

Government caves in

So, some are not equal before the law

It seems as though the parliament is finally prepared to pass the much discussed bill granting immunity to the World Bank some time this month, after the bill was approved by the parliamentary panel reviewing it. However, the government is yet to explain to the general public its rationale behind such a move that comes in sharp contrast to its often fire-breathing rhetoric when it comes to the issue of the sovereignty of the nation and relations with the donors.

The Daily Star has long been unequivocal in opposing the immunity bill, and nothing the government has said has induced us to reconsider our position. One reason for this is that the government has, in fact, never deigned to say anything by way of explanation to the public as to why it is taking this somewhat precipitous step. The very least the government could do would be to offer a rationale for its actions.

We oppose the bill because, in our opinion, it would run counter to the notion that everyone should be subject to the law. We fail to see why an international organisation which has extraordinary influence when it comes to setting public policy without any commensurate accountability should be further immunised from the consequences of potential wrong-doing. The World Bank has lectured the nation on the need for transparency and accountability too often for us to not notice the extreme hypocrisy of its demand for immunity.

Furthermore, the Bank claims that this immunity is merely a provision granted to it by all countries in which it operates. However, we have not been able to find any support for this somewhat implausible claim, and the government itself has conceded that the proposed legislation would be unique at least in the region.

The biggest questions remain for the government. On the one hand it is constantly talking tough on the issue of sovereignty and stating that no one can dictate to us. But what is this if not dictation on the part of the Bank? Furthermore, what would happen if the World Bank were denied immunity? Would it cease operations in Bangladesh?

The finance minister is on record as saying that if donors are not satisfied that they are free to leave, but it seems that when push comes to shove, that the government is willing to bend over backwards to accommodate them. The contrast between the fierceness of the government's rhetoric and the timidity of its actions is striking.

State Dept lauds B'desh

Serious concerns remain in some areas

THE US State Department has lauded the role of Bangladesh in the war against terror. That is indeed good news for a country that came under a barrage of criticism by the western media in recent times and even got branded as the "breeding centre" of religious fundamentalism. The report reflects the concern that Bangladesh has always shared with the international community over international terrorism.

But the report has also claimed that the Harakatul-Ul-Jihad-I, a terrorist group, is operating in Bangladesh. The matter of grave concern is that the group is reported to be linked to the al-Qaeda network. Now, the government must place the whole thing in the right perspective. The appreciation of our role vis-à-vis terrorism should not blur our vision when it comes to handling the tricky question of the presence of militant outfits in the country. Nor will outright denial of any such irritant being present here help us. In fact, it is no longer a secret that the activities of some organisations operating in the name of religion are being viewed with great suspicion by the international community. The recent crackdown on the suspected militants was proof enough that the government itself had deemed it necessary to act against them. But the move has fizzled out for inexplicable reasons. Then do we have to believe that the whole exercise was for public consumption only? Either it has been abandoned under the pressure from the rightist groups or it lacked the substance that could have made it a worthwhile attempt to wipe out the militants.

The State Department report says that the Harakat has six camps in Bangladesh and is suspected to have links to the attempt in July 2000 on the life of the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. So the danger that such organisations pose needs no elaboration.

There is little doubt that the militant outfits are the principal beneficiaries of the government's failure to catch the criminals responsible for the recent bomb attacks and killings. It is time the government acted with greater determination to neutralise the fundamentalist challenge.

Rethinking agricultural strategies and policies



ABDUL BAYES

three decades, Bangladesh agriculture witnessed significant in its structure, resource base, technology and organisation of production. Crop production, particularly rice, remained the sole concern and obviously earlier strategies and policies were geared towards achieving "rice self sufficiency". Arguably, there was a trade-off between rice and pulses or oilseeds. Bangladesh made significant strides in reducing food gap but gaps in the production of non-rice crops persist. However, the decline

valuable foreign exchange. But neither incentives and institutions nor innovations are enough in evidence to induce farmers to grow these crops. For example, onion or potato production could put down farmers' pales more than rice in terms of prices. Likewise, also horticultural crops. Are farmers then "irrational" to lie in a zone where they could produce better-valued crops?

The answer is no. Given technology, institutions and incentives, they are in fact maximizing their returns.

knowledge, information and technology. Public sector could pave ways for private sector participation in these activities by making or supporting suitable infrastructural investments. Pineapple growers at Modhupur hardly knows about the prevailing prices in the country, have no known technology to preserve them. The precariousness of the perishable products ultimately make them prey to middlemen to rob them of their due rewards. Electronic media, news papers and extension workers could stem the

phase of "growth through efficiency in input utilisation".

Fish and dish

Shahabuddin suggests for a strong agricultural growth linkage with fish and livestock production, including poultry. The poor can benefit from pond fishery through associated employment in fish production, fish catching, processing and marketing activities". But good quality seeds, hatchery and nursery arrangements at door steps tend to disdain such developments. The author further

The livestock sub-sector including poultry paints a promising picture. It has large potential in poverty reduction. As noted before, with rise in income and urbanisation, the demand for products like eggs, milk and meat are likely to increase due to higher income elasticity. But still the process of production and distribution is of subsistence nature. Community-based organization of production is needed. We are told that NGO, like BRAC and major agro processing units like PRAN are making efforts at mobilising milk or supplying high yielding animals to poor farms. The government has a major role to play in the changing scenario.

Meaningful messages

The messages from Shahabuddin's research should invite immediate actions. Dr Mahabub Hossain and other researchers also have long been harping on the messages. My personal experiences in fields and with farmers point to the potentials too. Therefore, they no longer remain to be food for thought but to be cooked, without any loss of time. Agricultural policies in Bangladesh need a revisit soon. Changes in consumer preferences, urbanisation, development of biotechnology etc. call for a shift in paradigm that pervaded three decades. The role of public sector has not diminished, as argued by some, but basically increased manifold as investments in inputs necessary for promoting high value crops could only come from public sector. Making the production of rice more productive, land should be released for the growth of other crops. Let us grow old but think about new ideas.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Agricultural policies in Bangladesh need a revisit soon. Changes in consumer preferences, urbanisation, development of biotechnology etc. call for a shift in paradigm that pervaded three decades. The role of public sector has not diminished, as argued by some, but basically increased manifold as investments in inputs necessary for promoting high value crops could only come from public sector. Making the production of rice more productive, land should be released for the growth of other crops. Let us grow old but think about new ideas.

in real prices of rice had helped increase food security, marginally if not substantially. Meantime, growth in per capita income, rapid urbanisation and skewed income distribution tilted the balance of food basket in favour of non-rice crops. This is in tandem with basic economic laws where consumers prefer high value crops such as eggs, milk and meat with rise in per capita income. Time seems to have come when public sector support needs to be directed towards increasing production of crops hitherto "unsung or unheard". Shahabuddin and other researchers observe that Bangladesh has comparative advantage in the production of many commodities that we tend to import with our

Researches have enriched rice, incentives provided inducement to produce rice but none of these apparently went to appease farmers and that is one of reasons for their decline. "The exploitation of this potential, however, depends on investment for developing infrastructure for storage, processing, marketing and financial services for which public support is needed". A broad-based agricultural research system needs to be developed to envelope all agricultural crops so that opportunity costs could clearly be coined and resources are used rationally.

Expansion vs efficiency
An important area is generation of

rot through dissemination of knowledge, information and technology. Likewise development of biotechnology could build upon bare footed farmers' baskets.

A move towards crop diversification should not mean sidelining staple food crops, rather, more researches need to be in front to raise productivity of land and crops at a much higher level than projected ones on the heels of declining cultivated land by 80,000 hectares per year! As Dr Mahabub Hossain observed once, strategies and policies must be rationalised through a shift from the phase of "growth through input expansion" to a

observes: "There is a great potential for fish production in Bangladesh through proper utilisation of the vast flood plains which has been marginally tapped. These areas which remain under water for more than three months a year can be utilised for raising fast growing short maturity species". While technical potential has been proved through experiments, the appropriate institutional arrangements in sharing costs and benefits are yet to develop. Initiatives at community level through some NGOs and even government-sponsored programmes hardly succeed in the face of strong barri- cades from the village barons.

Poultry and the poor

Ensuring credibility of caretaker government

ZAHID HOSSAIN

THE recent resolution of the European Parliament on Bangladesh has more or less echoed the demands of the major opposition parties for "systematic reforms" for ensuring independence of the Election Commission and to establish the credibility of the caretaker government so that the next parliamentary election can be held freely, fairly and in a credible manner.

The development partners of Bangladesh in their last meeting in Washington DC also recognised the vital importance of free and fair elections for the future development of the country and stressed the importance of preventing electoral preparation from being disrupted by political violence.

Former Finance Minister late SAMS Kibria also, for the last few months of his life, spent considerable amount of time for working out some formulae for ensuring credibility of the next non-political caretaker government so that conducting a credible free, fair and neutral election is possible. He could not complete the job and the last mission of his life remained unfulfilled.

As such, it will be really a rightful way to pay proper tribute to the memory of late Kibria by effectively reforming the Act of Non-Party Caretaker Government for ensuring a free and fair parliamentary election for which he spent so much time before his death. It will also help the nation overcoming the present political crisis for the greater interest of the country.

The practice of installing a Non-Party Caretaker Government for organising a credible general election was introduced in Bangladesh in 1996 and so far two parliamentary elections have been organised under this new arrangement. This new system, initiated for ensuring a free and fair election, although got initial approval of all the political parties, members of the civil society and other professional groups, has by now become controversial. Some of the activities of the Non-party Caretaker government of 2001 were received with serious objections from a number of political parties of the country and a cross

government and the elections conducted by it caught the imagination of the general public. A sizeable segment of the population came to believe that a Non-partisan Caretaker government was a necessary factor for ensuring free and fair elections in the country.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which won the election in 1991 was not apparently enthusiastic about conceding to the demand of the opposition leaders for accepting the caretaker system for conducting the future parliament elections, claiming that it was not possible for them to hand over power to an unelected body. There was lot of political agitation and demonstrations and a number of initiatives were even undertaken by various international organisations, including the Commonwealth Secretary General to resolve the crisis. Finally,

From independence up to 2001, eight Parliamentary elections, three Presidential elections and three referendums have been held in the country. Elections, at times took

exceptions which appeared to be attributable to individual candidates and their supporters, not part of any grand design as before during the military or dictatorial regimes. Moreover, the irregularities were not significant enough to affect the overall outcome of the polls.

The President, as per the provisions of the act, will appoint the Chief Adviser from amongst the Chief Justices of the supreme court who retired last and the integrity and neutrality of the former Chief Justice of the supreme court is normally beyond any doubt. But what about the neutrality, integrity, credibility and acceptability of the ten advisers who are supposed to be appointed by the President in consultation with the Chief Adviser? The activities and general performances of a few advisers of the 2001 Non-party

ruling party. Because in this case the will or wish of the majority party may likely to go against the spirit of non-party caretaker government.

As for the selection of chief adviser, clause 3 of Article 58C of the caretaker government Act says, "The President shall appoint as Chief Adviser the person who among the retired Chief Justices of Bangladesh retired last and who is qualified to be appointed as an adviser". That means while appointing the Chief Adviser, the President shall consider two criteria - the person who among the retired Chief Justices of Bangladesh retired last and also the person who is qualified to be appointed as an Adviser.

As per clause 7b of Article 58C of the Act, the President shall appoint the Advisers from among the persons who are not members of any political party or of any organisation

As such, the Chief Justice retired last is normally supposed to be appointed as the Chief Adviser of the next caretaker government if not otherwise disqualified or not available or is not willing to hold the office of the Chief Adviser.

According to available information and newspaper reports, the Chief Justice retired last was actively involved with the formation of a political party and was a reward to that he got an ambassadorial posting as a political person. Therefore a person associated with a political party automatically disqualifies himself to be an Adviser of the non-party caretaker government. And a person disqualified to be an Adviser of a non-party caretaker government shall automatically be disqualified to hold the office of the Chief Adviser of a non-party caretaker government above all possible controversy and blame and finally to ensure a really unblemished and credible free and fair election, express his unwillingness to hold the office of Chief Adviser. This will also save the nation from lot of bitterness and political acrimony.

In this connection, another aspect of the matter specially in the context of neutrality and acceptability of the Chief Adviser, may be seriously considered by all the major political parties and an appropriate decision taken for avoiding any future possible controversy in conducting a credible free and fair election.

The politically appointed judges who get elevated to the post of the Chief Justice of the country by virtue of their seniority and efficiency should "themselves feel embarrassed" in taking up the job of the Chief Adviser considering the real need of neutrality of the post and to ensure a really unblemished and credible free and fair election.

This is likely to enhance the image of the neutrality and acceptability of the non-party caretaker government and thereby the credibility of the election to be conducted by them will be more widely acceptable.

Zahid Hossain is associated with Bangladesh Enterprise Institute as Senior Research Fellow.

A person associated with a political party automatically disqualifies himself to be an Adviser of the non-party caretaker government. And a person disqualified to be an Adviser of a non-party caretaker government shall automatically be disqualified to hold the office of the Chief Adviser of a non-party caretaker government.

place to provide credibility to governments as well as to confirm constitutional changes, rather than to institutionalise the democratic process. Elections were also used to legitimate the actions of the civil-military bureaucracy carried out under the cover of Martial Law or the dictatorial rule.

In order to restore credibility to the country's electoral process and institutionalise the democratic system in the country, the leaders of all political parties waged a successful joint movement to remove General H.M. Ershad from power. As agreed upon by all the major political parties, a credible parliamentary election was held under the supervision of the Non-party Caretaker government headed by the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in February 1991, putting the issue of Non-party Caretaker government for holding Parliamentary elections on the political agenda of Bangladesh. The experience of the 1991 Caretaker

Parliament was dissolved and a new election for the sixth Parliament was held without the participation of the major opposition political parties. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which was in power, won what was termed a farcical election by the local as well as international observers. The new government formed after the election lasted for only few days and then they were forced to hand over power to the Non-party Caretaker government.

However, the new BNP government before handing over the power finally conceded to the opposition demands and made the necessary constitutional changes for a Non-party Caretaker government to hold all future parliament elections in the country through the thirteenth amendment to the constitution.

Up to 2001, two parliamentary elections have been organised under the Non-party Caretaker government system, and the 1996 election was generally peaceful, orderly, transparent, free and fair.

Caretaker government were bitterly criticised by one or two major political parties. It was said that since they were politically biased towards a particular ideology, they were not qualified to be advisers of a Non-party Caretaker government and their neutrality and integrity were questionable, at least for conducting a free, fair and credible election.

However, since now questions are being raised by different quarters about the neutrality of the Chief Adviser and some other Advisers of the 2001 Non-Party Caretaker Government and the demand for reforming the Caretaker Government Act is being stronger day by day, the leaders of major political parties, members of the civil society and other professional bodies should sit together and work out a formula for selection of advisers of the caretaker government which will be acceptable to all the major political parties. Even the parliament can amicably work out a formula but definitely not by imposing something using the strength of majority of the

associated with or affiliated to any political party. Clause 10 of the same Article says that the Chief Adviser or an Adviser shall cease to be Chief Adviser or Adviser if he is disqualified to be appointed as such under the same article.

Thus it is very clear that President shall appoint the person as the Chief Adviser who among the retired Chief Justices of Bangladesh retired last.

But it has not clearly stated in the Act that if a person is not qualified to be appointed as an Adviser, can he be qualified to be appointed as the Chief Adviser? The issue is very pertinent and crucial in the context of conducting the next parliamentary election. As such, the issue needs to be resolved immediately on priority basis and government should take the initiative.

With the retirement age of the Supreme Court Judges extended by two years, the present Chief Justice will continue to be in service even beyond the period when in normal circumstances, the next parliamentary election is scheduled to be held.

from fixed deposits; however, in the long run stocks and bonds theoretically provide higher returns as opposed to fixed deposits. Unfortunately, our fixed income capital markets have not been developed and expanded because of hostile tax rates on bonds and other debt instruments.

The government should consider implementing and increasing the security transaction taxes. It not only generates treasury revenues but also reduces speculative trading by informed traders (we have not forgotten the 1996 market crash).

We can foresee a major quandary for our honourable finance minister.

Simultaneously, we are optimistic that the minister will exercise his wildcard options (if any) given that the external fund flows will drastically decline and we are too young to be self-reliant.

Dr. M. Imtiaz Mazumder
Auckland, New Zealand

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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

Economic development

The finance minister is on record saying that, "The IMF and the World Bank are telling us to slow down the development and economic growth a little as they fear that there will be over-investment in the country..."(1).

The finance minister should tell the public the names of those particular officials of IMF/World Bank who made such a request to him.

Otherwise, we will be compelled to believe that these have all been told to make things look good as the Elections are nearing.

While he is making it sound like the whole populace is immersed in Economic Development, the people who are in the practical fields find that, they still have to struggle with even the basic infrastructural elements as electricity, water, gas, telephone, road-communications, etc. If the majority being just at subsistence levels is termed as economically developed, then we are living in a fool's paradise!

CNR, Chittagong

"Be smart"

I can't fully agree with Mr. Dev as his letter did not focus on the whole situation. It is true that English is not that important for those Japanese and Chinese scientists, but it is almost impossible for most of the ordinary people to possess extra ordinary genius like them.

So, we have to focus on the common people and the ground reality of Bangladesh, and not of Japan or China.

Learning English is a must in this world. The language is of utmost importance. Most of the universities here run their courses in English. As students have to express themselves in English, teachers also do the same in classrooms. Just think about a situation-all the students and the teacher of a class are good in Bengali and as- according to some people- smartness is not at all connected with