

Govt celebrates four years

Precious little for nation to rejoice in

THE overwhelming reaction to the record of the government over the last four years since it came to power is one of disappointment. The feeling of being let down reflects the enormous gap between the aspirations and hopes that were pinned on a party that had gained a mandate of over two thirds of the seats in parliament and what it has actually achieved in office.

Indeed, sometimes it is possible to almost forget the extent of the mandate that swept the current government into power four years ago, such is the controversy in which it has managed to mire itself. Its record is a litany of failure and it has suffered and continues to suffer a serious diminution of authority and credibility as a result, squandering the goodwill of four years ago.

To be fair there are some bright spots to the past four years. There has been macroeconomic stability and an increase in foreign investment to boast of. In addition, many social indicators are positive and agricultural output has increased, though these only reflect the pre-existing trends and indeed have little to do with leadership as such.

But more salient are the government's many failings, too numerous to mention fully here. Crime is down, but not enough, and the means by which this has been achieved have been reprehensible. In any event, the government's inability to get to the bottom of the spate of terrorist attacks that the nation has suffered means that security of person and property is lower than ever.

On the political plane we have seen what can only be termed as abuse of majority status and the arrogance of power that has hijacked the space for democratic opposition. It should be pointed out that the government's failings would have been even more pronounced had they not been matched by the shortcomings of the opposition.

The political culture of the country continues to deteriorate. The government remains blatantly insensitive to the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. Foreign policy has been directionless as we have offended more countries than we have befriended. Even the much hyped Look East policy has proven to be more words than action.

Corruption has reached unprecedented levels under the current administration, and encompasses ministers, the PMO, and the families of the powerful. In this respect, we must mention with dismay the rise of an alternative power centre that has emerged as the epicentre of corruption.

Given this background, we are bound to state that the only redemption for the government and indeed the country is a firm commitment to free and fair elections. Such commitment to the democratic process would go a long way towards redeeming the credibility of the government and restoring its prestige in the eyes of the public, but it must be admitted that the early indications in this respect have not been encouraging.

Power supply failure

Too blazing to brook

THE power supply situation has worsened further in the country, as reports of people demonstrating against frequent loadshedding in different places keep pouring in. In the extreme cases, the consumers have blocked roads or even attacked power stations in order to drive home their demand for regular power supply.

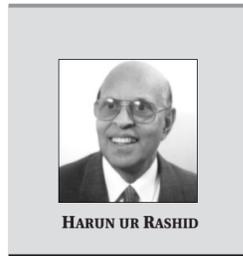
The public commotion is understandable as the month of Ramadan is into its first week, the Hindu community is celebrating Durga Puja, and Eid-ul-Fitr is less than four weeks away. The power supply authorities had announced earlier that the supply situation would be steadied before the two festivals, but in reality the frequency of outage has only increased.

The supply shortfall, amounting to 1000 megawatts per day, has a lot to do with the fact that production at 14 power generation stations is suspended at the moment. Five of these 14 stations are expected to resume production by October 15, which will help matters improve slightly. The power authorities should make sure that the improvement takes place according to the schedule, and take the necessary measures for resuming production in nine other stations as well.

Load-shedding is a chronic problem that has had a crippling effect on every sector of our national life. The FDI inflow into the country has increased, but the investors can only feel frustrated if the country fails to meet the basic requirements of industries. The productivity in mills and factories suffers badly due to erratic power supply, and so does trade and commerce, let alone pursuit of education by millions of students.

The public outcry is a ringing indictment on the poor management of the vital power sector where addition of capacity remains as elusive as ever. The decision-makers should treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves in order that the citizens are rescued from the desperate situation they are reeling under.

Turkey's admission into the European Union



HARUN UR RASHID

TURKEY'S talks for full membership into the European Union (EU) started off on October 3 on the wrong foot, as Austria has shown its racial and religious prejudices towards Turkey's entry.

Out of 25 members, Austria, changed its stance and advocated for an associate membership (second class member) of the EU for Turkey. The country more or less held the EU hostage to its irrational proposal.

The British Foreign Secretary (Minister) Jack Straw (Britain being the current President of the EU), chairing the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the EU, could only hope and pray that the crisis would be solved.

After thirty continuous hours of hard bargaining, Austria, a Catholic-majority country, climbed down, but insisted on yoking membership talks for Turkey with membership talks for Croatia, another Catholic-majority country.

Britain has always been a strong supporter of Turkey's membership to the EU, and the British Foreign Secretary reportedly hailed the deal as "a truly historic day for Europe and for the international community."

Turkey's concern

The Turkish people were hurt at the open exhibition of Austria's apparent racial and religious prejudices towards a secular Turkey. They are angry and disillusioned. They are now not sure whether it is at all prudent to obtain membership in a Christian club where some members do not want them there.

The US Secretary of State reportedly watched the situation closely as the US

its importance in strategic terms to the West has been emphasised by taking Turkey into the fold of Nato from the very inception. It is a close ally to the US and during the Cold War stood as a bulwark against the spread of the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East. During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the US had to withdraw its missiles from Turkey as a compromise in exchange of withdrawal of missiles from Cuba by the Soviet Union.

French conservative President Valery Giscard d'Estaing has publicly repeated his objection to its membership.

Giscard d'Estaing strongly argues that Turkey is an Asian country (Turkey's capital is in Ankara, Asia) and a Muslim majority one. He contends that these characteristics do not match those of the European Union.

It is intriguing to note that he did not raise objection to the location of

ship is due partly to the existence of its the right-wing government in a predominantly Catholic country (78 per cent of its population are Catholic) and partly to the unsuccessful Turkish attempt to besiege Austria's capital city Vienna in 1529 under the Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent. Austrians cannot shake off their mental syndrome that Turkey has been waiting at "the gates of Vienna" (a reference to the battle

clouds, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, reportedly said: "Turkey has taken a giant step forward on its march." Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul has been at the talks in Luxembourg.

Turkish membership should be seen as an opportunity of the EU than a threat. It would have been tragic if EU did not start talks with Turkey which has gone through considerable reforms in areas of human rights and economy to comply with the demands of the EU.

Conclusion

Turkey's membership will involve a long difficult process of negotiation. It may take between ten and fifteen years for its eligibility into the EU. Meanwhile, many Turkish people wonder whether Turkey should become a member of the EU given the opposition of some European states.

The membership of the EU has become so attractive for many southern and Balkan states (such as Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania) that they are willing, like Turkey, to undergo drastic social and economic reforms in exchange for economic dividends.

Many political analysts say that the EU has been using soft power instead of hard power to bring reforms to these countries for the benefit of their own peoples. One can argue that the EU strategy of using soft power has been more successful than the heavy-handed strategy of using hard power that the US has employed to try to bring about change in the Middle East. The bottom line is that economic gains motivate countries to join the EU, and in exchange they have to undertake socio-economic reforms.

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

BOTTOM LINE

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supports the membership of Turkey. She reportedly talked with the Prime Minister of Turkey, giving reassurance that Cyprus would not become a member of the Nato, while Turkey took four hours before accepting "common" EU policies, one of the conditions of the talks with the EU, implying that this would force them into agreement to allow Cyprus into Nato, of which Turkey is a member.

Turkey's strategic location Turkey's relatively small European sector with Istanbul (in earlier times known as Constantinople) as the main city covers only 23,764 square kilometres, separated from the Asian part by the Turkish straits. The Asian provinces, known as Anatolia, cover 755,688 square kilometres. Its population is around 70 million and constitutes about 99 percent Sunni Muslims. The country is strategically located.

Reservations by a few countries

The last minute deal by the European Union to the talks for admission to the Christian Club by a populous Muslim country illustrates the serious reservations of some European members to Turkey's bid to the European Union.

Even at the dawn of the 21st century, reservations about a secular Muslim majority country which has maintained diplomatic relations with Israel exist among the few so-called "secular countries" of the EU, although the EU is aware that Turkish membership would move the EU frontier to the border of Iran and increase its population to more than 500 million.

It is reported that 80 per cent of people of France, Germany, and Austria are opposed to Turkey's membership into the EU. The former

Cyprus, only 80 kilometres south of Turkey, when it became a full member, because it is a Christian country. The question is: Is Cyprus in Europe?

Another fact is that Israel, located in the Middle East, joins the European sporting contests and participates in the Eurovision song competition. Do any European states raise objection?

Identity crisis?

There are many Turkish writers who believe that Turkey suffers from an identity crisis. Does Turkey belong to European values or Asian (Islamic) values? Turkish position is comparable to being a matter which is "neither solid or liquid, it is jelly". It has both European and Asian values and cultures. Mehmet Ali Birand, a leading Turkish writer, believes that with the admission of Turkey with the EU, its identity crisis will be over. Austria's objection to full member-

between Turks and Christians in 1683 in Eastern Europe).

Turkey's entry into EU

Turkey has been trying to get into the European Union for decades. It became an associate member in 1963 and since then has been waiting "at the gates" of the Christian Club.

Turkey's desire for membership of the EU was accelerated when it found that by 2004, ten new countries including Cyprus (Greek-held part) became members of the Union, many countries much earlier than Turkey because they are Christian countries.

Turkish membership will be subject to the difficult condition of referendums to be held in France and Austria. Observers believe that this strict condition was not put for membership of other Christian countries. Despite all these dark political

Elections in Bangladesh and minorities

SUBIR KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA

THE holding of free and fair elections is a measure of how democracy works in a country and how it is practised by all major political parties, particularly the party in power. There is no reason why a national election should be rigged if all major political parties believe in the peaceful transfer of power through ballot.

The caretaker government system in the interregnum between two successive governments is an ad-hoc arrangement only for a limited period in a nascent democracy. Once democracy is deeply ingrained in the socio-political culture of a country, caretaker government system becomes redundant.

In an ideal democracy, political culture should be such that leaders have tolerance and respect for each other, adhere to norms of compromise and give-and-take, and place national interests and people's welfare above everything else. Power should be reckoned as responsibility. Power without responsibility is like a child toting a gun.

I wish to here raise an election related issue which I believe is fundamental to the future of our democracy.

Disconcerting news appeared in most of the major English and Bengali dailies following the recently held Chittagong mayoral election that minorities were intimidated and harassed by ruling alliance cadres and prevented from coming to some polling stations.

The disposition of the law-enforcement agencies deployed at the election, particularly the armed forces was positive, as they were reported to come to the assistance of minorities as and when they were subject to harassment.

While I do not think the government is insensitive to the plight of the minorities, no statement was issued assuring the minorities and cautioning those who attempted to cause violence and disrupt polling during the election and those who might resort to similar means in future.

Such a step by the government

would have been ideal and welcome to all democracy-loving people. The government, for its part, perhaps might not think it fit to get into such a small issue as this when it has a very long list of pressing national and international issues to tackle.

But whatever is the thinking of policy-makers in the government, the emerging scenario is far more compelling and complex to minority communities, who are apt to draw

combine their strength in support when there was any crisis, probably because some of them, while championing human rights and minority rights, were subject to harassment, intimidation, and physical assault, and a few even had to lay down their lives.

However, the print media is generally vocal in support of minorities and the socially disadvantaged, and a good number of

May I take this opportunity to appeal to the conscience of the majority, whose religion Islam means and propagates peace across the globe, to consider seriously whether minorities get equal treatment as citizens as enshrined in the Bangladesh constitution. Should there be a sound option that will guarantee safety and security of lives and property and religious freedom, I am certain it will be acceptable to all minorities, whatever may be the pre-conditions.

parallel between the atrocities unleashed on minorities in the aftermath of the 2001 general elections and the recently held mayoral election, though in a much smaller scale, and fear a repetition of similar violence in the forthcoming general elections, or even worse, depending on which party wins election.

As a member of a minority community, I worry about reprisals in the elections and so also do the overwhelming majority of minority communities, and their worries are not unfounded, as the short history of Bangladesh attests.

Political leaders in the ruling alliance should have been more forthright in making public pronouncements in support of the minorities to reassure them. Among the opposition leaders, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been expressing her concern and support for minorities when there is any disquiet, as do leaders like Dr Kamal Hossain, Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury, and left-leaning parties like JSD, CPB, and a few individuals who proclaim to be the followers of the ideals of liberation war.

Members of civil society and a good number of NGOs are quite sympathetic to the cause of minorities -- some in the latter group are in fact quietly doing good jobs for minorities -- but they have not been able to

newspapers have been consistently reporting on any incidents of repression against minorities and human rights violations. But despite active support from some progressive quarters, the situation has not much improved for minorities, particularly in rural areas, who still live in fear, because the perpetrators are emboldened by government's reluctance to recognise that the minorities do indeed suffer and have a genuine case. Crimes and infringement of laws should not be left unaccounted for; otherwise civility will be gradually replaced by wildness, reason by brute force, and respect and tolerance by hate.

The minorities constitute, according to unofficial estimate, close to 15 percent of the population, and 11.7 percent (Hindu 10.5; Buddhist 0.6; Christian 0.3; and others 0.3) as per official estimate. However, their representation in the administration, judiciary, and legislature, that is, in the government overall, and in business, academic institutions (particularly in universities), and other organisations, is palpably insignificant. At present there is no cabinet minister, no ambassador, no Supreme Court judge, no vice-chancellor, no head of any corporations, no secretary to the government, and no senior armed forces officer (except one major general in the army and one secretary posted outside of ministries).

where intake of minorities is the highest.

Land owned by minorities in cities is less than 0.1 percent and in general less than 1 percent country-wide. Few are in major businesses and fewer still have industries. The economic condition of minorities is miserable to say the least. Nevertheless, they are subject to physical assault, forcible seizure of their properties by neighbours, assault on the places of their worship, intimidation, and fear. I have also reports that lands belonging to Hindu and Buddhist temples and crematoriums are being encroached upon and slowly grabbed.

Many in the government are apt to say that the minorities are enjoying their rights peacefully and better off than those in India and other countries. Minorities in Bangladesh detest any comparison with citizens of other countries, and believe their rights should be protected in Bangladesh as per Bangladesh constitution, not according to what minorities in India and other countries enjoy. However, an example may be cited for the information of readers that three most powerful positions in India -- the Prime Minister (Sikh), the President of Congress Party (Christian) and the President of India (Muslim) -- are presently held by minorities.

Contrary to popular belief, the minorities were no better in a

significant way during Awami League rule than in other regimes. In the so-called golden days for the minorities during the period 1972-1975 and thereafter in 1996-2001, the Enemy Property Act was only renamed as Vested Property and slightly modified, retaining the diabolical provisions, by which minorities are being evicted from their own lands by unscrupulous people in connivance with land administration people. The minorities

available to them so as to extricate themselves from the onslaught of groups of armed cadres belonging to major political parties. The minorities yearn for a peaceful life, a life that may not give them affluence or even economic security, but gives them peace and freedom from fear, thus providing them at least a fighting chance to survive. A life of economic well-being, bereft of freedom from constant fear of threat, intimidation and torture in case of toting an independent posture is not at all desirable. The minorities look upon the government, the opposition and the conscience of the majority to give them guidance or a course of action, which ensures their peaceful co-existence.

I feel they have two options. The first option is that they may opt for representative democracy, meaning that there should be quota for minorities in all spheres of life from parliament to administration and the judiciary in proportion to the percentage of their population. They will elect their MPs as do women in the reserved seats of parliament. Quota should be fixed for all government jobs, both in the administration and the judiciary, barring a few posts, which will be obviously out of bounds for the minorities. Verily, the minorities will be treated as second-class citizens, but at least they will not be subjected to inhuman treatments during and after elections. Second, they may vote in future elections as a bloc and forge strategic alliance with a party that will protect them from assault, whatever may be its ideology.

While I generally salute our press as the champion of human rights and democracy, I am inspired to specifically refer to the editorial captioned Murder of NGO Workers of the Daily Star on July 31 as an admirable and logical piece of writing and an example of heroic and adept journalism.

I quote the relevant portion: "The majority Muslim population of the country is very concerned about the rights of the Muslim minorities in other countries. Just as we want Muslim minorities in other countries to enjoy equal rights with the majorities, so we must be prepared to give unfettered rights to followers of other faiths in our country. We lose the moral high ground of demanding equal rights for Muslims in other countries, if we fail to protect the same for the members of any minority community in the country. Let there be no mistake about it."

It is the constant endeavour of the minorities to find out what options are

The writer is a former Ambassador.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE 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.

GrameenPhone

It is really great to be a subscriber of GrameenPhone. Well, first of all congratulations for your EDGE service & its brilliant performance. But the sad thing is that often while we use Internet for website browsing we face technical problems, thus we can't browse at that time. Moreover, GP charges for that time too. I think it's not right to take money from us if we can't use Internet at that particular time.

I hope the Grameen authorities will notice this problem & soon find out a better solution for us.
Samihah Esha
Uttara, Dhaka

Hindu extremism

When ruthless extremists kill innocent civilians in the name of Islam, Muslims

around the world and in Bangladesh condemn the heinous acts in the strongest possible terms. When some ignorant social elements of Bangladesh are intolerant of other religions, majority of Bangladeshi citizens stand up in defence of the minorities. However, when Indian BSF terrorises the border areas, and kills innocent Bangladeshi nationals, Hindus around the world, and especially in Bangladesh, express no concern. They have so far remained dead silent, and extremely hesitant to criticise the state terrorism of India.

Shockingly, not a single Bangladeshi Hindu condemned the "Vishwa Hindu Parishad" (VHP), a terrorist organisation in India which instigated and mobilised one million Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992 to destroy the historic Babri

Mosque. Not a single Bangladeshi Hindu expressed concern on lifting the ban on VHP (ban lifted on June 21, 1995). VHP, a "JMB" type terrorist organisation, has various organisational wings. The "Bajrang Dal" is the youth militant wing of the VHP, organised in many Indian states. It operates major training camps called "Shakhas", where thousands of young men train in group activities, receive extreme religious education and learn the so called "self-defensive" arms training. VHP also has a female militant wing called "Durga Vahini" which is also governed by the same principles of "Bajrang Dal".

VHP believes in the declaration of India as a Hindu Rashtira. They are actively financing and campaigning for the implementation of a "Uniform Civil Code" and revocation of "Article

370" of the Indian constitution. It is well financed, and politically connected with BJP. VHP promotes extreme ideology and instigates violence and hatred by spreading lies such as "Muslims and Christians were Hindus in the first place, and that all citizens of Bharat are naturally Hindus."

I wonder how the moderate and tolerant Bangladeshi Hindus can remain silent about such vicious religious propaganda.
Shadabul Mujib
Los Angeles, US

No achievement!

On October 1, 2005 we celebrated the landslide victory of BNP-Jamaat alliance and as well as the so called 'Vote Revolution Day'. On that day they got the two thirds majority and

formed a new government. In a democratic country, people are the safeguard of democracy through the process of evaluation of their government's and elected members' success or failure. In other words, the elected members should act as representatives of people. Thus democracy can become meaningful to society and the country.

What is the achievement of the coalition government in the higher education sector in the last four years? From the view point of a student, we can say 'Not a good time at all!'

Our government has failed to secure the common men's fundamental rights.
Sultan Mohammed Zakaria
Information Science
University of Dhaka

Earthquake

preparedness

The devastating earthquake jolting India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and killing thousands of people has left lessons to be learnt by Bangladesh. Bangladesh's geographical position has made the country vulnerable to earthquakes. As there had not been any major earthquake since more than a century, the risk has become more tangible. The way high buildings are growing in the capital it could be presumed that there would be huge loss of life and property in case of an earthquake.

But are we prepared enough to face the immediate aftermath of such a quake? Do we have an adequate number of rescue workers with experience and are they equipped with modern rescue tools? The condition of our rescue operation was reflected when a garment factory collapsed in Savar and

an antique house collapsed in Shankhari Bazar. On both the occasions it took a long time to remove the debris and rescue the survivors. The rescue work was conducted almost manually.

The country's lone seismic observatory is situated at Chittagong which is almost a century old. The previous government and the present government had taken steps to establish a few seismic observation centres in the country. The buildings have also been constructed but, mysteriously enough, the costly equipment have never arrived. We are not prepared as well to treat the injured and to bury the bodies of the dead.

We have to always remember that following a quake hundreds of high rise buildings would collapse in Dhaka and the situation has to be managed simultaneously over a wide area in other parts

of the country.

Every time following an earthquake there are seminars where expert opinions are expressed but after that everything goes silent. There is no regulation over growing high risers and also no planning of effective rescue management. Earthquake is a type of natural disaster which is beyond any type of forecasting. So, we have to be prepared to face it any time. Every year a large part of our budget is spoiled due to corruption and misuse. But we are reluctant to pay attention to such a need.

The lessons have been left by the Oct 8 quake. Shall our government and the authorities concerned learn something from it?
Molnu Alam
Eskaton, Dhaka