

# Democracy in Bangladesh and its relevance for Pakistan

## Government's increased borrowing

Expenditure-control imperative

GOVERNMENT borrowing is up. Till June 30, 2002 it was to the tune of Tk 1878.41 crore from the central bank and Tk 1245.21 crore from different scheduled banks. Overall, this reflected an increase of 7.55 per cent over the previous year's level of borrowing. But in terms of the revised FY 2002 target, the overshooting has been quite substantial. As against the targeted Tk 1682 crore the borrowing stood at Tk 3123.62 crore on June 30, 2002.

The pertinent question is: what made the government resort to bank lending on such a big scale? The reasons are not far to seek even though the slashing of the original ADP outlay of Tk 19000 crore by Tk 3000 crore and its implementation up to 70 per cent would have normally reduced the necessity for contracting bank loans. A high ranking central bank official putting the revenue collection shortfall in the last fiscal year at Tk 4.5 billion thought that the deficit forced the government to borrow. Part of the propulsion seems to have come from poor aid disbursement. Donors are yet to respond positively to the government's request for assistance.

The government's bank borrowing is obviously indicative of an increase in revenue expenditure. Tightening of the belt in governmental or public sector expenditure and improved revenue collection are needed to obviate government's recourse to bank borrowing.

Government's eschewal of Supplier's Credit and its closure of Adamjee Jute Mills should go down well with the donor community. The World Bank resident chief Federick Temple has had good words to say on the AJM closure. One has to wait and see how these have a bearing on the flow of development assistance to the country.

Meanwhile, we have to do all we can to step up private investment. But given the trend of increased public sector borrowing, it's now only the sordid prospect for a squeeze on bank lending to private sector that we are looking at. Furthermore, it's a chink in the armour of microeconomic stability that we are worried about.

## Massacre of pilgrims

Militants must not be allowed to stifle peace hopes

THE dawn bloodbath on Tuesday near Pahalgam in Indian-controlled Kashmir that left nine Hindu pilgrims killed and at least 32 others wounded has pushed India and Pakistan back into battle mode. New Delhi was quick to point fingers at Islamabad, saying it was working to disrupt elections scheduled to start next month in the troubled Himalayan state. The government of President Pervez Musharraf came out with a prompt condemnation of "the terrorist attack on Hindu pilgrims" and rejected the implication that his country was involved "with contempt". Predictably, the exchange of diplomatic salvos was followed by massive deployment of troops on either side of the border. Sceptre of another confrontation between the nuclear-capable South Asian neighbours has once again resurfaced. So much for the diplomatic initiative by the United States and the United Kingdom to defuse tension in the troubled region.

Tuesday's attack on civilians by suspected Islamic militants was the second in less than a month after 27 people, including women and children, were massacred at a mainly Hindu slum in Jammu on July 15. After the worst attack in the disputed valley since a May raid on an army camp that left 34 people killed, a Pakistan foreign ministry spokesperson had said, "The motivation behind the attack seems to be to enhance tension in the region." This could also be true for the recent episode of bloodletting. Therefore, neither India nor Pakistan should allow themselves to get caught in the trap.

Dialogue, and not military confrontation, is and should always be the means to resolve the dispute that dogs Kashmir. Unfortunately, New Delhi has ruled out any dialogue with Pakistan until it reins in rebels it says are crossing the line of control into its territory. On the other hand, Islamabad denies it gives more than moral and diplomatic support to what it terms an indigenous movement for self-determination in Kashmir. Such rigidity keeps the windows open for the warmongers to sneak in and wreak more havoc on innocent lives. Both sides should keep that in mind and try to reopen the channels for bilateral communications.



DILARA CHOUDHURY

BA being a part of then Pakistan, shared a common constitutional history till 1971. For people of both then East and West Pakistan, democracy remained a far cry due to, first, by the evil designs of then ruling coterie consisting of civil-military bureaucracy, and second, by direct interventions by the military in country's political order. Even in post-1971 period, both had more or less similar experiences of having army interventions in politics and intermittent autocratic civilian rule. It is only as late as in 1991 that an autocratic regime in Bangladesh gave way to a democratic transition in the face of an unprecedented mass upsurge. Pakistan's political order remained marred with army as the main catalyst.

At present, however, a fierce debate is going on in Pakistan with regard to a constitutional package offered by the President and the Chief Executive of the country, General Pervez Musharraf, through which a democratic transition is in the offing in October 2002. Various features of the package and changes in country's electoral laws like substantial increase in number of seats in National and Provincial assemblies pertaining to general, women and technocrats, decrease in voters' age limit, abolition of separate electorate, smaller constituencies through delimitation in order to enhance MP-constituents contacts, shorter tenure of the legislative assemblies so that agitation politics can be controlled, making intra-party polls and registration of political parties act mandatory and barring politicians convicted of corruption and other offences so that new blood is infused and new leadership is emerged, are being analyzed by various segments of the Pakistani society. Amendments in the electoral laws are right steps in the right direction. As a matter of fact, we being a new democracy, perhaps may introduce

some of the above mentioned changes, especially increase of number of seats in the national assembly by having smaller constituencies, shorter tenure for the legislative assemblies and in particular, making intra-party polls and political parties registration act compulsory. However, one fundamental premise which makes the transition to democracy in Bangladesh and the potential one in Pakistan different consists of two very contentious issues, which are proposed restoration of article 58(2b) and composition and role of

democracy and its consolidation. The fundamental difference would be that Bangladesh's transition to democracy from an authoritarian rule in 1991 took place due to the mass upsurge of 1990 and there was no scope for the army to negotiate and carve a role for itself in country's future politics. Ershad tried but army withdrew leaving the field to the politicians and the people. We began our journey in 1991 with a number of democratic elements like a constitutional formula providing a framework of democratic government-institutional structure capable

Prime Minister, and supervisory role of the NSC the freedom and capacity of people's representatives would be seriously curtailed and they would be unable to carry out the will of the people. They would be more attentive to what the President and NSC want than paying attention to people's hopes and aspirations. There would be emergence of 'King's parties' -- the kind familiar in the United Pakistan's constitutional history during early 1950s. However, it is to be noted that the concept of checks and balances is a must in any democracy but the kind of Presiden-

The problem of exclusionary politics has been recognized and the constitutional formula and institutional framework are in place to deal with such situations. In Pakistan, the scenario is totally different. The question of having a genuine federal state and centre-province relation has been a dominant feature since the inception of the country in 1947. The tension arising out of those phenomena has not done away with even after the creation of Bangladesh. They still plague the country and the four federating units are still quarrelling about issues like

mission, to make the elections free and fair. Interestingly, the party in power did the least in this regard. In Pakistan, the electoral system is in such disarray that it is difficult to comprehend how free and fair elections can take place in that country -- the glaring example being the results of the recent presidential referendum. A number of factors like the regime's need, thanks to the constitutional formula, for getting the representatives of the 'King's parties' elected in the assemblies, the involvement of the provincial governors in the fray, weaknesses of the political parties and total lack of independence of the Election Commission are bound to create impediments in making the electoral process transparent.

Most important of all Pakistani people having lived under a feudal system for generations do not usually stand up against oppression whereas in Bangladesh, people do not like domination for long. Unfortunately, General Musharraf's proposed constitutional formula through which the democratic transition would take place is tailor made to maintain the status quo. Under the circumstances, how much hope one can have for a genuine democratic order in Pakistan?

I would conclude by stating that basic law of the country is important for democratic transition and its subsequent consolidation. At least, under such dispensation, the framework i.e. basic democratic institutions are in place as it happened in Bangladesh. Their functioning, however, depends on other variables. But at least people have a basic structure in which if the constitutional spirits are imbued that is somewhat lacking in Bangladesh at present, the prospects of its consolidation are bright. We began our journey in 1991 with a number of democratic elements and over the years new ones have emerged. There are scopes that we can and should capitalize on them to strengthen our still fragile democratic order. Pakistan, most probably, would not begin its democratic transition with such constitutional formula but as General Musharraf stated recently that every country should have a system according to its special needs and environment. Such being the case, the kind of democracy Pakistan would have and how it would be consolidated are of major interests to the political analysts of South Asia.

One more historical note that needs to be added in the context of Pakistan's future democratic transition, is our common experience of having a corrupt electoral system. All throughout Pakistan's history (1971 to date) elections excepting two (1988 and 1993) have been rigged in favour of incumbency. In Bangladesh we have had our share of misfortune in this regard (1973-1988) and it is only since 1991 that we have taken confidence building measures like constitutionally enshrined non-party caretaker government (NCG), institutionalization of domestic election monitors, and somewhat strengthening of the Election Com-

Dilara Choudhury is Professor, Govt and Politics, Jahangirnagar University.

## PANORAMA

Pakistani people having lived under a feudal system for generations do not usually stand up against oppression whereas in Bangladesh, people do not like domination for long. Unfortunately, General Musharraf's proposed constitutional formula through which the democratic transition would take place is tailor made to maintain the status quo. Under the circumstances, how much hope one can have for a genuine democratic order in Pakistan?

National Security Council in Pakistan. This fundamental premise clarifies the advantages Bangladesh has been enjoying in its democratic transition and its subsequent consolidation, and why the same may be fraught with difficulties in Pakistan even after the general elections in October.

In Pakistan, the restoration of article 58(2b) would make the Office of the President more powerful than anyone before excepting the martial law administrator during military rule, and the NSC without being an elected body, if not fully defined, would monitor, watch the parliament and the Prime Minister and take actions if they do not act 'properly'. It is argued that the proposed constitutional formula would ensure smooth functioning of the state institutions and prevent potential army interventions in country's politics. But the political parties and civil society leaders point out that in such eventuality the elected prime ministers would be nothing but puppets in the hands of the all powerful President who would undoubtedly be guided by the advice of NSC. In another word, by the army. However, until now neither the power of the President nor the composition and role of NSC has yet been finalized. But if they are finalized as proposed, Pakistan's transition to democracy and its subsequent democratization would be a far cry from our transition to

of both sustaining and accelerating the change and provide the instrument for stimulating increased participation, especially of the marginalized and the poor, and for securing higher level of institutionalization without the fear of having the army's overarching supervisory role. The people's representatives were the sole authority in their endeavours to materialize the will of the people. That our political parties and our leadership have not lived up to our expectations is another story but the fact is that they have not been constitutionally or otherwise restricted. This has been big boon for the country. Because without constitutional constraints there is always scope to make the people's representatives susceptible to people's will. Our major political parties may not admit it but in their heart they know that people of Bangladesh always opt for a change and despite ruling party's advantage in distributing patronage the party in power has been defeated both in 1996 and in 2001. So, if even pressure is build up on the political parties through political awareness of the electorate they would be compelled to shed their regrettable 'characteristics' and start behaving like genuine democratic political parties.

But in Pakistan that would not be the case. What would happen is that under the guise of checks and balances between the President and

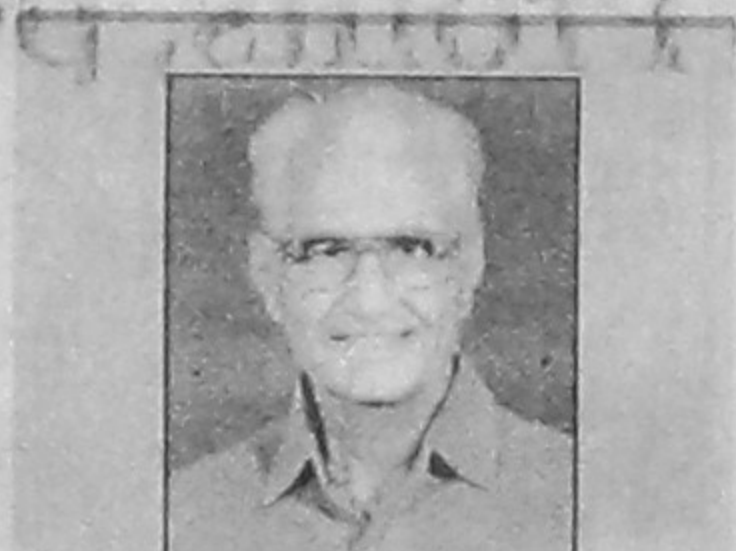
tial Office that would be created with the restoration of article 58(2b) does not quite fit into what democratic concept of checks and balances is meant to be. It would not augur well for democracy and enhance constitutional politics. Speaking of checks and balances we have constitutional mechanism in our system but due to our quest for a stable political order (article, 70) and absence of intra-party polls we have created an omnipotent executive and in such eventuality extra-constitutional means may take credence over the constitutional one. We would not want the kind of checks and balances Pakistan is talking about but we have the avenues to pressurize the political parties so that constitutional mechanisms are in place and functioning and thereby eliminate the scope for agitation politics and potential intervention of the army into politics.

Another boon we have in Bangladesh's phenomenon of homogeneity in terms of language and religion not found in any of the South Asian countries. It is a unitary state and, therefore, the question of centre-province relations does not plague our polity. Despite these God given endowment Bangladesh was besieged with insurgency in CHI, which ended as late as in 1997. It happened because the system was not inclusive enough to have all segments of the society to have a say in the governance of the country.

provincial autonomy and domination of one particular unit over the others. Under Musharraf's formula, I am afraid, those problems would manifest in much larger way as the provincial Governors would be acting merely as the agents of the central government with having the power of hiring and firing the provincial Chief Ministers. How can then the elected Chief Ministers have real power and be responsible to the people? This 'Vice Regal' system is bound to create schism and bitterness among the federating units and the central government. One hopes that Pakistan's bitter experience in tinkering with federalism during the 1947-71 should be enough reasons for the Chief Executive to act more prudently.

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## Why this insistent focus on Iraq?



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

THE US President George W. Bush has angrily rejected Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein's latest move of discussing the return of UN Arms inspectors to Iraq and seem to be hellbent on going ahead with the putative invasion of Iraq. Many wonder why the US is so adamant on choosing Iraq as the next target in its war against terror. Even Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, had dissented, though where he will be found on the D Day might not occasion anxiety to Washington. The European Union is unhappy and is saying so. Iran and Saudi Arabia have opposed the idea. Other Arab potentates are in consternation and have been pleading with the US not to open this Pandora's box, especially by King Abdullah of Jordan who is in perhaps the most exposed position; half the population of Jordan comprises Palestinians (refugees) and his economy direly needs better trade relations with Iraq. Russia and China also disapprove the idea of invading Iraq.

Many people would naturally want to know why is Bush so obsessed with Iraq. The reasons may not be too far to seek. At a personal level, he is surrounded by hardliners from the time of his father; they are in key positions in his administra-

tion the way they were in the early 1990s. These people now regard Iraq as the unfinished business of 1991. They want Bush Jr. to finish what his father left undone. This time round the removal of Saddam Hussein from office is the main objective.

In terms of interests, analysts reel off various possible motivations. In the order of what one regards as important pride of place should go to what the Israelis think on the matter: They regard Iraq as their

oil; the US-Israeli duo see the survival of pro-US Arab dictators, kings, Amirs and Sheikhs as vital. As noted the Iraqi regime's cosying up to the Iranians and the latter's more or less positive response is sure to look like a big and growing challenge to American role in its Asian redoubt. Pax Americana in ME is what both regimes in Tehran and Baghdad disapprove. Joining together of an oppressive theocracy with a nominal Arab nationalist

point that removing Saddam is not an easy or cost-free proposition. They see dangers.

The critics' common presumption is that Iraq is a brittle state; it can split under strain along its ethnic faultlines: Its population comprises three distinct groups that are not integrated into a harmonious and inclusive nation. Since Saddam runs a tight ship, he cannot be removed except through a horrible war and may require the deploy-

is Shia and lives in close proximity to states containing Shias, i.e. Iran and Bahrain. Iraqi Shias have traditionally been poor and suppressed. There is much obscurity about their politics or what motivates them; their likely choices are simply not known. Saddam has carefully fomented the sectarian feelings but has kept them contained. It is feared that the south too may insist on being a separate state, the geograph-

seem to be an earnest start of hiding the ME of terror -- to full Bush satisfaction. In recent history the US bete noir has been Iranian fundamentalism. Few American experts have forgotten the US experiences before, during and after the Iraq-Iran war. It is an unfinished business from yester year. In a way, the selection of Iraq now only makes sense if it is to be a preliminary to the more serious and complex business in Iran. Iranian society, despite the 23 years of Mullahs' hard work, remains a plural and variegated society with many political schools and barely suppressed forces.

The US is being sorely tempted by the ongoing struggle for power in Iran. On surface it is a tug of war between entrenched hardline Mullahs and the more moderate and democratic elements of the clergy itself. What does President Mohammad Khatami represent or whom is a question on which most outsiders can only speculate. What seems certain is that this power struggle seemingly between hardline and moderate Islamists is portentous. In Khatami's corner loom huge and amorphous forces. He won twice with the votes of women, youth and the unemployed. These sections still feel ignored and marginalised by the entrenched clergy. The country may be teetering on the brink of a civil strife because big chunks of population are involved on either side.

In this situation the US administration has hitherto shown an admirable restraint, though its strain may be telling now. The dogged insistence on getting Saddam may be a reflection of developments in Iran which seem to be relentlessly moving long can the US remain restrained?

M B Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

## PLAIN WORDS

Throwing out Saddam would seem to be an earnest start of ridding the ME of terror -- to full Bush satisfaction...the US administration has hitherto shown an admirable restraint, though its strain may be telling now. The dogged insistence on getting Saddam may be a reflection of developments in Iran which seem to be relentlessly moving towards a denouement. For how long can the US remain restrained?

immediate security threat on various grounds. To begin with, Iraq is an important oil-producing country, sitting on a big lake of hydrocarbons with a potential for development. While oil wealth of Saudis is no threat to Israel or the west, Iraq's is. And Israel is not alone in feeling threatened. Iraq poses a threat, in the short run, to most other Arab potentates in the region because of his regime's origins. Although Saddam is a tough absolutist tyrant, his political origins lie in the Baath Movement, an authentic Arab Nationalist movement, who is inimical to Arab dynastic rulers. From the US and Israeli viewpoint, the recent Iraqi and Iranian policies of trying to make up should pose a serious threat. For, both are members of the Bush's 'axis of evil' possessing ample resources, both human and material derived from hydrocarbons.

Then there is the politics of ME

tyranny in denouncing the American imperialism can cause turbulence. If this relationship develops, Middle East can become even more unstable.

In the short-term, replacing Saddam Hussein with a pro-US regime in Iraq should serve all US major interests. Who can forget that many analysts think that an unavowed aim of the Terrorism War is to eventually fight the Iranians. It is probable that the US will not directly intervene in Iran. For, that can become an open-ended war, ala Vietnam. A new and adequately pro-western regime in Iraq can possibly be made to re-enact the 1980s war to corner and weaken Iran. Adequate western aid for it will be available. What is needed immediately is the replacing of Saddam Hussein with a more pliable General. But the critics -- these include the Europeans, the Arab potentates and many American experts themselves -- make a

of possibly hundreds of thousands of American or European troops, if available. These may have to stay in Iraq for a long time to ensure the successor regime overcomes the possible chaos and strife. Anyhow such a war generates many uncertainties.

The collapse of the Saddam regime amidst a military defeat is sure to create chaos and strife in which the northern Kurdish areas might declare UDI; if a separate state arises there, would it be suppressed bloodily? An independent Kurdish state would be an anathema to the Turks who have been fighting their own Kurds near the Iranian border for long. Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq are a distinct ethnic entity. They may be particularly incensed with Baghdad but feel equal antipathy towards Arabs, Iranians and the Turks.

Among the Arabs in Iraq there is a sectarian divide: much of the south

ical location of which would worry Israel and the US because it may befriend Iran, on the one side, and strengthen other organisations like Hamas in Palestine and Hizbullah in Lebanon, on the other. It can also cause turbulence in Bahrain and other Gulf areas.

King Abdullah's worry about the 'can of worms' centres on the possibility of Iraq splitting up. After all Iraq is not a single ethnic unit; its current boundaries were arbitrarily decided by the British in 1919. Since oil business needs stable conditions, Iraq's sectarian problem has been kept dormant through suppression. Through the centuries ME has shaken down to a pattern of coexistence. An upheaval in Iraq can rekindle ancient conflicts that may unwittingly produce unpredictable consequences, with the US facing more problems than it can cope.

Throwing out Saddam would

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Indian wheat: Our transformation from animal to poultry!

It's a good news that the probe committees have found out at least 2,000 sacks of date-expired Indian wheat meant for poultry feed in an abandoned government granary in Bogra (August 6). According to different newspapers' reports, tons of low-grade Indian wheat has already found its way into different government granaries in northern districts.

A few years ago some of our businessmen imported tons of vetch, an animal fodder, from Australia, in the name of lentil, and sold that in the market. We, the people of this country ate that animal fodder. Some businessmen even import rapeseed oil to sell it as edible oil. The rapeseed is also used as animal

fodder. With the progress of time, it seems that, in the eyes of some 'mighty persons', the mass people of Bangladesh have transformed from animal to poultry. So they now want us to eat poultry feed, may it be date expired. Not a bad up gradation of us!

If we look at the headlines of our dailies, we will find that Bangladesh is a breeding ground for sensational news. The 'mighty persons' may rest assured that some other sensational news will come up soon in the newspapers' headlines, which will make us forget this wheat episode. Then, we are afraid, money may start play its usual game and transform this date-expired poultry feed into edible human food. The patriotic political leaders, who are allegedly involved in this 'valuegate', will work as catalyst in this process

of transformation. After all, money is 'all mighty' in this country; we are so feeble vis-à-vis to it; political brotherhood is so strong in us; and our conscience is always on auction.

Faruque Hasan  
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

### BAF fighter purchase--not again!

The Prime Minister's recent declaration to buy more latest fighter plane for BAF has come as a surprise to many citizens. Hasn't she learnt from the mistakes committed by the last government while purchasing MIG-29?

In our poverty-stricken country, do we need jet fighters, when most of our people can't even manage a proper meal everyday? Moreover, who are we going to fight with?

Maybe, we could invest the money in procuring helicopters for disaster management like flood, cyclone and other natural disasters. Would sense prevail on our government? F Hussain  
Gulshan, Dhaka

### Divided expressway

It was interesting reading about the MagLev project envisioned by our Communication Minister. Kudos to him for looking beyond conventional technology.

Having said the above and supporting the most advanced communications technology in Bangladesh, I am of the opinion that 'MagLev' trains are less important than a second highway link to Chittagong alongside the existing one. Combining the two highways into one in the future would create a divided expressway (separate ways

for going down and return). This is very necessary considering the need of the hour.

A divided highway exponentially decreases the chance of head-on collisions and allows for much faster traffic. If multi-axle trailers (like 18-wheeler trucks) are allowed to ply between the Chittagong port and Dhaka, I am doubtful our present Chittagong highway can accommodate them. Lastly, the MagLev project at this time will stunt the growth of the air-conditioned bus industry plying on the Dhaka, Chittagong and Cox Bazar routes. May also adversely affect the airline industry on these routes. A divided highway on the other hand is real infrastructure development without affecting existing industry.

Readers, think about it. Can traffic from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok fit on our

current, puny Dhaka-Chittagong highway? AA  
California, USA

### New flag law

The amendment to the National Flag Ordinance, 1972 came just a week prior to the death anniversary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. One might wonder why the Government is so keen to issue an amendment in such a hurry.

First the national holiday on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August was cancelled by Khuldea Zia's government and now this. There is no denying of the fact that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the central figure around whom all the movements of the liberation war and our struggle for independence took place in 1971. Even leader like late Ziaur Rahman did not publicly criticise Mujib as far as I know. So,

why are we still struggling to acknowledge Mujib's role in our independence more than 30 years of the liberation? Md. Towhid Salam  
Los Angeles, California

### August 15 holiday cancelled!

I came to know from your July 23 issue that the present BNP government has cancelled the official program on August 15 and earlier it has cancelled the public holiday on that day. Awami League did the same with November 7 when it came to power in 1996. There may be dissension among the AL and the BNP regarding their political ideologies but there should not be dissension regarding the issues that involve the nation. The change of public holiday with the change of

government clearly shows the degree of intolerance between the two leading political parties of the country. Public holidays must be fixed and can never be a function of whims of any political government. Probably Bangladesh is the only country where public holidays also change with the change of government.

Like public holidays, the two parties are deeply indulged in dispute over some other national issues. This is a matter of shame for the nation that we are yet to settle these issues because of party feud. Will the political parties come forward to reach a consensus on all the issues of national importance forgetting the political dispute?

Islam  
Tangail