

Ctg airport in private hands

Efficient management expected

THE decision by the Cabinet Purchase Committee to entrust the Thai Airways with the responsibility of managing Chittagong Shah Amanat International Airport is the first of its kind. It represents a significant move by way of associating a foreign company with the operation of an important infrastructural facility. The second international airport of the country was clearly not being operated to its full commercial potential -- thanks to unimaginative and resource-constrained management. It has great potential because of its geographical location. When it was inaugurated a few years ago, high hopes were expressed by the government and business community alike about its potentiality of being a bridge-head to the East Asian countries. In fact, it was hoped that the export oriented trade of Chittagong will get the much needed boost. While the potential remains intact, it is now for the new management to realise it to the full.

For whatever reasons, the airport failed to become an optional international gateway for air travellers it was expected to be. The civil aviation authority could not attract well-known airliners to use this airport, mainly because the latter realised that it was not going to be viable for them in terms of business. The government must take this into serious consideration while deciding on their policies. It was hoped that the business hub of Bangladesh would be buzzing with foreign trade delegates frequenting the city thus making the airport more useful. But lack of a decentralisation policy proved otherwise. Now we hope that with the induction of the Thai Airways, the Shah Amanat Airport will come into bloom.

It would also, in our view, be able to complement the government's eastward policies. At the same time, entrusting a foreign private company with the running of an important facility like an airport shows that the government is not only serious but also getting liberal with its privatisation policy in regard to handling and management. And why not? If public sector management fails to deliver, then it is the only best option to try out other avenues; and in this case if a private company is able to bring the airport back to life, it would be beneficial to the economy of Bangladesh. Let the new management blend commerce with efficient service delivery.

Police's firepower

Decision for improvement couldn't have come a day later

WE have watched with trepidation that a number of policemen have been killed in encounters with criminals in recent times. So it is not difficult to guess how insecure people are feeling when the law enforcers themselves are falling prey to organised crime. The government decision to buy modern firearms worth Tk 93 crore for the police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) was necessitated by the rising incidence of crimes.

However, the constraints and limitations plaguing the police are far too many and the whole issue should be viewed only in the context of firepower replenishment. The broader issues of modernisation and reform need to be borne in mind and fully addressed.

Without question, better training and equipment will be needed if we want the law enforcers to make their presence positively felt. Indeed, we have long been pleading the case for enhancing the training, mobility and firepower of the law enforcers who are often pitted against hardened criminals. We also laid emphasis on surveillance and intelligence which appear to be a very weak point in the overall law enforcement system. Mobility of the police is another sore point as the criminals are using fast-moving vehicles or vessels to get away.

But all of it will be of little avail if the long-pending police reform is not carried out to ensure greater efficiency on the part of the police force with a guarantee that human rights norms will be fully observed.

The members of the Cabinet Purchase Committee have rightly expressed their indignation over the murder of policemen. However, the decision-makers should also realise that the efficiency of police can be increased only through a reform package.

George Bush and his shadow-boxing



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

DO not kick a man when he is down, and George W. Bush, the US president, is down these days. His rating has dipped, some former US diplomats are critical of him, the 9/11 investigation failed to establish any link between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussain, and the count-down to the hand-over of Iraqi sovereignty shows difficult days ahead. Last week, the US president was addressing journalists on the White House lawn while Afghan president Karzai stood next to him. He took a swipe at the journalists, asking them to keep their questions short, because he said he was feeling very hot. Why should he not? Since the heat has been turning up on so many fronts.

In an ideal world, George Bush should be tried as a war criminal like an Eichmann or a Milosevic. But it will not happen, because he is the leader of the free world, the president of the only superpower. At best he will be defeated in the next elections should the US voters decide to snub him. Then perhaps he will walk into the twilight of history as the first US president who misled his people.

But meanwhile, Iraq will be left worse than it was found. It is possible that the country might split along its three ethnic fault lines, the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Kurds. It is possible that the country will be drawn into a civil war. The suicide bombs, pipeline explosions, mortar attacks, sniper bullets, and every other sort of death and violence will continue to characterise the power struggle in post-handover Iraq. And pretty soon the world is going to learn the true meaning of "Iraqi Freedom." The Iraqis will be left alone

the number of terrorist attacks had declined in 2003, then came back quickly to correct its record. The number of terrorist attacks had actually increased in 2003.

It does not make sense that George Bush attacked a sovereign country on flimsy grounds like these. Rather it is terrifying once you think that the most powerful country of the world acted at the behest of a dubious character like Ahmad Chalabi whom it has now openly accused of providing misleading information. Frankly, what

hatcheries. What is the big deal about diluting one dictator in Iraq in the name of democracy?

But then it also makes you wonder what is George Bush's big idea of democracy. It is amazing how he never realized that the sanctity of democracy is enshrined in the dignity of people, and that the dignity of the Iraqi people was undermined at the first instance when his army occupied their country. It is now clear that these people never welcomed the US invasion, no matter how hard

Saddam Hussain to be tried by the Iraqis. But if you really think about it, this was not why the United States went to war in Iraq. It went to war in Iraq because it wanted to eliminate terrorism, and Saddam Hussain as an accomplice. It also went to war because Saddam Hussain was a clear and present danger to its security.

Now the whole thing has got a different spin for obvious reasons. Everything George Bush claimed as infallible evidence, turned out to be a lame excuse. Which reminds

Iraq and remove Saddam Hussain, the more he reminds us that he has been wrong about both. The ongoing violence in the post-handover Iraq and the charade of Saddam's trial will remind us even more that the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, which will raise a pertinent question in sensible minds. What about George Bush and his grand illusions? What about a democratic ruler, who violated the sovereignty of another country on false pretense?

In an ideal world, George Bush would have been accountable for his terrible sins, but we do not live in an ideal world. In that case I would like to suggest something. Saddam should be allowed to take Bush to the court ruling that George Bush had misled his country, so that it cannot escape the fair hands of history. I bet my bottom dollar, a hundred years from now both Saddam and Bush are going to look the same, because both believed that they were right even though they were wrong. Democracy or dictatorship, the danger lies in the shadow boxing

Saddam is a dictator because he forced others to believe in his shadow fighting. Bush is a democrat because he expects them to believe in the shadow he is fighting. Yesterday, the Security Council refused to endorse the US proposal to exempt its troops from prosecution at the International Court. Let us pray that more refusals will come, because in the world of shadow-boxing, light is the only hope.

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to stew in their own juice, free to seek their own doom, once the occupation forces are withdrawn.

What looks definite though is that George Bush was wrong to invade Iraq on all counts. By now it is evident that he was wrong about Saddam having WMDs, about Saddam having links with al-Qaeda, about the Iraqi people welcoming the invasion, and about dealing a deathblow to terrorism and its network. A recent survey (mentioned in BBC's Hard Talk by Tim Sebastian) showed that a significant number of Iraqis were in favour of attacks on the occupation forces. The US State Department said in its recent report that

does it matter if the world is one dictator less? Come to think of it, even that did not happen. George Bush has taken his place.

If you recall George Bush's vaunted proclamation in which he stated that the invasion of Iraq would send a message from Damascus to Tehran that democracy was inevitable? After the attack on innocent people in Fallujah last week, his proclamation rings hollow because if Saddam made the Iraqi people starve without democracy, George Bush is shoving it down their throat. And history will vouch that in many countries, his country cultured dictators like fish in

George Bush and his Goebbels tried to prove it to the contrary.

Two mules put together do not make a racehorse. The invasion of a country to remove its dictator does not bring democracy, but an oxymoron. It is amazing why the president of the world's leading democracy fails to understand that democracy is diminished when it is dictated. It is like confidence building. The people must do it themselves instead of watching others do it for them.

By the end of this month, Iraq will be handed over to the Iraqis, at least that is what George Bush and his allies would like us to believe. They are also going to hand over

me of a Sardarji joke. A Sardarji once went to buy a television and asked the salesman what was its price. The salesman replied that he was not going to sell the television to a Sardarji. The Sardarji went home shaved his hair and took off his turban before he returned to the store to ask for the price. Again the salesman told him that he was not going to sell the television to a Sardarji. When the angry Sardarji asked the salesman how could he tell that he was a Sardarji, the salesman curtly said that only a Sardarji could think that a micro-wave oven was a television.

The more George Bush emphasises that it was right to go to

The budget and the challenges

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

WE indeed face many daunting challenges. Endemic poverty, growing income inequality, stagnating investments, widespread corruption, and deteriorating quality of public services are some of the serious economic and human development problems that confront us. Expiration of the multi-fibre agreement at the end of the year is another monumental problem hovering over us. Meeting these challenges will require significant shifts in our policies, major reordering of our priorities, restructuring of our expenditures, and radical reforms in our system of governance. While the budget shows relatively more responsiveness to the agricultural and rural sectors for which the Honourable Finance Minister deserves appreciation, it contains, notwithstanding the claims otherwise, no daring reform initiatives to address the above challenges. The Finance Minister himself in his budget speech admitted, "We will implement in an incremental way reforms designed by ourselves in order to achieve pro-poor growth and reduce inequality between the rich and the poor." Unfortunately, based on our past experiences, incremental reform translates into no reform at all and more importantly, reform, by definition, needs to be of big-bang type.

Let us focus on poverty, the alleviation of which has historically been our overriding national priority. Admittedly, the budget has been prepared to implement the targets set in the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP). It must be remembered that the I-PRSP was fashioned to reduce poverty by achieving 7 percent so-

called pro-poor economic growth. Unfortunately growth has never been pro-poor in our country. The past efforts to promote growth ended up in creating monumental disparity of income and opportunities between the rich and the poor in our society. For example, the rich-poor income disparity increased from 27 fold to 46 fold in the last half of the 1990s. Thus, in spite of the rhetoric otherwise, we seemed to have followed a strange strategy of further enriching the rich to reduce the poverty of the poor. The proposed budget, which adheres to the same pro-rich trickle down principle, holds out no hope of reversing this ominous

It has impeded the intellectual growth and development of cores of our village boys and girls, clouding the future of their families. Quality education for their children has historically been the ticket to get out of the poverty trap for many families. Thus, allowing the quality of rural education to deteriorate perhaps represented the most flagrant betrayal of the trust placed by the rural constituents on the policymakers. This has unfortunately led to the creation of a permanent underclass. The proposed budget shows no serious initiative to address this issue of deteriorating quality of health and educational services.

relevance and usefulness for whom they are intended. The proposed budget unfortunately shows no signs of remedying these problems.

Corruption is a monumental problem for us as a nation. This is the result of an overly centralised system where transparency and accountability are difficult to be ensured. In fact, they can be better achieved at the grassroots through institutions which are accountable to the people. Thus transferring of more resources to local bodies and requiring transparent spending of those resources through effective participation of the people (e.g., holding open budget meetings)

raising duties on imported raw materials in the budget may unfortunately hasten this process.

Given the stagnant condition of investments and mass production in general in our country, we need to bring about a major shift in our strategy to encourage production by the masses and generate self-employment, if we are to eradicate poverty. Such a shift will require empowering people, especially the poor, to become the authors of their own future along with promoting large-scale manufacturing. This will in turn require eradicating the "poverty of their mind" and unleashing them to take responsibility of their own future rather

Policies in Bangladesh have always been of the rich, by the rich and for the rich, despite the pro-poor slogans. The poor have been given the voting rights but no representation at the policymaking. The proposed budget unfortunately exhibits no bold departures from the past and represents the same state of affairs.

trend.

The proposed budget, we are afraid, is also unlikely to enhance the human development of the poor most of whom live in the rural areas. Yes, again there are increased allocations in the budget for health and education. However, the ever increasing allocations for the social sector in the past have not drastically reduced poverty -- the income poverty rate declined by less than only 1 percent during the 1990s. The sharp declines in the quality of rural health and education which accompanied the increased allocations and the resulting rapid expansion of infrastructure building and the hiring of more functionaries have contributed to this grim state of affairs. The cost of this deteriorating quality especially of education has been painfully high.

Increasing allocations for health and education by themselves are not likely to benefit the poor. These investments need thorough and careful analysis. The per capita ADP spending on health, for example, is about Tk. 150, much of which is spent on bricks and mortar or salaries and benefits. Even the poorest person generally spends more in a year for his/her health than the government does. Thus, the best that the government could do is to make strategic investments that will magnify the returns on the spending of the individuals rather than be their substitutes. This would also require services to become demand induced, rather than supply driven from the top, as has traditionally been the case. The problem with supply driven services is that they often have little

may go a long way in rooting out corruption from our society. This will obviously require a bold initiative to democratically decentralise our system of governance. The budget shows no such initiative except for making an allocation of Tk. 40 crore for Gram Sarkar.

Let us come back to the issue of poverty eradication. On the one hand, eradicating poverty will require stimulating investments to create employment, and on the other hand empowering the people to create their own employment. Unfortunately, all our past efforts (including ensuring macro-economic stability) to encourage private investments have not been very successful. In fact, we seem to be going through a process of de-industrialisation in our country. The proposed reduction of duties on imported finished products and

than becoming mere beneficiaries of the generosity of others, as has generally been the case. Unleashing the creativity and productivity of the poor will not only help reduce poverty significantly, it will also help achieve much higher growth rate than the 7 percent required by I-PRSP. More resources, however, need to be channelled to the poor and an enabling environment created for them so that they can succeed in their own development. The government has allocated, among others, Tk. 600 crore for agricultural subsidy, additional Tk. 1,379 crore for micro-credit and a substantial amount for transfer payments for this purpose. Although these allocations represent commendable changes, their implementation or lack of it is the real challenge for us. For example,

during the first seven months of the last fiscal year, only 31.4 percent of Tk. 300 crore earmarked for agricultural subsidy was implemented. The proposed budget offers no strategy to effectively deal with this problem

The shrinking capacity of the central bureaucracy -- which is increasingly being shrunk by graft, corruption, inefficiency and the breakdown of discipline -- is the root cause of the severe deficiency in implementation. This limitation may be remedied by increasing allocations to local bodies, which can also be an effective conduit for making more resources available to the poor. Unfortunately, the Honourable Finance Minister showed usual constraint in allocating funds for grassroots institutions. For example, the block grant allocations for Union Parishads (UPs) and Paurashavas in the proposed ADP are Tk. 190 crore and Tk. 125 crore respectively compared to Tk. 174 crore and Tk. 100 crore for the previous year. Even this small amount of block grant for UPs is not directly given to them and they do not also have the freedom to spend the money. By contrast, Paurashavas and even the Gram Sarkar have direct allocations.

To conclude, policies in Bangladesh have always been of the rich, by the rich and for the rich, despite the pro-poor slogans. The poor have been given the voting rights but no representation at the policymaking. The proposed budget unfortunately exhibits no bold departures from the past and represents the same state of affairs. And it is set to be passed on 30 June next

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OPINION

Ominous signs

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

WITH the growing miscarriages of justice and continuous failures in arresting the rising spate of crimes of all forms and dimensions, one sees ominous signs for the ruling class on the horizon. When the Joyinal Bahini (led by Jyonal Hazari) terrorised innocent people the then ruling class not only looked the other way, but also provided indirect blessings. Now a more vicious and equally ruthless gang of lawbreakers has emerged -- Bangla Bhai and his vigilante group. In this instance it is much worse since the goons, apparently, have not only challenged the authority of the ruling class, but the authority of no less than the prime minister herself. The home minister too has reportedly ordered the arrest of the Bangla Bhai and his gang, and yet nothing seems to happen. The political hierarchy in the BNP must realize that the Joyinal Hazari episode was one of the trump cards it used against its opponents Awami League during the last elections. There is thus no reason to think that the opposition would not take advantage of a similar situation when the opportunity presents itself.

As one who has been a keen observer of unfolding events in the political and social scenario in the country since our independence, it is my considered opinion that one of the other major weaknesses of the ruling class happens to be the unbridled and often undue highhandedness in dealing with its opponents. I have been a witness to many of the political persecutions in the Awami Baksl days. It appears that many of the actions of the ruling class today resemble that era.

BNP has totally messed up its policies and interventions with the media. Frankly, it appears as though the people in charge of the media, have no clue whatsoever. Surely you cannot "beat and harass" them to induce them to say things in your favour. Besides, the ruling

class must realise that one of the cardinal principles of the media is to be more critical of the government's workings, rather than merely project its view-point.

The emergence of Bangladesh was no accident. It may have been shrouded by many currents and crosscurrents of events, but the fact remains that one of the key reasons for our independence lay in not using religion as its foundation or base for its statehood. It is one thing to have faith in your religion, it is quite another to use and abuse it as an element in statecraft. History has it that rulers who have allowed persecutions on the grounds of religion have simply landed themselves into an irreversible state of affairs. Look at what has happened to Pakistan. Saudi Arabia is now cracking under the burden of religious extremists, while the elections in India and the subsequent downfall of the Vajpayee regime stand as proof of the victory of secularism over religious extremism. The continuous desecration of the places of worship of the Ahmadiyyas by religious zealots therefore should serve as "red alert" for the ruling BNP.

The only thing the ruling class seems to specialise in, today, is to hide and even defend its failures of unprecedented magnitude, particularly while dealing with the lives of the lesser known. Hundreds have perished in the rivers due to passenger launch capsizes since the BNP took the reins of the government, and all it has done is to issue condolence messages and send rescue teams and then abandon the search for dead bodies after a while. The ruling class also seems to specialise in finding reasons and scapegoats for all its failures. On the other hand, all sorts of fanfares on one pretext or the other continue unabated. The way many of the government's lawmakers move about in their business looks like they are on top of the world and everything is under complete control. Complacency and sheer arrogance are a perfect recipe for downfall.

There is a famous saying, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." The way the venerable Law Minister time and again explains to the media about the "progress so far made" in connection with the setting up of the Human Rights Commission or the BAC or the appointment of the Ombudsman it looks like he is bent upon to do exactly that -- fooling all of the people all of the time.

Never before in the history of this country perhaps has there been so much political string pulling and power play in the PMO's office like it is to day. It has allegedly come to the state of "a government within the government."

As one belonging to the so-called middle class section of our population, it is my impression that it has continually been an uphill task for the fixed income group of the country to keep both ends meet and now they have nearly reached the level of extinction. Conversely, just consider the fact that governments (particularly state governments) in India have been known to lose elections just because there was price increase of some essential items like cooking oil and onions. No matter what our venerable finance minister may say or not say, the fact remains that winning the "hearts and minds" of the people will be impossible without providing some real succour to the disadvantaged. On the other hand, the gap between the rich and the poor is also at its worst today. The sights and sounds of luxury vehicles on the streets of the capital city including their flashy show rooms are also reflective of the pro-rich economic policies of the BNP regime.

Last, but not least in importance, BNP is suffering from the psyche that "nothing matters" -- members of the public can be ignored at will. But members of the public today are far more conscious than they used to be two decades ago.

AL MAMUN MOHAMMAD

MAY 2004 saw elections in the world's largest democracy. The Congress party fell far short of a majority, but as India's single largest party, the Indian system of democracy deemed it that Congress forms the government. Many had expected Mrs. Gandhi, as party leader, to become the fourth member of the Nehru-Gandhi tribe to be prime minister. The Gandhi families are regarded as India's monarchy. The Congress supporters had expected a coronation, not an abdication. It is peculiar enough that a dynastic monarchy can exist in a democracy that is barely 50 years old, but what is stranger is that the person that the electorate elected refused to mount her ancestral throne. It would appear that it is not a democracy, nor a monarchy, merely a messy mongrel of a political system.

In explaining her reasons for declining the post, Sonia said, "One thing has always been clear to me... that the post of prime minister has not been my aim." Perhaps she should have made this clear before the elections. Have Gandhi in-laws never heard the term 'time-wasters need not apply'? Her 'inner voice' advised her not to go through with it. In many countries there exist mental health laws preventing people who hear voices from standing for election in the first place.

Protests were reported across the country. Her refusal to become prime minister threw Congress into turmoil at a time when it should have been basking in victory. Outraged party workers stormed Congress headquarters, next to Sonia's house in Delhi, breaking doors and windows and demanding that she change her mind. A crowd of more than 1,000 was gathered outside. Some shouted "Either it is Sonia or nobody." Violence erupted soon after news broke that Sonia and her senior aides had swung

their support behind an alternative choice.

Is a farcical form of democracy to be found only in the less developed world? The idea of the masses voting for one person and another getting into office also has a certain resonance on the other side of the globe. In 2000, Al Gore received half a million more votes than George W. Bush. Not only was there a clear majority across the union, there was also evidence of election anomalies in Florida where Bush's brother was governor. Bush lost an election and won a court ruling, presided over by a bunch of Bush family cronies and Republican stalwarts.

The 2000 presidential elections seemed to be a travesty of what democracy is all about. However, this may be an extreme case, but the US model is hardly a paradigm of democracy in action. It is a multi-party democracy with only two parties that both have the same policies, advisers, think tanks, secret society members, and lobbyists. Since 1776, there have only ever been four major parties that have participated in the American system. It is not quite a monarchy, but it has its barons, lords, and squires in the guise of its political dynasties.

In modern democracies dynasties are not that uncommon. This year also saw another election. This time, in the land where the ancient Greeks first implemented democracy. The planning and preparation performed by Greece for this year's Olympic Games has shown the strength of the Greek's desire and enthusiasm to hold fast to her traditions. They care just as much about democracy as they do about allowing world-class athletes to hop, skip, and jump. In March the New Democracy Party leader Costas Caramanlis won a resounding victory. He is part of a political dynasty that brought Greece out of military dictatorship. He is the nephew of Constantine Caramanlis, who was Prime Minister four times (1953-1963, 1974-1981). Caramanlis faced off in March with

George Papandreou, son of Andreas, the founding father of Pan-Hellenic Socialist Party (PASOK), and grandson of George Papandreou, the leftwing post-war leader, both former Prime Ministers. The whole of Greek politics over the last few decades was dominated by two families: Caramanlis and Papandreou.

There are many peculiarities that modern election processes throw up. This month will see elections for the European Parliament. Over the last year there has been a concerted effort made by the extremist nationalist far right parties to build a presence in this Europe-wide forum. Parties such as the BNP (UK), FN (France), and Vlaams Blok (Belgium) have joined forces to participate in a system that they all find abhorrent. They all oppose the idea of a European Union, but yet they all want to help each other win seats in its parliament. Jean Marie Le Pen pronounced, in French, at a fund-raising dinner in Manchester that: "I hope that many people from the BNP will be elected and that we will create a very strong nationalist movement within the European Parliament." It seems that even the right wing dogmatists are just as pragmatic as the mainstream politicians.

There appear to be several problems with the implementations of democracy in the modern world. Are these problems just minor shortcomings of poor administration or are they inherent to an impracticable method of ruling? The problem lies with the concept of democracy itself. It never worked with the ancients, and it doesn't work today. We should not look at these ridiculous examples of recent years and consider them to be one offs. The problem is with the whole concept of democracy. Humans are not meant to rule humans by laws that humans have made themselves.

Perhaps Winston Churchill said it best: "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried."