

## Hasina's no to vengeful politics

Forward-looking element in the speech welcomed

THE address by prime minister and that by leader of the opposition on Sunday didn't exactly run parallel to each other, there was something complementary between the two speeches. They threw a line to each other in an apparent bid to steer clear of the present political mess. It is a recognition of what the people wanted, and that's where the hope lies. However belated, it is welcome.

Yesterday, we focused on the prime minister's call for enlightened politics (Alokito Rajniti). Today, we greet the promise made by opposition leader Sheikh Hasina in her speech that she wouldn't indulge in politics of vengeance if she returns to power. When politics has gotten to the level of seeking obliteration of each other, Sheikh Hasina's statement not to pay the BNP back in its coin sounds like spreading the olive branch.

The change of tone, at this stage perhaps more on the part of opposition leader than that of the PM, may have marked the beginning of electoral politics. The fact that they are striving to endear themselves to the people augurs well.

Whether the public will take Sheikh Hasina's repudiation of vengeful politics at its face value may be something to ponder, though. When in power Sheikh Hasina had promised not to call hartal if she would be in the opposition. But she has.

Nevertheless, we believe that just as Begun Zia hit the nail on the head by stressing the need for 'enlightened politics' so also has Sheikh Hasina made a correct diagnosis of the national political ailment by emphasising the necessity for eschewing vengeful politics.

Another positive feature of opposition leader's speech is she did not ask for toppling the government. She has demanded early polls which is not outside the norm of democratic politics. But whilst the opposition can demand snap polls they cannot impose the same on the people. That will be undemocratic, unconstitutional. The right to declare dates for general election rests with an elected government.

The best electoral politics the opposition can now do is to direct it energies towards mobilising public opinion in its favour by staging massive rallies and forming human chain, marking a complete departure from hartal, the surest route to unpopularity. They should join the parliament to stay in, without any further vacillation.

The opposition has expressed doubts as to whether the next general election would be free and fair. People would like to be convinced about the assumptions they are basing their suspicion on.

## Essentials costing unusually dear

Get to the bottom of price jacking

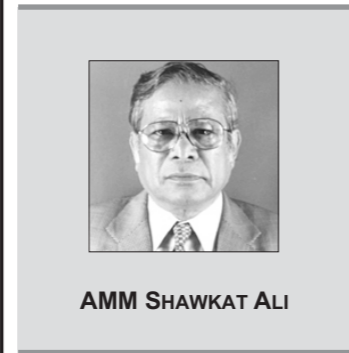
THE government has failed to tackle and contain the abnormal rise in the prices of daily necessities. We have been witnessing with great alarm in the last few weeks that for whatever reasons prices of essential items in the market have registered a steep increase. Surveys carried out by various newspapers including The Daily Star have revealed a very distressing picture. In some markets, prices of some vegetables and other consumer items have hit the roof, causing unimaginable misery to low and middle income groups.

Various reasons are being cited by the government for such a scenario. The Prime Minister has ascribed higher domestic prices to increased import costs. The floods and heavy rains are also held responsible for supply shortfalls and consequent rise in prices. Though there is merit in such arguments, yet not all of the soaring spurt in prices can be explained away in terms of flood damages. We think it is the large scale extortion at the ports and ghats, on the highways and supply lines and at the wholesale and retail points that is pushing up the prices. Even the commerce minister himself has admitted to a high incidence of extortion taking place.

In the past there were allegations of a nexus between some insider vested quarters and traders causing market distortions through the choking of supply lines. Though it is just an assumption as far as this year is concerned, it would nonetheless be worthwhile to probe how deep that nexus has gone and how active it is in the present scenario.

There must be a neutral and expert investigation into the price situation, followed by an identification of the culprits and action taken against them. In the webs of such vicious and criminal manipulation, the helpless consumers suffer the most. Those who resort to black marketeering must not be allowed to continue with their trading in human miseries.

# The best is yet to be



"POOR governance, graft worry us" was the title of a news published in an English daily the other day (October 10, 2004). The sub-title was "We are doing our best". The title is based on the observations of the visiting administrator of USAID, Andrew S Natsios. The subtitle is the sum of the reply to the observations made by Andrew Natsios who is quoted to have said "Further deterioration in governance, corruption and the rule of law would not only affect Bangladesh's economy but also threaten democracy". He further said "we are worried". Andrew emphasised the need for checking the slide and called for commitment not only from the Finance Minister but also from other ministers, members of parliament and parliament as a whole to overcome the situation.

In response, the Finance Minister was reported to have said that the government had taken a good number of steps to ensure rule of law and to improve law and order and further that such things could not be changed overnight. What has been left unsaid is that it is not a question of overnight but more than a thousand days including nights. It is an irony of fact that the critical observations of Andrew Natsios come at a time when the four-party alliance government has just celebrated its more than a thousand days in power through a public meeting.

About the commitment of all ministers and the parliament as a

whole asked for by Andrew, it can be said that such commitments have been given during the past three years or more as part of the conditions of the donors' pledge for development assistance. The situation has not shown much signs for improvement in governance including the slide in law and order.

### Many election pledges fulfilled!

Andrew's observations come in sharp contrast to what has been claimed by a four-party alliance

(Sangbad, October 10, 2004). The subtitle of the news contained the appeal by the business community to the State Minister for Home Affairs "Please save us".

### The views of small entrepreneurs

It was reported that the shopkeepers of different markets of Dhaka city met the State Minister in the conference room of the Home Ministry on October 9, 2004. Representatives of a cross-section of shop owners attended the meeting

Policy Dialogue (CPD) not to speak of Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) and the lead donor like the World Bank (WB). BEI published its findings in January 2004. The study is titled "Reducing the Cost of Business in Bangladesh". The conclusion drawn by the study is that compared to China, India and Pakistan, the cost of doing business in Bangladesh today is considerably higher. Among others, the judicial system and law enforcement have been cited as major factors that add to high cost in doing

business.

### Findings from CPD

CPD conducted a study titled "Business Competitiveness Environment in Bangladesh, 2004". The survey covered 100 companies each having total assets of not less than Tk. 100 million. The major findings of the survey as these relate to the state of governance tend to provide a rather gloomy picture. First, the faith in independence of judiciary has been eroded further in 2004. More than three-fourths of the companies or 78.6 percent underscored that judiciary is not independent from political influence of members of government, citizens or firms.

Second, the incidence of crime, violence and organised crime impose significant costs on business. Police services cannot be relied upon for protection of business from criminals. This has been reported by as high as 93.9 percent of the companies surveyed.

Third, the magnitude of undocu-

mented payments has grown in the area of awarding of public contracts. This was reported by 93.5 percent of the companies under the survey.

Fourth, the lead determining factors of business competitiveness environment have been identified to be 14 in number. Among these, corruption leads the list of factors, inefficient government bureaucracy ranks second and crime and theft ranks third. Last year, crime and theft ranked sixth. Crime and theft is affecting business more than it did in 2003.

assessed to get external assistance. The costs of doing business, except for the big ones, are hardly assessed. The major cost in this regard is the abject failure in the prevention and detection of crimes by public sector agencies. Worse still, there is widespread public perception that the law-enforcing machinery is utterly incapable and corrupt.

The government, in a desperate bid to check the continuing upswing in organised crimes, has established elite forces like RAB, Cheetah and what have you. RAB has done some good work in apprehending some notorious and dangerous criminals who later died in 'encounter'. This has been widely criticised by the media. The issue of protecting small and big business concerns continues to remain a live problem that is adding to the cost of doing business as well as ensuring human security. At the end of the day, the citizens are victims of high price and insecurity. This is the message that the small business leaders appear to have attempted to give to the State Minister for Home Affairs. Despite the government doing its best, the best is yet to be seen. At the other end, Andrew seems to have attempted to drive home the message that widespread sense of insecurity coupled with the absence of rule of law pose a threat to democracy.

It remains to be seen if within the course of next two years in office, the alliance government will be able to solve the problems raised by Andrew, the independent think tanks, the media and the small business leaders.

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# An Islamic political party in America

RON CHEPESIUK

IN the late 1980s, when 37-year old Jabril Hough was a Methodist who attended church every Sunday, he began having religious doubts about Christianity's Holy Trinity and the worship of Jesus as the Son of God. "I searched for an authentic Christian Bible that had not been altered or tampered with, but couldn't find one," Hough recalled.

Then after the Gulf War broke out in 1991, Hough became aware of Islam and began studying the religion. "Islam's monotheism began making sense to me," Hough said. "The religion says God is one and he has no partners, parents, sons or daughters."

Today, Hough, one of approximately 4.5 to five million Muslims in the US, is chairman of the national board of the Islamic Political Party of America (IPPA), the country's first and only Islamic political party. With about 4,000 members and chapters in 12 states, the IPPA seeks to encourage Muslim Americans to become more involved politically.

"We (Muslim Americans) need to organise politically because we are living in the most dangerous period in our history," said Ali Abdur-Rashid, the IPPA's national coordinator and one of the party's three co-founders. "Muslim Americans are scared. We know what happened to the Japanese during

World War II, and we don't want that to happen to us." The party was founded in April 2001, five months prior to 9-11, but IPPA officials said that Muslim Americans were facing serious problems like religious profiling and hate crimes long before the event

2001 and then deported in August 2002.

IPPA officials said none of the political parties have taken the Muslim American community seriously. "When it comes to Muslim Americas, there is no balance in American politics," Hough said. "Look at that first

resulting in most party members lacking the time or energy to caucus with any of the presidential candidates."

The conference discussed such issues as educational system reform, "stopping the national tax rate" and the importance of equality in health care.. Conference representatives agreed to establish a national platform that would "provide the backbone to the core of the IPPA ideology and position in the hopes of becoming a benefit for all the people of America, not just the Islamic population."

Hough acknowledges that the IPPA is concerned about the plight of the Palestinians, but he added that the party is focused on domestic issues. Abdur-Rashid said that anyone can join the party, so long as they "believe in one God, Allah, and follow the teachings of Prophet

Muhammed." The party hopes to build alliances with non-Muslim political groups, he said. "We will work with a non-Muslim group so long as they agree with our principles."

The party is also working hard to embrace both traditional Muslims and what officials identify as

said.

The IPPA also has a social action programme called the Ma'un Society, which is made up of volunteers who work in their communities in the areas of health care, crime prevention, family counseling and special services. The volunteers direct people to the source that can help them with their problems. The society also provides communities with drug interdiction, prenatal care and cholesterol and blood pressure screening services.

"The Ma'un society is IPPA's way of bringing our people together for the common good," Abdur-Rashid explained.

Party officials are excited about the party's potential to play a seminal role both in the Muslim American community and national, state and local politics. But they plan to move slowly to build a base and ensure the party as a viable political entity. At their National Platform Conference, some party officials talked about running a candidate for President in the 2008 elections.

"It's a possibility," revealed Hough, who added "We are making rapid progress, and we don't need millions of members to continue doing that."

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## OPINION

# 'Bush is dead wrong': Stiglitz is probably not right

DR. M. S. HAQ

"BUSH is dead wrong" is the title of one of Joseph Stiglitz's recently published articles in *The Guardian* newspaper. In the article, Noble Laureate Stiglitz pointed out, among other things, the rate of annual economic growth of the US -- on an average 2.5 percent over the past 3.5 years -- was slower than during the Clinton years. He also indicated in the same article, the growth rate of 2.5 percent was better than 1 percent of Europe's during the above period. He presented such facts as: the drop of median income in real terms; the transformation of a surplus -- 2 percent of GDP left by the Clinton Administration -- into a deficit of 5 percent of GDP through tax cuts for the rich; and an increase in the number of Americans not covered by health insurance; in an attempt to establish how, according to him, Bush's failed policies have cost the economy dearly. But he agreed the economy was stimulated, a little though, by tax cuts.

Noble Laureate Stiglitz might be wrong, in many respects, when it comes to his analysis and finding with regard to "Bush is dead wrong" due, among other things, to the following reasons:

Mr. Stiglitz used time dimensions and pertinent statistics as some of the key factors in his analysis. But based on those and other factors he had used in his analysis, it might, inter alia, be difficult in a deeper sense for many people to conclude, at this point in time, and in a straightforward and wholesome fashion, "Bush is dead wrong". Because the 'perimeter' of the kingdom of knowledge is still nearly unknown or undiscovered or both; a continuous chain of what I will call the 'relative truth' after the 'relative truth' has apparently been the motive power (used in an engineering sense) for knowledge available so far to human beings (hereinafter: the knowledge, unless used otherwise); the per capita share of the knowledge is not the same or equal throughout the world; and the very existence (in a physical sense) of explorers, developers and users of the knowledge say, human beings, is not absolute but relative to say, time and space, like-wise the products of human beings and the outcomes of those products, for example. Those are among the reasons why two big physics theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century -- quantum and relativity -- have failed, in several respects, to deliver a unified field theory to the

world -- approximations cannot apparently become the basis of the unified theory, per se.

The bottom line is: in an apparently moving, as well as constantly changing reality (up to and beyond say, sub-atomic levels) that has been constantly affecting say, the life and living on earth, the demand

'full' insight into the matter, per se. In view of that and other considerations, it now appears Noble Laureate Stiglitz should have taken inter alia a harder, broader, deeper and more balanced look at the President's policies and the resultant outcomes (including intervening variables in pertinent areas)

the multiplying and cross cutting effects, especially in the post 9/11 environment, of such developments as the growing interdependency between and among the world countries; the inequalities that currently exist between and among the countries in the worldwide competition ranging from

survival (used in a deeper sense) to prosperity; and the magnitude and consequence of present day disasters, both natural and human-made; are becoming increasingly instrumental in say, pulling and pushing the economies of world countries including the US in various directions, relative to time, space and the degree of impact. Closely related to it, is the existence of a direct and inverse relationship between environmental stability and economic stability at various operation levels. Stiglitz has apparently failed to internalise those and related factors into his

Clinton years with that of Bush's, in an effort towards establishing policy outcome differential (not used in an engineering sense). He concluded the growth was slower during the Bush years. It is fine. But, while terming Bush's policies as failed ones and linking them with the growth rates, he apparently failed to appreciate say, the relative tolerance levels of the US economy during Clinton and Bush years. It implies inter alia the Noble Laureate was not probably prepared to accept the fact that 2 is not always equal to 2. Stiglitz's analysis did not apparently consider, in

terms of economics, the difference between performing in a non-war situation and in a war situation (say, the 9/11 attack on the US and its ongoing consequences) when it comes to challenges and opportunities under the respective situations, per se; and the impact of Bush's post 9/11 policies on the safety and security of the US, the people, and the country's corporate governance; to mention a few. Further, he should have reflected on the economic costs of meeting the challenges of the country's ongoing war economy that has seen so far and inter alia: the shift of priorities; the policy, as well as strategy change or redirection (or both); the redistribution, as well as rerouting of resources; the formulation of new programmes or readjustment of existing programmes (or both); and the change of implementation plans and modalities in both internal and external dimensions of the US. In short, Stiglitz seems to have failed, in many respects, to unearth the 'truth' behind the 'truth' in his policy analysis effort.

Two plus two is not always four. The same holds well when it comes to say, generating output(s) through a process of economics and that of manufac-

turing (used in an engineering sense). It is easier to produce the required output(s) 'just-in-time' through say, a numerically controlled machining centre or a high-precision speed lathe than through a government machinery. One of the reasons is: while the former works under known and controlled variables, relative to time and space though, the latter does not largely work in that way. The approach of economics to say, problem-solving is, in many respects, based on say, choices and probabilities and that is why an economist cannot presently afford to give a direct 'yes' or 'no' answer to many problems in pertinent areas.

In fine: firstly, President Bush does not deserve the comment "Bush is dead wrong"; and secondly, it is expected Noble Laureate Stiglitz will step up his effort towards the revelation of the 'truth' behind the 'truth' in his area(s) of expertise.

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