

## Only 20 percent tax collected

NBR must improve record

WITHOUT tax revenue, neither can a government be run, nor will it be able to provide basic services to the citizens. Taxation, therefore, is the cornerstone of governance. It is thus that we share the dissatisfaction expressed by the finance minister over the underperformance of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) when it comes to the matter of collecting taxes. It is imperative that tax collection be made as efficient and evenhanded as possible.

The available statistics are very discouraging. It seems that only 20 per cent of the collectible income tax revenue is netted by the NBR. This is a lamentable figure, and every step should be taken to ensure that the targeted revenue figures are reached. We cannot say what the exact reason for this shortfall is, but whether it be inefficiency in collection, collusion between tax officials and tax defaulters, errors in assessment, or a lack of confidence in the system, no effort should be spared in order to rectify the matter.

Of the more than 1.5 million who have been brought within the tax net and possess Tax Identification Numbers, barely half a million are actual tax-payers, and many of them pay taxes significantly lower than assessed. Those already within the purview of the NBR must be made to pay their fair share -- and it seems to us that following up aggressively here would be an obvious and simple place for the NBR to start.

The next step must be to expand the tax net and bring a greater proportion of the population under the purview of the NBR. Out of a population of over 140 million, it is absurd that there are still only slightly over 1.5 million TINs. Almost 30 per cent of domestic GDP remains totally outside of the purview of the NBR, and many professionals and small businessmen continue to avoid payment.

But the problem is not merely with the underperformance of the NBR nor corruption on the part of its officials. It has also to do with harassing genuine and regular taxpayers, not to forget though, the lack of conscience of those who avoid paying taxes. It is a crying shame that so many of our fellow countrymen and women have no moral qualms about not paying their fair share.

## A flood imperative

No trading on human miseries, please!

THE victims of Dhunat embankment breach are in desperate need of relief. But the latest reports indicate that the relief operations are plagued by anomalies and corruption, apart from shortage of the materials that the marooned people need to survive. Locals have complained that relief materials have been procured even in the name of non-existent villages!

Obviously, the relief operations have to be carried out in a very organised manner as a huge number of people have to be reached. The operators have to identify the needy people, most of whom are now living on embankments in a highly vulnerable condition. Time is also a very important factor because the pauperised people may not be able to hold out for long. But the picture we are getting from the affected areas is a dismal one -- a big chunk of the victims are yet to receive anything.

The trading on human miseries will have to be stopped immediately. People are struggling for their lives, while activities like misappropriation of relief goods are going on unhindered. A fair and effective relief distribution system is the need of the hour. The local administration must ensure that relief materials reach the targeted groups of people. The Dhunat tragedy will be multiplied if malpractices are allowed to swamp relief operations. We must not forget that for the victims it's a question of survival.

Price hike of essentials is another concomitant ill of almost any natural disaster. The supply lines have been disrupted in most of the flood affected areas. And prices of daily necessities are rising alarmingly. The government should form a price vigilance committee in order to closely monitor the situation. And the business community is expected to show a compassionate understanding of the prevailing situation and refrain from capitalising on people's miseries. Activities like hoarding and creating an artificial crisis can only further contribute to the sufferings of the people. We are facing a great crisis and only sincere, collective efforts can see us through.

# Politics of consensus, not of confrontation

HAFEEJUL ALAM

THE election scenario of the Dhaka-10 constituency (July 1, 2004) unfortunately reminds us, once again, that in Bangladesh the party in power can manipulate a desired result, causing thereby a tremendous disservice to democracy. That the people have lost all confidence in the total process of governance has been clearly proved by the total inactivity of the election commission and the relevant organs of the establishment. It becomes now crystal clear that for a just and fair election, people no more look to the constitutional body like the election commission, far less to the government, but to the higher judiciary and the armed forces. These specifics in the very arena of statecraft bear out that by any standard we are yet to develop a democratic mindset and that our system of governance suffers heavily from lack of transparency and accountability.

Needless to say, if such a situation continues, democracy would die down in no time and whether we like it or not, the rest of the world would look at our affairs with extreme cynicism. It is already said that the bitter rivalries between the leading political parties and the highest corruption rates in the world threaten the democratic stability and impedes the economic growth of Bangladesh. Similar opinions were also passed by our development partners, but to no avail so far.

There is no denying the fact that corruption and criminal politics is nothing new in this part of the world. We could trace such evils back to Pakistani days, albeit not on the scale found today. The tragedy is that successive Bangladeshi governments remained rather unmoved and no sincere efforts were ever taken to address the vices. The situation became even worse during the largely corrupt and autocratic regime of General Ershad. However, neither BNP nor AL could improve the state of affairs either. Therefore, if our political parties are really sincere about doing good to the poor and helpless people of our

Therefore, instead of resorting to internecine hate-campaigns and confrontational politics, both the people at the helm of affairs and in the opposition may better learn from our neighbouring countries as to how democracy works. It is always better to learn from others than to behave imprudently and thus disgrace the cause of democracy.

It is now obvious that even a caretaker government could not be competent enough to ensure a free and fair election unless there is a consensus among the political

parliament should be made supreme through necessary constitutional amendment, so that, like the free press, the members of the parliament could also express themselves without fear or favour, and can decide who or which party will govern the country and for how long.

One wonders as to whether the concept of independence of judiciary is ill-assorted to the make-up of our body politic. It is amazing to note that the successive "democratic governments" reportedly

ment generation, minimum wage, or social security for wage earners. On the other hand, although the government says that the so-called micro-credit organisations are amassing huge wealth, capitalising on rural poverty, there is no direction as to how to fend that off. From one estimate it has been observed that over 60 per cent of our rural population are still below the poverty line.

Owing to structural inefficiency, the government was unable to use even one-third of the budget allocated to contain the religious fanaticism and the unlawful activities of both the rightist and the leftist extremists. No sovereign country can allow any private forces within its own territory. If such ominous developments are not nipped in the bud, massive destabilisation may follow at any time. Here, may we not also forget that if we are inclined to welcome our neighbouring country for being secular and progressive, we ourselves can ill afford to do otherwise. In today's bread-and-butter world, religion-based politics has not only become obsolete but irrelevant too.

To sum up, it may positively be argued that still the BNP, with its vast majority in the parliament, has the inimitable opportunity to shape Bangladesh as a truly democratic country. Instead of resorting to unnecessary and unpopular constitutional amendments or ripping up the history of our liberation war, it could utilise its unique position in the parliament to transfigure the total system of our governance and reshape our destiny as a truly democratic nation, so that we could not only regain our lost image internationally, but also secure our position as an economic tiger of South Asia. However, from the existing state of affairs, one can only conclude that perhaps things will continue to go the wrong way for a long time!

Hafeejul Alam is a management specialist.

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country, there is no alternative to taking a united stand and to go for the politics of consensus, rather than that of confrontation.

Obviously, the move of the AL to join the parliament is a welcome approach and it is the parliament through which the opposition can bring all the misdeeds of the ruling party to light and suggest remedial measures. But if the members of the parliament are elected through massive rigging and if the opposition members are not allowed to criticise the establishment, it can hardly perform as a state organ of democracy. Let alone command any respect from the nation. Our leaders should remember that nothing is permanent except noble deeds.

parties as to the appointment to the high offices of the president, head of the caretaker government, speaker, chief election commissioner/election commissioners, members of the anti-graft body and such other constitutional positions. There should be a clear distinction between the party and the government, and democracy should be restored in party hierarchy of the ruling as well as the opposition political parties. The prime minister and the leader of the opposition should cease to be their respective party-heads, and other ministers too should not hold any party positions, for in a democracy the ministers are expected to represent the state, not the party. The elected

prayed for time at least on 19 occasions on this or that plea to implement the hon'ble Supreme Court's landmark judgment directing the independence of judiciary from the executive. There is no reason to believe that the process of praying for time would end up in any near future and until then no one can expect any semblance of democracy in this country.

May we not forget that democracy and good governance can never be expected to thrive in any form of economic discrimination, as it is bound to lead to sweeping social disorder and lawlessness. It is very unfortunate that the successive governments could not yet formulate any programme as to employ-

tion of Tk 300 crore for rural uplift during the last fiscal year, and there is no possibility that the government would at all be able to utilise the current budgeted amount of Tk 600 crore for the benefit of the rural poor. It is reported that about 200,000 people are added to the corps of the unemployed every year and that about 20,000 women and children are trafficked over the border every month for engaging in immoral activities, and we find no concerted effort to meet these challenges either. Thus a vicious circle has been created to hold up not only economic development, but socio-political stability as well. The need of the hour is therefore to initiate honest and sincere efforts to

# How to be remorseless



M.J. AKBAR

YOU can't get the right answer if you ask the wrong question. What is the wrong question? 'How long will the Manmohan Singh government last?' What then is the right question? 'How long will this government function?'

Governments have lasted before without being able to function, so there is no reason why they should not do the same again.

This government consists of two kinds of partners. Allies like the DMK and the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti, who have no specific antipathy to the BJP, believe that their political demands will be honoured by this alliance. The TRS is convinced that it will get a separate Telangana state after November, and is ready to wait. The DMK is certain that present equations will ensure victory in the next Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu. The bulk of partners are united by a single desire, to keep the BJP out of power, and, irrespective of differences, that motivation has not weakened. The Marxists may be genuinely upset by the Budget proposal to increase foreign direct investment caps in insurance and telecommunications, but this does not mean that they want to open the door to the BJP.

And yet when an important Marxist like Sitaram Yechury warns the government that it cannot take support from the Left for granted, it is a wake-up call. A familiar of history is the king who reigns but does not rule. A government that func-

tions is obviously something more than a bureaucracy that administers. Its purpose is defined by the direction it sets, with the economy as the key to the future. The decision to raise FDI caps in selected industries, and divest a further 5 per cent in NTPC was critical in terms of the parameters that the Manmohan Singh government wanted to establish. The signal was that it would not be hostage to the well-known views of the Left.

The Marxist response could have been perfunctory, or vehement

lucrative part of the trade, but the term is not used because of the feedback factor.) A company like LIC sits on massive resources that are an obvious temptation to men who influence the economy by their control of capital. Mrs Indira Gandhi nationalised private banks, to wild applause from the Left, because she wanted to shift control of banking capital from the business elite.

What FDI does is to permit foreigners to become significant owners, and decisive managers, of this resource base. Marxists may have

remain split. Nearly one third of the seats in the Bengal Assembly, from Kolkata towards the north along the Hooghly river, are either directly controlled by the working class, or influenced by them. The Left Front cannot afford to alienate this core constituency.

The insurance market was opened to the world by the last government. Dr Manmohan Singh and finance minister Chidambaram gave a commitment in their Budget that this would not be reversed.

Which brings us to a heresy that

## BYLINE

There is a term in marketing that applies to electoral politics: Buyer's Remorse. This is the difference between the dazzle of the shop window and the look of a purchase in the less glamorous atmosphere at home. In politics this translates to hope before the elections and the reality afterwards. The trick, if you can manage it, is to go back to the voter before remorse sets in. You have to be remorseless to succeed.

without being serious. It became serious because the FDI cap on insurance was raised. Why is insurance so important?

It is common knowledge that a former ambassador of the United States, Frank Wisner, resigned from the State Department after his tenure in Delhi to become a vice chairman American International Group (AIG), with a specific brief to open up the Indian market to American insurance companies. Lobbying is still an impolite word in Delhi, but a perfectly respectable one in America. Wisner has spent substantial chunks of his time in India working the system to influence policy, including during the preparation of this Budget.

Insurance companies hold perhaps the largest resource of capital outside banks. This money comes from that well-known person, the Common Man, who has invested against the uncertainty of post-retirement years, or as a legacy to his family in case of death. (Life insurance is a misnomer, or a 'semi-misnomer'; death insurance is the more

been unable to choke capitalism, but they balk at the thought that Indian resources are being 'gifted' away through the transfer of equity. Moreover, their electoral base will not permit them silence. The working class treats foreign equity in sectors like insurance as the death warrant of its protected rights, for the arrival of foreign ownership is tantamount to harsher working conditions and a threat to job-security. This is what the Left means when it says that this decision goes against the commitment to continue reforms but with a human face: that human face is the face of the working class.

The Marxists also know that their real strength comes from their monopoly of power in Bengal; if they lose Bengal, the Left movement begins to dissolve. While the post-election difference in seats is generally substantial, the hidden fact is that there is not much difference between the Marxist and anti-Marxist vote in Bengal. The latter vote is conveniently split, but there is no guarantee that it will always

the ruling alliance will be loath to admit. But the fact is that as far as economic policy is concerned, the Congress is a natural ally of the BJP rather than of the Left. The Congress moved away from the quasi-Socialism of Indira Gandhi in the Nineties. "Reform" after all was a rebellion against the failed policies of the past, and who had set those policies except the Congress itself? A Congress-BJP government would produce a very smooth Budget, heavily endorsed by the stock exchange and Frank Wisner.

The Congress alliance with the Left is built around a shared view of secularism; it is, therefore the Narendra Modi-RSS factor that keeps the Congress and the BJP apart, although in practice the Congress has played footsie with soft Hindutva when it so suited the party.

Equally, the Congress-Left amity is vulnerable to economic policy. One side will have to compromise to sort out the tensions of this Budget, and it will not be the Left, since compromise for Marxists is electoral

direction, towards instant populism. Electricity has become free for farmers in Andhra Pradesh. Such good news has no legs, because free electricity now means no electricity a couple of years down the line. Not a very good idea, therefore, to ask a voter for his invaluable support then.

Similarly, in Punjab, Captain Amarinder Singh, who was swamped in the elections, places a claim on water. It is a commonplace in futurology studies that the next generation of wars across the world will be over water rather than oil, but trust Indian democracy to pick up wars from both the past and the future and place them at the service of the here-and-now. Has a calendar been sent to Congress chief ministers indicating that they should get ready for the next round of bloodletting known otherwise as a general election? Congress chief ministers who lost in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, after doing their best, have been rehabilitated in the party. Digvijay Singh and Ashok Gehlot have been made general secretaries

of the AICC to lead the Congress back to victory in their states, now that incumbency is the headache of those who defeated them. One gets the impression of generals being positioned, troops being arrayed, and the political arsenal being stocked with generous handouts. This is sensible war-planning by Sonia Gandhi.

For a while we were led to believe that there would be dual authority in the country, but this is palpably wrong. There is only one authority, and that is Sonia Gandhi. Allies acknowledge it in their speeches in Parliament. Congress chief ministers check out decisions with Mrs Sonia Gandhi before they check it at all, with the Congress Prime Minister. Dr Manmohan Singh accepts reality by sanctioning, from the PMO office, an unprecedented throne room for his leader. Sonia Gandhi then sets the agenda for both government and her party. She is not going to make the mistake of initiating conflict. But she is not going to shy away from it either, if pushed once too often. There is also the worry about unforeseen circumstances: what happens if the Supreme Court rules against Laloo Prasad Yadav, turns down his appeal against the High Court judgment and confirms his guilt? She is preparing for the dangers of incompatibility. Actually, the sooner it comes, the better for her, since the best time for war is when your gathering army is matched by the enemy's disarray.

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You have to be remorseless to succeed.

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## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

### No face value

Our sick politics generates ideas, metaphors and similes, encouraging sarcasm and pessimism. How the politicians defend themselves against criticism? Thick hide, all-proof shields, and too much air-conditioning of the wrong type. The culture of abuse is becoming institutionalized. There is no longer any face value in society.

Our politics is almost on the point of collapse, due to disregard of rules and ethics. If politics were a football game, the ball cannot be deflated or inflated. Sometimes the air pressure inside is too much, hence the ball bounces, and is difficult to control (for more than three decades). Too many headers and spot kicks. Ground-passing is not possible when the turf is not level. The referee is invisible most of the time, and there is something wrong with his whistle.

Political cricket is easier to imagine. The bat is crooked, the stance is faulty, and the cross-bat strokes

offer simple catches. There is no plan in the fielding; and the boundary marking is not visible at many points. There is no time for singles, and a 5-day Test match is beyond the phlegmatic temperament, (compare with the 5-year term of office after a general election).

A three-year term would be unstable, and a 4-year term would be taxing the exchequer. Louis Kahn's superb architecture cannot induce the members to sit in the august building. We are witnessing the clapping of democracy with one hand. The message from the politicians of Dhaka is that Democracy cannot be shared (with the Opposition). Hence retire, or the Himalayan heights, but to the crowded streets of the metropolis, with the voters. Direct approach--the paper work can wait.

Do you like political music? Be-taal; Har-taal is no taal. No tuner or conductor; and now, few listeners. Piped dreams? The pipe is leaking. Chariot ride? The pankhiraaj is not

willing.

Where the politicians relax to deliberate? Not on our wide and breezy rivers--too many launching ceremonies! Pajero rides? May be the petrol bill of Tk two lakhs per annum would be charged to the national exchequer. [The amount is not too high-it is less than two gallons per day!]

CNG means compressed natural gas. We need CPG-compressed political gas. It might compress the ego also. Our politics is like the expanding universe. But the latter theory is now being questioned. The alternative is LPG-liquefied political gas. Cannot export it; hence we need more politicians to make the idea viable. The other side of the coin is: from where do our politicians get so much energy, to do so much damage, with so little professional expertise? Our system loss in politics is better than none. We are saturated with negative achievements-fully eligible for the international dubious awards!

Our politics is like drafting a

budget without head or tail. It rolls and gathers momentum. It gathers no moss, hence no accountability (in an one-eyed parliament). To be an MP is a nice avocation.

What is the difference between a teacher and a politician? You learn from one, and unlearn from the other. Why sick a large percentage of the young men like to go into politics, judging from its popularity in the campus? Easy come, easy go (including leisurely earning). We were a lazy society. Not now. Now novel types of extra-curricular services are available, for a fee. The spirit of entrepreneurship is gathering momentum, but there are black holes in the handling and distribution of the dividends. That is the way the bosses desire. "Yes, boss!" is a magictaaz.

Alif Zabr Dhaka

### Academy politically controlled?

The recent DS editorial on the

alleged unethical control of new admissions of students by the student fronts of political parties is very disturbing. It raises fundamental moral issues: what is the purpose of higher education, when the players (the teachers and the students) lose sight of the ultimate goal in seeking knowledge. How judgement and discretion are sharpened? The timeless deterrents are disappearing from the society.

The boundaries of the working conditions are becoming blurred on what should not be done, and when and where to stop this far, and no farther. On the one hand the regime is trying to contain copying and cheating in examinations; on the other hand the student bodies are not being controlled with do's and don'ts. The indiscipline mushrooming in the society is staggering, with the top tiers unable to control themselves and the followers.

What has happened to our parliamentary culture? The morning shows the day, and the evening shows the way! We falter with begin-

nings, although the foundation-laying ceremonies are very popular. The latter is due to misplaced kindness (if it could be called kindness). The politicians are very fond of sermonizing, but most of the anomalies in the society start with political insensitivity to the permanent values of life. What do we do with these unpatriotic groups of noise makers, who are leading the future generation astray?

A Hussain Dhaka

### DV winners

Among the people, who applied for DV-2005 last year through Internet, the winners are receiving their letters in Bangladesh. After getting the first letter, the DV winners have to face some problems. DV winners did not pay attention to the spelling of their names when they filled up the forms. Many of them made a lot of mistakes in their names on certificates. That is why, DV winners have problem facing the US Embassy

officials. So at the time of filling the DV form, all applicants should be aware about matching their names in the form with the names on the certificates. The first DV form is a technical form, in which, DV winners have to fill up their own names as well as have to submit all the information regarding their family members.

All the information is recorded in computer of the National Visa Center through data entry. So every column of this form has a significant value. Every form should be filled up by a lawyer. From my experience, I found that DV winners' names are written differently in many certificates, such as Mohammad is written as MD, in SSC, Mohammad in HSC, Mohammad in BA and so on. Again, his name may be correct but his father's name is written inaccurately. That is why the DV winners make correction of all these things from the education board; but it seems that the visa officer of embassy did not consider all these matters.

There is another important thing: The DV winners, who did not have 12 years of educational background, have to show an occupation in the form. But they decided on such an occupation guided by other DV winners in the past, but this is not right.

DV winners require training after getting the DV, sometimes, they do not give importance to training. But training related to your occupation is very essential. So it is very important to select the correct occupation and also take proper training. The occupation, which you have chosen, must mention the name of the training center and also the duration of the training period. The DV winners must be alert about another thing: Do not laminate any education certificates. For DV 2005, the forms have been filled up through Internet, so there was no need, for signature.

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