

Pre-election budget?

Let partisan considerations take a back-seat to people's needs

THE recent economic review prepared by the country's leading independent think tank CPD raises an important point about the politics of the budget. The fact is that, especially after the mid-point in the tenure of any parliament, the government of the day has tended to frame budgets with an eye on upcoming polls. The CPD review is thus a salutary admonition and one that our policy makers would do well to keep in mind.

Of course it is unrealistic to think that there will be no electoral considerations coming into play in the budget session. Nor is there anything wrong with the government keeping one eye on the electorate, so long as the greater interest of the nation is not sacrificed to small interest groups and partisan self-dealing.

That said, the government should think in terms of enacting policies that actually benefit the people rather than doling out favours in the form of generous budgetary allocations every five years just before an election. Projects and policies that are well-conceived and efficiently implemented are the way to win over the voters, not pre-election promises of great windfalls.

Our primary concern is not that the budget will be too political, but that it will be too partisan. We do not want to see ruling party constituencies and ruling party affiliated concerns showered with funds and those of the opposition neglected. We would like to see allocations based on need and national interest, not on partisan considerations.

For the long term, we urge governments to take the tough decisions early on in their tenure. It is rare to see any government take bold steps near the end of their tenure, as such policies can tend to be unpopular or controversial. We would also like to see funds properly utilised in a timely fashion. The creation of working oversight bodies to bring accountability and transparency to the process would be a good step in the right direction.

The ADP is already bloated and the government has been unable to properly utilise all the funds that have been earmarked under it. It will therefore be obvious to all if the next budget is framed with an eye on upcoming elections and is overly susceptible to manipulation of public resources and misuse of funds, or is a realistic one in line with the needs of the people. The government should keep in mind that the nation will be watching very closely.

An unprecedented twist to politics

It gets dirtier

IT was a sad sight of a woman leaning over her window with her child in her lap threatening to jump out of it to avoid being arrested by the police. One was projected from the world of the sublime to the absurd when one learnt that the lady in question had been served an arrest warrant in a case of theft instituted by no other a person than her husband himself.

The whole episode defies imagination because the man behind it happens to be a former president and his wife, by virtue of her marriage to him, a political player of sorts. The saga of the arrest that lasted a few hours was preceded by the expulsion of the wife the previous day from the apex body of the political party that the husband happens to lead.

Nobody can dispute a party chief's prerogative to deal as he or she pleases with a member of his or her party. But what occurred in this instance is an example of the sordid and decrepit level that our politics and politicians have sunk to. The whole affair illustrates not only the disingenuous proclivities of a party chief, it also demonstrates the pressure that political personalities can be subjected to for ulterior political motives. It is unprecedented, unheard of and wholly repugnant to societal norms and sensibilities.

Mr. Ershad is not a man of small political clout and by resorting to the political shenanigans, he may have demeaned himself in the public eye. One of the things that Ershad's detractors criticise him for is his inability to draw a line between his political and private lives. The recent episode perhaps proves them right.

There is a suspicion that behind the scene intrigue and machinations, perhaps under duress of the ruling party, may have brought the sensational event about by forcing Ershad's hands. On the other hand it may be Ershad's way of sending out political signals. Be that as it may, such a situation should not have been allowed to occur, whatever might have been Ershad's political compulsions.

Resurrecting Bandung spirit



M ABDUL HAFIZ

TO commemorate the golden jubilee of the first Bandung conference held in 1955, Presidents Bambang Yodhoyono of Indonesia and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa convened a second Afro-Asian conference which was held last month again in Bandung under the banner of New Afro-Asian Strategic Partnership (NAASP). The conference adopted "reinvigorating the Bandung spirit" as its theme, and more than 100 countries of the two continents participated. The conference aimed at forging a framework of solidarity, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural ties in order to cope with global threats and problems and to cooperate at the UN in the spirit of unity and strength created at Bandung in 1955.

It has already been hailed by some of its participants as a "historical watershed" in international relations, especially for the third world. But in the post 9/11 world ravaged by two pre-emptive wars waged by the world's sole superpower in pursuance of its national security strategy to achieve unchallengeable primacy in the new century, doubts abound if the spirit fostered fifty years ago can indeed be revived. Will NAASP be able to play a role in moderating the excesses of unilateral pre-emptive use of force and promote a multi-lateral international order?

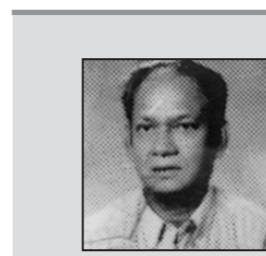
A retrospective glance at the international situation that obtained half a century ago when the first Afro-Asian conference was held would help focus attention on the tectonic shift that has taken place since then, and find out whether it is anymore possible to reassert the spirit that the original Bandung meet gave birth to. Faced by the wave of Pax Americana, will a reinvigoration of the Bandung spirit among the leaders of Asia and Africa — a *sine qua non* of the multi-polar world the pioneers of Bandung dreamt of — work?

Even in the 1950s, the world's geo-political landscape was not without its chasms. The decade was marked by an international scene dominated by

the US and the USSR, two superpowers armed with thousands of kilotons of nuclear weapon and inter-continental missile delivery system dedicated to mutually assured destruction, and were locked in a nerve-racking cold war. But then the first Afro-Asian conference was attended by larger than life figures of the stature of Zhou En Lai of China, Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Ahmad Sukarno of Indonesia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. All of these stalwarts were anti-colonial warriors, visionaries, and

determined to achieve the strategic goals of its project for a New American Century. In that it has already successfully launched two wars and altered the geo-politics of the Middle East in favour of Israel. As against this, third world countries can no longer anchor their international relations to non-alignment, and they have to perforce readjust their politico-security policies towards co-existence with the sole superpower and a recourse to opportunism, expediency, and conformity. In that milieu there is little chance to reassert the Bandung spirit aimed at wiping out an attempt for new impe-

Referendum in France



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

A referendum on the European Constitution has just been held in France. The French voters rejected the constitution by 55 percent to 45 percent. It should be considered a setback to the steady march of the European Union (EU) but certainly not a catastrophe.

The British media closely followed by the US media have raised a spectre of doomsday. The reason for the British is simply that they are unable to take the plunge with the EU because of their "special relationship" with the US. For the US, it is more complex. For the immediate future, it sees the EU as a strong competitor in all fields although for the long run it realizes that EU can be a valuable partner.

The constitution for Europe raised more noise than it deserved. Any constitution is a complex document and the one we are talking about was no less. What worried the voters deep down was the question of loss of sovereignty of member states although it was not clearly spelt out. There was mention of a EU Foreign Minister, which may have troubled some voters. What is beyond any shadow of doubt is that the entire issue of the constitution was not clearly enunciated in a simple manner that could be understood by the voters. The entire exercise gave the impression that it lacked adequate preparation.

It has to be clearly understood that it will take a considerable period of preparation of public opinion before they can be asked even in an oblique way to surrender a part of their sovereignty. The nation state is the reality with which we live and die. The only meaningful supranational institution that has grown since the end of the Second World War is the UN, with its current member standing at 191, and nobody will claim that

even the tiniest member state has surrendered an iota of its sovereignty to this world body.

The EU since its birth more than half a century ago has been advancing steadily in the direction of a supranational body, and over decades has greatly advanced in that direction, from a Franco-German treaty, moving on to a group of six, and then eleven, and on to fifteen, and very recently to twenty five. The most dramatic move towards integration has been the adoption of the Euro, replacing

really mean that the people want time for reflection and to become mentally prepared to take the plunge.

I have been amused by the hullabaloo created by the media about the membership of Turkey to the EU. The fact of the matter is that Turkey has been striving for membership of this powerful organization for half a century. It has gone to the EU again and again only to be rebuffed. Turkish foreign policy which has a long-term vision, has remained steadfast. In

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

The French referendum will work as a temporary brake. It is evident that European public opinion was not ready to answer the question of adoption of the constitution. Before that event, slowly and painfully the people of Europe have to be made accustomed to the fact that Europe, where the concept of nation state was born, is getting ready to say good bye to that idea.

national currencies like the French Franc or the German Deutschmark.

Thus over the years EU has established institutions driving her towards the cherished goal of political union. This is the hardest one to achieve. For, as we have noted above, the adoption of the constitution involves surrendering a part of sovereignty. It is evident from the French vote that people are not ready yet to take that plunge. For the adoption of the constitution all 25 members have to vote "yes."

The "no" from France has a very important meaning. For the founders of the EU are France and Germany, who are really the motor of this powerful organization, which plays an ever growing role on the world stage. The nation state as we witness in the world today was born following the French Revolution in 1789. Thus we saw that following the rejection by a majority vote, the victors assembled at Bastille, which was the hated prison that had been pulled down by the revolutionaries. So if the French voters were unable to say "yes" that would

the last EU summit, Turkey after a long battle with all the members, managed to extract a date for the start of negotiations this coming autumn. This was the toughest hurdle she had to cross and Turkey waits for those negotiations to begin. Nobody will suggest that the negotiations are going to be easy or the route a short one. The expectation is that it will take at least half a dozen years for the talks to be completed. The one reassuring element for Turkey is that at the Helsinki summit a few years ago, the decision was made to invite Turkey to talks. Turkey has been attending EU summits ever since.

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PERSPECTIVES

Spirit is generated in the human mind and is preceded by renaissance in all human activities -- arts and literature, ideas and ingenuity, morality and ethics, politics and social reform. The spirit generated at Bandung did not come from nowhere. Unless the present stupor in thought is broken, new ideas cannot be born -- let alone the spirit of the original Bandung.

committed to a brave new world. With this breed of leaders vanished from the scene, the leadership in the developing world is today dominated by mediocrity and servility, incapable of breaking through a complex web of intrigues being hatched by the powerful.

Even if scores of countries in the third world are for resurrecting the Bandung spirit and their new strategic partnership calls for a multilateral approach to conflict resolution and to addressing the issues of terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, many in their ranks are the staunch allies of the US, and in one way or other subscribe to its neo-conservative philosophy. The Central Asian republics, the Gulf states, and a number of other Arab states have close relations with the sole superpower and are at its service to promote the interests of Israel. India also is on the way to becoming the US' strategic partner. How they all will balance the conflicting paradigms of Bandung and beyond remain to be seen.

It was at Bandung that the seeds of the Non-Aligned Movement, which took concrete shape at Belgrade in 1961, were sown. The bipolarity of the post-war years having passed into history and with the advent of a unipolar world, an unrivalled US seems

rum and neo-colonialism. Can those goals be achieved by the Allawis, Karzais, and Abu Mazens of this world?

Even if Bandung 2005 continues to back a sovereign Palestinian state, there is no visible sign on the part of NAASP that it will take a stand against Israel's undermining of the Quartet's road map to a viable Palestinian state by withdrawing its settlements only from the Gaza but consolidating those in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that have been under occupation for forty years. Neither is it in a mood to safeguard Iran's right under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes (even under intrusive IAEA inspection), which is being challenged by the US at the present NPT's seventh review conference in New York.

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Europe rejects a bad statute

People win over the market



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

BY voting out a conservative constitution proposed for the European Union, the French and the Dutch have dared to swim against the current. The "no" coalition, consisting largely, although not exclusively, of the radical Left and social movements, won against heavy odds in both countries.

In both, the "no" vote reflected the ruling governments' intense unpopularity and popular resentment against persistent unemployment, and other domestic factors.

Admittedly, the French and Dutch voted from a mix of motives, including xenophobia about immigration, a fear of loss of identity, and wanting to keep Turkey out of the EU. But defence of livelihoods and democratic sovereignty and was even more important.

About 15 percent of the vote was from the isolationist, chauvinistic Right. However, the largest and most attractive part came from the pro-integration Left.

The referendum, especially in

France, reflected a class divide. The upwardly mobile professional voted "yes." But the working class, facing hardship and economic uncertainty, rejected the "Europe of the Bosses."

The referenda spell the constitution's death. This will have a huge moral and political impact globally. Hopefully, it will lead to a democratic debate on the aims and purposes of the European Union: Is its original rationale valid? Should it be rooted in human rights, peaceful co-existence and respect for international law, or should it change?

Should "Social Europe," based on rights to healthcare, education, and welfare, be replaced by "Corporate Europe," where the market rules, competition drives down wages, and the state abandons its citizens?

The world has a big stake in this debate. A progressive "Social Europe" can support global struggles for liberty, justice, and peace, and help resist hegemony and Empire, while reducing North-South inequalities.

But a conservative Europe will become a pale imitation of the United States, at best a competitor, not an alternative. That will perpetuate

the present unequal world order. The constitution would have put the EU on that course.

Over the past decade, the EU has hardened its global postures. It competes with the US in selling arms to the Third World. It demands unreasonable concessions on trade in services and manufactures, while retaining agricultural subsidies. This goes against the Third World's interests.

The EU uses softer language than the US, but it arm-twists the Third World just as effectively in

the convention which drafted the constitution was established top-down, through nomination. It was mainly comprised of representatives of governments and national/European parliaments, and excluded civil society.

The constitution subordinates hard-won social rights to so-called free competition, and treats corporate interests as sacrosanct. It whittles down the fundamental right to work to the right to look for a job! It removes valuable social protections. And it mandates that

consensus rule, under which all EU decisions had to be unanimous in 25 member-states, it gives excessive powers to the Big Four (Germany, France, Britain, and Italy) and discriminates against smaller states.

It erodes the democratic decision-making space on immigration and social policy and grants the veto to parliaments only for defence, foreign policy, and taxation. The emphasis, however, is on a Common Foreign and Security Policy.

An especially offensive feature of

paper: "A Secure Europe in a Better World," calls for military "intervention anywhere," which is "early, rapid, and when necessary, robust." It says: "We should be ready to act before a crisis occurs." This is similar to the obnoxious Bush doctrine of "pre-emptive/preventive" war!

Central to this vision is the military-industrial complex. No wonder, European armaments manufacturers have gained enormous influence in Brussels. The drafting convention's defence group consulted 13 "experts" -- all from the arms industry or the bureaucracy. Their influence ensures huge new armaments orders. The EU hopes to match the US in military research too -- a disastrously costly move.

The EU's new militaristic orientation is unrelated to any external threat.

The defeat of the constitution is welcome. But now there must be a serious democratic debate on what kind of Europe its people want -- an arrogant Superpower which is unkind to its own citizens, or a federal entity that respects equality, caring-and-sharing, and justice, and wants to reform the present iniquitous world order?

Hopefully, this debate will lead to an elected constituent assembly which drafts a new statute -- not for a Europe of the Bosses, but a Europe of the People.

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Political stooges responsible for ills on DU campus

NAZRUL ISLAM

BEATING of university students and assaulting female students by police and a particular student organisation are not a new phenomena in our country. From the late 1980s, we have often been witnessing such incidents on different campuses in the country. But what happened during the last few days after the tragic death of a female student in a road accident on the Dhaka University campus is unprecedented and beyond imagination in any civilised society.

On the first day on May 28, the way the police behaved with the grief-stricken students following the death of Shammii Akhter Happy in the accident is unacceptable. Police indiscriminately beat up the students, including the female

ones, journalists, pedestrians, and whomever they got in their vicinity. The wildness of the police was not only unimaginable, but it also surpassed all previous records. They even dared to enter the classrooms and examination halls of the Institute of Fine Arts, dragged the examinees and students out of the rooms, and clubbed them mercilessly.

Those who saw the satellite TV clips and read newspaper descriptions could comprehend a fragment of the atrocities perpetrated by the law enforcers. But the eyewitness account was more vivid and horrific. At least 100 students were injured, many seriously, by the rowdy behaviour of police.

There was a time when it was unimaginable to beat a university student, especially a student of Dhaka University. Even during

We felt ashamed when we came to know that the VC of the country's biggest university invited the cadres of a student organisation to rescue him instead of confronting the general students with his might and authority. The VC who does not have the moral courage to confront the general students, does he have the moral right to lead the university?

Ershad's autocratic rule in the 1980s, the police did not dare to assault the students the way they are doing now in the so-called democratic era.

However, it is not new for the police to commit such crime on the DU campus. On July 23, 2002, the same police force launched an unprecedented assault on the students of Shamsunnahar Hall. Just imagine, what could happen when a group of rowdy male police

stormed into a female dormitory in the middle of night.

Now come to the second day's incident on May 29. The agitating students were demonstrating against the police atrocities of the previous day and demanding resignation of the proctor for his failure to protect the students. There was a strong rumour that the proctor invited the police onto campus, and if even the rumour is not true, he did not come to scene and take any

steps to restrain the police from their barbaric acts, which was his official and moral duty.

At one stage, the students entered the IFA building where the VC was meeting with the IFA teachers. The students were demonstrating inside the IFA, blocking the way of the VC to come out of the room of the director of the institute. Eyewitnesses said the VC did not try even once to come out of the room and calm the students. Rather he had a

good time drinking a couple of cups of coffee or tea in the air-conditioned room. He then telephoned the JCD leaders to rescue him from his imaginary confinement. And what did the JCD cadres do?

They applied the example their predecessors set in the 1980s when the JCD cadres assaulted the female students of Rokeya Hall on the open street of the campus. They applied their previous experience and skill of 2002 when they swooped on the

female students who were demonstrating to protest the Shamsunnahar Hall incident.

The ruling party cadres not only beat up the male students with sticks and branches of trees but also beat the female students and molested them, according to eyewitness accounts. What a barbaric act! How can a student behave so inhumanly with a fellow student? It is only possible for the cadres of the ruling party who can act with impunity.

The ferocity of the JCD was not stopped there. On May 31, they again went mad, swooping down on a procession of combined student bodies. They beat up everyone whom they encountered and went on a manhunt at different places of the campus. Again, the female students were not spared from their fury.

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to know that the VC of the country's biggest university invited the cadres of a student organisation to rescue him instead of confronting the general students with his might and authority. The VC who does not have the moral courage to confront the general students, does he have the moral right to lead the university?

If he uses the cadre-power of a particular student organisation, does he have any authority to stay in office? By such act, does not he become the stooge of the particular party or organisation? How long these political stooges will run the educational institutions? I think there is no dispute in the notion that these stooges are always responsible for all the ills happened on the campuses.

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