

Investment climate

A matter of image

A leading German businessman, Peter Clasen, chairman of the OAV-German Asia-Pacific Business Association, has provided some food for thought. He has stated something important with an authenticity of having seen it from the other side. He has said to the effect that antagonism and acrimony between politicians have smeared our image abroad which, in turn, adversely affected the prospects of investment in the country.

The point needs little elaboration since people know very well what a price the country is paying for politics of confrontation. But even more worrying is his observation that Bangladesh is viewed by the German business community as one of the "worst places" for undertaking any commercial venture in. This is precisely where the price for social and political instability goes beyond all conceivable limits.

Long-term planning and reliability have been identified as the two most important prerequisites for attracting new business partners. This is understandable, but not achievable as long as politics remains turbulent. As we have seen, political unrest tends to upset everything -- from economic planning through investment to the retailer's business.

There are also complaints about the efficiency level of the system set up to cater to the needs of prospective entrepreneurs and investors. If they do not get credit facilities and there is no assurance of regular power supply, the flow of foreign investment is likely to dry up further. What we must not overlook is that we are living in a competitive world where the rivals are ready to offer a lot more.

Germany is one of the biggest markets in the EU and an important trade partner of Bangladesh. So, it should occupy a special place in our plan of expanding trade ties internationally. But before anything else, it is imperative that foreign investors' problems are addressed in right earnest.

It is now evident that investors look forward to political stability. Our political parties have to realise this plain truth and keep in view the image of the country while trying to undermine each other. We are not living in a closed society that can afford to ignore the issues concerning image.

JS finance bodies in comatose

Accountability exercise goes by default

THE failure by three constitutional committees of the parliament, as stated by the Public Expenditure Review Commission (PerC), to ensure accountability and transparency in public expenditure and remove corruption in state organisations cannot be made a short shrift. It is a sad commentary on our committee system that three most important committees -- public accounts, estimate and undertaking, have failed to deliver the goods expected of them, according to the PerC report in question. The PerC even went to the extent of saying that had they functioned properly, there would not have been any need for a commission like PerC.

The overall disinterest in making the JS bodies work at an optimal level is exacting a heavy price on the efficacy of a parliamentary system of government. First of all, there was shortage of logistic support; secondly, as the chairmen of the three committees themselves commented, there has been negligence on the part of the government and parliament. And lastly, the failure of the parliamentary standing committees themselves to follow the rules of procedure in terms of holding at least one meeting in 30 days has made them grossly underperform. In fact, we had noticed in the past that some of the committees on important ministries did not hold any meetings at all for more than six months since their inception. To top it off, the opposition absenteeism in those bodies rendered them ineffectual to a large extent. There was a suggestion that if the opposition were given chairmanship of some of the oversight committees, the system might have worked, and worked for the better.

It is in the long-term interest of both the major political parties that the parliamentary standing committees are fully formed and functional. This is one area where bipartism will should be spontaneously forthcoming simply because there is a common, transcending stake in the committee system.

Crisis in governance and state of democracy

DR. M. ATAURO AHMAD

B ANGLADESH'S existence as an independent nation has been traumatic as well as promising. The first decade witnessed extreme volatility in politics, the second decade with a brief interlude of civilian-democratic regime, was marked by a long period of authoritarian rule. The dawn of 1990s witnessed changing notes -- the global democratic revolution paved the way for democratisation in Bangladesh. The return to a democratic rule in 1991 with a consensus on parliamentary system of government was an important episode in the nation's political history. The continuation of democratic rule for the past twelve and half years, amid serious power conflicts, and peaceful transition ensured through a constitutional provision of 'care taker' government, signifies Bangladesh's success in sustaining a fledgling democracy. Today, in 2004, the country seems to have come to another 'turning point' for consolidation of her democratic governance.

The record of the present government in the past twenty eight months in crucial areas of governance i.e., public law and order, combating corruption, bureaucratic performance, and human security has fallen short of citizens' expectations. The politicians of different strokes, including one former president, a noted lawyer came out publicly to criticise the government for its inability to stem the tide of corruption and crime in

well as the tasks and responsibilities of the main opposition party.

I have argued in this article that the root cause lies in the lack of reforms in political parties at this stage of our democratisation. The renowned political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset, in a 1998 article in the *Journal of Democracy* talked about the indispensability of political parties as "a social mechanism that permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among the contenders for political office". The parties therefore act as training ground for political leaders

who will eventually assume a role in governing society. In addition, the parties contest and seek to win elections in order to manage government institutions. Civil society, often termed as "well-spring of democracy" is romantic and cannot replace political parties. Therefore, emphasis should be given to reform of political parties. Without strong political parties and institutions that are accountable and effective, the democratic process cannot func-

tions. Both the parties lost touch with the electorate, failed to tackle increasing corruption in their ranks and showed scant regard for the poor. They became discredited in the eyes of citizens, enabling Hugo Chavez to emerge from the political vacuum promoting an image of an honest military man, who was elected President in 1999.

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perception among large segments of society that political parties are ineffective and out of touch with

landscape. We should not take any comfort from the current crisis, as the decline of political parties ultimately threatens the foundations of democracy.

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democratic institutions is critical to reducing the severity of the ethical dilemma facing political leaders. Just institutions are not plagued by bribery and graft. When political leaders and officials engage in such behaviour, they

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tion for the good of the people.

In Bangladesh, despite an abundance of advocacy and citizen groups, and NGOs, 'the recurring partisan political stalemate consigns the country and its citizens to abject poverty'. Although Bangladesh has moved from military-authoritarian rule over the past decade, it has appeared that the main political leaders have learnt little, and contributed to the continuing political impasse. The influence wielded by leaders of major political parties over supporters and citizens is constantly used for narrow individual, group or partisan purposes. These lead-

ers are the ones who promote divisions in society at large. The reforms in political parties will make them stronger institutionally and people will hold them in higher esteem. The political parties and civil society will, then, become natural allies where parties reach out and engage civic groups and cooperate with them on specific issues. Otherwise, the political parties in Bangladesh will degenerate into personalistic, hereditary, self-serving political entities

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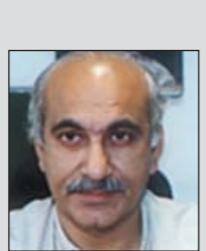
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their needs. The exposure of scandals and corruption done by party leaders through media has diminished the image of parties and leaders. Lack of ethics in rank and file of political parties is a serious flaw. Nomination process, leadership positions and distribution of economic benefits are the major concerns of party activists. The democratisation of political parties and transparency in operation of party and government functions are essential for renewal and reform of political parties in Bangladesh. The young leadership must be groomed and trained to replace the older generation who are still dominating the political

Sub kuchh luta ke hosh mein aaye to kya kiya...



M.J. AKBAR

tian faith does not make George Fernandes or P.A. Sangma or A.K. Antony unacceptable.

For five years the primary purpose of the Congress has not been to remove the government, but to make Sonia Gandhi Prime Minister. There is a subtle but vital difference between the two objectives. It is the difference between Opposition politics and Coterie politics. After 250 weeks of seeking the first objective, the Congress has kept aside 10 weeks for the second objective.

rather than the other way around: I know the feeling and sympathise. Even after humiliation in the last Assembly elections, all Congress leaders sent to television studios insisted that their belief in Sonia Gandhi was non-negotiable. Sonia Gandhi herself left no doubts on this score, while those closest to her, like Ambika Soni, were vociferous. As late as in December, she was saying that the BJP seemed scared of a "mere woman". It is a somersault to now suggest that a "mere woman" is scared of the BJP.

spurned all suggestions of an alliance and mounted a soft-Hindutva plank. It was only after the results of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh that the fantasy began to evaporate.

The key question now is: Has everything been lost, or is reversal possible? Is it *Sab kuchh luta ke* or merely *Bahut kuchh luta ke*? The very idea of unity has brought a spring to the Congress step, but before taking a leap, a few facts need to be placed in perspective.

Two years ago, the Congress

able to retain the number of seats that they have in the present Lok Sabha. Every Congress ally will be expansive with words and misery with seats.

True alliances are built not in drawing rooms, but on the streets, when party workers mobilise for a common cause. One of the curious facts about the Congress is that it has not taken up, in any significant manner, a single issue in the last five years.

Statements by nominated

spokespersons from television studios have replaced the politics of the

If the Congress is run on traditional lines of rotating presidents and a muscular working committee, all the bits and pieces that have fallen off over the years will return. A political party is a collective, not a fiefdom.

The sight of a leader, who once waited for the world to call on her, flitting about from home to home is indicative of disarray. But once again, what would have been effective a year ago, seems desperation 10 weeks before the polls. Against such disarray, the BJP enters this election with only one problem: the cockiness of those of its second-generation leaders who are beginning to behave as if they have already won.

The BJP has dismounted from the Ayodhya rathyatra, and climbed on to the Vajpayee chariot. The wheels of the Vajpayee chariot are not a temple and a mosque, but economics and peace. It is a formidable vehicle, driven by a leader at the top of the popularity charts. The positive response to the Pakistan initiative proves that Vajpayee is correct in his belief that while conflict might get votes, peace can reap a much higher dividend.

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As Talat Mahmood also pointed out, albeit mournfully, there are two kinds of fire. There are the *ummeed ke chiragh*: the lamps of hope must never go out in the Congress. Alas, their dilemma might be better summed up in a line that Jaipal Reddy, who is from Andhra Pradesh and will therefore be familiar with Urdu, the language of the old Nizam state, will understand: *Khud hi laga aag tamashai ban gaye...* It is difficult to translate the nuances of Urdu into English, but let me give it a try: We have become spectators of a fire we ourselves lit.

And so Congress space continues to ebb on the electoral map, leaving pools of resentment where the party once had a candidate. The party recedes, stage by stage, state by state. A wit might suggest that it is headed for the shrink, but there is nothing funny about this development. Indian democracy needs the interplay of two national parties, even if their presence is not effectively nationwide. The Congress needs internal strength far more than external support. Sharad Pawar should be inside the party, discussing strategy with outsiders, rather than outside discussing options with Congress.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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The problem is not the wish, but wish fulfilment. Sonia Gandhi believes that a fudge will work. Privately she has assured Sharad Pawar and other Opposition parties like the DMK and the CPI(M) that she will not be a candidate for Prime Minister. Publicly, Congress spokespersons are under instructions to say that such questions will be dealt with after the elections. I hear that the principal spokesman, S. Jaipal Reddy, was pulled up because he insisted that Sonia Gandhi was still the only leader the Congress would accept as Prime Minister. You cannot blame Jaipal Reddy: this is the line he has been plugging ever since he was given the honour of speaking on behalf of the party. (Jaipal, whose friendship I can claim, is not a natural Congressman; he is intelligent but not a sophist. In fact, he remains one of the most brilliant stars of his generation. Ever since he has become a Congress spokesman, his brain has been mortgaged to his tongue,

There is no need for others to be discreet. As his colleague P.A. Sangma correctly points out, Sharad Pawar cannot accept Sonia Gandhi as any alternative coalition's leader without compromising on his party's basic Constitution. Democratic politics does not provide space for "private" assurances on public policy. This is why Pawar has said that any Secular Front against the NDA must accept the principle of collective leadership.

It was the question of leadership that prevented the formation of such a Secular Front at least a year, or even two years ago. If you want to be a Front, and Secular, what better opportunity could come your way than the Gujarat Assembly elections after the riots? There is reason to believe, after analysis of the vote, that such an alliance would have defeated Narendra Modi, and reshaped the swell of Indian politics. But Sonia Gandhi

would have been the central glue of such a Secular Front, because it was still a closed fist: the hollow within had not been exposed. Today, the Congress will be isolated if it contests alone, and squeezed if it opts for an alliance. The Left has been Sonia Gandhi's most loyal ally, but it will not concede a single seat to the Congress in Bengal, Kerala or Tripura. What the Left does elsewhere does not much matter.

In Bihar Laloo Yadav will give unto Congress banter, and keep unto himself all the seats. The Congress share, out of 40, will be in single digits. In UP, Mayawati bargains like a moneylender: whatever she gives will be at high interest. The DMK has fewer problems, because the Congress is already marginalised in Tamil Nadu. Congress will get a better deal in Maharashtra, but that is a bit of a Barmecide's feast: neither Congress nor Sharad Pawar will be

street; it has become an air-conditioned party. On the two issues central to the BJP campaign in the coming elections, peace with Pakistan and prosperity in India, it has had very little to say. There is no alternative economic policy that has been articulated. And on a subject as important as Pakistan, there is dead silence.

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pleasure by fair means or foul, the police being more favourably placed to achieve them because of having arms at their command.

Mr Huda pointed out how the police force was made weak and inefficient. To it was added greed resulting in corruption. Inefficiency and corruption are happy bed-fellows to breed insolent monsters.

Understandably the people have learnt to withdraw dependence on the police. Some kidnapped businessmen have purchased their lives negotiating ransoms with the abductors. Their elementary wisdom did not permit them to risk their lives relying on the unreliable police. Amusingly, in some cases it was the police personnel that worked as middlemen in the finalisation of the ransom deal with the kidnappers.

The business community of Natore set up a *stick and whistle blowing association* against the terrorists, toll-collectors crushing hard resistances put on their way by vested quarters. This example is worth emulating by business communities of other areas of the country.

Still the truth is that whereas every sect of the professionals has run amuck to capture money and

Our police in disarray

AR SHAMSUL ISLAM

A law and order worsen aspersions on the police are usually to inflate. Not to speak of other quarters even the inner circle of the government has vented deep concern at the alarming crime situation. The other day the state minister for law and parliamentary affairs, in a seminar, called upon the home minister, in his very presence, to resign his office if he could not provide protection to the people. Admittedly, it is no use mentioning the multi-dimensional crimes being committed every day in our country as the full list of the same is on everybody's tip of the tongue.

Forster IGP and secretary Mr Nurul Huda wrote quite an illuminating article entitled *What offends our police?* in the DS of 20 Dec last. He has focused on, inter alia, the defective and biased recruitment process of the subordinate ranks of the police, fund constraint for training, inadequacies and flawed spirit of the Police Act of 1861 etc.

He has proposed what may be called an innovative design for experimentation by taking one small district where all affairs of the police will be conducted by the police administration itself free

from all extra-departmental interferences. "There is no dearth of men of character, honesty and integrity even now. There are enough roars for reformations in the polity of the police. But they faded in whimper."

If we turn over the pages of history of this subcontinent we would hardly be able to discover occasions when the police could come close to being hailed as people's friends. One splendid

test they laid hands on silencing their opponents by force. The police were indiscriminately used in this gestapo sort of exercise.

The police were no fools to shy away from obliging the ruling masters because it nicely fitted into their design of self-aggrandisement. They considered it an immunity from accountability for their acts and deeds. This pro-

tests they laid hands on silencing their opponents by force. The police were indiscriminately used in this gestapo sort of exercise.

This consciousness of power coupled with inordinate greed for money led the police to turn violent, unruly, arbitrary, self-seeking and corrupt. Understandably, the seething resentment of the police at vast deficiencies they had to suffer in their numerical strength,

pay and benefits, training, arms, transport, service rules and promotion guidelines had already imprisoned qualms of conscience if they had any.

Ours was a job-shy economy where crimes and anti-social activities were bound to gallop. The criminals, anti-social elements found it easy to peddle their nefarious trade if the police could be gained over on their side. Our police were readily gullible. Interestingly, instead of being combatants the police acted as collaborators

in political exploitation and an affectionate beacon from the society to absorb them (police) in its bosom.

exception was the Liberation War of 1971 when the police (at least an overwhelming majority) fought standing shoulder to shoulder with the people against the Pakistani forces. And in all fairness the police alone were not to blame for that damaging blackside.

In the newly free Bangladesh the undemocratic and fascist character of our politicians began to be exposed. They turned the police to be almost a battalion of their political party in place of a force of the opposition. And it