

## SSC results

Reason for hope as well as despair

**C**ONGRATULATIONS are in order for this year's SSC examination results. It is heartening to note that the passing percentage is nearly fifty, which, compared to last year's, is ten percent higher. The institutions, boards, candidates, teachers, as well as the ministry of education, deserve kudos for the overall outcome. We would like to think that this year's increase in the pass rate is a reflection of both qualitative and quantitative improvements.

Another feature that catches one's attention, apart from the rate of success, is the quantum jump in the number of candidates that achieved a GPA of five, the monopoly of which is of the ten top schools of the country, most of which are in the capital. It is worthwhile to note that the new system of calculating the marks for the elective subject accounts for the quantum leap in the number obtaining perfect GPA of five. But the dismal feature is that not a single candidate from five hundred and sixty seven schools, madrassas, and vocational training institutions, has come out successful.

The success rate may be attributed to the measures taken by the education boards as well as the schools. All those that took the final exam of the board had to go through a strict training process; and no one, who could not cross the pre-test hurdles was allowed to sit for the exam. One must also recall the education ministry's initiative that helped curb cheating in the exams. All these measures are laudable.

However, while looking at the rate of success, we cannot overlook the stark reality that there are an equal number of unsuccessful candidates, which adds up to the process of accretion of carry-over candidates -- from one year to another. This is a national loss, a waste of money spent and human resource drained out before being properly developed. Basically, the failure of more than fifty percent of the candidates in a major public examination is the mirror-image of a failed system -- asymmetrical urban-rural learning opportunities topped off by poor educational administration and management at the secondary level.

The slight improvement in the results should, instead of making us complacent, drive us into attuning the system in such a way that it averts such high percentage of failure.

## MR Akhtar Mukul

An inimitable freedom fighter passes away

**I**T would be very difficult for any Bangladeshi to forget MR Akhtar Mukul -- not just for his sharp-witted columns and writings, but mainly because of his highly satirical and incisive presentation titled 'Charam Patra' over Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, that helped to keep the embers for freedom burning during our liberation struggle in 1971. In fact, it became rallying-point of a programme for all Bangladeshi at home and abroad in their quest for strength and resolution in those testing times. His creative bursts of witticism riding on the crest of a free-flowing Dhakaia dialect would have an instant mind-lifting effect on the listeners.

Whatever he did with his words by way of taking pot shots at the Pakistani occupation forces over his radio programme could not be matched by thousands of words in print or blasts of gunfire. He acted as a powerful inspirer and motivator on the mass contact side of our freedom struggle. The regular listeners of his extremely popular programme in 1971 can never have an amnesia over his memory. And, the *Charam Patras* he put together in book-form before he died, can be read by the present generation to get a feel of those times.

We are deeply saddened by the passing away of such an icon of our freedom struggle. We join everyone in recalling his contributions in our fight for liberation. While praying for the salvation of the departed soul, we express our sympathy to his bereaved family. And lastly, we hope that his works will not fade away with the passage of time; the new generations to come will continue to seek inspiration from his contribution that remains a sparkling part of our liberation war legacy.

## Baghdad's June 30 political charade



M ABDUL HAFIZ

those for its earlier version i.e. the interim governing council (IGC), consist of the men loyal to America. PG will be, in fact, run by men whom the occupation forces trust.

Although the name of the UN is liberally used, it is not given any meaningful role in the steps leading to the general election. All that the resolution does is to authorise the world body to assist in convening a national conference to select a 100 man consultative council. This body will help the PG in holding the elections while retaining a

mission it is charged with, doubts abound as to whether things will go the way the resolution visualises.

The ideal would, however, have been to place Iraq under a UN set-up, with the responsibility for peace lying with an international force coming from neutral countries. Only an election under such a dispensation would have been considered legitimate by the people of Iraq and the world at large. Nevertheless, the new UN resolution is a well-meaning document

resisting the occupation -- like Shia clerics Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah Ali Sistani -- are not in a mood to cooperate with the PG. To them, the PG, like the IGC, consists of men loyal to the US. Its members have been chosen, no doubt by the IGC at the UN's behest, but obviously the PG will be run by men whom America trusts. This could serve to alienate the Iraqi people from them and the signs are all visible. Whether such a team can, with the confidence of the people, help rebuild the country's infra-

structure and economy is another story.

Although the UN resolution

sion of Nicaragua, at the helm. It is certainly not for nothing that these US preparations are afoot.

It is a cruel joke that even by the wording of the resolution, which seeks the UN to take up a direct role in policing Iraq and seeks a "peace-keeping force" under the UN flag, US shall retain practically all authority, and the "peacekeeping force" shall be under its command. Kofi Annan, who is in a dilemma, desperately wants to have a piece of the show, but also knows that thanks to the UN's dubious role, particularly with regards to its sanction-related policies in Iraq ravaging its population, the UN also is a no less hated entity in Iraq, and will be attacked by the insurgents with a great relish. So the Secretary General takes an absurd position that the UN personnel will go in only if the occupying power, in essence the US, guarantees security to such personnel.

As a result, Iraq's new regime installed under the guns of US tanks, will be nothing more than a travesty of the "sovereign" entity which the new dispensation is supposed to be. Off-the-shelf CIA asset, Iyad Allawi was made strongman prime minister -- just like Afghanistan's US-installed figurehead Hamid Karzai, another CIA old boy. Iraq's defence and interior ministries also will be run by other US assets. Some 160 senior American advisers will supervise all key ministries. All the US billions currently funding Iraq and overall control of oil revenues will be managed by a special American "advisory and monitoring board." That's a small sample of the "sovereignty" that will follow the political charade of June 30.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

## PERSPECTIVES

**I**t is not for nothing that the US has now turned to the world body where it has also successfully tabled a resolution stipulating the end of Iraq's occupation and paving the way for the assumption of office by a "sovereign" Iraqi government. As the US' going got tough in Iraq the Americans, alarmed by the aimlessness of the war, could not quite charitably take the mounting casualties reaching a number of almost 1000 after the war had been formally declared over as well as a \$186 billion cost for the Iraq misadventure. The US after its vain efforts for over a year to co-opt others to share her woes had virtually none to bail her out of Iraq quagmire.

So it arm-twisted the UN's "dismally weak secretary-general" into allowing his organisation to be crudely misused to effect a "transfer of sovereignty" to Iraq by supposedly selecting the candidates for a new regime through Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy to Iraq, and thus legitimising the continuing Anglo-American occupation behind a different facade. The resolution provides for a new provisional government (PG) the members of which, like

veto power over its policies. What makes this electoral exercise suspect is that the elections to the transitional assembly will be held by a government that takes order from the US, whose whole effort is directed towards ostensibly transferring the authority to the Iraqis while retaining control in its own hands.

Consequently, the elected government that is to take over after the general election in the winter of 2004-05 will lack legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqis. While hoping that the PG will be able to

so far as it seeks to extricate America from the Iraq morass. Still it remains doubtful if the PG will be able to deliver what is expected of it. Because, in the end Washington chose its own men and ignored the UN after the latter provided the required fig leaf.

Even if the UN move at America's behest is already suspect, the question remains whether the UN resolution will at all be acceptable to the Iraqis. Given the anarchy and chaos in occupied Iraq no fool-proof answer can be sought at this juncture. But those who are today

gives the PG the right to ask the US-led multi-national forces to leave the country, and stipulated that the multinational force will leave Iraq not later than January 30, 2006, the American alacrity on the ground points to a planned long haul in Iraq. Baghdad now has the largest CIA station the world has seen since the fall of Saigon in 1975. The US embassy in Baghdad will have 1300 US officials and at least 1500 Iraqi employees. This embassy will have three officials of ambassadorial rank with John Negroponte who supervised the Contra inva-

gation of Nicaragua, at the helm. It is certainly not for nothing that these US preparations are afoot.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

## Economic policy, populism and the fiscal budget

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

**M**ARTIN Wolf, the noted Financial Times columnist, entitled one of his recent essays in the newspaper "Economic policy should not be a popularity contest." No, he was not referring to the Government of Bangladesh budget, 2004-2005, just announced, though his stricture would be apt if he did. The latest budget is of course not unique; it belongs to the same genre as its predecessors, and the idea of popularity contest runs through them all. Neither is Bangladesh unique. The title of Wolf's essay could easily apply to most countries, developed countries not exempted. (He was actually talking about the European Union countries).

Ask any serious policy maker about his job, and chances are that he will say economic policy making is not the easiest of jobs. And he will be right. But then the ability to make hard, unpopular decisions where necessary is what leadership is all about. This is accepted wisdom but bears mention even the risk of being seen as pontification.

Define populism as action that pleases certain groups of people, especially those with political

clout, or no action that might hurt certain social groups, and we have had plenty of it in past fiscal budgets. An arguable evidence of its overall importance is the very low tax/GDP ratio in Bangladesh. Combined with administrative inefficiency and corruption, populism has kept the ratio at low levels over the decades. This is primarily

native is the opaque and easier world of indirect taxation.

This is not to deny that efforts at reform have been made. The introduction of the value added tax in place of sales tax is considered a right step. Measures of trade liberalisation of the 1980s and the 1990s, while not welcome to all, were certainly important steps to

resources. This may well be true. But for better evidence of popularity contest one should look elsewhere. A couple of examples should suffice.

The proposed budget allocates Tk 6,000 million for farm subsidies. This has been fairly widely hailed as a good step. Such a perception is strange in a world where important

budget discussions, that a previous government had allocated a measly Tk 1,000 as farm subsidy. What happens if the present political opposition forms a government in the near future and feels forced to do its bit to raise the subsidy further?

This brief note is not meant to be a tally of populist provisions of the budget. But the innovation called "festival allowance" for retired government employees deserves mention. The population of the country is ageing. The number of older people just past their arbitrarily determined "retirement age" is thus also rising. Is there any justification for a special dispensation for this class of citizens, without regard to the income status of individual in the group, except that they are becoming a powerful electoral force? Again, will not a possible future government formed by the present opposition also feel tempted to pamper the group? Populism in matters of budgetary policy can be a dangerous game. The national economy will suffer in the end.

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due to an income tax base that has remained stubbornly narrow.

Taxation of income is unpopular all over the world, but here Bangladesh appears to have an atavistic affinity with the US in its special hostility to taxation. Direct taxation is seen by governments more as a feared weapon of political self-immolation than as an instrument of economic policy.

They, at best, tinker with it from time to time. Their preferred alter-

the much needed opening up of the economy to the world. Still, populism abounds.

Some critics think that presentation of an unrealistically large budget is itself a ploy to earn popularity. At Tk 572,480 million, the proposed budget is some 16 per cent larger than the revised 2003-2004 budget. Many critics think that the size of the budget has not been matched by concrete proposals to harness requisite financial

international efforts are under way to whittle down subsidies. That developed countries provide hefty subsidies to their agriculture, or that these countries can be rightly accused of hypocrisy in their dealing with developing countries in the matter of subsidies, is beside the point here. Subsidisation of production does carry with it twin dangers: it distorts prices and creates vested interests that are difficult to do away with. Ignoring

in the proposed budget is double the Tk 3,000 million provided in the preceding budget, with scant rationale for such an increase. We are told that the ruling coalition actually wished an even sharper increase. It is futile to look for an economic rationale for the sudden conversion to the cause of farm subsidy. The idea of a popularity contest comes to mind far more easily. Perhaps equally important is the fact, studiously highlighted in

this for last 12 years, without cheating, reluctance, or bad faith.

The 1991 special agreement has been designed to prohibit the rivals from attacking each other's power plants and nuclear installations. Interestingly, the facilities listed constitute a secret that no body else in the world is supposed to know. This mutual trust can be the basis for a more expansive defense relationship between the two countries.

Of course, the defense pact is no panacea for the problems that India and Pakistan face. Nor is it going to automatically remove internal and external threats to the subcontinent. But it might provide some hope to the people of the subcontinent that India and Pakistan will not remain divided and ruled from abroad, like in the bad old days of colonialism. The people of the subcontinent must opt for a smarter future than the one submitted to foreign control.

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## OPINION

## Rethinking Saudi Arabia's soul and future

MUQTEDAR KHAN

I recently returned from Saudi Arabia, where I attended an international conference on terrorism at the global headquarters of Wahhabism. It wasn't a how-to clinic. It was an effort to come to grips with the growing acts of terrorism in the name of Islam.

The Imam Muhammad University in Riyadh is the factory where Wahhabism is produced and serviced in Saudi Arabia. A large number of the Saudi clerics and the various ministers who attended were open and willing to listen.

Sometimes they were in agreement.

Abdel-Wahhab, an 18th century cleric and founder of the Saudi Salafi movement. This subgroup of Sunni Muslims follows a literal interpretation of the Quran and is believed to have helped shape the minds of Osama bin Laden and the 19 Saudis who were among the 19 hijackers in the Sept. 11 attacks.

During the conference in closed-door sessions, I was extremely critical of Wahhabism as well as Saudi policies, and I found the Saudi scholars and the various ministers who attended were open and willing to listen.

Sometimes they were in agreement.

But they were never offended.

Some even encouraged me to speak more.

There were, of course, the usual number of sycophants and apologists, but even they seemed apprehensive and willing to question their own beliefs.

I ran into a member of the Majlis-e-Shura -- the Saudi parliament -- at a TV studio where I recorded a one-hour interview on Islamic democracy, and he berated me for not being more critical than I was. I listened to him lambaste the university and Wahhabi clerics for being the source of the problem behind

terrorism in Saudi Arabia.

"All they teach," he said, "is to hate those who are different. We are a country that is economically in the 20th century and intellectually in the 14th century."

The House of Saud has long relied on two types of elites: the conservative religious elite, and the liberal political and economic elite. For decades the latter had focused on milking the oil cow. In exchange for unrestrained freedom to become rich, the ruling elite allowed the religious elite the freedom to preach their narrow and intolerant interpretations of Islam.

Without self-critical and reflective voices within the religious establishment, Wahhabism got out of control.

Wahhabi ideas are now so deeply embedded that neither the ruling elite, which had abdicated its responsibilities, nor the religious elite, which is afraid of what it has created, can rein it in. Any attempts at sudden reforms may upset the delicate balance within the society and empower those who have decided to use terrorism to replace both elites.

Saudi Arabia needs to push social and political reforms with underpinning of moderate and open forms of Salafi traditions, moderates within the religious establishment must prevail over the extremists. They need to be prepared to make significant compromises -- maybe even

regional stability. It must fast track its social reform and maintain a steady progress toward political reform. The promise of municipal elections must be kept and the momentum toward more representative and accountable government must be sustained.

For the House of Saud and the House of Abdel-Wahhab to come together to dismantle Wahhabism and replace it with a self-critical, more open and softer form of Salafi traditions, moderates within the religious establishment must

deviations -- in the Wahhabi doctrine and in Wahhabi institutions. The extremists could then be isolated and their power weakened.

The staging of the terrorism conference at the Imam Muhammad University signals hope.

It is time Saudi Arabia stopped looking backwards for guidance. Those who drive looking in the rear-view mirror are only destined to crash.

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