

Costly elections

Legislate new electoral laws

SOME of the comments made at a recent international workshop on 'Infrastructure Financing in Bangladesh' bring into focus the need for reforming our electoral laws to make elections transparent and fool proof. There was a correlation that was drawn up by the World Bank representative, between the high cost of getting elected in Bangladesh and its eventual impact on the country's infrastructure development, investment climate, and ultimately the development process.

While opinions may differ on the extent of the linkage the fact remains that connection between ill-gotten money and election has a profoundly deleterious impact on politics as well as on all sectors of our economy.

We reiterate our earlier calls for urgent reform in our electoral laws in a manner that would end the power of money as the only factor that can get people elected as member of parliament. There has unfortunately been a harmful nexus in our country between money and elections, where, in most cases, ill-gotten money is utilised to seek the highest elected office, only to accumulate more of the same.

The fact has also been recognised by the judiciary, which has directed the EC to elicit information regarding the candidates' income, assets and liabilities. This is where we feel the EC can play a very crucial and significant role in decoupling money and politics. Although the High Court directive provides enough clout to the EC to gather information, it must do more than this, in that the EC must also ascertain the veracity of the given statements of the candidates. The candidate, as also the party, must be made to go through a straining process before he or she can qualify as one. All relevant information on the candidate must also be made public for the benefit of the voters.

We feel that the matter of party registration and funding as well as election expenditure must also be brought under the purview of the EC. This necessitates new and appropriate legislation as a part of electoral reform in Bangladesh that must be put in place immediately.

For all too long money has dominated politics in Bangladesh, and the electorate have been given a raw deal. This must be ended through necessary reform in our electoral process, sooner rather than later.

Living with danger

Another kind, Bangladeshi-style

THIS has the smack of a horror movie relived in actual life in those rows of buildings upraised dangerously close to the undersides of aircrafts whizzing in and out of Zia International Airport. The perfect Hitchcock-type visual of eye-ball sprouting, stretched out, scary stares from the inmates at the descending or ascending wide-bodied aeroplanes on to and from the runways of ZIA.

It can hardly be contested that the buildings which were erected in defiance of height restrictions near the airport need to be lowered down to the safety of prescribed ceilings.

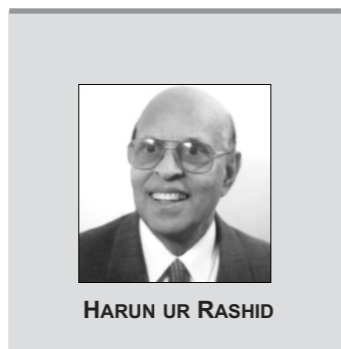
The Civil Aviation Authority, Bangladesh (CAA,B) and Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha (Rajuk) after having identified 111 buildings as 'risky' took out a court order to demolish the upper stories of some such constructions. Sixty-six of them have been spotted in the most 'vulnerable category; of which, 17 have already lost the unauthorised height.

Several questions arise out of this absurd situation. The CAA, B and Rajuk are working in tandem now to enforce the building rules out of grave aviation and ground safety concerns, but couldn't they have acted in a coordinated fashion beforehand so as to avert the costly demolition exercise in the first place? Waste of public and private resources is involved in no small measure here.

Principally, whose fault is it? How could the buildings be raised in the dangerous funnel to a height that would expose aircrafts to lethal brushes and the inmates of those houses to mortal dangers? Were the building owners served with timely notices to refrain from the unauthorised vertical construction? A suspicion arises in the public mind as to whether silence of some officials was bought off; otherwise, how is one to explain the buildings coming to height without anybody in authority noticing it or taking a corrective action?

We would like the issue to be addressed by instituting a probe and making the public aware of the outcome of it, so that the people owning land in the area together with the designated oversight bodies are fully sensitised about their respective duties.

Why did Israel dismantle the Gaza settlements?



HARUN UR RASHID

ISRAELI Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (76), is an old war-horse but he made history by dismantling settlements and relocating 8,000 Israeli settlers from the Gaza earlier this week. He is the first Israeli leader who has withdrawn settlers on lands illegally seized and occupied for the last 38 years after the 1967 war.

Sharon has always taken a risky strategy, whether in Lebanon in 1982 or in the Gaza withdrawal today. His Likud party is on the verge of collapse because of disunity on the question of withdrawal of Israeli settlers, and the hawkish US-educated Netanyahu, his political rival and former Prime Minister, resigned from the cabinet.

According to an Israeli historian, Uzi Benziman, never in Israel's history has there been a man such as Sharon (his parents, Samuel and Vera, migrated to Israel from Russia in 1922). He is unique in his personality and his perception of the world, his

approach to peace and war is often difficult to understand. His ability to survive politically has been spectacular. He is commonly known in Israel as "Israeli Caesar."

The question is why

It is not because of the recognition that Israel has illegally occupied the Palestinian lands after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Political observers believe that there are

Jewish character of Israel

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected the idea of a binational state. Israel wishes to remain a Jewish state. This means that the overwhelming majority of population must be Jewish.

That is why Sharon has made two key decisions: (i) the construction of a wall between Israel

and West Bank, grabbing many areas of the West Bank where Jewish population have settled there since 1967, and (ii) the pull out of Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip. Both these decisions are designed to address the demographic imbalance.

Israel's birth rate is dwindling. That is why Israel wants more Jewish immigration from US, France, and the former Soviet Union.

Swap of land

One of the areas is reported to be

power with the assistance and support of the US (since the removal of Saddam Hussein, only Iran is considered to pose a threat, and that is why both US and Israel do not want a nuclear programme in Iran, while Israel has nuclear warheads). Their new danger of losing Jewish identity emanates from increasing Arab population within Israel.

Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the extreme right political

party, has already started slogans about disengagement (withdrawal) from Wadi Area and Umm-el-Fahm. Lieberman advocates a "populated land swap."

This means Israel will give Umm-el-Fahm and the adjacent Arab-populated area west of the "Green line" to a future Palestinian state, in return for depopulated lands in the West Bank. This is called "soft transfer."

The residents of Ummel-Fahm reject firmly the idea and they called it "racist and unacceptable." The Arabs want to remain Israeli citizens. The left-wing Israeli political parties also oppose the idea on the ground

Conclusion

The Gaza Strip is only 5 per cent of Palestinian occupied lands. The Gaza pull-out alone will not bring peace unless Israel dismantles illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and agrees to the rightful demands of transfer of East Jerusalem to them. Sharon is determined to annex the settlements in the West Bank and retain East Jerusalem. "Might is Right" remains the doctrine of Israel in the 21st century.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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primarily two reasons for taking such a decision.

First is he is well aware of the very high cost, in human, political, and military terms, in protecting the small number of Israeli settlers in the Gaza. There is no military solution to a political problem concerning the rights of Palestinians.

Second is to maintain the demographic majority of Jewish population within Israel. There are two options for Israel:

- (a) a bi-national state in a large territory, living with Arabs, or
- (b) a Jewish state with a small territory.

According to available information, Bangladesh imported goods worth US dollar 101.06 crore from India during the FY 2001-02 as against its export to India goods for US dollar 5.02 crore, and thus suffered a bilateral deficit of US dollars 96.03 crore. Trade deficit now stands at US dollars 166.00 crore favouring India which is a 72.86 percent increase in three years. Trade deficit with China was only US dollars 9.24 crore in the FY 1990-91 when Bangladesh exported goods worth US dollars 3.32 crore to China. The bilateral trade deficit now stands at US

average.

Implications

The Gaza withdrawal is accelerating the debate over Israel's future identity with narrower borders. In this debate, demogra-

phology will be the main guideline. Topography or more land for Israel has taken a back seat.

Since Arab population is increasing faster than Jewish population within Israel, attention has been turned to Arab areas within Israel where the Palestinian population is increasing by leaps and bounds.

Now a lot of Israelis want to swap the Wadi Area including the Umm el-Fahm in return for the large Jewish settlement "blocks" east of the "Green Line" on the West Bank. Umm el-Fahm is the second-largest Palestinian town inside Israel's pre-1967 borders.

To Israel, neighbouring Arab countries do not pose any threat whatsoever because Israel has become the strongest military

party, has already started slogans about disengagement (withdrawal) from Wadi Area and Umm-el-Fahm. Lieberman advocates a "populated land swap."

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Mounting trade deficit and trade diplomacy

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE mounting trade deficit with the major trading partners of Bangladesh, widened further and crossed 4,008 billion US dollars in the fiscal year (FY) 2004-05. The trade deficit - which was 3,207 billion US dollars in the FY 2003-04 - shot up by 25 percent in the FY 2004-05.

According to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), trade deficit increased due to sharp rise in the import volume of petroleum products, consumer goods, and capital machinery. As the dollar maintained a steady rise in rate against the taka and the taka depreciated by 8 percent during the last fiscal, the cost of all import items went up to a great extent. The country's export policy, which is led more by political consideration than by commercial and economic ones, has also contributed in widening the trade deficit. According to the official statistics, the country's trade deficit has tripled during the last 10 years.

Product-wise import figures during the FY 2004-05, released by Bangladesh

Bank, reveals that petroleum products worth Tk 9,665.81 crore were imported, which was higher by Tk 3,699.42 crore than FY 2003-04. Consumer goods worth Tk 7,839.66 crore were imported as against Tk 5,416.62 crore in FY 2003-04. Foodstuff worth Tk 3,530.11 crore was imported as against Tk 2,363.80 crore in FY 2003-04. Industrial raw materials worth Tk 29,661.72 crore were imported, while it was Tk 28,546.12 crore in FY 2003-04. The import of capital machinery increased at Tk 6,673.55 crore as against Tk 4,688.10 crore in the last fiscal. The import of edible oil, which was Tk 3,243.44 crore in FY 2003-04, alone decreased by Tk 229.79 crore. Import of petroleum

products recorded 62 percent increase while the consumer goods import recorded 44.73 percent rise in FY 2004-05.

According to the statistics available with the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), the country's export volume rose to 8,655 billion US dollars while the import value increased to 12,663 billion, creating the ever highest trade deficit of 4,008 billion US dollars in FY 2004-05. Exports grew only by 14 percent while imports increased by 25 percent during the period. The growing trade deficit has already created pressure on the exchange rate and the

cost of all import items went up to a great extent. The country's export policy, which is led more by political consideration than by commercial and economic ones, has also contributed in widening the trade deficit. According to the official statistics, the country's trade deficit has tripled during the last 10 years.

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taka has been devaluated by 8 percent against the volatile dollar. The country's foreign currency reserve also reduced to 2.85 billion US dollars which is equivalent to import bill for three months. Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed, an eminent economist of the country, has ascribed the situation to the speedy trade liberalisation policy adopted by the government.

The country's trade deficit with 20 major countries in FY 2002-03 was over Tk 30,449 crore. Commerce Minister Air Vice Marshal (ret'd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury disclosed it in Parliament in June last year. Of the total, deficit with India only was Tk 7,358.53 crore followed by Singapore at Tk 5,006.59 crore, and China at Tk 4,408.28 crore. Over the last few years, in fact, Bangladesh has been recording a 20 to 25 percent increase in trade deficit on the

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The commerce ministry has proposed to set up consular offices or appoint honorary consuls in 46 territories across the world to safeguard the country's trade interests in a complex global trade scenario. But setting up of consuls and appointment of trade officials will help the country to promote trade and investment abroad, only when these consular offices are manned with competent and dynamic people. In this era of trade diplomacy, the exporters of Bangladesh need to develop trade links with their foreign counterparts.

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OPINION

Which government will smite the religious militants?

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

THE finance and planning minister Saifur Rahman may have tried to trifle away the degree of menace of massive bomb blasts of 8/17 across the country, covering 63 districts all at a time -- 500 in a spate of 30 minutes -- by arguing that now-a-days bomb explosions are a regular phenomenon of the world, no country is spared from this danger. India has experienced it in its parliament complex a kind which we are exempted from. But the people of Bangladesh are no longer that fool to be comforted by such wily contentions of the minister. Indeed the present day world is smeared by 9/11, 7/7 and compared to their scale of devastations 8/17 is really insignificant. But in terms of coordination, precision and breadth of network it has carried a weight and message unseen and unheard of.

is a very basic difference between the bomb occurrences in other parts of the world and those in Bangladesh on 8/17. Nowhere in the world the government is so blamed for any incident of bomb blasts. But in Bangladesh the recent bomb attacks are alleged to be due to government indifference and laxity.

Meanwhile volumes of exercises, physical, mental, intellectual, by the government, opposition, civil society, business communities etc. bearing trademarks of blame game, smear campaign, thrashing of intelligence agencies, analysing the causes and highlighting the effects -- destroying democracy, secularism, progress -- have come to top focus crowding the print and electronic media. It is no use repeating on them. Better be on the track to try to weigh if the present government or any other government of a different combine if succeeding the existing one can hold out a hope of fighting truly and

meaningfully against terrorism in Bangladesh.

It is highly improbable that the present government combine will fight out Islamic terrorism that has spread its tentacles all over the country over the recent years. The causes are not far to seek.

Firstly, the government has on

It is highly improbable that the present government combine will fight out Islamic terrorism that has spread its tentacles all over the country over the recent years. If a government of different colour comes to succeed the present combine, will that government grapple tooth and nail with the Islamist terrorists?

its council of ministers powerful religious fundamentalists who cherish the ideal of ruling the country by sharia laws as are also the goals of the perpetrators of 8/17 bomb operations.

Secondly, the BNP is not a party that has tried to learn that state and religion are different entities. One is to be totally divorced from being identified with the other. Infiltration of religion into governance

appears quite acceptable to its political philosophy. Perturbed only when it militates against BNP suzerainty.

Thirdly, the BNP is mostly a motley assembly of self-centred elements. They have come under its banner only to hunt interests. A good number of seasonal birds,

political turncoats have donned the BNP colours. Any risky political manoeuvring to avoid repeat of 8/17 bomb blasts may not be supported by the party hirelings.

Fourthly, the BNP seems terribly perturbed to see that it has solved its own political equations wrong. When asked why it took two anti-liberation dons on cabinet it replied gratifyingly that drawing them into lap would help keep them under

restraint within safe bounds. But exploiting cabinet position they infiltrated into and extended within the core of the government hierarchy. Taking cue the Islamist fundamentalists outside paced up their activities so as to steadily gain confidence that they can go their way alone offering the government

a wise option to team up with them. Fifthly, could the BNP gauge properly that after the fall of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and President Musharraf of Pakistan playing into Bush's hand the fugitive Islamists from those two countries have been in frantic search of a shelter elsewhere and discovered Bangladesh as a safe haven for the Islamist hordes that the western journalists alleged to the

wrath of the government? If overawed by a likely situation coming into reality it would be difficult for the BNP to rise to the occasion to offset the terrorists.

Sixthly, drunk with a political culture of mutual exterminations the ruling. BNP's all strategies were aimed at containing the main

opposition Awami League. Apart from an inclination towards the Islamist extremists the BNP leadership wooed the religious fundamentalists believing the entente would wipe out the Awami top brass. It is near impossible that the BNP would break up this circle. Though hard pressed by the donor countries and the general mass of the country to catch and punish the perpetrators of 8/17 scourge it is

hardly probable that the BNP would go much beyond eye wash exercises to chastise the culprits.

If a government of different colours come to succeed the present combine, will that government grapple tooth and nail with the Islamist terrorists? Let us dispassionately find out a probable answer to this question.

If the present government of the BNP-led combine leave out in future, the first priority of replacement may come to the Awami League and its allies as may be formed in days to come.

The hard reality is that the Awami League, if coming to power, may soften its stance to go all out to extirpate the religious extremists from Bangladesh. The Awami League is a party no less addicted to capturing power. If having it, its first concern may be enjoying authority and amassing personal fortunes through means fair or foul. In the process it may lose much of its credibility and people's confi-

dence reducing it to an outfit stooping to meek compromise and conciliation. It may avoid to undertake any tough job that may involve it into turmoil and risk its stay in power. The promises and pledges to beat out the religious extremists may get diluted providing space for the militants to maintain their status undamaged in the society.

The other redeeming feature is that probably no single party can be voted to power and if the Awami League is pushed to power its alliance partners may have contained personalities who will pressurise the government to refrain from hobnobbing with the religious extremists and acting against the interests of the masses.

Another strong safeguard will be the EU, donor countries, used to warning the government time and again against fraternising with the religious terrorists.

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