

Police belligerence against journalists

Beating them is becoming a habit of this govt

IT was painful sight indeed to see members of the law enforcing agencies pouncing on newsmen in the streets during the political programme of the opposition on Sunday, which left several of the latter severely injured. The policemen also broke into pieces some expensive cameras of photojournalists. There was evidently no provocation on the part of the newsmen and yet it gave the impression that the policemen acted of their own with malicious intent or to fulfill some hidden agenda. Our concern gets further heightened when we learn that the law enforcers swooped down on the beleaguered journalists while they were sitting on the streets to protest police brutality. The frenzy displayed by the police in the process brings forth the question of standard of training they received on the issue of crowd control and how to behave with the working journalists.

It is a universally accepted fact that journalists and photojournalists will rush to cover any incident, be it political or social, on behalf of the newspaper or news agency they belong to. It is also a widely accepted norm that all sorts of cooperation ought to be extended to them so that the news can be placed in its true perspective for the common readers. True, at times of social or political violence, some harm may come their way, but that usually comes as a mere accident, and not as a result of a deliberate assault. But, in Bangladesh, we note with alarm the rising trend among the members of the law enforcing agencies to target newsmen to release their anger. The extremely vengeful nature of some members in uniform is taking a turn for the worse, especially at times when they are deployed to thwart any political programme of the opposition. They are often seen to be beating up newsmen indiscriminately with bamboo sticks or butts of rifles in a deliberate attempt to cause grievous bodily harm. While such acts are deplorable, it is equally distressing that the authorities concerned have not taken any step to end this anti-press stance of the members of the law enforcing agencies.

It is high time someone told the policemen that newsmen were not to be considered their adversary in any situation. What the newsmen present is a true picture of what happened on the day, with no malice to anyone. It is the responsibility of the media to depict the truth and they will keep on doing so, no matter how hard anyone may come down on them. The media has withstood political pressure in the past. They will do so in the future.

Punishing the people, all over again

Call for hartal unnecessary

HARTAL doesn't serve its stated purpose, far less a 36-hour long one, which actually recoils on the caller. It works as an instrument of punishing the people. Just as the ruling coalition has tarnished its image because of unbridled corruption so also hartals threaten to do the same for the image of the opposition. Without going into any detailed analysis of the various dimensions of hartal-inflicted losses, it must be said that it is disruptive in nature with a potential for damage to both public and private property including seriously hindering the vital day to day activities of traders and business houses.

There is also considerable disruption in the regular functioning of the schools and other academic institutions. Currently, A Level examinations are underway, being conducted by the University of London through the British Council in Dhaka encompassing candidates from all over the country. Some HSC examinations are also clashing with the hartal fixture. The international examinations are conducted under a strict schedule. These cannot be rescheduled, not just because there is a problem in Dhaka. We should also take into account the injuries that take place during the clashes that usually mark hartals. Often the injured are left unattended and uncared for, let alone other forms of medical attention received.

While the opposition should go for innovative and result-oriented programmes for achieving their objectives, the administration in turn has to display tact and restraint in dealing with a hartal situation. The ever-increasing aggressive and militant postures taken by both the opposition and the administration in resolving the contentious political issues is only making things more and more complicated and violence-prone.

Let ultimate political wisdom prevail with alternative means of political protests adopted as a dialogue process is initiated. The sooner the better.

Liberalisation and food security

A case study on Bangladesh



ABDUL BAYES

THE International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) organised a workshop on "Trade Liberalisation and Food Security in South Asia: The Lessons Learnt". As is well-known, of late, the issue of food security and its linkage with openness has become a bone of contention not only in political platforms but also in economic encounters by enlightened economists. Held recently in New Delhi and coordinated by its Director of Asia, Dr Ashok Gulati, the workshop turned out to be a collaborative effort by bringing on board the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) and the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR). The findings of case studies on trade liberalisation (TL) and food security (FS) -- spanning 2-3 years and covering most of the countries in South Asia -- were presented in that workshop to show the implications of TL on FS. While I wish to present each of the country experience in turn in future, allow me to start with the experience of Bangladesh with food policy changes and FS.

Changing regimes, chiming challenges
As far as Bangladesh's experiences

with reforms are concerned, Dr Nuimuddin Chowdhury, Nasir Farid and Devesh Roy came up with some conclusions which could, possibly, contribute to our food for thought. Mainly three messages emerge from their deliberations drawn upon field level data: (a) advent of new technology (HYV), development of infrastructure and market liberalisation worked in tandem to deliver favourable food security outcomes for Bangladesh; (b) a liberalised trade regime and downsizing of government (role in procurement and distribution of inputs and outputs) had favourable impacts on poverty and nutrition; and (c) there had been a perceptible increase in the cost-effectiveness of the public foodgrain distribution system (PFDS).

The favourable impacts of TL (and of HYV and infrastructure) are transmitted through growth of outputs, market size, the size of private stocks, the emergence of two peak harvest seasonality, and finally the declining real rice prices. For example, in 1950/51, Bangladesh's rice production per capita was only 60 per cent of 2000 and the seasonal spread in rice price was greater than 40 per cent. The authors also pointed out the positive role of the private sector in

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The successive policies of de-regulation and privatisation of agricultural input and output markets paved ways for a prosperous agriculture in Bangladesh. The growth of production and exports of horticultural products and agro-processing -- as a result of liberalisation -- could be an eye opener in any discourse on trade liberalisation and food security. Bangladesh's experience could also be a lesson for neighbouring countries where food distribution till now is mostly a game of the government.

relieving the nation of the reeling rice sector. The favourable supply performance has been due to a fairly rapid expansion in the size of market. "Between 1980 and 2003, the size of the markets has grown by 10 million tons. During the same period, the nominal price per ton has risen by Tk6110. As a rough approximation, in value terms, the market has grown by Tk61.1 billion. In 2003, the total number of farms in Bangladesh was estimated to be 13 million. This translates to a per farm expansion in value terms equal to Tk6000 at average price prevailing during the last 20 years. This was bound to provide a powerful stimulus towards rice's commercialisation".

Growing farm surpluses created a new breed of traders to channel surpluses to the market. In 1990, for example, farmers sold two-thirds of their marketed output at the farm gate through marketing agents -- operating with little personal capital but helped by informal credit channels, at times most labour intensive and require no government initiatives. There is no evidence of distress selling of surplus rice as there is no evidence of rent seeking in loan markets.

Nuimuddin Chowdhury and co-authors also discuss market integration which I personally would

like to dub as a siren sign of food security. Various empirical studies point to a perfect market integration where a price increase in one market leads to an equivalent effect in another. The authors notice a "marketing revolution" in the volume of private stocks, narrowed period of temporal arbitrage among rice traders and a widening of marketing outreach for average arbitrage. Per capita private rice stocks roughly doubled between 1960s and early 1990s. In absolute terms, private rice stocks have grown faster, particularly since the late 1980s. During the early 1990s, in the post-harvest months of January and June, private rice stocks alone exceeded total government food grain stock by a factor of five. On farm stocks account for about 75 per cent of all holdings, while trade stocks account for the remainder.

Two important observations need to be highlighted here. First, by 1990, the marketing of rice had turned out to be fairly even across classes of farms and across months in the market year. Second, there is no evidence of distress selling by the farmers reflected by the fact that the percentage sold in months away from main harvest months have not fallen sharply. "The clear implication is that growing rice in

Bangladesh had become a profitable business and that marginal and small farmers have been included in this propitious development".

That leaving the food imports to private sector is not always a curse, but may be blessing sometimes, is forestalled by the rice imports by private sector over the years. Interestingly, large proportion of the Letter of Credit (L/C) opened by private importers is small in amount of less than 500 MT. The largest 10 traders imported 16 per cent of the total imports during 1994 and 1998. "The structure of the rice import trade was atomistic, with very little real possibility favouring existence of price collusion among so many importers". With this kind of experience one can, perhaps, wonder why the government till now sits on sugar or other food item imports.

Food security

The results of the policies outlined above have been an increase in per capita availability of food grain in the post-liberalisation phase averaging 165.2 kgs, compared to pre-liberalisation mark of 158 kgs. Further, variability in consumption went down between these comparable periods. The distribution of rice intake increased for the bottom 40 per cent while it decreased for the top 20 per cent. The private

sector has been relatively more cost effective in delivery of food grains compared to the public sector over the years. The real prices of rice over the years depicted a downward trend in the study periods implying enhancement of entitlements for the poor. The authors, however, note that a full blown liberalisation might hurt the poor segment for the society but the rich might benefit.

Comments and questions

The authors' period of benchmark for liberalisation seems to shift from time to time. Sometimes it is 1993/94, sometimes before 1990s thus creating confusion in assessing the impact of TL on FS. Second, as the authors themselves argued, advent of HYV and development in infrastructure along with liberalization resulted in the positive outcomes outlined. And finally, it is the economic growth from trade liberalisation -- mostly in manufacturing, services and construction that affected real wages positively -- that went to improve FS.

That is, however, not to deny the facts that those successive policies of de-regulation and privatisation of agricultural input and output markets paved ways for a prosperous agriculture in Bangladesh. The growth of production and exports of horticultural products and agro-processing -- as a result of liberalisation -- could be an eye opener in any discourse on TL and FS. Bangladesh's experience could also be a lesson for neighbouring countries where food distribution till now is mostly a game of the government.

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The dilemma of a new 'oldest' nation

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

ONE of the significant changes that Japan had gone through at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to become the 'oldest' nation in the world, not in terms of being the land of an ancient civilisation, but in terms of high proportion of old people in country's population. The proportion of elderly population in Japan passed the benchmark of 20 per cent threshold last year, thus making the country a land full of retired people no longer in a position to contribute significantly to the economy. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in its 2006 report published early this month on the aging of Japanese society has indicated that as of October 1, 2005, roughly 25.6 million people in Japan were 65 years old or over. The figure is slightly over 20 per cent of the total population and marked the crossing of that threshold for the first time in history.

The ministry also released the results of another survey more or less at the same time focusing on a different grim sides of population statistics. The ministry announced that the fertility rate in Japan in 2005 was 1.25, lower than the figure of 1.29 recorded a year earlier. The figure virtually means that an average Japanese woman in her child bearing age is now giving birth to 1.25 babies, much lower than the figure needed to sustain country's current population level. This latest disclosure runs contrary to all earlier predictions. Japan's

The low fertility rate coupled with the aging of the society would eventually lead to the acute shortage of work forces in Japan needed to sustain the necessary structure of an advanced society. The government is working on various options needed to tackle the problem. But the issue of foreign workers in Japan remains a contentious subject. While the foreign and economy ministry officials have pressed the government to accept foreign workers, the justice and health and labour ministries remain cautious, citing the social cost of accepting foreign workers.

National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, for example, estimated in 2002 that the fertility rate was supposed to decline to 1.31 in 2005 before bouncing back. The institute also hinted that the population of Japan was supposed to drop below 100 million by the year 2050.

The extremely low fertility rate figure announced by the ministry, however, would mean that the population of Japan will decrease to less than 100 million nine years earlier than projected. As a result, the recent figures released by the ministry are stirring serious debate within the media, policy makers and concerned groups on what the country now needs to do to check this disturbing trend.

A number of research institutes in Japan that had long been working on population issues were in fact projecting this grim outcome for quite some time. In 2001, a private research organisation known as Attractors Lab Co. estimated the birthrate for 2005 to be 1.25. The company also hinted that the rate would hit rock bottom 1.14 in 2022. This earlier projection now coincides with the figures released by the

Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

The issue of declining birthrate and an aging population has been the topic of heated discussions in Japan ever since projections in mid-1980s gave early warning of the problem and hinted that the country might be heading towards more trouble if the issue was not tackled in time. Though the Japanese government had taken numerous measures since then to encourage couples to have more children, none seem to have any significant impact on the people. As a result, a new soul searching is now on in Japan about the important question of how best to tackle the issue so that the danger signals the country is getting could be effectively by-passed to ensure that the society remains immune from serious social consequences of declining population. The decade of economic slowdown that compelled Japan to initiate drastic changes in working environment is partially blamed for this unexpected outcome.

The decade of economic downturn, known in Japan as the 'lost decade', had compelled the government to focus solely on

economic recovery, be it at the cost of sacrificing the important aspect of creating a much needed social harmony. While progress has been made recently in improving job situation, it has also resulted in swelling the ranks of part-time and temporary employees and other non-regular workers. This group of work force with less support of any solid cushion in times of crisis now represents one in every three members of Japanese workers and their number among younger generation is much higher than the average. Compared to regular workers they earn much less and also lack stability in working condition. It is among men and women falling into this unhappy group of workers that the birth rate is significantly lower. The reason is not unclear at all.

A 2002 survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on people in the 20-34 age group showed that while 40 per cent of regular employees were married, the rate fell drastically to less than 10 per cent for part-time and temporary workers. Uncertainty about the future and earnings that merely allow

workers to survive are compelling many of them to keep a distance from the possibility of starting a family life. This is probably a natural tragic outcome of a reform initiative that put virtually all the emphasis on a singularly important goal of ensuring economic recovery, forgetting about the important aspect that the end goal of recovery is to ease the burden of uncertainty that people are now compelled to shoulder.

Another area that Japan needs to improve to ensure that a declining birth rate in an ageing society is effectively controlled is to create a right environment for working mothers so that they are able to continue their work. A recent survey had shown that even in companies with a system of child care and pregnancy leave, about 70 per cent of women quit job on becoming mothers. A number of surveys and studies conducted recently by various groups give clear indication that the Japanese society is slowly waking up to the call to tackle the problem. A recent finding of the National Institute of Population Research and Social Security Research suggested that a key to

tackling Japan's low fertility rate is also to have men share more work of bringing up kids. More than 80 per cent of child bearing responsibilities are now being shouldered by wives alone.

The low fertility rate coupled with the aging of the society would eventually lead to the acute shortage of work forces in Japan needed to sustain the necessary structure of an advanced society. The government is working on various options needed to tackle the problem. For the old people alone Japan in coming days would need a large work force of helping hands that the society is simply unable to provide. As a result, recruiting such workers from countries with surplus human resources is one option that Japanese policy makers these days are giving serious consideration. But the issue of foreign workers in Japan remains a contentious subject. While the foreign and economy ministry officials have pressed the government to accept foreign workers, the justice and health and labour ministries remain cautious, citing the social cost of accepting foreign workers, such as frictions with local communities.

But as time runs out for Japan to address the issues related to declining population and the ageing society, experts believe it is now a matter of time for the door of Japan to be opened to workers from other Asian nations. Hence, it is also time for countries like Bangladesh to initiate serious studies that would look at the possibilities of how they would be able to best utilise the situation to their own benefit.

OPINION

Constraints in the path to peaceful co-existence

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

ON the mini screen of the electronic media the other day the whole nation watched a frantic effort on the part of the Chief Election Commissioner to convince the press that indeed he was not a bad man. Rather, he claimed to be a very 'friendly person' assuring his 'fullest' and 'sincerest' cooperation to the media from now onward. One of the two Election Commissioners was with the CEC all in smile giving a nodding approval to the latter's belated realisation. The press men were in the CEC's office at his own invitation.

Meantime, the turmoil over his words and action, his mimics, his alleged and deliberate dodging (or shall we say flouting?) of the Hon'ble High Court directives to update the existing voter list instead of going for a new voter list, his preferring an appeal against High Court ruling and yet

continuing the process of making a new voter list without waiting for the results of the appeal, squandering in consequence huge amount of public money, have been very much in the air. Any possible exaggeration over his role excepted, even the ministers and leaders of the present four-party alliance appear now to have been equally concerned about CEC's role. Law minister Moudud Ahmed, among others, has insisted that the CEC should no longer bide time to act in lieu with the judgment of the supreme court on the issue of voter list updating.

On the other hand, the fate of the reform proposal for the system of the caretaker government and the Election Commission vis-a-vis the current demand of Awami League led 14-party alliance for removal of the present CEC and the two ECs, continue to be very uncertain. The government, in its part, appears to be disinterested to discuss the reform proposals

taking a self-same hard line on its committee members. On the prospect of CEC and the two ECs voluntarily stepping down after their appeal on the new voter list was rejected by the Supreme Court, the law minister in particular thought that this would be their personal decision where the government didn't have any guidance or comment to offer. The CEC himself thought that those who wanted his resignation were ignorant of the constitutional position in this regard. His position, he claimed, was a constitutional post not at all regulated or guided by the ordinary rules of employment of government employees.

None would challenge or contest the validity of such contention. Yet it would be very difficult for anyone with little sensibility to accept the ever erratic personal demeanor of the present incumbent. In fact this gentleman since his assumption of office in May 2005 has given rise to innumerable controversies through his

words and actions. At his instance the enumerators in the field in many cases were reported to have prepared new voter list with fictitious names and addresses mostly non-existent. These were all done on the basis of concocted or false data. As a direct impact of such machinations the whole environment for a free and fair election has been utterly vitiated.

On top of all these farcical activities of the CEC MA Aziz resulting in the production of an unbelievably inflated voter list with two crore additional names under his supervision had created history. Things are taking such a bad shape that it is now almost impossible on the part of the opposition political parties to participate in the 2007 general election under the present CEC and his entourage. Boycott on their part seems to be inevitable. More so when the government continues to be adamant on the committee comprising those with whom AL led 14-party alliance

refused to sit for any dialogue on the reform proposal. It may be recalled in this connection that the 14-party alliance authorised Awami League alone to do the talking on their behalf. Likewise the 4-party alliance could authorise BNP to represent all of them in the dialogue. But they didn't do so deliberately and purposefully in order to get formal recognition of Awami League and to salvage their brazen faces on war criminals. BNP itself appears to have sided with them to ensure that the dialogue doesn't take place at all. The liability of the failure, in their opinion, would then be conveniently shifted on Awami League's shoulder. This is not likely to work at all.

Against the backdrop of such a mutually contradictory scenario the crisis precipitating in an abhorring rapidity is most likely to take the country to a point of no return. And when the situation goes out of control due to the present state of indifference and intransigent atti-

tude of the government a hellish tragedy is sure to befall on the nation. The government leaders are expected to display the desired sensibility and prudence in tackling the fast waning situation. The damage already done to the image of the government by the CEC can still be repaired. Since the reform proposals on the system of caretaker government and on the election commission have already turned out to be a very urgent national issue and since, at certain point the government also expressed its willingness to discuss and to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution, there is no point in being stubborn and arrogant on the composition of the committee. It must be realised that any dilly-dallying over the reform proposal can push the country to a catastrophe.

Time is running out fast. If there is real good intention of the government the reform issue will have to be settled now and before the present term of the government ends. Because the changes that

would emanate from the discussion and agreed upon, will require consequent amendment of the existing provisions. That means the present parliament, will have to be in session to make such amendments.

If in the worst option, the present 4-party alliance or for that matter, the government are nursing any intention to go for next election unilaterally ignoring the major opposition party and the 14-party alliance keeping them out of the run it shall be a shameful replication of 15 February, 1996 election. Time has changed radically and no contrivance at creating a 'B' team for an opposition will work this time. The eyes of almost the whole western countries, the donor agencies, the ADB, the World Bank are intensely focussed on our next election. No sort of fabrication and election engineering shall hopefully escape their notice. If it is otherwise our national prestige and credibility will be at a stake. There is a persistent demand from the

donors for such a government as would reflect without prejudice, the genuine opinion of the people. As a pre-condition, therefore, they have time and again insisted that all the contesting parties to the election get fair and equal opportunities in the next election.

But, looking around, there is practically no sign or indication from the government machinery towards ensuring such a most desired and ideal situation. The liability certainly devolves upon the government, at least the majority part of it. There is unfortunately no preparation in this regard. On the contrary, the nation continues to witness a literal fiesta of state and inconsistent words from the government party leaders much to their listeners' discontent. This is indeed ridiculous and hence must be effectively discarded to avoid endless controversies now contaminating the sanctity of our hard-earned nationhood.

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