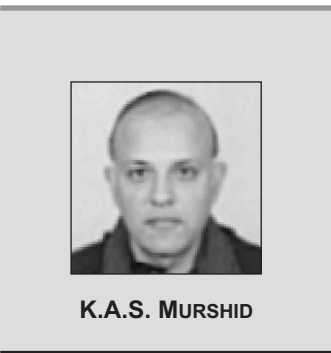
But various personal or group conveniences overcoming all kinds of practical logic has become part of our economic management. For example, the river transport sector is extremely lucrative but there is no regulation of the vessels which has led to almost 500 dead in just over a week. But that isn't the end. The same situation continues till date and another story on the front page depicts how bad the scene is for people who travel by the river. It's the convenience of the vessel owners, almost always political in nature that allows such actions to happen which kill life. Thus it's natural the smallest possible planned for ADP in recent times has gone up to become the largest ever proposed, amounting to Tk 19,500 crores.

The media states that the smaller ADP proposal has caused great resentment with the BNP with a group saying that the political cost of such a financial package would be too high. The result is another behemoth that one is sure wouldn't satisfy common economic sense.

It's this dual approach to development that is extracting a high price. When, after blowing such a lot of heat on large ADPs, the government goes for a conventional bloated ADP, what difference will it make if it plans to hold mid-course reviews of economic performance ?

Such an attitude and transparent admission of giving in to political pressure proves that governing and politicking have begun to take on the same meaning. And that is why many bureaucrats have begun to wear two coats. While admitting that ADP is a development document with a political face, the prime objective is developmental and that is something that has been largely forgotten. Unless that is not remembered the price for politically dominated development decisions will also be political bad news and no amount of verbiage can prevent that.

Dubious forecasts



K.A.S. MURSHID

LET us try to peek into the future. That, after all, is what economists were supposed to do -- at least until Malthus came along. Remember his famous theory where he compares population growth with the growth in food production to predict certain mass starvation and famine as population outstrips food supply? Well that didn't quite happen in his own country or in the West generally, which led generations of 'development economists' to re-deploy the Malthusian baggage to the so-called developing countries. Even so Malthus continued to mislead, and ever since economists have been wary about making 'certain' predictions. Thus, a whole new lexicon developed, intended to cushion every utterance, every statement by suitable 'escape' clauses. Thus, the famous 'on the one hand...' and qualifying statements such as '... need to treat our conclusions with caution in the light of ...' , or 'it appears to be the case that,' or even that 'the evidence tends to point towards...' etc. have become staple elements of paragraphs churned out by e.g. yours truly. Most of my co-professionals have in fact

abrogated their right of prediction and prefer to 'diagnose' instead (I mean of course the ailments that afflict the economy) -- a process that unfortunately 'tends to' fall short on prescription and rely somewhat more heavily on description. Enough prevarication -- let's try and peek into the future of Sonar Bangla -- although my hands tremble as I write these words. I hope you will forgive me if I use a few jargons in

earnings and trends in foreign assistance. Developments in the (regional) trade and energy sectors also have very important implications for medium term prospects of the economy.

Optimistic scenario: The following assumptions are made:

- 1. A political consensus on non-disruptive politics;
- 2. Moderate improvement in law and order;

the process.

Future scenarios

The medium to longer term prospects for Bangladesh need to be seen in the context of on-going trends in the economy, society and politics. The social and political dynamics deserve special consideration and may well be of much greater consequence than economic variables *per se*. An attempt is made to delineate probable and likely economic outcomes, keeping in mind that actual performance will be determined by the interaction of a number of forces and the role of risk factors, both domestic and global. Domestic risk factors include the state of politics, governance and law and order while global risks relate to the pace and extent of recessive tendencies in the advanced economies, the demand for workers in labour-importing countries, the health of Bangladesh's export

- 3. Quick recovery from world recession;
- 4. A more enlightened view towards regional cooperation in trade and energy;
- 5. Significant progress in pursuing critical reforms in the energy, utility and nationalized industry sectors.

Under the above assumptions, the prospects of moderate to good GDP growth rates can be expected. The chances of increasingly hitting GDP growth rates of 6-7 percent will improve as the manufacturing sector takes off. The higher growth rate may come however at the expense of greater instability due to increased integration with global markets and vicissitudes of the global economy. There is already evidence that domestic agriculture and industry are less inter-linked than ever before, judging by the fact that for much of the 1990s the two sectors took turns in achieving high

growth rates. It is quite possible, for example, for both sectors to move up and down together in some years, which would impart a higher level of instability to the economy.

Successful integration with the global economy especially after the MFA phase-out, will take the economy to a higher, more confident level. The private sector appears to have responded well to government incentives (lower duty, credit) to

be sustained.

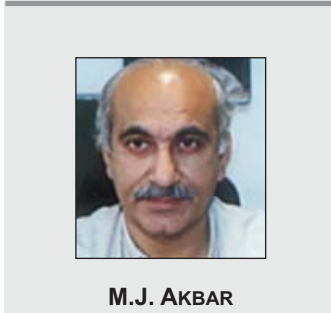
I believe this "optimistic scenario" is highly plausible and within grasp of Bangladesh provided that social and political factors can be handled. Under this scenario the Human Development Index will continue to improve and poverty will also be significantly reduced. However, in absolute terms the number of poor people will remain very large, continuing to need direct

these circumstances growth will remain retarded at less than 4 percent and no major dent can be made in terms of poverty reduction and human development.

Dear reader, I will leave you to choose your own scenario. But do allow me to leave with a few parting thoughts. Economies can turn around -- sometimes in the most unexpected of ways. Like Bangladesh, Pakistan until recently, was faced with a rapidly declining economy: growth fell to less than 3 percent, reserves plunged to around a billion dollars and its currency came under severe speculative attack reaching at one stage to almost Rs 74 to a dollar! In less than a year, reserves have bounced back to \$5 billion, the currency regained much of its lost value (at Rs.60 to a dollar) and the IMF is predicting growth rates of 4-5 percent. Nothing short of a miracle -- which of course now stands to be demolished by the threat of war. Any lessons here for Bangladesh? I hope to be able to write on this subject at a later date, but to cut a long story short, 'The evidence tends to point towards the possibility that the Pakistani experience may perhaps be of some relevance. On the one hand ...'. No, before I conclude I must at least point out one very important step that Perviz Musharraf took in Pakistan. He put the bank defaulters solidly behind bars till such time as they settled their debts. I believe that around 50 percent of the bad loans were recovered quite quickly as a result. Mr. Finance Minister might want to examine this matter more closely.

Dr K A S Murshid is an economist and Research Director, BIDS.

It's one minute to twelve



M.J. AKBAR

IF India and Pakistan did not have nuclear weapons they would have fought their fifth war by now. (Kargil was the fourth.) Is that good news or bad?

Which is worse? The periodic blood lust of the past or holocaust postponed? The promise of mutually assured destruction (appropriately acronymed MAD) kept the peace in Europe after the second world war. There was more than one occasion when NATO could have moved against the coalition under the Warsaw Pact led by the Soviet Union: in 1956, when Hungary was invaded by Soviet troops; twice in 1961, when Soviet missiles were deployed in Cuba and when the Berlin Wall came up; perhaps even in 1967 when the Czech uprising was crushed. Each time, one side blinked and catastrophe was averted. In the 1960s there raged proxy wars between the West and the Soviet Union. (West, of course, is a notional term. Australia, which is about as East as you can get, thinks of itself as part of the West, as indeed it is, politically, economically and ethnically.) Vietnam was the high point of this confrontation, but wars in the name of decolonisation and neo-colonialism were rampant through Africa, Latin America and Asia. It was the Great Game played in every part of the world. But the principals, America and the Soviet Union, made absolutely sure that they did not lose the world in the process of trying to gain it. (China spent this phase of history quietly

building up its strength and waiting to see which elephant survived before it took on the exhausted victor.)

Eventually, when the death count became unacceptable, and public opinion could no longer be as easily manipulated by artificial or simulated scare tactics, America changed its strategy. It decided to bleed the Soviet Union to death. Moscow cooperated by its biggest blunder, the invasion of Afghani-

barrier between battlefield and civilian life over and over again. Between Germany and the Soviet Union alone they lost some 37 million lives; add to this the six million Jews that the Nazis devastated and destroyed and the world of carnage takes on a new meaning. By the 1960s, American soldiers were being officially encouraged to take their frustrations out on Vietnamese civilians though stark murder or serial rape. (The prosti-

more than eight years. From the year of Kargil, or a bit before, a strange kind of artillery exchange has gone on, whose purpose is beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals. It is a slogging match on either side, empty of evacuated terrain that sends shudders of delight through the hearts of arms merchants but is of no practical use to anyone else. A more purposeful confrontation might be taking place in Siachen, but I am no

rules. It suits Pakistan perfectly, because Islamabad can choose the distance it wants to maintain between itself and the successes or failures of this clandestine force. A regular army such as ours will search for a pitched battle. An irregular one such as Pakistan's will seek darkness and offer suicide. "Tiger" Prabhakaran has been conducting exactly such a war in Sri Lanka, and with more tenacity, since he has no safe base to fall back

BYLINE

The volatile passions that rule the fate of the subcontinent, fermented by religion and history and experience, are too provocative for a nuclear age. But one thing, and perhaps only this thing, is clear. The stalemate has become dangerously stale. It cannot continue without a geometric escalation of risk. Between the second world war and the erosion of Soviet Union, the nuclear clock wavered at five minutes to twelve across Europe and America. In India and Pakistan it is now one minute to twelve.

stan. But someone was also doing some sharp thinking in Washington. Even as the physical and economic cost of pacification rose in Afghanistan, Ronald Reagan upped the ante in nuclear capability. Both sides always knew that the strength of their economy would be a crucial determinant in the confrontation. The stratified, over indulgent and undernourished communist economy could not keep pace with the rapacious vigour of capitalism. The colour television set defeated the black and white television set, to use a metaphor. Comrade Humpty Dumpty had a big fall.

But at least part of the reason for the unprecedented half a century of peace in Europe after the second world war was that Europe was exhausted. It had inflicted too many wounds upon itself; it had raped itself too often. The nature of war changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century less than five per cent of the casualties of war were civilians. By the end of the century the percentages were reversed. The second world war destroyed the

tutes of Saigon were better off; at least they got paid. There was no urge towards ethics or discipline on the Soviet side; and Russian soldiers in Chechnya today have inherited the characteristics of savagery disguised as war. But, once again, Europeans and Americans never turned their own homelands into battlefields.

India and Pakistan are not tired of war. One reason may be because their four wars have been short, and the collateral damage has been minimal. Their longest war was the first one, lasting some fourteen months during 1947 and 1948. The field of operations was limited to the province of Jammu and Kashmir, and air power was not used to any significant extent. 1965 did see dogfights, but civilian targets were scrupulously avoided. 1971 was a walkover, once the talk began. And Kargil was again limited in both scope and operations. All four were very professional wars, to part it accurately. None spilled over into the kind of attrition displayed by Iran and Iraq during their terrible war of

expert on glacier warfare.

The nature of Indo-Pak war began to change when the use of terror became an element in the overall Pak strategy. This was both more surreptitious and more immature during the Punjab days, when abatement and succour were on offer rather than official endorsement and policy-support to separatists. The elimination of the Valley of Kashmir from the Indian union is the declared aim of Pakistan. The support to terror in the valley, and for the valley, is qualitatively and quantitatively different.

What India is facing in what should be called its third Kashmir war is what the Soviet Union faced in Afghanistan: a struggle between regular and irregular armies. (This is exactly what American and British troops will face, by the way, in the next phase of the Afghan war, with the irregular forces still using Pakistan as their operating base, with or without the formal help of the Islamabad establishment.) Such a war is debilitating and provocative because it is conducted without

upon for rest and regroupment. Such a war is also, clearly a war of nerves. Pakistan has acquired extraordinary expertise in this war of nerves.

What can Delhi do in response? It can, and does, threaten a larger war. But this threat is partly compromised by the absence of clearly defined war objectives. The terrorists are effective, or not, on Indian soil. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that for one successful terrorist attack perhaps a dozen or more have been intercepted and aborted. But success is a one-paragraph story, while failure dominates the headlines. The most familiar stated objective is to cross the Line of Control in "hot pursuit" of terrorists into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. But there is no Jenin across that Line of Control; and if a terrorist camp had any sense it would probably be operating from Peshawar or Balochistan. How far do you go in search? How far can you go?

Pakistan's military dictators live on the brink in more senses than

one. Their rule is amoral and, by any modern standards, illegitimate. To turn Marx on his head, they have nothing to lose but their chains.

Shifting the line of vision to a subjective perspective, what does Perviz Musharraf have to lose by war? Nothing, and he may have everything to gain.

At which point comes the paradox: can anyone gain from a war that everyone might lose? A nuclear war is implicitly and explicitly civilian; that bomb will not do surgery, it will flatten and mass-destruct. It serves the Pakistan military establishment twice over to raise the ante, because nothing is better guaranteed to bring the world scurrying to South Asia than the prospect of nuclear devastation.

The Pakistan government is the only government in history to openly and regularly threaten to use nuclear power. Armageddon is a weapon in the range of its options. Its strategic thinking can be summed up in a sentence: if we go, we take you along with us.

As the problem goes down to the wire it becomes a game of finer and finer calculation: what level of desperation is needed to touch that button? The trouble with the answer is that it is human. And no science has been devised that can accurately measure the vagaries of humanity. There are no standards to determine the power of anger or desperation.

The volatile passions that rule the fate of the subcontinent, fermented by religion and history and experience, are too provocative for a nuclear age. But one thing, and perhaps only this thing, is clear. The stalemate has become dangerously stale. It cannot continue without a geometric escalation of risk.

Between the second world war and the erosion of Soviet Union, the nuclear clock wavered at five minutes to twelve across Europe and America. In India and Pakistan it is now one minute to twelve.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

When the state intervenes to doctor personal morality

ABDUL HANNAN

WHEN the State intervenes to doctor religion and personal morality, it is prying into the privacy of others and is clearly intruding on fundamental rights of civil liberties, personal freedom of choice and freedom of expression. This is precisely what the government did recently by banning 12 satellite TV channels to 'resist encroachment of alien culture on the religious and social values' of the country. The ban, however, was soon withdrawn after causing damage to the reputation of the government. Earlier, the government banned 'Matir Moyna', a feature film by Tariq Masud and Catherine Masud on similar ground. The film had the rare distinct honour of being invited to Cannes film festival. These interventions came close on the heels of government ban on the *Far Eastern Economic Review* for adverse reporting on Bangladesh. It is not known if these measures were isolated episodes or indication of a certain design. But

one thing is certain that these government actions raised disturbing spectres of totalitarian regimentation and control, religious intolerance and bigotry and sent wrong signals to strengthen the views of detractors at home and abroad.

But Bangladesh is not a Stalinist Gulag nor it is Mollah Omar's land of a dark age, nightmare and nihilism without newspapers, television, arts, culture and education, freedom and human rights, where women are consigned to the indignity of the confines of four walls. Bangladesh is a free, open democratic and liberal society, the *Review* report about the spread of madrassa education and increasing influence of religious right notwithstanding. True, madrassas have proliferated by leaps and bounds by competing patronisation and support by all the political parties to pander to the Islamic appeal of constituency to win election. But there is no evidence to substantiate the allegation that the madrassas are offering Taliban style teachings, training and indoctrination with political ambition. There was nothing to be rattled

or defensive by the adverse reporting. There was no need to ban the magazine or to restrict visas for foreign travellers to Bangladesh as we have nothing to hide. Everybody is welcome to see Bangladesh to believe and judge. A casual visit to any social club of the city or to any

who is a former prime minister, are women. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia herself is a very forward looking progressive and liberal minded person. But then who are her self-righteous and sanctimonious advisors engaged in subterfuges and sabotage by adopting restrictive

There is no need for undue alarm and no need to adopt illiberal measures. In the present day of liberalisation of trade and commerce there is no point in shutting us out of the globalization of the commerce of culture and entertainment. Our culture with its inherent strength of true aesthetic and spiritual value will prevail and the trivial, the vulgar and the ugly will disappear.

weekend social party in houses of posh residential areas, the unexpurgated dance scenes in Bangladeshi movies and the all too common sight of boys and girls mixing cheek by jowl on the university campuses and Dhanmondi lake side walkways will only confirm that far from becoming backward, obscurantist and conservative Muslim state, Bangladesh compares favourably with many of the liberal societies of the West. Besides, both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition,

measures to smear the image of her government as reactionary and illiberal? Needless to say, such neurotic actions by the frenetic few in her cabinet blow a hole into the reputation of her government and is a burden to our diplomats assigned to promote the image and interests of the country overseas. A house cleaning may not be out of order.

There is no doubt that some of the satellite cable TV channels are purveyors of crude, lewd and salacious explicit images of sex and

blood is not the only component of human body nor pleasure and fulfillment the only pursuit of life. Human beings also possess a brain and a heart. The human spirit also soars like a skylark in imagination and gets a feel of a sense of sublime, something far more deeply infused, whose dwelling place is the light of the setting sun, the round ocean, the living air, the blue sky and the mind of men and women.

Our dilemma is to leap into the age of Internet, satellite dishes and

products and ideas. All values and moral standards and judgments are arbitrary and irrational. In a global value system and ideas finally the best and the abiding will survive. The last thing the country's culture needs is government inspired coherence, conformism and regimentation. Personal freedom can be protected only within a structure of self-imposed restraints, rules and boundaries. Men and women are entitled to live their own lives as they choose according to their own ideas

of what is good provided their choice does not harm others. It is the individual, the people and the society who will decide if they will drink Coca Cola, eat big Mac, Chinese, Thai, Italian and French cuisine, see Hollywood and Bombay movies, sing Rock and Pop and accept Microsoft or opt for the sweet surrender to tradition of pastoral life of myths, magic and simplicity in *panta vat* (wet rice), ploughs, pots and potteries, sing *vatiali*, Lalon and *marfati* and descend to defeat and despair and relinquish personal talent, creativity and excellence, growth, progress and civilization.

So what is needed is not a moral crusade but a cautious tolerance, a grudging recognition of the diversity of moral standards. The problem in essence is to find a blend of multi-cultural civilization whose meaning lies not in undermining the individuality of different cultures but in allowing them to be more completely themselves, to be an expression of authentic will of everyone growing out of genuine and universal spiritual roots hidden beneath the skin of our global civilization.

Don't we find somewhere the foundation of most religions and cultures -- though they may make thousand and one distinct forms -- common elements such as what transcends us, the mystery of being, a moral order that stands above us, certain imperatives that come to us from heaven, a belief that our deeds will live after us, a respect for human dignity and for nature, for life and for other people and cultures? A vibrant culture is able to awake an individual to stand alone with a broader identity of humanity.

So there is no need for undue alarm and no need to adopt illiberal measures. In the present day of liberalisation of trade and commerce there is no point in shutting us out of the globalization of the commerce of culture and entertainment. Our culture with its inherent strength of true aesthetic and spiritual value will prevail and the trivial, the vulgar and the ugly will disappear. Let hundred flowers bloom and let the sky remain wide open.

Abdul Hannan is former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh UN Mission in New York.