

## Victory Day

Together we can march ahead

TRUMPHE of freedom, the most exhilarating and ennobling of human emotions, is what we are set to celebrate today -- our Victory Day. That's our fundamental reference-point; the fountainhead, as it were, of inspiration; the beacon for guidance; and a touch-stone against which we should evaluate our performance from time to time.

As we celebrate the Victory Day, the question that invariably figures is: how victorious have we emerged in our nation-building role in the 31 years following independence. Big question, but a brief answer can be given to it: we lost that original groundswell of unified spirit and energy that was the hall-mark of our liberation day attainments. Sadly, we then drifted -- until 1991 when return of democratic values at the crest of popular movement put us back on track. What we have done since then is too well known to recount but we will only say this that after three elections we are still nowhere near achieving a political culture that can keep democracy working to yield collective economic and social good for the people.

Yes, the fundamental step towards political independence is geographical freedom. But can its fruits be enjoyed except through a democratic system in operation -- parliament, its plethora of oversight committees and a judiciary independent of the executive? Then ultimately, what is political freedom worth if it cannot bring economic welfare to the general masses as distinguished from serving some elite only?

Economic management has two aspects: the first consisting in average-oriented policies based on social justice norms to benefit maximum number of people; and the second involves a global orientation to productivity, customization and pricing on a competitive basis so as to sell well in the overseas markets.

Political freedom should give security, a sense of well-being. But has it? The menacing law and order situation saw crimes and murders on the rise putting public security to ever newer risks. It took such an ugly turn as a failure of the normal system that the Army had to be called out in aid of civil authority. But there have been deaths in custody entailing questions of fundamental law and civil rights.

The terrorist bombings in Mymensingh were an eye-opener to a new threat to our national security, palpably as part of the contemporary global insecurity phenomenon. While the political parties should have taken a common stance on it, they resorted to blame-game oblivious of the collective stake in it.

The knee-jerk reactions in the media area, reflected through arrests of journalists, are an anachronism in a democratic society and bodes ill for the profession of journalism.

As we celebrate the victory day, we express our deep gratitude to all the freedom fighters and martyrs for creating a homeland for us and to countries as well which stood by us in our hour of greatest trial.

## Biswa Ijtema

Prayers of millions of Muslims should not go in vain

WE joined the hundreds of thousands of Muslim devotees who prayed for continued peace, prosperity and progress of the Muslim world on conclusion of the three-day Biswa Ijtema at Tongi riverside yesterday. This is the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world after the Hajj.

We would like to raise a few points at the end of this large gathering -- firstly we hope the real spirit and significance of the gathering, getting rid of hatred and promoting brotherhood would be upheld by the participants after the Ijtema.

Alarmingly in the recent times we have witnessed a growing distance between Islam and the West in the wake of September 11 attack in America and subsequent terrorist activities elsewhere allegedly committed by radical Islamic groups. In this context we strongly feel the need for a greater understanding and grasp of Islam by the West. They should take the authentic historical elements of the religion into account before passing any judgement, because Islam is basically oriented to peaceful coexistence, harmony and tolerance between different communities and faiths. Failure to comprehend that fact is only likely to widen the misunderstanding between the Muslims and the Western World. And that is something the West would have to avoid at any cost. At the same time, Muslims of the whole world also have responsibilities to safeguard the image of their religion from being tarnished. We condemn those who have been using Islam in their schemes of serving their political purposes and agenda.

We unequivocally condemn those as well who have been distorting the religious faiths with full knowledge. Religious extremism should not be foisted on people by taking advantage of their ignorance, superstition and gullibility. Killing innocent people in the name of protecting religion can never be accepted. Terror doesn't bring peace; it only increases the possibility of greater friction. There have been many examples of such conflicts in the recent past.

In the end we are hopeful that the Akheri Munajat by millions of Muslim devotees for peace and prosperity in the world, would not go in vain.

# No retreat on the local government front!

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

THE local government train has hit a road-block. Just as we were gearing up for major advances on this front with positive recommendations from the concerned cabinet sub-committee, our assertive Finance Minister let loose a veritable volley of criticisms which for the moment appears to have succeeded in forcing a stalemate on the issue. It is not clear how far his salvos come from conviction (he talks a different language with Development Partners) but it is whispered he enjoys the backing of many members of parliament of all parties. Saifur Rahman's ire is directed at the proposal for a upazila parishad but in effect his vociferous interventions have cast a cloud over the whole idea of strong local governments. Even the fact that new union parishad elections are just round the corner has not put local governments back into the political centre-stage. Clearly, the uphill task of realising the popular demand for strong local governments has been made just that much more difficult. Not necessarily a cause for despair but certainly a need to re-group both on arguments and strategy.

The absence of a vibrant local government sector has not necessarily meant that rural areas have been a neglected sector in Bangladesh. NGOs, agencies like LGED, national programmes on immunization, primary education, girl education have together produced important positive changes in Bangladesh society. The demand for strong local government is not primarily about replacing the above agencies. But three decades of development in independent Bangladesh has also convincingly brought home the limitations of the ruling development model in which the best case scenario is firmly stuck at one percentage point of poverty reduction a year. The argument for local governments is first and foremost an argument for breaking through the limitations of existing development approaches to achieve a radical scaling up of poverty reduction. Local governments *per se* will certainly not achieve such an objective but an intelligent and strong local governance agenda can meaningfully address many of the dysfunctionality of our over-centralised administrative and political system and thereby unleash the societal energies for faster poverty reduction. This is why it is such a pity that instead of being a lead actor in elaborating such an agenda, Saifur Rahman has seen fit to champion only the narrow political fears of some of our members of parliament of being edged out of the local development scene.

There are compelling political arguments too why a strong local government sector is critical to Bangladesh's democratic transition. Though we have made the shift to democratic governance over a decade ago, the political space remains a very narrow one. There are few preparatory grounds for

responsible parliamentary careers; many members of parliament come with a shocking lack of administrative, development or governance experience. The scope for active citizen participation in governance too is virtually limited to the five-yearly trek to the voting booth. In between elections, the political establishment and the citizenry at large have few institutionalised channels of interaction. Strengthening the local government sector may hold the key here to opening up political spaces and anchoring our democracy on more meaningful roots.

There is also a strong governance argument for the focus on local governments. For the ordinary citizen, government in Bangladesh is a distant entity, to be feared,

ideas. The overriding principle at work is to ensure a close supervision of local governments by central administration and a pre-eminent central jurisdiction on local development while at the same time allowing the space for a local political process. The "approach" born of this principle moves on an implicit bifurcation whereby accountability issues are emphasised for the lower tier and development administration issues for the upper tiers. More often than not, the goals of accountability and development administration thus come to be pursued in isolation from each other resulting in an in-built barrier to effective local governance.

A second feature of the realpolitik in question is that powers and responsibilities of local govern-

ments. The institutional reality at the local level is a multi-agent one and in the task of promoting local economies all actors be they NGOs, agencies, the private sector, civil society will likely have a role underpinned by the facilitating role of local governments. Indeed, such a novel but necessary role calls for a new governance approach, one built around the idea of coalitions understood both as process and as working arrangements in which the energies of the government, local governments, NGOs, civil society and entrepreneurs find a virtuous fusion.

There is a third issue to be addressed too, namely resolving the new tension on the MP's constituency role and local governments. Though rarely a focus of public

discourse, this is the tension behind the current impasse over local government reforms. Given the fledgling nature of our democratic experiment, it is not surprising that this issue has surfaced at this time since it is not only local governments which are weak in Bangladesh, so is the role of the member of parliament in shaping the democratic outcomes for society. There are three dimensions to MP's developmental and constituency role: *lobbyist* for constituency to central government, a *developmental role in the constituency*, and *grievance redressal* channel i.e. a sort of local ombudsman. How are these roles operationalised and what significance do they carry for the discussion on local government? Take the case of lobbyist. This is a political role. There is no issue here as such of developing formal procedures. On the developmental role, there is clearly a question of formalising this role. This is also the area where

tensions vis-à-vis local governments can arise in the absence of clear and appropriate guide-lines. In developed countries, this role has been phased out over a long historical process. In developing countries, this role is still very much present but the institutional mechanisms vary. Currently, this role is institutionalised through the strong advisory role given to MPs over local government projects. Since 1997, the advisory role has even extended to union parishads. However, an advisory role of MPs over local government projects is not conducive to building a viable local government system. This is clearly not the optimal developmental role for the MP. What can be argued for are, firstly, no formal selection or approval role over local government projects but informal roles of sug-

gestion and monitoring, secondly, control over a formally specified sum of central government funds for local development for emergency schemes and innovative schemes, and thirdly, restricting the right of the MP to select and monitor but technical screening and implementation will be through regular administrative channels. Variants of this model run in most developing countries. Philippines appears to have the worst variant in that the money is given to the MP without much screening leading to widespread corruption. Thailand has recently done away with the system. India follows a more structured system under the title Local Area Development Schemes. Bangladesh can lead the way by concentrating attention on innovative and emergency schemes.

On the third potential role of the MP as a grievance redressal channel, this is currently not recognised as a formal role but there is a very strong informal role centred around *tadbir* (which one should add is politically very inefficient in terms of MP's political role as well as in terms of societal outcomes, not to talk of the enormous wastage of resources incurred by supplicants). However, in developed democracies and even in many developing countries, this role has been formalised through a) a constituency office for the MP, b) having specified assistance to record and scrutiny grievances and maintain a data-base on grievances, c) formally channeling grievances to appropriate authorities for redressal, and d) monitoring progress on redressal.

Will the current impasse over local government reforms be broken? The outcome is directly dependent on the level of moral, intellectual and political pressure which can be mobilised behind the local government reform agenda. Though we have certainly hit a road-block, the door has certainly not been closed. For the civil society, the task is a twofold one. The first is to pry open the political deadlock over the upazila issue. A strong and well-designed local government at the upazila level is critical to elevate the local government sector to its strategic role. The latent social and political support behind the upazila parishad has to be made more forcefully visible. Reservations on the upazila format of the Ershad era has to be engaged; not much effective discussions have taken place on the alternative formats possible. However, we have also to pursue the parallel agenda of investing union parishads and pourashavas with a new generation of roles, responsibilities and powers. The second agenda is less politically charged but no less strategically important. The coming union elections offers a critical window of opportunity to pursue meaningful initiatives on this front.

Local governments are critical to Bangladesh's prosperity and democratic future. There can be no retreat on this front.

Hossain Zillur Rahman is Member-Secretary of the Local Government Support Group.

Many countries both in the developing and the developed world have (China and Switzerland as two case examples) have successfully forged a new strategic frontier for the local government agenda, namely the promotion of local economies. The poverty context of Bangladesh makes this a doubly potent frontier to explore...In many ways though, such a focus is a novel one for Bangladesh but changing ground realities make such a focus an increasingly relevant one.

tolerated and avoided if possible. The administrative mind-set which still prefers to see citizens as subjects can only be challenged and reformed by taking government nearer to the people.

None of the above implies that simply having local governments will achieve all the benefits indicated. The challenge really is one of devising a reform agenda which can convince on achieving results. But Saifur Rahman and the political class he is giving voice to do not want to allow us to come to this stage of agenda-building at all; they appear intent on destroying the agenda at the level of first principles. And this is where they are clearly in the wrong. Wrong in terms of development strategy, wrong in terms of political maturity, wrong in terms of democratic vision.

The agenda for strong local governments has routinely floundered on two features: one, entrenched opposition within the governing elite, and second, an excessively normative orientation amongst advocates. The penchant for ideal-type solutions has only served to obscure the need to engage more effectively with the forces who shape as it were the *realpolitik* of the sector. One important feature of this *realpolitik* is that policy attention to local government in Bangladesh has always found it necessary to balance the demands of the accountability principle with those of effective development administration. The precise nature of such balancing has not necessarily been conducive to consolidating a process of institutional and political growth of the local government sector. However, notwithstanding the outcomes, there is a certain durability in what may be seen as the official "approach" to reform

ideas. The overriding principle at work is to ensure a close supervision of local governments by central administration and a pre-eminent central jurisdiction on local development while at the same time allowing the space for a local political process. The "approach" born of this principle moves on an implicit bifurcation whereby accountability issues are emphasised for the lower tier and development administration issues for the upper tiers. More often than not, the goals of accountability and development administration thus come to be pursued in isolation from each other resulting in an in-built barrier to effective local governance.

Given such a *realpolitik*, advocates of strong local government can hardly rest merely making some ideal prescription. The battle really is a three-fold one: a political battle to counter the entrenched opposition, an intellectual battle to make strong local governments a compelling agenda, and a policy battle to tease out the most meaningful entry points for reform action. It will be foolish to imagine that Saifur Rahman is the only stumbling-block here.

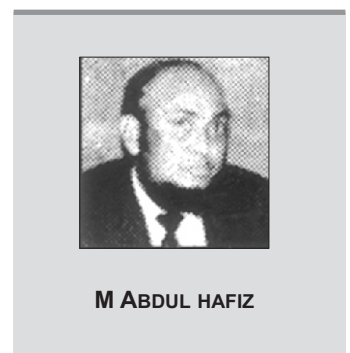
A politically intelligent strategy on local government has three core agenda to pursue. *Firstly*, full use has to be made of what may be seen as the *permitted* space for reform. The bureaucratic elite has an interest in supervised development administration and the political elite has an interest in electoral experimentation. These two poles describe what may effectively be

target them as a very practical and very useful entry point for pursuing new reform ideas? Yet the tendency here has been to see such tasks only as a preserve of the bureaucrats while local government advocates remain fixated on ideal prescriptions at the level of first principles. This is precisely an example where a shift towards greater political intelligence in agenda-building has become so necessary.

A more intelligent strategy is also about winning new arguments for the focus on local governments. Many countries both in the developing and the developed world have (China and Switzerland as two case examples) have successfully forged a new strategic frontier for the local government agenda, namely the promotion of local economies. The poverty context of Bangladesh makes this a doubly potent frontier to explore, one indeed in which our Finance Minister should be taking the lead rather than poring cold water on the local government agenda. In many ways though, such a focus is a novel one for Bangladesh but changing ground realities make such a focus an increasingly relevant one. With migration and multiple livelihoods as dominant features in the lives of the poor, a local economy perspective has become a crucially relevant reference frame in which livelihood strategies for a scaled-up attack on poverty are best forged. The cited examples of China and Switzerland have demonstrated the dividends to be had from orienting local governments towards a role as promoter of local economies. It should however be added here that the cast of actors who matter here extend well beyond local governments *per se*. And this is where the argument is about local *governance* and not just local gov-

ernments. The institutional reality at the local level is a multi-agent one and in the task of promoting local economies all actors be they NGOs, agencies, the private sector, civil society will likely have a role underpinned by the facilitating role of local governments. Indeed, such a novel but necessary role calls for a new governance approach, one built around the idea of coalitions understood both as process and as working arrangements in which the energies of the government, local governments, NGOs, civil society and entrepreneurs find a virtuous fusion.

# Another war closely following the US invasion of Iraq?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER months of alarming pronouncements as to an axis of evil, preemptive strike and regime change emanating from Washington, now a Damocles' sword -- the UN resolution number 1441 drafted by the US and passed unanimously by the United Nations Security Council on 8 November last -- hangs ominously on Iraq. The resolution imposes impossible conditions for Iraq and its provisions are of a character that makes confrontation inevitable. Although it heightens the prospect of war in Iraq, the European dissent faded away when Bush pulled off completely unanticipated victory in November 3 midterm election to the US Congress. In the present milieu the victory is looked upon as a mandate for Bush's ultra right agenda. Therefore, for all the posturings particularly by France and Russia, they did not want to earn US' displeasure by tabling rival resolutions. As a result, the final outcome was very much as the US had designed.

After having gained UN's assent for its resolutions the US administration was carefully scripting a series of media leaks about its war plan so that the war frenzy built up by it remained in place. According to those leakage, the initial phase of the war would involve the insertion

of about 80,000 troops who would join the war after ten days of intensive bombing and seize certain strategic enclaves. The larger invasion forces of 2,50,000 would then begin gathering for the final push to Baghdad. Eagerly joining the war frenzy, Britain announced the mobilisation of 15,000 soldiers for swift deployment in the theatre of operation. Meanwhile the attacking echelons which already assembled in the region are going through a high-tech computerised exercise in Qatar desert.

Simultaneously, in the shadow of

oil minister, said the oil "will exceed 300 bn barrels when all Iraq's regions are explored." If true, it means Iraq has a quarter of the world's oil. The enormity of this reserve can be gauged from the fact that with the North Sea reserve of 5 bn barrel Britain is EU's largest oil producer. This explains the US' sense of urgency for a regime change in Iraq so that a pliant government can be installed there and the country becomes her oil protectorate of sorts. Haunted by uncertainty over continued oil flow from Saudi Arabia because of its growing

would want to be in," John Teeling said exuberantly. But it is not anyone's business. The moot question is: Who gets the oil or its business?

In last October, behind the closed doors of London's Royal Institute for International Affairs, leading oilmen, exiled Iraqis and lawyers held a meeting entitled "Invading Iraq: Dangers and opportunities for energy sector," and tried to address this tricky question. If America changes the regime, one might expect US companies to get it from Iraq's new dispensation. But one with some background knowledge

resort to "all means necessary." The companies would also "lose Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti oil because if their Arab brethren did not stand by Iraq, it would force to stop the oil flow."

After a painful battle the IPC signed the nationalisation agreement on February 28, 1973. Today if a regime change takes place three of the world's largest public companies -- BP, Shell and Exxon Mobil will be fighting for their old IPC possessions.

Back in 1970s the IPC was compensated for its lost oilfields, and

be worth fighting for. The stakes are equally high for the French, Russian and Chinese. It is interesting that these three countries which delayed the US' UN Iraq resolution have potentially massive oil pacts in Iraq. Saddam is believed to have offered the French company Total Elf Fina exclusive right to the largest of Iraq's oilfields, the Majnoon. Meanwhile Russia and China have sought various deals on the supergiant West Kurma and Rumaila fields, respectively. They have been assured that their stakes will be taken care of.

Former CIA director James Woolsey who is close to Iraqi opposition groups recently told the Washington Post. "It's pretty straightforward. France and Russia have oil companies and interest in Iraq. They should be told that if they are of assistance in moving Iraq towards a decent government (in other words, if they are of assistance in changing the regime, the pet project of George Bush), we'll do the best we can to ensure the new government and American companies work closely with them."

Experts on international law seem not to be on Woolsey's sides however, and a new government may have little choice to work with Saddam's current friends. "Regime change does not change the acquired rights the companies have in the area," says Doak Bishop, the vice chairman of the Institute of Transnational Arbitration. "If the Russians and the French have legal rights in those fields, then a regime change would not oust them of those rights, but it could well get pretty messy." Should "regime change" be a reality, one thing is guaranteed -- shortly afterwards there will be mother of all legal battles.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS

## PERSPECTIVES

"Regime change does not change the acquired rights the companies have in the area," says the vice chairman of the Institute of Transnational Arbitration. "If the Russians and the French have legal rights in those fields, then a regime change would not oust them of those rights, but it could well get pretty-messy."

the US' impending invasion, another war over who has the right to Iraq's lucrative oilfields in post-Saddam period is in the offing. All the parties relevant for the future shape of things in Iraq -- particularly those five permanent members of the UNSC who finally reached consensus in approving resolution 1441 -- recognise one thing: Iraq has the potentials to become a great oil nation again. There is a huge gap between the trickle of oil now coming out of Iraq and its actual capabilities.

According to OPEC, the entire world's known oil reserves run to 1000bn barrels. Iraq could claim one tenth of it, just over 100 bn barrels. However, in an interview before the current conflict Taha Hamoud Mousa, then Iraq's deputy

differences with the House of Sauds the US is bent upon putting the game plan in action, while other players of the game also want a share of the spoils. It is not for nothing that the US would tax her taxpayers during a period of its economic recession.

Iraq's oil has additional attraction. It is not miles offshore under a treacherous sea like that of Britain. It is thus much cheaper than the oil Britain produces. John Teeling, head of one of the companies to admit to working in Iraq is exultant. His Dublin-based company, Petrel is keen to develop Iraq's unexplored oil fields. This oil could cost as little as 97 cents a barrel and can then be sold for \$30 a barrel in global market. "A 97 per cent profit margin -- that's the kind of business any one

of Iraq's oil would soon find that it's not as simple as that. Iraq's history of oil development only can throw some light on how a scramble for Iraqi oil is likely to end up.

Iraq's oil was originally developed through a consortium called the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) with a quarter of its share going to BP, Shell and forerunner of Total Elf Fina. The rest was owned by Standard Oil and Mobil. But in 1972 it was nationalised by revolutionary Iraq regime. The negotiation over nationalisation had been fierce and Geoffrey Stockwell who headed the IPC team had some extraordinary clashes with both Saddam Hussein and Vice President Salih Mahdi Ammash. The latter said Iraq would "go through any battle with the companies that was necessary" and

that would normally end any future rights they might have. However they may well show that the compensation deal was signed under duress. An incoming Iraqi government could face a giant legal compensation case. "If you argue there is something amounting to duress, then one could also argue that the compensation agreement is invalid," says Professor Thomas Walde, formerly principal UN inter-regional adviser on oil and gas law. This, in any case, a bargaining chip for the companies to deal with the new government. It would play a role in the race for getting new titles.

The stakes are high. Iraq could be producing 8m barrels a day within a decade with the prospect of earning \$87.6bn a year at the rate of \$30 per barrel. Any share in it would

## OPINION

# DCC - dead or alive?

VOX POPULI

IS Dhaka City Corporation dead or alive? Do we feel its existence? We do not. It does not repair its roads, it does not collect and dispose of solid waste, it does not do enough to control mosquito menace. The whole city has become a veritable dustbin. This is a city where there is no full time city father -- a full time Mayor. We did not know

that the present Mayor, after being elected as such, would continue with his previous appointment. Had this been known before election the voters might have been hesitant in voting for him because the post of Mayor demands whole time and undivided attention of its incumbent. It is not humanly possible to discharge the duties and onerous responsibilities of the Mayor in addition to some other equally high

pressure job unless he is a super man. We wonder how the city father, combining in himself a number of administrative as well as political appointments, can have sleep in the night. Again, this is an unfortunate city where a large number of its Commissioners are under custody due to charges of criminal activities having been brought against them. Even before their arrest under the Operation Clean Heart they could not

move freely and needed police protection in which situation it was not possible on their part to attend to their duty.

Dhaka, a city of ten million people and already beset with all sorts of problems of gigantic magnitude, is projected to be the fourth largest city of the world by the year 2015. What preparation the DCC has got to face the challenges of municipal administration of the fourth biggest city of the

world? Leaving aside the question of DCC's preparation for the emerging situation of the fourth biggest city we would like to discuss the present situation. It was repeatedly announced by the Mayor that repair programme of city roads, almost all of which are in dilapidated condition and some of them are not fit for use, would start immediately after the rainy season was over. The rainy season has passed, but no such

repair activity is in sight. Even if the work commences right at the moment it will be difficult to complete the job before the advent of the next rainy season. The repair and upgradation of some important and arterial roads were supposed to be undertaken under DUTP. Here also we are yet to see the beginning of the work although some foreign firms are stated to have already been given contract for these projects. Nothing is being heard when the repair work will

start and what is the present status of the repair programme. The citizens and tax payers have a right to know what is going on inside the DCC in regard to repair of its roads.

At the moment, the DCC, with a part-time father and a considerable number of Commissioners in jail does not appear to be in a position to discharge even its minimum responsibility, not to speak of doing it efficiently. Things have come to such a

pass that it appears to be high time that the government should seriously think of disbanding the present DCC and either go for fresh election or appoint an able person as its Administrator the reason being non-availability of its Mayor and a considerable number of Commissioners for performing their regular duties in the DCC and its total failure to perform its obligatory functions.