

## WB fund stuck up

Coordination failure at our end

It is no secret that the health sector, like many other areas of public concern, is also plagued by planning anomalies. But the report that the health ministry's failure to submit operational papers in time has delayed its gaining access to World Bank funds (\$ 74 millions) for procuring essential drugs is indeed a shocking revelation. Such insensitivity to and neglect of routine exercises is something unheard of.

There have been belated attempts to offset the ill effects of the lapse. The ERD wrote to the WB last month asking for 'immediate support' and a contingency plan was approved by ECNEC on April 18 and signed by the prime minister. However, as far as the functioning of the government is concerned, this is an example of how the bureaucracy makes last-ditch attempts to regain control over a situation, after failing to take appropriate action in time.

Lack of coordination in governmental activities in such a basic matter is a far from acceptable. The issue has a direct bearing on the health services provided to the people in rural areas. The services are known to be inadequate and these can only worsen further when essential drugs are not procured due to bureaucratic procrastination. Delay in getting funds released from the international agencies created similar problems in the past also, but it seems the ministry concerned has not learned anything from its experience.

Now the question is, whose heads should roll for the dislocation caused to supply of medicines? There is no way to take the issue lightly, given the grave nature of the lapse. The responsibilities must be fixed clearly.

## By election

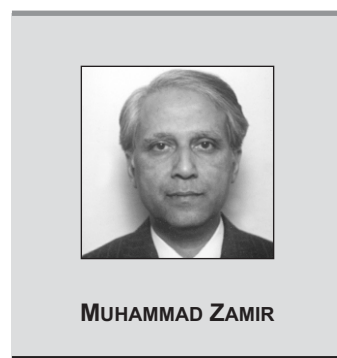
Code of conduct must not be breached

It is surprising to see that two candidates from the same political party have been given two separate symbols for the coming by election in June. Though MA Mannan and Mahi B Choudhury are candidates from the same political party, Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh, Mr Mannan has not been allocated the same symbol as Mahi Choudhury and they have decided to take legal step against such decision. Lately we have been witnessing that the campaigning for Dhaka-10 constituency has been dogged with controversy. Mr Mannan had earlier alleged that his supporters were not being allowed to campaign for him freely.

In fact there have been reports in the newspapers that his supporters were being manhandled and cars used for the campaigning were damaged allegedly by the supporters of his opponent. Election Commission itself had assured him of taking steps to ensure security for his supporters after Mr Mannan lodged a complaint with the EC that his opponent, the ruling coalition candidate Mosaddek Ali Falu, was violating code of conduct. We appreciate EC's prompt move to ask its officials to take actions against those violating the codes, but those actions must be visible. One may recall that from its very inception Bikalpa Dhara was allowed little space to operate.

EC had to wait for a complaint to be lodged before taking any action, whereas it was there for all to see how opulent the campaign of Mannan's opponent has been not only after the official announcement of the nomination, but even before that. The elections are scheduled for June 6 so the EC has to take corrective measures immediately. Because for a free, fair and impartial election, all candidates should be allowed a level playing field.

# The difficult art of practising democracy



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE people of Bangladesh in general and the inhabitants of Dhaka in particular, have passed through anxious times in the past few weeks. Indiscriminate arrests and abuse of fundamental human rights have been important points of discussion in practically every home in the capital. There have been passionate arguments. It eventually led various representatives from the civil society to seek clarification from the judiciary on 27 April, 2004 about the propriety of government action. This was done through a public interest writ petition.

After due hearing, the Special Division bench of the High Court directed the government to submit a report within three weeks detailing the names and particulars of the thousands of persons arrested under Section 86 of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Act and the steps taken for their release. The Court also asked the government to show cause as to why this Section should not be declared to be without lawful authority and of not having legal effect being ultra vires of the constitution.

There are two important elements in this scenario. Firstly, civil society was sufficiently provoked to file such a writ, and also secondly, the learned Court thought it fit to issue such a directive on the government.

The relevant officials of the government have tried to justify such inappropriate, arbitrary

detention through alleged 'conspiracy' theories. This controversial, much abused reason, has created further debate. In fact, it has done little to allay the fears of the common people on the street. Innocent civilians have found themselves in the crossfire of politics and have suffered unnecessarily. The government may try to explain away their action in various ways, but it will be difficult to paper over the sad spectacle of

Thank God for small mercies. That might have been the final straw on the camels back. At least this bit of over-kill was avoided. I hope the readers permit me this pun.

Pictures speak a thousand words. Evening bulletins, in their quest for truth, also faithfully telecast the deteriorating situation all over the world. I am sure that such pictures of unrest drove many potential investors away. What can our diplomatic representatives do

desch the most violent country for journalists in Asia.'

We have also seen earlier this month the critical observations of Mr Toru Shibuichi, Country Director of the Asian Development Bank with regard to corruption, inefficiency and poor infrastructure. His report categorically stated that these negative factors are hindering Bangladesh from achieving a much higher economic growth in keeping with its potential. Similar sentiments

presence is however pertinent. She has mentioned that the MPs from her Party will "try to speak in the House, but would come out again if not allowed to do so."

One can only hope that the Administration and the Speaker of the Parliament will ensure that every Member has an opportunity to express his or her views. If such a step can consolidate democracy, then let us do it.

Our political leadership probably

positive approach. What is required is rapprochement.

The Opposition feel that they count in the body-politic of the nation. We need to be bi-partisan in our approach. There is no harm in this. There has to be breadth of vision. The government also needs to be more tolerant about peaceful protests. They also have to respect the basic rights of freedom of thought, association and speech. Democracy pre-supposes fairness. It also postulates that we can agree to disagree.



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hundreds of parents and relatives seeking information about their missing kin in various police stations and in front of the Central Jail. We have a serious image problem abroad and this sort of publicity so soon after the article in the 'Time' magazine will not help the country's cause.

We always hear our politicians delivering sermons on how our diplomatic missions abroad should function and attract foreign direct investment through economic diplomacy. These platitudes need to be examined against the backdrop of such police action and the charges of graft that accompanied such arbitrary detention. The seriousness of the situation led even a normally pro-establishment paper to note in its editorial of 28 April that 'the very act of the police lying in wait at bus terminals, only to pounce upon commuters entering the city from various parts of the country, speaks of methods of operation that can only be likened to the way feudal societies worked in medieval times.' The only silver lining was that there was no deaths.

abroad when their efforts are undermined through scenes of such gross abuse of fundamental rights.

Democracy is a difficult art. It requires patience, wisdom and tolerance. Mere slogans and speeches do not encourage democracy or foster democratic institution building. Dissent has to be permitted for democracy to function. Constructive criticism will have to be allowed alongwith analysis and censure, if so necessary.

The people of this country have suffered from various causes for many years. Poverty, corruption and lack of law and order have over time exacerbated the malaise. Failure of democratic institutions, controversial and questionable constitutional amendments should not drag the nation down further.

It is not gratifying to read in the morning paper that the Committee to Protect Journalists, based in New York has tagged Bangladesh as the world's fifth worst place to be a journalist. They have also mentioned that 'crime, corruption and lawlessness makes Bangla-

were also expressed in the Bangladesh Development Forum where donors drew attention to the prevailing corruption in Bangladesh and the absence of law and order.

It is satisfying to note however that democracy has been given another chance to function within our parliamentary matrix. We have a significant budget session ahead of us. It is expected to take into account the ramifications of January 2005 and beyond for our textile industry. The future of millions of Bangladeshis are involved. We also have the implications of post-Cancun multilateral negotiations. This scenario is filled with complex variables.

We should view Awami League's positive decision to participate in the forthcoming Budget Session in the Jatiyo Sangshad from this perspective. They could have taken that extra step and decided to either resign or continue to be absent till rules of procedure took effect. They have not done so. They have been responsible and mature in their decision. Sheikh Hasina's observation about Awami League's

needs to learn that co-operation is essential for inter-party relations. There is wisdom in negotiating across fault-lines that are created because of any crisis.

It does not help if one side asks the other to apologise to the nation. It must not be forgotten that many of the allegation levelled against the government continues to exist. The causes for such charges need to be identified instead of these being thrown out of the window as being politically motivated.

The Government has to understand that the only way to make democracy function is to be less partisan in its approach. Every single MP, whatever his political party, has to be acknowledged as being the true elected representatives of his constituency. It is not a game where the winner takes all. Democracy is participatory management juxtaposed with accountability and transparency.

It is true that we have a competitive political environment. There are however certain rules of engagement and they should be respected. What we need is a

One good step might be to ask the Opposition to suggest some names or nominate a few who could be Members of the Anti-Corruption Commission or be the Ombudsmen. There is also the National Human Rights Commission. This is not naive. I am suggesting such steps with all seriousness. Let the Opposition feel that they count in the body-politic of the nation. We need to be bi-partisan in our approach. There is no harm in this. There has to be breadth of vision. The government also needs to be more tolerant about peaceful protests. They also have to respect the basic rights of freedom of thought, association and speech.

Democracy pre-supposes fairness. It also postulates that we can agree to disagree. Healthy politics requires prudence. Democracy alone is the foundation on which we can expect to build the edifice of good governance. Responsible governance is the only means by which we can break out of the vicious cycle of criminalisation of politics and also assure for ourselves our individual freedoms and economic opportunities.

Every country in the world has its own agenda. In this age of competition, there is every likelihood that we will be left behind, unless we get our act together.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

# Do we live in a less unequal world?

IYANATUL ISLAM

OVER the past two years, a great deal of debate has surrounded the issue of global inequality. Is it declining, as some argue, or is it rising, as others contend? The issue of global inequality is an important element of the broader discourse on the benefits and costs of globalisation. To the cheerleaders who would like to see a deeply integrated world economy, a decline in global disparities in income is evidence that poor countries -- and the poor within such countries -- are catching up with their richer counterparts. Critics and cynics contest such optimism, arguing that the world is much more unequal now than it has ever been.

To the uninitiated, such discourse is not easy to make sense. As World Bank economist Martin Ravallion has argued, the protagonists in this debate often do not clarify the implicit value judgements that are embedded in the evidence.

It turns out that there are at least two ways of measuring disparities across nations. In one approach, all countries are treated equally, a case of "one country, one vote." Thus, tiny Chad in this framework gets the same weight as gigantic China. The resulting inequality index of real per capita income across nations is a so-called "unweighted" measure. It typically

yields a disturbing trend of what Harvard economist Lant Pritchett has called a case of "divergence, big time." Poor countries, with some notable exceptions, have progressively fallen behind rich countries.

The alternative is to allow for variations in population size across nations when measuring global inequality, a case of "one person,

the world average to 60 per cent between 1980 and 2000. India's progress has been much less dramatic, but is still noticeable, with its per capita real GDP (also measured in 1995 PPP dollars) rising from 16 per cent of the world mean to 25 per cent over the same period. Scholars who highlight these undeniably positive developments -- such as Sala-i-

countries in the 1990s, a large number of which are in Africa. Thus, even as one celebrates the rise of China, should one forget less fortunate nations? Indeed, Sala-i-Martin recognises the tragedy of Africa and has argued that, if current regional trends continue, one would see a resurgence of global inequality in the 21st century.

overlooks the important issue of inequality *within* nations. One is struck by the irony that disparities within China and India have actually gone up in the 1990s even though they are held as distinguished exemplars that have contributed to the decline in global inequality. Perceptions of growing inequality within nations can cause major political upheavals, as the

There is a growing consensus among economists that the interaction between growth, inequality and poverty represents the "eternal triangle." Growth reduces poverty, but such gains can be offset by rising inequality. Furthermore, rising inequality may retard growth through multiple channels. Examples include the way in which inequities in society can constrain the capacity of the poor to invest in health and education and undermine social and political stability.

one vote." This engenders a so-called "population-weighted" inequality index of real per capita income across nations. It yields a rather optimistic picture of declining global inequality. Why?

The reason is not difficult to fathom. Two of the world's most populous economies -- China and India -- have grown rapidly in recent years, with the former managing this feat over a much longer period and in a much more visible fashion than the latter. Not surprisingly, as Branko Milanovic points out, China's per capita real GDP (measured in 1995 purchasing power parity or PPP dollars) has increased from 17 per cent of

Martin and Surjit Bhalla -- thus question the credibility of those who wring their hands in anguish at the "disturbing" rise in global disparities.

Critics have seized on the "China effect" in contesting the evidence of declining global inequality. When China is taken out of the available estimates, the outcome of a sharp decline in world inequality dissipates. Growth has blessed some countries in the age of globalisation far more than others. As the 2003 Human Development Report published by the UNDP has shown, the 1990s witnessed negative growth in 54 of the world's more than 180

The rather different value judgements that are reflected in different measures of global inequality have not been satisfactorily resolved. Those who defend the "one country, one vote" could, for example, argue that this is a time-honoured convention enshrined in the UN system. Yet, the "one person, one vote" principle is intrinsically democratic and its reflection in measures of inequality is able to incorporate the rising economic fortunes of populous economies in Asia.

Some scholars, such as Nancy Birdsall and Glen Firebraugh, argue that the preoccupation with inequality *between* nations

stunning electoral defeat of the ruling BJP and its allies in India has demonstrated recently. Seduced by a smug strategy of celebrating the victors of recent economic growth while conveniently forgetting its victims, the architects of the BJP appear to have paid a heavy political price.

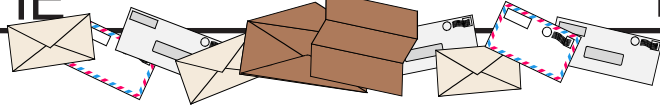
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way in which inequities in society can constrain the capacity of the poor to invest in health and education and undermine social and political stability.

Some scholars, such as Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, the Princeton-based Australian philosopher Peter Singer, and Columbia University's Thomas Pogge, emphasise that the concern for global inequality lies at the core of developing a system of global ethics. Sen argues that one should always reject the "comforting conservatism" that leads the international community to quietly accept the grotesque inequities that characterise the world today. To Pogge, concern about inequality is an integral component of global citizenship. Compassion, Singer adds, should not be limited to fellow citizens within nation states. When the world at large decides to embrace the view that the welfare of a fellow citizen who lives 10 kilometres away matter as much as the welfare of someone living 10,000 kilometres away, it can lay the basis for the emergence of a truly global community. Only then can we say that we are living in a less unequal world.

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



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Unending eddies

Kudos to The Daily Star (Saturday, 15 May 2004) and Mr. Naqvi for raising important questions on the current political situation in Pakistan.

How and who will hold together the unconditional merger of political parties? Does the head of the state also need a political party to belong to? Is power and unity of command possible only through uniform? Is democracy possible without political parties? And between the devil and the deep sea lies the choice of keeping up the cosmetic face of democracy to ward off admittance of external patrons and curb the internal sycophants' lust for power.

Is 'not learning from history' the reason for the country to still remain at the beginning of yet another political system? Or the probable solution may be hidden in-- some are born great/wise, some achieve greatness/wisdom, while others have greatness/wisdom thrust upon them! Farida Shaikh BAPA, Dhaka

### Killing of Bangladeshis by BSF

Killing of Bangladeshi nationals by the BSF (Border Security Force) of India has become a regular and commonplace news item. It does not attract much attention. Nobody seems to be bothered by it.

The trigger-happy BSF members never have to undergo any explanation, let alone court marshal for their indiscriminate action. Their high-ups are not preventing their soldiers from killing the innocent citizens of a neighbouring country.

True, there are smugglers and criminals operating in the border area and the border is a byword for the sovereignty of a country. But the vast border with India in many areas are not explicitly recognisable and it is very much natural to cross the frontier mistakenly. The only answer to such an incident cannot be opening

fire.

A high level meeting between the BDR and the BSF took place in Dhaka. The BDR included this issue on the agenda and their BSF counterpart assured of looking into the matter. Nothing has changed. How cheap is the life of our brothers and sisters to our 'biggest democracy' neighbour? Joy Dhaka

### Musing at the political hangama

The political leaders are rather indifferent to the reality the society has no option but to back their grandiose proposals.

Uniformity has limits, which the local leaderships (in politics or other fields) are not willing to concede easily. One track minds have rigidity. Flexibility is the hallmark of development and progress. It is possible to keep the core uninfected and compromise at the

peripheries. Have consideration for the neighbour, with his distant or dim views.

There is variety in every society, and it is possible to enjoy, in a small way, the luxury of diversity. The nation's physical infrastructures may be under-developed, but the construction of the foundation has to go beyond stone-crushing (chips) stage.

Tradition and change will always clash, but time is a great healer, and leveller. Compromise has to reach the level of art. The right to one's own choice is the other name of democracy (without violating the law). That explains the existence of other parties. The playing field is not a proprietary item. When the politicians tax the electorate with gibberish, it is unfair.

The current mania is the general belief that some other parties are up to anti-national or unpatriotic conspiracies. Then the cultivation of politics reaches a deadlock, and the society suffers -- as it is suffer-

ing now. Play (with an idea), generate, cultivate, and implement. Short-cuts hamper progress. Tolerance is a cement, enhancing flexible unity at the national level.

Imposition of ideologies by inward-looking ambitious leaders restrict elbow room for local autonomy and choice. We still seem to be grappling with the fundamental approaches to the preamble to the constitution! What a farce after three decades. Let us be less ambitious, and do some spring cleaning. Our philosophy is overloaded with fissiparous dissipation. We cling to marginal and temporal advantages.

Style changes, and it cannot be imposed. Tolerance must have latitude and large footprints, for other tourists (not confirmed addicts to pet visions) to access and enjoy the other fields. In primitive societies, totems and taboos had many signposts. Our younger and new generations are quite different from what we were in our

student days. The effect of the current environment is missed by many political leaders.

Patriotism has not diminished, but it is more diffused than peaked, as the monitoring patterns look different. The background cannot become the foreground all the time; otherwise the small pleasures of life would erode, resulting in mental irritations. Do not impose on the other fellow, and you might gain a friend.

From time to time, the society is disrupted with various brand names of Pandora's boxes. Gullible goodies lull the moral and aesthetic sensitivities from time to time. These days the hand is more trusted than the brain. What are the limits of sentimentalism? A loaded query.

The fiery passion of the youth and the decadence of the aged have to be balanced. The solutions have trade secrets. But entangled therein, there are many other axes to grind.

### Md Abad Dhaka Failed parties

The world is passing through a very crucial moment, while the political stability in Bangladesh is deteriorating day by day. People have so far tested the two major parties and both of them have failed. I think they should practise tolerance and self-restraint.

The opposition's April 30 game turned out to be a ridiculous attempt to oust the government. When will our politicians realise that their duty is to serve the nation, not only the party that they belong to? Reaz Ahmed Tottenham, London, UK

### Sad state of affairs

Bangladesh does not belong to any political party, individual or any particular family. It belongs to 140 million people of the country.

But through their actions and behaviour, both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia want to show us that Bangladesh belongs to them only. What a shame! By doing so they are insulting those great leaders, people and the valiant freedom fighters who struggled, fought and sacrificed their lives for an independent Bangladesh. Also due to their poor performance the country is going backwards instead of moving forward.

In the BBC Bangla Service listeners' opinion polls on the Greatest Bengalees of All Times, we see the name of Professor Golam Azam(?). What a surprise! Unfortunately not a single listener named Tajuddin Ahmed, Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury and Pandit Ravi Shankar as the Greatest Bengalees of All Times.

On the whole a sad state of affairs. Iqbal Ahmed New Eskaton, Dhaka