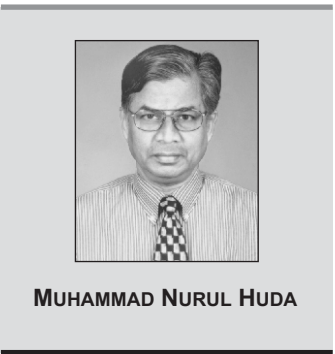


Ignominy of 'illiberal democracy'



THE Bangladesh political scenario abundantly shows that a political culture conducive to stability is yet to emerge. As far as threat perception relating to security is concerned, in our situation, the internal dimension has to have an edge over the external. Experts agree that there are two definite indicators of weak states: lack of social cohesion and state capacities. The security and enforcement dilemmas of weak states are rooted more in internal threats. Recent studies on third world security conclude that internal political and economic instability pose serious threats to core values of such states as independence and sovereignty.

Negative fall-out

Bangladesh, it appears belongs to the category of Third World politically instable states as well as to the category of weak states in security consideration. We have to unfortunately admit that the fragile growth of our democratic institutions since early 1991 need to be nurtured if they are to survive. Democratic renewal in Bangladesh have come

under democratic sway in the recent past and has perhaps spawned an "illiberal democracy". Democracy, in our parlance, has not brought constitutional liberalism. This is not unusual as to date few illiberal democracies have matured into liberal democracies.

Assuming that Bangladesh is passing through the supposedly illiberal phase of democratisation, it is presumed that political instability that goes with the period of transition has security implications for the country. The sources of such instability are negative politics, lawlessness, misgovernance, patronising violence, keeping armed cadre in student labour fronts, boycotting parliament amongst others. The reasonably free and fair election in the yesteryears still remains open to question in terms of both input and output. The questionable input for our election has been money, including substantial amount of black money. Such money militates against the democratic spirit and impacts negatively on the quality of elected representatives.

Criminalised and commercialised politics

Discerning observers would agree that in recent times, middle class professionals with credentials and with roots to the people have been squeezed out of the political market to yield place to rich businessmen, industrialists or individuals with questionable means of income. The security ramification of this phenomenon is that elected legislators having the backing of black money amassed through smuggling of narcotics or illegal arms can put the

country at the mercy of few powerful dons, pulling strings from behind. Fingers are already pointed at such elements. In the context of the violent trend in politics such accusations cannot be summarily ruled out. Therefore, the election system, vitiated by money-and-politics nexus and a literally non-performing parliament are factors sufficient to make politics volatile and unstable with serious long-range ramifications.

strain on scant resources to the detriment of felt needs of enforcement in critical sectors, in addition to spoiling the image. The armed students are protected by the regime and opposition. Some studies suggest a causal linkage between endemic violence and demise of democracy. The increasing incidences of violence in Bangladesh politics over the years are clouding the future of democracy.

Our intolerant political conduct is

Extremism and denominational politics

The ulterior use of religion for political ends and a constitutional provision for making Islam the state religion appear as an anathema for a country that started its journey as a secular polity. Bangladeshis were no less devout Muslims in 1972 than they have become in post 1988 under Islam as a state religion. Under cover of religion, in our fledgling polity,

loyal political associates.

Divisive polity

There are at least two divisive issues that keep the socio-political pot simmering, often boiling. Those issues relate to our identity and who made the declaration of independence. Politicised emotion is the root of those controversies. The difference over the issues between the two major political parties get translated into a social divide, thereby negating the scope for

The elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 may have restored the supremacy of political leadership but in the meantime immense damage has been caused in our political culture by the combined onslaught of corruption, criminalisation and commercialisation of politics of the country. The penetration of business interests in politics made possible through a policy of distribution of political patronage and bureaucratic support continued on a wider scale and the emerging business class not only attempted to control politics through donation to party coffers, they displayed a greater readiness to join politics themselves. We now have politicians and parliamentarians who have business interests. This commercialisation of politics has become the safest and convenient vehicle of achievements.

Our tendency of carving out a niche for self or group in politics and business leads to fierce competition which possible has linked politics to the underworld violence. Our politicians crave for Westminster model of democracy but they have combined the colonial agitational politics with the role of the opposition. This is the mindset of both position and opposition. One cries for maintenance of law and order, protection of nation interest while the other fights for the democratic rights of the people in relentless agitation, work stoppages and violence. Therefore, policies, postures, statements and actions of the political parties and ruling regimes have significant role in conflict aggravation and its transition from one phase to another.

The interface between the political feuds and intense power struggle, on the one hand, and violence of different

intensities, on the other is provided by the underworld to which the political leaders of various stature are connected in a shady way. According to credible reports nearly 300 godfathers control criminal and terrorist activities across the country. The godfathers belonging to major political parties are actually mid and high level leaders of such parties.

The link between small arms and violence has given rise to organised crime which is sustaining due to triangular nexus among criminal underworld, power-hungry political elite and corrupt law enforcing agencies. The arms-violence linkage is assuming a permanent shape in our politics, economy and society. It has emerged as an internal dimension of our security concerns. Without a non-partisan political commitment it would not be possible to root out this menace.

Bangladesh polity has failed to forge national cohesion on fundamental values. Inadequate nation building and state building processes are the cause. Lack of mutual trust and prevalence of hostile political attitude have resulted in weak political institutions and weak national capacity to resolve national issues. The process needs to be reversed.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.

Immigrants assert in America

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

WELL organised demonstrations all over the US in April by undocumented immigrants and a day without an immigrant on May 01, 2006 also coupled with massive demonstrations to register protests against proposed crackdown on illegal immigrants and to demonstrate the economic power of immigrants have caused their impact on the economy felt.

Historically America is country of immigrants since its inception as a nation state in the 18th century. It has often been called the melting pot. America has traditionally opened its doors to immigrants from all over the world. These immigrants migrated to America to improve their living conditions as most of them were poor in their country of origin. Backgrounds of immigrants are vastly different. Since 1780 complexion of immigrants has changed. Most of the immigrants were from Europe before 1780. The Europeans, particularly the Portuguese, began transatlantic slave trade that brought millions of Africans to America.

The backgrounds of today's immigrants expand beyond the European borders. Immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America are flocking to America to enjoy free life style, and to make money to have improved living condition. Racial discrimination and slavery in America were so focused that led to civil rights movement in 1955 which culminated in 1968 in poor peoples' march spearheaded by Martin Luther King. He was awarded Nobel peace prize in 1964 for his non-violent movement to establish the rights of black Americans. This non-violent campaign was adopted by him from Mahatma Gandhi's concept. Following his assassination in April, 1968 by white supremacist, riots broke out in every major city of America. The civil rights movement succeeded in bringing about such laws as Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination in employment practices and public accommodations; Voting Rights Act of 1965; Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965 which changed immigration policy and Civil Rights Act of 1968 that banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing.

Possibly this civil rights movement inspired undocumented immigrants in America to organise protest demonstrations on April 10. Massive gatherings turned up on the National Mall in Washington DC where tens of thousands peacefully demonstrated their view points. It was unprecedented. Similar demonstrations were also held on May 01 throughout the country. Bill H.R 4437 was the cause of these demonstrations. The bill contains border protection, anti-terrorism, and illegal immigrant control act of 2005 which has a myriad of measures against illegal immigrants. It

Protest demonstrations by undocumented immigrants have shifted focus on a contentious issue in a way seen seldom in politics in America. Possibly the main purpose of these kinds of demonstrations is to convey their message to Americans to seek their understanding of the immigration problem. It is better late than never to resolve this problem as America could turn out to be Hispanic. Without proper diagnosis the issue would become explosive for America.



makes working class people felons and punishes any person or organisation that provides support of any kind to undocumented immigrants. The Bill would, among other things, build a 700-mile fence along the US-Mexico border, authorise local police to arrest illegal aliens, and make illegal presence a felony. While commenting on this bill, Hilary Clinton, Senator from Democratic Party said: this bill would make Jesus Christ a felon.

As a compromise solution to the existing immigration problem, Republican Senator John McCain and Democrat Senator Edward Kennedy placed a bill in the Senate, which, inter alia, provides scope to illegal immigrants to become citizen over a period of five plus years and a guest worker visa programme for future immigrants. If this bill is passed by the Senate, illegal immigrants would be required to pay a fine of \$ 2000 plus all back taxes. Already Senate Judiciary Committee has approved the bipartisan bill. Bill Frist, Republican Majority Leader

in the Senate circulated a proposal without guest worker programme. Neither the house bill nor the Senate proposed bills recognised President Bush's guest worker program. It seems that opinion at least is not divided on one count that no amnesty would be granted to illegal immigrants.

However, it seems that there is bipartisan consensus in the Senate in favour of some of the House measures to curtail illegal influx, but on balance the Senate is more inclined to regulate and regularise the presence of 10 to 12 million illegal immigrants. In a dramatic move the Senate passed a bill on April 26 to spend \$ 2 billion to stop illegal aliens entering along Mexico and Canadian borders.

The nation wide demonstrations sponsored by National Day of Action and coordinated by an umbrella organisation known as the National Capital Immigration Coalition raised slogans: "we are American; we are not criminal; and we are workforce for America's

economy". Organising such massive gatherings at the capital reflects the strength and unity of the undocumented immigrants. It may be mentioned that 22 million voters in America are Spanish speaking population. The presence of such massive protesters at the capital encouraged Democratic members of the House of Representatives and Senate to join them and support their cause. Congressman Jim Moran, Democrat from Virginia, Congressman Al Wynn, Democrat from Maryland, Senator Edward Kennedy, Democrat from Massachusetts addressed the gatherings.

Since this year is the election year for the House of Representatives and Senate, Democrats took the opportunity to extend their support to the undocumented immigrants, but a good chunk of Americans do not support to extend a kind of amnesty to illegal immigrants. They are of the opinion that it makes no sense to legalise illegal aliens because they are here already. That turns

out to be defeatism at its worst. Americans consider the 1986 amnesty designed mainly for the third world illegal aliens, mostly from Mexico and Central America, was a slap in the face of legal immigrants. On the other hand, business leaders and advocate for immigrants' rights argue that America's economy would collapse if all the illegal immigrants are deported.

It is estimated that illegal immigrants cover 25 percent of agricultural work; 17 percent of office and house cleaning positions; 14 percent construction jobs; 12 percent food preparation and servicing and 4.9 percent labor forces. 56 percent of the illegal immigrants are from Mexico. It was followed by 22 percent from Latin America; 13 percent from Asia and 6 percent from Europe and Canada. According to Bengali newspaper Thikana of New York, there are roughly 86,000 illegal Bangladeshis in America. They are mostly located in New York, Florida, Miami and Boston.

Population in America is increasing by leaps and bounds. It has increased by 100 million since 1970. The Census Bureau estimated projection of the population by 2050 will be 420 billion. A group of anti-immigration reform in America speaks that if any of those bills in the Senate is passed a minimum of six million wives and as high as another 10 million will cross from Mexico alone which will quadruplicate the Spanish speaking population. Apart from illegal immigrants, America is accepting a million legal aliens every year which speaks of population explosion in foreseeable future.

Over the past weekend hundreds of thousands illegal immigrants took to the streets in Los Angeles and other cities also to demonstrate to establish their rights to stay in America. But many demonstrators were chanting slogans in Spanish and waving flag of Mexico. That caused anxiety in American society. This reminds me of Professor Samuel Huntington's theory that Spanish speaking Mexicans have hidden agenda to recapture the territories which they lost during America-Mexican war in 1846-48.

Protest demonstrations by undocumented immigrants have shifted focus on a contentious issue in a way seen seldom in politics in America. Possibly the main purpose of these kinds of demonstrations is to convey their message to Americans to seek their understanding of the immigration problem. It is better late than never to resolve this problem as America could turn out to be Hispanic. Without proper diagnosis the issue would become explosive for America.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat, resides in Virginia.

Helping the ultra-poor to help themselves

Most NGOs engaged in credit operation for the ultra-poor have their respective programmes and are trying to excel in their respective ways. And with all this it is proved that the ultra-poor are also credit worthy, what is necessary is innovating effective rules and system for such credit operation keeping in consideration their capacity.

MD. ENAMUL HAQUE

HOODWINKING the supposed risks NGOs of late are extending microcredit to the ultra-poor and in the process are trying to establish the credit worthiness of the extreme poor groups. Just a few years ago in various surveys and researches NGOs were criticised for not reaching microcredit and other financial services to the most needy -- the ultra-poor. Some NGOs rather took it as a challenge and tried to find a sustainable as well as flexible model for the purpose. And some among them have reached the success in their effort by now. About 63 associate organisations of ASA, BRAC, Grameen and PKSF are active with their new models in extending microcredit to the ultra-poor. For instance, the ASA associate has been able to cover one lakh 55 thousand extremely poor families within one and half years with its own source of finance. About Tk 67 crore has been distributed among them with a credit balance of Tk 23 crore. This coverage of the ultra-poor seems to be the highest in the country.

From various surveys and researches it has been known that in Bangladesh the ultra-poor constitute about 15 percent of the population. As such the number of ultra-poor families in the country stands at about 45 lakh. Though Grameen Bank as well as different ministries of the government, other banks and other NGOs succeeded to bring about one crore 50 lakh poor families under the purview of microcredit service but the major portion of the ultra-poor left uncovered. Because the existing standard of transaction and rules and regulations were just beyond the ability of the ultra-poor to abide by.

There was also apprehension among the NGOs whether the ultra-poor can repay the loan extended to them. Besides, extending credit to them would entail more operative cost and risk but less income. In the circumstance, some donor organisations extended their assistance, and some NGO's embarked on the programme. For instance, BRAC took up "Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP)" project to cover at least one lakh families with a budget of Tk 185 crore within five years ending this year. Their objective has been equal implementation of both financial and social programmes including transfer of wealth, training to imbibe self-confidence among members, increasing savings etc.

Meanwhile, Swiss Agencies for Development Cooperation (SDC) extended assistance to a number of associate organisations for operat-



An ASA small credit beneficiary.

ing development programmes among the ultra-poor. On the other hand, the government handed over a fat amount from the past budget to PKSF for credit distribution among the ultra-poor through the NGOs. By now PKSF could reach Tk 150 crore to more than three lakh ultra-poor through 63 NGOs. Besides, PKSF has covered further 60 thousand families from its own resources. PKSF extended loan to its associates at one percent interest, the associates distributed at 9-10 percent to cover at least their operation cost. Grameen Bank distributed interest free credit to the tune of Tk 4 crore 35 lakh among 60 thousand beggars to motivate them to discard the bad habit.

In a recent workshop on the effectiveness of different models it has been found that each organisation achieved some degree of success in recovery rate, building confidence among the ultra-poor, establishing discipline, motivating them to create their own fund through savings. This proves that the ultra poor are also credit worthy. However, they need some extra facilities, viz, lesser rate of interest, flexible recovery system fixing installments on the basis of income, training etc. However, ASA seems to have provided comparatively more successful and confident model, the main specialty being selecting the areas which are most remote where there is no bank, no big market, economy is solely dependent on agriculture, manual labour is the only basis of income, affected by river erosion and flood where livelihood is always uncertain and members as widows, women deserted by husband, physically disabled etc. ASA created an associate organisation specially for the ultra poor in greater Rangpur and greater Mymensingh districts which opened 41 branches to serve them. They distributed credit on flexible condi-

tions within a ceiling of minimum Tk 600 to maximum Tk 5000 and raised a separate group of workers to manage the operation. And although in this programme expenditure is more and income is less than in general micro-credit programmes, but it is conducted with its own resources without outside aid.

Besides, ASA operate a special programme for the 'monga' affected poor. The branches in the monga prove northern districts extend a credit of Tk 2000 to each vulnerable family before start of monga period to procure food for the time until harvest with half of the amount and meet communicating expenses for work in town or other places during monga with the remaining half. Repayment installments start after three months. Another programme is financing for cattle fattening 6-8 months prior to start of monga period. The members sell the cattle just before monga, repay the loan and ensure livelihood with the profit during monga.

Most NGOs engaged in credit operation for the ultra-poor have their respective programmes and are trying to excel in their respective ways. And with all this it is proved that the ultra-poor are also credit worthy, what is necessary is innovating effective rules and system for such credit operation keeping in consideration their capacity.

Md. Enamul Haque is Executive Vice President of ASA.