

Four years of opposition role

A saga of less than responsible conduct

YESTERDAY we commented on the four years of the alliance rule. Today we shall dilate on the four years of opposition role in our politics.

Regrettably, the overwhelming impression is that the Awami League (AL) has failed to play its part of a responsible opposition befitting a party with a long history in politics.

Granted that the opposition was denied adequate space by the ruling alliance; we have no hesitation either in accepting its argument that honest dissent and political rights of the opposition were met with violence by the government. We will even go so far as to say that the AL was the victim of gross violence perpetrated by the administration. But, in spite of all these, we are compelled to say that the AL came through in the last four years as a party that has failed to fulfill its mandate as a responsible opposition just as the government has miserably failed on its part to fulfill its role as a responsible government. And the nation unfortunately is very much the worse for the combined failures of the opposition and the government of the last four years.

First, AL politics during this time revolved around its policy of boycott of the parliament. This was a most ill advised action, an outright betrayal of the electorate. One wonders why they got elected at all if it was to abdicate their responsibility reposed by the voters. Did the AL ever consider the fact that their decision to boycott the parliament has caused their constituents to go unrepresented in the house of the people, however undermined by the Treasury bench?

Second, AL politics was exclusively directed from the very first day towards non-cooperation and later toppling the government rather than being based on specific issues. One recalls with as much horror as with trepidation the 'trump card' of '30 April deadline' of the AL last year, to uproot an elected government.

Our only hope now is that in the time left till the next election the AL will act to rehabilitate its image as a responsible opposition. It can do so by eschewing hartal that is bringing the party to disrepute. It can do so also by creating an image of an alternative party in power with alternative policies, as enunciated by its leader the day before yesterday. By inculcating a culture of intra-party democracy can the AL also make its actions creditable in the public eye. Much of its image will also depend on the quality of its nominees for the next election. One would expect the AL not to stake its reputation on the likes of Zainal Hazari.

A party like the AL must stand out on the strength of its own policies and programmes rather than try to thrive on the failures of the government, which unfortunately has been the case of most opposition parties so far.

Our Durga Puja greetings

The triumph of good over evil celebrated

THE Durga celebrations which began on a note of fervour and enthusiasm and eventually saw a record 20,000 mandaps set up all over the country, were interspersed, initially, with stray acts of vandalism -- thanks to a vicious version of zealotry. Even though the government had taken precautions, untoward incidents of idols being vandalized in as many as 25 temples were alleged by Bangladesh Student Juba Oikay Parishad which needs to be gone into. The people responsible for the desecration need to be brought to book to prevent the same happening again.

Unfortunately, we have had to preamble the write-up with a negative allusion so as to din the right sense into the trouble-mongers' ears that never again should the mischief be enacted. For, it not only hurts the sentiments of the Hindus, who must be seeing their biggest festival as a touchstone of their religious rights but also the sensibility of all people in the country.

Why should a handful be able to sneak through the defences and even try to undermine the longstanding inter-communal harmony between the Muslims and Hindus. In fact, all communities in Bangladesh have equal constitutional rights to observance of their religious festivals, practices and rights.

On the whole, the government must be credited with having put in place such security devices as metal detectors and CCTV at the sites which enabled the devotees to perform their obligations well enough. The terrorist threat is a reality that cannot be wished away, and must now be met with all the modern arsenal we can command.

The true strength of a pluralistic society lies in mutual and spontaneous respect for all religious festivals by way of sharing the mirth and well-being of one another.

Nabami and Dashami marking the final phase of the Puja festivities fall today, and, as the most auspicious occasion in the Hindu calendar approaches its climax with the immersion of the Goddess Durga, we wish them happy Bijoya.

DERAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA

THE WTO is currently a 148 member strong organisation. This number includes 32 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), six of them are founding members (Bangladesh being one of them), 24 more LDCs signed-in or joined later, and another eleven that are either Observers or in the accession process. As may be readily observed, more than a quarter of the WTO Members and Observers come from the LDC ranks.

In an organisation which is supposed to be membership driven, where every member theoretically enjoys veto power in the decision making process, one would expect that the interests and concerns of the LDCs would be acted upon on priority basis, particularly given their formidable numerical presence. However, as is said in England, justice is open to all -- like the Ritz Hotel. One wonders whether the WTO often behaves like the Ritz Hotel when it comes to its income-poor members.

As we mark the first decade of the WTO one may be also be curious to know what has happened to the LDCs during this period. The trends highlighted below, however, cannot be necessarily attributed to the nature of functioning of the multilateral trading system.

Exports and Trade Balance: According to UNCTAD, in 2004, LDCs share in world trade (export plus import) stood at 0.68 per cent (approximately \$13 billion), compared to 3.06 per cent in 1954. However,

our estimate, based on WTO data set on 48 LDCs reveals that the share of the LDCs in global export has increased marginally from 0.46 per cent to 0.58 per cent between 1995 to 2003 (last year for which figures are available). The share of these LDCs in global imports also registered marginal increase from 0.65 per cent in 1995 to 0.71 per cent in 2003.

In this connection, one needs to be reminded of the fact that the top 5

in oil exporting/producing countries, e.g. top 5 LDCs (i.e. Angola, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Myanmar, and Chad) accounted for about 61 per cent of the FDI inflows.

Foreign Aid and Technical Assistance: We do, however, observe some progress in case of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) flow to the LDCs, increasing at an average rate of 8.7 per cent per annum between 1995-2003. This resulted in an

The aggravation of in-country income inequality was paralleled by a growing income gap between the richest and the poorest countries in the world. Between 1960-1962 and 2000-2002, the gap of per capita GDP between the 20 richest and 20 poorest countries increased by three times. In the same vein, the share of the richest ten per cent of the world's population has increased from 51.6 per cent to 53.4 per cent of total world income. Reviewing the progress indicators of the LDCs, the optimists proclaim that we live in the best of all worlds, and the pessimists fear that this might very well be true.

LDC exporters in 2003 (Angola, Bangladesh, Yemen, Equatorial Guinea, and Myanmar) accounted for about 57 per cent of the total exports of the group. This process of export concentration within the LDCs is increasing. During 1995-2003, LDCs as a group continued to experience high negative trade balance. Indeed, average trade deficit increased by more than 30 per cent in the non-oil primary commodity dependent LDCs.

Foreign Direct Investment: Currently, the share of LDCs in global FDI inflows experienced an upward trend during the period of 1995-2004, increasing from 0.43 per cent to 1.65 per cent. However, these FDI inflows to the LDCs were highly concentrated

increase in the share of LDCs in total ODA flows to all developing countries from about 26.3 per cent (1995) to 38.8 per cent (2003) during the same period. As a matter of fact, perceptible increase in ODA flow to LDCs was observed particularly in the post-2001 period.

Some increase in the inflow was also observed in case of trade-related technical assistance and capacity building support, although the quality of such support still remains suspect.

Economic Growth: The positive changes which we observe for the LDCs as a group, in terms of trade and investment performance, coupled with foreign aid inflow, were paralleled by some improvement in the

real GDP growth rates. Indeed, the LDCs recorded an average growth rate of about 5.2 per cent per annum during 2001-2004, against about 4.8 per cent during 1995-2000.

Dynamism and Differentiation

Thus, one cannot deny the fact that we observe some dynamism in the economies of the LDCs. There is a positive interpretation of this, which gives us hope and which the global

However, we should also not lose sight of the broader picture of marginalisation of the LDCs as a group. The dynamism I have just mentioned is also characterised by a continuing and persistent process of severe differentiation and acute polarisation. The flip-side of these apparent indicators of progress in the LDCs is that these marginal advances have been hardly adequate to precipitate any significant and tangible

capita food consumption index has declined by 6 per cent over the last 20 years. Today, nearly 650 million poor and hungry people live in the LDCs -- a number which has hardly changed during the last decade. This process was largely underwritten by a steady deterioration of income distribution in the LDCs.

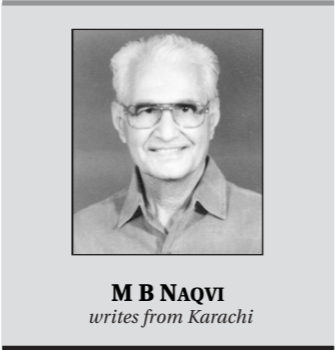
More than half of the LDC population continue to live on less than \$1 a day, while about 81 per cent live on less than \$2 a day. The number of people living in extreme poverty in LDCs is likely to increase from 334 million in 2000 to 471 million in 2015. There goes your Millennium Development Goals!

Indeed, the aggravation of in-country income inequality was paralleled by a growing income gap between the richest and the poorest countries in the world. Between 1960-1962 and 2000-2002, the gap of per capita GDP between the 20 richest and 20 poorest countries increased by three times. In the same vein, the share of the richest ten per cent of the world's population has increased from 51.6 per cent to 53.4 per cent of total world income.

Reviewing the progress indicators of the LDCs, the optimists proclaim that we live in the best of all worlds, and the pessimists fear that this might very well be true.

The author is Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The article draws on a section of his Introductory Statement delivered at the Inaugural Session of the recently concluded International Civil Society Forum 2005: For Advancing LDC Interests in the Sixth WTO Ministerial, Dhaka, October 3-5.

Who is doing what in Iraq?



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

having infiltrated into the newly recruited Iraqi police. But there was not a word about what were those spies doing from any western source. Then, how come the British army needed to smash the jail wall which has not been described as a private or militia jail. Were they actually handed over to Muqtada's men? Not a sound can be heard on such questions.

I have before me the transcript of an al-Jazeera story. One quotes it

Thirdly, the latest stories out of London now openly accuse Iran of providing sophisticated equipment to Muqtada's militia. Tehran is also accused of egging on the Sunnis in Iraq -- an astounding claim that defies common sense. Wouldn't Sunnis see something sinister in Iran urging them to attack Shia targets? One dismisses these stories as being unrelated to Iraq; they appear to be a part of an American-led campaign to demonise Iran as much as possible.

chose the majority of its favourites from Shias among the Iraqi dissidents abroad. Entire reconstruction talk and action was based on sectarian considerations and areas were identified by the sect dominant there. Shia sectarian hatred of 'Sunn'i' Saddam's oppression and murders, no doubt also a fact, was exploited. And Americans did rely more on Shias, alienating the once-dominant Sunnis.

To this explosive mix, is added the

PLAIN WORDS

While all Arabs need to embrace human equality and create a more democratic dispensation given the current international climate of opinion, with or without kings, they have to realise that a widespread Shia-Sunni civil war will knock out the Arab ME as an actor in world politics. That will not serve any Arab purposes. The Arabs have to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps in both economic and political spheres. Foreign intervention in their affairs can only be at the expense of common Arab interests.

firstly because it comes from an independent Arab source and secondly because the story was also initially published in two British newspapers before suddenly disappearing completely from media screens and pages. Al-Jazeera's story says the spies were in Arab costume, they had enough high explosives to blow up any building, cause grievous human losses, and had a timing device in the Cressida car they were driving. This was in Basra, a predominantly Shia town. Several British writers on the internet have accused British forces of fomenting Iraq's sectarian divide by targeting Shias and blaming it on Sunnis. That is the classic tactic of dividing communities for staying on in Iraq until they have successfully pacified and reshaped it according to their own wishes.

so that a climate of opinion is created to expect some American or Israeli military action against Iran on the nuclear question.

The first conclusion one draws about Iraqi developments from 2002 onward is that it was curious that the Anglo-American leadership had quickly picked on the western Arabists' pet theme of Iraq being an extremely brittle state: a state with a Shia majority being ruled and oppressed by a Sunni minority. Oppression of Kurds also added to its basic instability. From the beginning, Paul Bremer, the Bush administration's viceroy, talked in, and dealt with, political matters in terms of Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds, emphasising these sectarian entities. Much of it was about their relative shares of power and money. Then there is no doubt that the US experts

Jordanian and Saudi fears of the rise of a Shia Iraq in the heart of the Arab world. Age-old animosities, barely below the surface almost in all Arab countries, have been semi-dormant. New emphases on sects can only tend to revive those divisions. Although the Shia numbers do not constitute a majority everywhere in the Arab world, but they are large enough to cause major social change, if they were to be given equal civic rights in a democratic dispensation. In this age and clime, how can such significant minorities as Shias in Saudi Arabia (four million?) or Kuwait or Yemen be ignored, while they are a clear majority in places like Lebanon and Bahrain. A greater degree of equality of all citizens can no longer go on being denied, if for no other reason than Americans having undertaken the job of reor-

cance of Arab oil and the region's importance for all aspirants to world domination. There is also the Israel factor: both Americans and Europeans, especially the British, are sworn supporters of the Israeli actions, including all their land grabbing for almost 90 years, including the refusal to accept back those whom they (Israelis) had driven out of their homes. It is now widely seen that the US wants to dominate the ME more completely through satellite regimes that are to be controlled by Israel. Many Arabs believe that the US-UK combine is deliberately fanning the fire of a Shia-Sunni civil war in Iraq and their conduct speaks loudly enough.

Insofar as the old Arab-Ajam (non-Arab) conflict and the Cold War's more recent resurrection in the shape of Saudi Arabia-Iran

rivalry is concerned, it too looks to being orchestrated by the Americans. While America cannot make Iran do its bidding, few Saudi actions on the international stage can take place without an American inspiration. No one can minimise the stifling influence of the US in Saudi governance. If so, it has, inevitably, two contexts: one is to increase pressure on Iran vis-a-vis its atomic program; that is a major consideration, as already noted. But it is also a major factor in enlarging the scope of the largely manipulated Shia-Sunni civil war. Saudi intervention -- how old is it? -- can make the flames of this Iraqi struggle engulf large swathes of the ME. One doubts whether any Saudi minister would happily see a region-wide civil strife along Shia-Sunni lines unless he was pushed into it.

While all Arabs need to embrace human equality and create a more democratic dispensation given the current international climate of opinion, with or without kings, they have to realise that a widespread Shia-Sunni civil war will knock out the Arab ME as an actor in world politics. That will not serve any Arab purposes. Their societies will unravel and governments may get blown away. At any rate, social stability from now on will have to be based on human equality and democracy rather than on the inherited privileges of a few and the servility of the many. But the Arabs have to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps in both economic and political spheres. Foreign intervention in their affairs can only be at the expense of common Arab interests.

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OPINION

Will the PM kindly tell us what is happening?

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

HONOURABLE Prime Minister:

I am fully aware as to how busy you must be but there are a host of questions crowding my mind, which I would like to bring to your notice. I have no access to any of your ministers or senior civil servants, not even a high-profile lobbyist who would be prepared to bring to your notice my concerns, and hence I have chosen this path. I seek your indulgence and forgiveness having encroached into your valuable time.

It is my strongest belief that many amongst the team of your close confidantes are sycophants and misleading you, a fact, which is now well established and public knowledge. I bear no grudge against anyone, nor do I have any personal interest in maligning any one of them. I am an uncompromising diehard nationalist.

There is a famous saying in English: "A man is known by the company he keeps." Are you sure that

you have the right kind of people in your administration? I doubt it. I would question the integrity, the moral and ethical calling of many amongst them. A friend of mine the other day asked me not to worry, saying that as far as morality and ethics were concerned, the whole world was on a downward swing. Yet, I would like to urge you to seriously consider this aspect: the question of affordability. Surely what the president of the most powerful country and other developed countries can get away with neither you nor Bangladesh can afford. Your home is slowly and surely getting more and more vulnerable. It has always been my conviction that a graceful exit is far better than a pompous entry.

It is indeed high time, both for your sake and our beloved motherland, that you catch the bull of religious extremism by its horns and bring it to justice and systematically destroy its evil network. Though, of late, many of us are somewhat pleased to see that some actions are

being taken in hauling up these vicious criminals, yet people are confused about the level of commitment of your administration. There exist too many vague areas: what about dealing with the breeding grounds of these terrorists, the Madrassahs, the Tabligh Jamaats? In just a few months we will be hosting the Biswa Ijtema, giving opportunities for religious fundamentalists from abroad to sneak in. It is high time that the administration should put in place concrete plans and keep the public informed. One cannot live and operate from both sides of the fence. Besides, if you are seeking people's co-operation, people must be fully apprised of how and why they should co-operate.

You want to win elections and be in the seat of power? Surely you must try your best, that is what the game of politics all about. But I think the path

you have chosen to arrive at that goal, is a dangerous one and I fear in the end it may even prove to be self-defeating. The world is a witness today as to how destructive and turbulent that path is, trading and politicking in religion. These champions of Islam, like Frankenstein's monster, will one day sooner than later be sure to turn against you. They do not want you as much as they do not want anyone else. They have an agenda of their own. Look at nations around the world today, what this particular brand of religious extremism has done to Pakistan. It is now fighting enemies both internal and external. Its very existence stands threatened.

Keeping aside the philosophical aspects and the inevitability of consequences thereof, allow me to present before you a few other pertinent and burning issues facing the

nation today. How is it that knowingly you still continue to retain a number of your key cabinet members who have been confirmed non-performers and evidently corrupt? Although many neo-politicians (there is no dearth of them in this country) would like me to believe that you are doing so under compulsion driven by party interests, I for one, have a hard time accepting that argument. Politics or no politics, no one in this world is indispensable. This brings up the question of cutting down the size of your cabinet.

Now that you have an independent Anti-Corruption Commission, why is it limping for months and for all practical purposes remain inoperative? Cabinet meetings are held regularly and most of its deliberations and decisions rally round approval of some high-profile projects of infrastructure development costing billions of takas matched by

foreign donor funds involving huge overseas purchases primarily aimed at raising party funds and fattening the purses of contractors. Given the prevailing state of the country and the growing discontent amongst all ranks of people across the country, the government's prioritisation and strategic program planning appears to be totally out of focus.

Whatever happened with the appointment of the Ombudsman? Whatever happened to that illusive question of separating the judiciary from the executive? Had this been in place today, the system would have taken care of itself and gone a long way in dealing effectively with many a critical aspects of law and order. Perhaps as the spinning out effects there would have been no need for creating the "elite" force, which has now turned out to be the Achilles' heel for your administration.

Your administration's efforts,

despite claims of success in effective dealing with law and order situation, looks like a fallen man trying hard to save himself from sinking in quicksand. You and your government is seen to be doing a lot, yet it is perceived by the people as little more than sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Have you forgotten the shameless tragic incidents that took place in the highest seat of our education, none other than the University of Dhaka, more recently at the Bangladesh University of Science and Technology, evidently engineered by the student front of your party? It is high time you should put a moratorium on the operations of your party's student front, if not for all times but at least for a period of two to three years. Trust me, should you dare take such an action, contrary to popular belief amongst the ranks of your party members, it is bound to enhance your image nationwide overnight.

I have not been able to sleep

thinking of the high pressures 70 percent of the country's population is subjected to, due to unprecedented spiraling of prices of essentials of daily use. People are extremely worried and already at their wits end thinking of how they would meet their bare minimum during the Ramadan. Many in your administration talk of your party's commitment to "politics of development." Surely there can be no development worth its name whose benefits are beyond the reach of the majority of the country's population. Food first, everything else later. Give us this day, we shall think of tomorrow later.

What I find rather disconcerting is that despite all this and more we are going to witness innumerable Iftar parties through out the month of Ramadan sponsored by the administration on some pretext or the other. I wonder, what is happening?

May Allah protect you.