

A day we owe so much to But future lies in strengthening democracy

AS of last night thirty-five years ago a wholesale genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani armed forces on the people of Bangladesh had triggered a people's war for liberation from the clutches of the occupation forces. Today we commemorate that monumental occasion.

A powerful message with an intrinsic overtone of its own reverberated throughout the country unifying the people with a rock-solid determination to write a new chapter in their annals, in the process, to world history. So long, what had been a political course of action revolving around their demand for autonomy, suddenly burst forth into an armed struggle for freedom. The massacre of innocent people on the night of 25 March 1971 and subsequent unleashing of the Pakistani killing machines all across the country left no choice for the Bengalis but to take up arms.

While talking about the unprecedented War of Independence waged by an ill-armed people against an enemy that was armed to the teeth, mention must be made of the saga of supreme sacrifice of the women in terms of loss of near and dear ones, defilement, physical and mental endurance they went through with great fortitude. They kept the embers of hope for ultimate victory - freedom - burning despite the maneuvering of a dangerous adversary that was on a killing mission. They extended help and support to the War of Independence in every sector and they fought shoulder to shoulder with their brothers.

Understandably, the genocide and the resulting massacre led to a massive exodus of people into neighbouring India, where the hospitality extended by both the Indian government and the people from all walks of life remains unparalleled in history. The anguish of the uprooted people seemed less when they received the much-needed emotional and practical support in their times of trial and tribulation.

A word of tribute to the seminal role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the War of Independence; for he truly is the architect and central figure in the creation of Bangladesh.

By the time we commemorate the next Independence Day, we will have seen another general election and an extremely important one at that. The interlude between now and then therefore assumes crucial significance in terms of strengthening democracy without which the gains of independence will not be fully consolidated or fully realised, for sure.

Of late, we have seen a welcome initiative crystallising among the civil society aimed at securing people's right of choice in a qualitative sense by demanding that honest and competent candidates participate in the next election. It should find resonance with the political parties in the shape of fielding candidates with impeccable leadership credentials. And the people must too demand it.

ACC's new brain wave

Show some results, please!

THE Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is going to launch its so-called "trap case drive", in an apparent bid to catch the corrupt in the act in 12 government organisations known for their high propensity to corruption. The idea is to lay a trap for corrupt elements to walk into it and then be caught.

But to publicise the new move the way it has been done, albeit with some tactless gusto, could only lead to alerting its likely targets to lie low and refrain from going about their usual business smelling danger in the air. The success of any such drive is basically dependent on an element of surprise and secrecy with which it is commenced in the first place, let alone how discreetly it is conducted on the whole. Making announcements in advance may prove self-defeating. What the drive needs is more bite than bark.

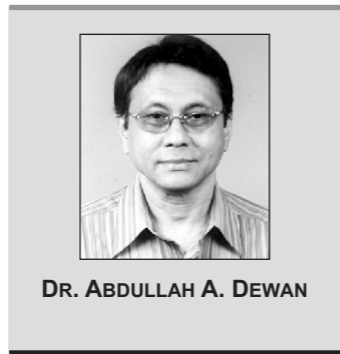
True, its periodic presence in the corruption-vulnerable places can have a deterrent effect to some extent; but given its shortage of resources including manpower is it in a position to spread its attention thin on different tasks without diverting from its mainstream function which is to investigate corruption cases on the dossier and help prepare prosecution against the corrupt?

But the idea of receiving complaints from people, assuring that their identities won't be revealed, is a good one. This is likely to put pressure on the dishonest officials as a channel of feedback from the people will be opened through this move.

At the end of the day, what the people want to see is tangible result. The ACC has already squandered time on internal conflicts and chasing files in the government pertaining to its organogram, absorption of the former BAC officials and the cases handed down to it by BAC to get the organisation going in a meaningful way. The government should take its share of blame, no doubt.

While we welcome the new signs of the ACC trying to get down to business, we cannot help but urge all concerned to ensure that the body is enabled to crack down on corruption in a manifestly effective way.

Why politicians fail to deliver political goods



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

A year ago this week, my first article: "The political economy of hartals" was published in The Daily Star. Thanks to a 9:00 am traffic jam at Jatrabari on March 11, 2005, I was on my way to Comilla when I bought the newspaper and read a report about UNDP's research findings of GDP loss of 3 to 4 percent due to recurrent hartals that triggered my concerns. My article started with a question: "Have hartals and lockouts in Bangladesh become a tool of last resort for voicing dissenting views by opposing political parties?"

Reams of pages have been written in all the local dailies since then. Apparently, the frequency of hartals has continued unabated. Calling hartal is now the first resort instead of the last. Because the ruling BANJIP (BA= Bangladesh, N= Nationalist, JI= Jamaat-e-Islami, P=Party) instead of taking a conciliatory posture doggedly resolved to confront the oppositions with lathi charge and tear gas -- a trait reminiscent of infamous Governor Monayem Khan's rule by repression. The oppositions' resolve to boycott the parliament further deepened and the BANJIP's disregard of the rule of law went unimpeded.

Another issue on which many of us wrote passionately is corruption. Like hartals, they not only had no deterring outcomes on BNP's

NO NONSENSE

Analogously, the production function for political goods (PFPG) is a technical relationship between politicians (as one of the inputs) and goods and services (outputs) that are produced by the politicians. Here politicians are inputs in a PFPG as workers are in a GDP production function defined above. In economics, we often say, what you get depends on what you put in: "garbage in, garbage out" is a popular phrase.

malfeasance and sleaze, the modus operandi of governance progressively turned into a kleptocracy. Two latest cases that truly took some life out of my pen were the alleged \$230 million money laundering scam of the PM's son (yet to be confuted by the PM or the Malaysian government, but still, I must emphasize, unproven) and the kitschy story about the Chief Whip's use of the parliament cafeteria for his family's grocery supplies and cash taking to supplement groceries not sold in the cafeteria.

In a democracy, the voters elect politicians to lead them to prosperity through production and delivery of political goods (those due to the existence of government). Unfortunately, our politicians work to lead only themselves and their party functionaries to prosperity.

One of the most important concepts in economics is production function -- a technical relationship between inputs (factors of production such as land, labour, physical capital, technology, entrepreneurship, and raw materials) and outputs (real GDP). Obviously, the quality of output will depend on the quality of inputs. The productivity of labour (goods produced per hour of work), for example, depends on workers' education, skill, and experience under a given working condition.

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goods and services (outputs) that are produced by the politicians. Here politicians are inputs in a PFPG as workers are in a GDP production function defined above. In economics, we often say, what you get depends on what you put in: "garbage in, garbage out" is a popular phrase.

The delivery of political goods is central to the formation of mass opinion about democracy. Citizens form opinions about politicians' performance in implementing public policies (to create jobs, control inflation, and distribute incomes) in judging whether democracy is functioning as promised.

A hierarchy of political goods by John Robb ("Weak, failed, and collapsed states," May 1, 2004) is presented below. My assessment of the current stance (MACS) of these political goods in Bangladesh is noted in parentheses.

-- Security of life and property: This is the state's primary function. It provides a framework through which all other political goods can be delivered. (MACS: security of life and property is considered weak in Bangladesh).

-- Rule of law: A system of codes and procedures which regulate the interactions of the population and set the standards for conduct. (MACS: System is there but the application of law is highly discriminatory. Party people can get amnesty for murder).

-- Medical and health care.

(MACS: very poor, only the rich have priority access).

-- Schools and educational instruction. (MACS: Very poor, private tutoring at SSC and HSC is the norm nowadays)

-- Critical infrastructure (roads, railways, airways, water ways, electricity, gas, quality water and sewer, waste management, etc. (MACS: many of these nearly in collapsing state mostly because of political corruption and mismanagement).

-- Money and banking system (MACS: a dual banking system in operation; private banks in good standing, nationalized banks are inefficient and poorly managed because of government borrowing and loan defaulters).

-- A business environment (MACS: very poor, Hawa Bhaban allegedly collects toll for any new business venture PMO approves, also collect toll from existing businesses).

-- A forum for civil society (MACS: Good, but BANJIP is indignant of most deliberations of civil society discourse, media is always under threat).

-- A method of regulating environmental commons (MACS: very poor, almost whimsical and bribe driven).

A more descriptive taxonomy of the health of a state based on its ability to deliver the political goods are assessed by examining three categories: Strong States, Weak

The Gordian Knot must be cut

The initiative taken by the combined opposition parties to break the political impasse and the government's response to the initiative are indeed welcome signs. Since the government holds the power to bring about necessary legislative changes making it possible to hold a free and fair election leading to a peaceful transition of power, it would be unwise to resort to political posturing or to kill time.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

AN eminent jurist's observation about whether the Bangladeshi psyche totally comprehends the concept of power in its various ramifications is profoundly intriguing. Many patriotic Bangladeshis would take up swords with him for raising such a question when many Bangladeshis have shed blood fighting for democratic rights snatched from them by military dictators and autocrats.

Such condemnation, however, would only postpone introspection of an issue vital to our national development. In a negative sense, power would mean the capacity to say "no" to a request or a demand by an individual or group of individuals or even a majority of the citizens of a country. In a positive sense, saying "no," if the negative response is lawful, then power wielded by a group so chosen freely by the people is to be welcomed. But when power is given to a group who later on betrays the people and puts on the garb of a tyrant, then their rule not only becomes tyrannical and absolute, but also destructive, both for the possessor and also for the people over whom power is exercised.

Great people are those who believe in the dispersal of power, its dissemination up to the smallest possible administrative units, so that Alexis Tocqueville's fear that

"unlimited power is itself a bad and dangerous thing (which) human beings are not competent to exercise," and Lord Acton's precept that absolute power corrupts absolutely do not come to pass. The concept of power must also embrace French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality which denotes that a set of action affecting free people must at all times have their consent.

Unfortunately countries like ours, which, despite being blessed with an almost homogeneous population, lack social cohesion, making practice of democracy difficult. Devoid of Kantian sense of morality, practitioners of politics in Bangladesh are more involved with personal aggrandizement than on serving the people in whose name they presume to practice democracy.

An eminent economist, as an example, has raised the question about the ownership of Poverty Reduction Strategy Plan (PRSP) by the marginalized segment of our society. He has reproached the Bretton Woods Institutions' approach to poverty reduction as being "flawed on both theoretical grounds and based on empirical evidence," and has raised doubts whether during the consultative process the PRSP authors were advised by the deprived segments of our population that the fertilizer prices be raised, imports further

liberalized, state owned enterprises should be privatized, and interest rate should be raised.

The PRSP authors' confidence that the non-elites need not be consulted reflects the arrogance of power and their obsession with Hobbesian solution to the problem of personal security through the construction of a sovereign state ignoring the presage that unless "the whole public action of the state is directed at securing the greatest good of the greatest number," would lead to the crumbling down of the edifice of the state.

Bangladeshi society is fractured not because of feudalism introduced by Lord Cornwallis through the permanent settlement in the 18th century British India nor because of caste system practiced by certain religions but because of the widening gap between the rich and the poor since our liberation.

That there has been economic development is undeniable. GDP has increased many fold. Population has doubled since liberation yet due to significant improvement in the agricultural sector of the economy famine/starvation on a large scale is unknown. Export earning, particularly of the ready made garment sector, has increased so much that in the recently held Hong Kong round of WTO negotiations the impressive growth in Bangladesh of this sector has been cited by the US as a reason to deny LDC zero duty facility for export of RMG to the US.

States, and Failed States.

-- Strong States are in full control of their territories and provide high quality political goods to their citizens. They perform strongly in GDP per capita (and its growth), the UNDP Human Development Index, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, and Freedom House's Freedom of the World Report.

-- Weak States suffer from religious, ethnic or other tensions, such as political unrest and regional conflicts that limit or decrease the state's ability to deliver political goods. Poverty reduction becomes ineffective, small minority benefits from GDP growth, corruption becomes the way of doing state and private businesses, and application of the rule of law is discriminatory and is weakly applied to favoured ones. Examples: Iraq (under Saddam), Belarus, North Korea, Libya, and, I would argue, Bangladesh.

-- Failed States are incapable of providing much political goods. Examples: Nepal, Congo, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Iraq (today).

Bangladesh plainly fits the taxonomy of a weak state as described. How can the situation be improved? Educating the voters through civil society forums and making them understand that delivery of expected political goods is a function of the type of people elected for political offices. In this context, Professor Yunus's "competent candidates" formula should receive serious consideration.

The formation of a civil society group on March 21, is a first in our nascent and troubled democracy. The three important missions, articulated by Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, namely:

-- Prepare a mid-term (15 years) development vision and make it a national manifesto.

-- Exchange views among a cross-section of political parties

called "permanent minority," or due to the threat perception of the majority emanating from cultural, ethnic or ideological behavior of the minority leading to such cruel oppression of minority, suggested by Edmund Burke, that in a democracy majority of the people is capable of inflicting with much greater fury that can ever be apprehended by the dominion of a single scepter. There is no guarantee, Burke argues, that majority, however transient, would be any more concerned with the interest of the minority and democracy itself, therefore, does not take away the problem of tyranny. A similar fear was expressed by John Stuart Mills, who questioned the thesis that because the minority cannot out-vote the majority, therefore, the minority need not be heard. One could easily argue against the efficacy of majoritarian rule which permits fifty one percent of the population to oppress the remaining forty nine percent in the name of democracy.

If we consider Bangladesh still in the stage of transition from authoritarianism to democratic rule then we have to ask ourselves if democratic culture has been imbibed in our psyche, validating Francis Fukuyama's concern that "even if you have an election or have a democratic transition, whether that will be sustainable in a society that is close to subsistence, that does not have any kind of resources, where you have low levels of education, very severe ethnic and other kind of cleavages." Albeit Fukuyama's skepticism would find more relevance in sub-Saharan Africa than in Bangladesh, yet for democracy to work one would need "those kinds of unwritten norms and cultural values, the ability to compromise, the willingness to abide for certain types of rule, (and) respect for law."

and civil society organizations across the country to create public awareness, and

-- Analyze election platforms of major political parties, hold national policy forum meetings and initiate post-election follow-up activities, if followed through, may ultimately save the country from further ruin.

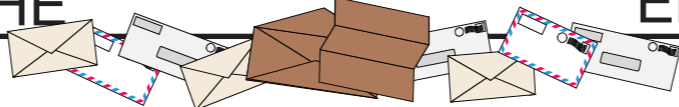
Long-term solutions would involve targeting academically gifted students to study law and economics and draw them into politics. Economics and law are to be emphasized, not to the exclusion of other fields, based on the western models, where nearly 90 percent of the lawmakers have law degree with economics, in most cases, as undergraduate major or minor subjects.

The parliament is the ultimate forum for accountability for all activities of political appointees and public servants. A well qualified breed of lawmakers with impeccable integrity and an independent ACC would be the most effective deterrence against public policy mismanagement, and malfeasance thus guaranteeing delivery of political goods to the citizens.

With the current breed of politicians and those waiting in the pipeline, any hope for better governance seems to be something of an illusion.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

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.

Our political parties

We the general people never hoped to see that our two major political parties would talk to each other. Because they were not interested even to see the shadow of each other. But after the BNP sent a letter on the electoral reform proposal, the AL took it positively. It is a positive development for our national politics and for our country.

Political crisis is the biggest obstacle to any development in this country. Only due to lack of communication between our two major political parties, we are moving backwards, instead of keeping pace with globalisation. Now time has come to change this attitude in the interest of the nation as a whole. We want to watch a constructive dialogue among them on the electoral reform issue. Through dialogue it will be possible to work out a

durable solution.
Mir Salahuddin Robin
College of Textile Engineering & Technology, Dhaka

Railways

In a flood prone city like Dhaka, the railways will be costly to build and operate. The elevated monorail system will be very appropriate for Bangladesh. It should be given due consideration.

Shafiq Rahman
One-mail

US policy on Pakistan

This is in response to the article "New phase in US relations with South Asia." It is not a surprise that the US treats Pakistan this way. Every time the US needed Pakistan, it always rewarded it with economic and military aid and when Pakistan's need is gone, the US ignores the country. After the fall of the Soviet Union which took place after the defeat of the Red Army in

Afghanistan, Pakistan was sanctioned by not only the US but by most of the Western world because of its nuclear programme. Pakistan, after Libya, was the most sanctioned country in the world during the 90's. However, despite all the hardships, Pakistan still went ahead and acquired nuclear weapons capability.

On top of this, Central Asia, once under the control of the Soviet Union, has some independent states now. These states are rich in natural resources such as natural gas, oil, minerals, etc. There are only two ways of getting these natural resources out of Central Asia: through Iran or through Pakistan via Afghanistan. American relations with Iran are at an all time low, so the only way would be to go through Afghanistan and through Pakistan (Gwadar will be used as a port for the Central Asian states). So Pakistan's strategic value has increased greatly in the last few years. Both America and China are competing to control Central Asia and both are trying to sway Pakistan

into their friendship. America has tilted towards India because of a rising China and naturally Pakistan is starting to tilt heavily towards China.
Masood Khan,
Chicago, US

Evaluation test for class five and eight

Recently, the government introduced an assessment test for the students of class five and eight. As per the system, the students of class five and eight have to sit for an assessment test to prove themselves eligible for the next class i.e. class six and eight. It is an SSC examination in a miniature form for the students at an early age. Because the board sets the questions and they have to go to another school and sit for the exams. It is rather a good step as the students get used to facing the public exams at an early age in a different environment. If the education authorities want to attach value to this system then why the school pres-

surizes the students with final exams? Moreover, the students of class eight not only have to appear in the final exams, they also have to sit for the selection test for scholarship exams. In addition, the students who are selected have to bear another pressure. The quality of their performance declines as they have to appear in so many exams at the same time. The questions are set differently. For example, for the final exams there are 100 marks allocated for each subject separately, which is not done in the assessment test. In the assessment test, for class eight there is 100 marks allocated for all the subjects excepting Home Economics. As the students have to appear in the final examinations from their respective schools and their promotion to higher class depends on their final exams, they put less emphasis on the assessment test.

Moreover, the students of class five have to sit for the test in February, when most of the students are promoted to the higher

class.

They have to study for the test without the textbooks, because almost all the schools take back the books provided by the government/NCTB. Students have to buy the books again for the test which is difficult for poor students.

If at this stage they do not do well in their assessment test and are demoted to the lower class, they will be psychologically affected. If they are not demoted and the school keeps the students to the classes based on their final exams, then what is the value of this assessment test? Moreover, knowing the quality of primary education, especially in the rural areas it is doubtful whether the students will be able to do well after not being in touch with the books for two to three months.

Why the students of class eight have to sit for this test at the end of that particular year and why the students of class five have to appear in the test at the beginning of the next year? Is their particular reason for this? I think the

education authorities should look into this matter.

Romina Dewan Kabir
Free Lance Consultant, Dhaka

An appeal to WASA

Popular Housing-1 area is located at Barabag under Mirpur-2. This is a new private housing. The housing comprises of about 35-40 plots. Most of the plot owners have constructed multi-storied buildings in this housing.

Currently, about 200-250 families live in different flats in this housing.

The government has provided most of the civic amenities like electricity, gas, telephone etc. Dhaka WASA, in late December 2001 also installed "six inch" new water pipes in this housing. WASA has connected this six-inch line from a newly installed 12-inch main pipe lines of Barabag. But unfortunately till now we are not getting any water supply from this newly installed line.

Virtually there is no 'water flow'

in this newly installed pipe lines in Popular Housing-1 area. It is surprising to note that a single drop of water did not come through this newly installed water line at Popular Housing-1 area after its installation. We do not understand the reason behind this non-supply of water. Most of the people of this housing are to pull water through a motor from the main Barabag line.

On several occasions the residents of this housing appealed to the WASA authorities to conduct an enquiry into this matter and initiate necessary steps to supply us water through this newly installed line. No progress has yet been made on this, though. We, therefore, request the WASA authorities to kindly conduct an enquiry into the matter and take necessary steps to supply us water through this newly installed line.

S.M. Khalequezzaman
Mirpur-2, Dhaka