

Destruction of Ashulia

The environmental outrage must stop

OUR kind of environmental predators never ceases to surprise us. How quickly they can unlearn the lessons slapped on the face of their peers by the public enraged over foul-play with nature committed earlier on! It was tree-felling predation at Osmany Uddayan or in connection with the previous location of the NAM conference hall that caused public consternation with some edifying effect on the perpetrators, one would have thought. But we are proved wrong; for, the tyranny is back again taking on a new form. It is now the filling up of a vast tract of land at Ashulia for the sake of a housing complex which recreates the old fears and concerns.

After having grabbed low-lying public land at the natural retreat of a recreation centre that Ashulia is, the Jamuna Group of Industries embarked on a massive land development operation at that expansive location. A hired fleet of 200 dredgers and several giant haulers at the ready provoked the law enforcement people into a preventive action at the nick of time. But it is doubtful if the intervention would have come had there been no public uproar spearheaded by Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon in the first place. At least three cases under the Wetland Protection Act have been pending against the Jamuna Group of Industries.

The question is: how dare they attempted the earth-work at such a huge public place without any official clearance? Who gave them even a tacit permission to try land development for a housing complex there? These questions need to be pursued till the masterminds are tracked down and exposed to the public.

The absurdity of the housing complex is underscored by the environmental value of the locale. The bowl of Ashulia is critical to flood control around Dhaka city, not to mention the fresh air it breathes into the surrounding atmosphere. While fully endorsing the demand of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon to save Ashulia as an eco-oasis near the polluted metropolis, we urge the administration to put the project completely out of action. It should not come back in any form or manner. Legal action also needs to be processed against the group that attempted such a piece of environmental piracy.

Tax on imported magazines unsupportable

This hurts because it's about information and knowledge

THE Government has done it again. It has imposed extra tax and duties on imported magazines making it dear for the readers and ensuring that access to information is weakened. This is a very unusual approach given that the government has committed itself to a knowledge based society and is banking upon that to rescue its moribund state of economy.

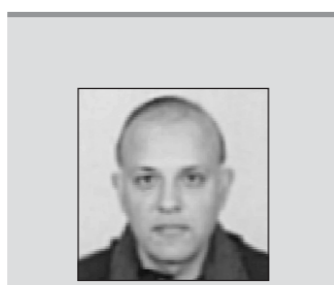
What really baffles is the attitude towards these sectors by the government one after another. During the last budget, it imposed a stiff tax on computers and other IT peripherals which raised a howl of national protest. The Government backed down only after it was pointed out that the IT sector was being depended upon for rescuing the national economy. Fortunately for us, some saw the lack of wisdom in this matter and it led to a revamping in the proposals and tax was withdrawn.

The disturbing aspect of this scenario is that the planners and tax collectors are set upon by visions of serious limitations. Taxation is far too serious a business to be left in the hands of tax collectors and estimators. It is a subject which decides the direction of the state and that needs to be recognized at the policy level. Imposing tax on IT and reducing the same on newly imported cars doesn't manifest a display of direction setting. It may haul in some extra money in the short run but in the long run, it will always fail to deliver the basic goods. It seems just as the world is starting to take itself seriously on many issues including information as a source of economic development, we are beginning to sharpen our ancient swords of traditional methods of tax collection.

Media reports that the total tax on the magazines could be as high as 30 per cent and the price increase even higher. Given that scenario, we are really being shut out from information sources. This government has sadly set up examples whereby all knowledge-enhancing products have had to face the taxman's wrath. Although there is not going to be any serious improvement in the collection sector, the government seems more motivated by money than knowledge.

No tax on readables, please.

Rule Cambodiana



K.A.S. MURSHID

MR. X is a highly respected gentleman from Chittagong, well known for his progressive views but who later turned to spiritual matters after long years of intellectual flirtation with left politics. In other words he is neither pro-AL nor pro-BNP a rather difficult and unusual position to be in these days. The time has now come for many, many more people to forsake their traditional party loyalties based on sentimental or personal reasons and to take a hard look at our parties and their leaders. How many of them can we be really proud of? Ask yourselves just one question. Is there a single politician today who you really look up to and respect? If your answer is yes, send me a mail I need to talk to you!

I started out by introducing Mr. X, who among other things is also a key witness to history unfortunately he is one of those who distinctly recall

listening to all the radio broadcasts made from Chittagong after 25 March 1971. I imagine there were many others who too must have heard these broadcasts. So what's all the fuss about? I suggest we simply ask this gentleman what happened and who said what and move on from there! (I would of course be happy to pass on his contact address).

people to really care!

At any rate it is now imperative to get out of this narrow, party-driven straightjacket that I believe is the fundamental reason for much of what ails us. Actually, for some inexplicable reasons I see the ghost of Cambodia in every nook and corner of Bangladesh (especially in dark nooks and corners). Now mind, you Cambodia today is very different

dented in the history of the planet. The arrangement was certainly unique but it could not last forever something (or someone) had to give. The Royalists were ousted by Hun Sen but later brought back in this time not as equal partners but as junior partners in a coalition government. The Royalists resisted, swallowed their pride and fell in line. Ever since, Cambodians have not looked

accentuated vertical division within society, for example in the bureaucracy, among professional groups, the police and, presumably right across the board. You may well have BNP neighbourhoods where AL supporters fear to tread, and vice versa; there may even be schools and kindergartens with pro-AL sections and pro-BNP sections. If these do not exist yet, well let's give it

towards our turbulent shores -- an odorous breeze that pervades every nostril in the land from Presidents to paupers, from slaves to sovereigns. How long before the breeze turns into a gale? And where are you going to be then?

The foundations of development lie in a country's institutions. The strength of institutions lies in the ability to perpetuate itself indefinitely. This can only happen if institutions are able to reconcile and absorb conflicts. Conflict resolution and cooperative action are the critical ingredients of a successful transition out of poverty and stagnation. I know this is not obvious to many, and I really don't have the time to explain. The argument, however, is persuasive and has led to at least one of its champions to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. Perhaps I might discuss this at another time. I am hesitant about launching into a full-scale treatment of the topic for another reason: a much respected reader warned that while he enjoyed reading my stuff he would certainly stop if I dwelt excessively on development issues. The only problem is that every issue is ultimately a development issue. The trick is I guess to discuss development without seeming to. I am afraid even I cannot always pull that off convincingly.

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

The foundations of development lie in a country's institutions. The strength of institutions lies in the ability to perpetuate itself indefinitely. This can only happen if institutions are able to reconcile and absorb conflicts. Conflict resolution and cooperative action are the critical ingredients of a successful transition out of poverty and stagnation. The argument, however, is persuasive and has led to at least one of its champions to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics

Perhaps the emphasis from the very beginning should have been not on who was first but who was the most effective (broadcaster, I mean). Now, that would have probably settled much of the useless controversy that has been generated and sustained over the years. Too many of us are still alive and able to recollect what happened thirty years ago. Thus the only alternatives are to rephrase or reword the debate (along lines indicated above) or alternatively, wait another thirty years (by which time there will be few surviving witnesses) and even fewer

from what it was even a few years ago (or so I am told) so can it be that somehow we are stepping into shoes that even the Cambodians have managed to discard?

Many of you will remember that before the coup in Cambodia in 1997 there were two Prime Ministers, two cabinets, two armies and two police forces. This was a recipe for confrontation, intolerance and violence, as each tried to outdo the other in appropriating the resources at the disposal of the State. At the time I had considered this to be a unique example of statecraft unprece-

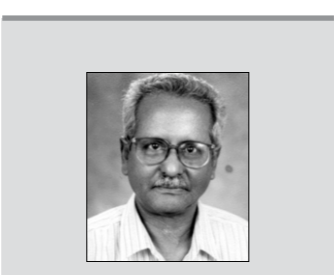
back. What is the moral of the story? Run them out of town but let them back in again, if they behave! That's when the ghosts turn into monsters. Since Bengalis are not Cambodians, they do not fall in line and they never behave. And I guess some do turn into monsters.

I hear you say 'this guy is losing it! What ghosts? What monsters? And at any rate what Cambodia has got to do with it?' Well, I was just thinking out loud. I mean we do hear a lot of talk about polarization these days. Sadly, this does not refer to widening 'class' differences anymore but to an

a few more years. After all there are Jamaat schools already teaching our children to be good Muslims. The idea of a BNP school probably deserves serious consideration where best to teach our children the real history of Bangladesh? Let every BNP office in the country open a school to teach history if nothing else! Now, that will get AL really going.

Thus, even if we do not announce it as much, it is crystal clear that our society has split vertically across a pretty meaningless and utterly foolish divide that blows ill winds

Amending Constitution: More powers to president



M.J. ZAHEDI

transplant them onto a federal system.

"Will this work?" asks the paper. The paper thinks it will not. It says stability and sustainability should be basic benchmarks for a political dispensation following a three-year period of military rule. But on both these counts the package fails the test prima facie, it says.

According to the package, the

include a perpetuation of his rule through a second term. The president will have an additional leverage in the form of his being head of the National Security Council. The body is supposed to be a consultative set-up. But it is actually ideally suited to a president wishing to, in the words of the *Daily Times*, slave drive the entire system. It would allow him to nominate members to the NSC, excluding

strong, un-elected, dictatorial president and provincial governors, weak elected parliament, prime minister and chief ministers, strong centre, weak provinces. This system, according to the *Daily Times*, is neither stable nor sustainable. It is not democratic either. According to the paper, if attempts are made to implement and practise it, the country will be caught in the grip of political instability sooner rather

minister joined hands to wrest some power back from General Zia. In the event, another thought springs to mind. How will General Musharrif ensure that the next parliament and prime minister are even more docile than the ones created by General Zia? By rigging the next elections to his heart's content?

Political parties, the media and the civil society, as expected, have

ended it. But he amended it bringing in the notorious article 58(2)B, which empowered the president to dismiss the PM and dissolve the NA. All his constitutional amendments aimed at fortifying the position of the president. In 1973 the constitution was back but in a heavily distorted form, the powers had swung from the PM to the president. The incumbent presidents used this article to dismiss four PMs in eight years, between 88 and 96, every time they had to dissolve the NA also because that was the only way to get rid of the PM. The provinces also suffered the same fate: the tally of dismissals and dissolutions totals four PMs, four NAs, 16 CMs and 16 PAs, quite an impressive score, by any reckoning.

In the latest proposals the President has been given the discretionary power to remove a cabinet with the PM on any one of four grounds. One of the grounds is failure to check corruption. Poor prime minister and his cabinet. If a custom or police officer takes bribe, and for similar crimes, he loses his job! All the checks have been placed on the PM but none on the president in whose office have been concentrated all the powers, not even the residuary powers have been left with the PM. Even the political parties would become irrelevant because even a party enjoying overwhelming majority would have no say in the election of the OPM. The NRB instead of strengthening institutions as it claims is in fact proposing to institutionalise political instability, writes an analyst in an article in *The News*.

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OPINION

Budget 2002-2003 and SAMS Kibria's comments

Z U AHMED

It is said that 'commonsense is very uncommon' and may I add in the same vein that intellectual honesty is also illusive in Bangladesh. The remarks are in relation to some of the 10-point suggestions made in the National Assembly recently, by former Finance Minister Mr. SAMS Kibria, on the National Budget 2002-2003 proposed by the Finance Minister Mr. M Saifur Rahman. I have the following observations on some of the points of criticism and suggestions made by Mr Kibria:

Whitening of black money: Mr Kibria in his budget for 2000-2001 allowed black money to be whitened on payment of 10 percent tax without requiring it to be invested in industry.

The Budget for 2002-2003 has allowed investment of black money exclusively in industry without payment of any tax. Surely, an economist like Mr. Kibria would agree, that the macroeconomic benefits arising year after year of Mr. Saifur Rahman's proposal is much more than Mr Kibria's previous provision.

It is interesting to note that criticism of allowing black money for investment in industry without payment of tax has come from Mr Kibria who in 1999 (u/s. 19B of I.T. Act) al-

lowed black money for purchase of real estate (an unproductive sector) by payment of tax @ Tk. 250 per sq. metre for larger houses, which if we take the case of an apartment measuring 2500 sq. ft. i.e. 232 square metre (valued at Tk. 50 lac) comes only to Tk. 58,000 i.e. 1.16 percent income tax. This unprecedented opportunity allowed by Mr. Kibria would encourage more and more corruption in the government/semi-government sector. The officers and employees would find a safe haven to invest their black money by paying only 1 percent or less tax depending on the size of the house.

Import of motor vehicles: The lowering of tax on import of new cars and proposed ban on re-conditioned cars has been politically played as lessening the tax on rich people at the cost of the poor. Mr. Kibria perhaps has forgotten or willingly did not mention the environmental benefits arising out of such proposal. In my opinion, few people would be willing to buy a re-conditioned car with Tk. 3 to 4 lac when a new car can be purchased within Tk. 4 to Tk. 5 lac unless they are first class first fools. Further, the buyers of re-conditioned cars are not poor people but upper middle class people of the society. Why then we should shed crocodile tears! The Government has now allowed import of old cars while low-

ering the tax on new cars and let the purchasers decide.

Investment climate growth: Mr Kibria has deplored the negligible growth in the industrial sector of the country but at the same time he opposed the proposal to allow black money, without tax, for investment in industry. His contention that improvement in law and order situation is a pre-condition for investment is true. Unacceptable law and order situation existed in the past and still exists today. But this is a matter of degree and not of kind. This cannot be improved in the short run without full co-operation of all political parties -- let's accept this. But should we not take help of other measures in the meantime or should sit idle?

Pro-poor stance: Mr Kibria has proposed, among other things, for making fruits, fish, sugar and soft drinks duty free. In view of the very tight foreign reserve position of the country, I wonder how sensible is the proposal and whether these items are necessary for the poor people whose cause he is trying to champion. One must not forget that 50 percent of the population of Bangladesh is living below the poverty level.

For kind information of Mr Kibria, proposal of the present Finance Minister to revise the IT Return Form,

with a view to obtaining personal details of the assessee, such as foreign travels, size of household, particulars of expenses for education of children, medical expenses and the like, will surely increase the tax burden on the rich and, therefore, to use his own terminology, be repressive not on the poor but on the affluent population of the country.

For any Finance Minister of a third world country like Bangladesh, a balanced budget, without maximising internal resources, is a wild dream. There are very limited options. To become self-reliant, one must accept hardship. Life is not a bed of roses, especially for the people as well as Finance Minister of a poor country like Bangladesh. The culture of criticising government measures for the sake of criticism only, without discussing all relevant factors, and the predecessor blaming the successor for doing a better job than him (in the sphere of whitening black money), is what I call intellectual dishonesty. The problem with our present Finance Minister is that, due to his accounting background, he is prone to call a spade a spade. He is perhaps unable to philosophise and say 'what's in a name, why call a spade a spade, after all it is an agricultural implement!

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DR. MAINUDDIN AHMED

It is a serious topic of the time and is broadly discussed at all levels. Several discussion meetings, seminars, etc. have been organized by NGOs and government organizations to express the concern of our people. They are timely as we cannot sit idle and face the adverse consequences. The government has directly voiced its concerns to the conflicting parties and in the international fora. The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organized a seminar (Indo-Pak conflict: Consequences for Bangladesh) on June 19, 2002. It was attended by very respectable citizens of the country including former minister, state minister, ambassadors, high ranking military and government officials, journalists, scientists and professors. Considering my life long association with nuclear science and technology home and abroad, BISS invited me to attend.

The seminar expressed its concern on any future conflicts between our two great nuclear neighbours. However, recent development shows that the cloud is disappearing from our horizon due to intervention by the superpower. For the time being we can feel relieved, but who knows when it will hit the headline again. We should not be complacent, as at any time our people

could become the victims of others' adventures, particularly the nuclear one that does not know the boundaries. The theme of the seminar was possible nuclear implications, particularly the political and economic consequences. Two keynote speeches, one dealt with description of the atomic bomb, its delivery system, energy released and havoc it could cause with the example of Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- two Japanese cities, and second paper was general in nature covering social, political and some economic aspects. All agreed that Bangladesh should have a contingency plan so that she is not caught unprepared. It is a fact that in nuclear science and technology Bangladesh is not with LDCs but her ranking is higher among developing countries. If not in all, she participates in most of the activities in peaceful application of nuclear science and technology organized by the UN specialized bodies like International Atomic Energy Agency, FAO and WHO. Why not Bangladesh should make a contingency plan? In-house experts are here. In case of shortfall and external assistance they know where to go.

I mentioned in the seminar and through this paper I wish to strongly emphasize one economic consequence Bangladesh will face if a nuclear war happens at our backdoor. Most of rivers are flowing

from India, wind could flow in any direction and due to our porous border people and goods move unabated. How are we going to avoid radioactive contamination in case of a nuclear conflict involving India? Even if the level of radioactive contamination in food and agricultural products of Bangladesh is within the acceptable limits we cannot control the contaminated food and agricultural products coming from our neighbours. It is not like the scenario that happened after Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in Ukraine in 1986. A shipload with heavily contaminated powder milk was intervened offshore and the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission was mandated to check every incoming food items for radiation contamination. It will be a Herculean task compared to imported food through ports but not impossible to take some measures ahead of time. We should not forget that the consumers of the developed countries are extremely cautious of the quality of food they eat. Any news on contamination will scare the foreign buyers and will immediately affect the export of our food and agricultural products. It happened in 1978-80 when USA blacklisted import of frozen foods from South Asian countries due to unhygienic condition of our processing plants and the level of contamination by the pathogenic microorganisms in the pro-

cessed products. With great efforts of confidence building our processors have come to this stage of export of these products. Radioactive contamination is something beyond their control; government intervention will be needed mostly. We have the codes and standards from hygienic processing to pesticide residues and radioactive contamination in food. As a member state of Codex Alimentarius Commission -- a joint programme of FAO/WHO -- that recommends food standards and codes and ISO, I feel the know-how is in the country, particularly with Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institute. Our problem is the proper implementation of the laws due to shortage of manpower and facilities. As a new danger is looming in our horizon that could seriously affect our very fragile economy we should seriously think about capacity building to control import and export of food for the confidence of consumers at home and abroad. Therefore, it is the opinion of the conscious citizens that government should make an urgent plan of action so that we are not caught unprepared in case of a nuclear conflict in the region.

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