

## Losing the people's trust



ANM NURUL HAQUE

### BY THE NUMBERS

**It is a vicious cycle of hypocrisy that we are living through, and the good politicians are driven out of the political arena by the bad ones following the economic theory that bad money drives away good money. To bring it all to an end, we must devise the kind of political system where the well-being of the nation is at the core of the system.**

At least 60 percent of the people in Bangladesh find politics a shambles. A study styled "Unbundling governance towards an annual report on governance in Bangladesh" by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), a local development research institute, revealed this unpleasant truth for the nation in a seminar held at LGED Bhaban in the city on July 29.

The survey found that about 36.4 percent of the people have "low trust" in the country's political parties, while nearly 60 percent have shown their pessimistic views about improved politics, and 39.6 percent are pessimistic about the future of the country.

Only 5.5 percent of the people

are highly optimistic about the future of the country, while 31.3 percent of the people expressed concern about the high insecurity in the political arena. On the other hand, more than 31 percent people showed their low trust in politicians and 33 percent showed their negative attitude towards women's participation in politics.

The PPRC has compiled the survey report, which revealed the diminishing trust of the people in political parties, after interviewing about 4,500 people in 64 villages in the 64 districts, 30 rural towns, and 10 district towns across the country, including Dhaka and Chittagong metropolises. The people, on behalf of whom the political parties claim to operate, hardly figure when it comes to decision making. This is a sham democracy which only serves the

interest of the politicians, not of the common people.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has said that the tempo of development activities of her government has generated newer investment, and the growth of mills and factories, which is what has caused a shortfall of electricity needed for fueling these expanding operations. She said this while presenting a brief resume of the development by her government at the National Conference 2006 of Diploma Engineers on March 27. The prime minister also made a similar statement in a public meeting held recently at Rajshahi. She made such an unpalatable statement when the country is passing through an unprecedented power shortage due to failure of her government in the power sector.

Whatever the acclaimed successes of the government may be, all the successes have been eclipsed by failures in three major areas -- improvement in power supply, the curbing of massive corruption, and the reining in of prices. It is a particular malady for the nation that the government, instead of facing the facts, has

become crippled with the persistent pressure of the price spiral of all the essential commodities. The most comical aspect of the crisis was that when the national media reported the immense sufferings of the people due to price spiral, the then commerce minister, Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, informed the nation that the prices of essential commodities in the market were stable. A national daily termed this remark of the commerce minister as "a cruel joke."

The prime minister is now urging the people to send her party to power, again, in order to wipe out corruption. Bangladesh has become a global brand name for corruption because of the rampant corruption by the persons in the corridors of power. As the people have witnessed increasing corruption

throughout the whole tenure of this government, there is little chance to cut ice with the people with hollow words.

The people of this country have seen the immense damage done to the national economy by the endless spate of hartals that have been observed since the return of parliamentary government in 1991. The political parties of the country have resorted to hartals to press the government for accepting their demands.

What makes the matter even more disgraceful is when the prime minister says the price hike is not affecting people, as the rise in purchasing power will help them to absorb the increase in the prices of essentials. The purchasing power of some people, who have accumulated huge wealth through all sorts of dubious means, has risen beyond our imagination. A section of people has become rich overnight by questionable means, but another section (majority of the people) is hard pressed to obtain two square meals a day in the present price situation.

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Being agitated by repeated country-wide hartals, the then prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, had promised that her party would never enforce hartals, even when it would be the opposition. Now, opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina claims that she is forced to impose hartal as the government does not accede to her demand for resignation. This is an attitude that needs to be changed.

The people attained the independence of Bangladesh after

colossal bloodshed in the fierce

liberation war of nine months. They never expected such a failed and ineffective national parliament in the country. BNP, while in opposition during the AL rule, also took to the recourse of boycotting parliament, often on trivial grounds. The AL has also resorted to the similar practice of boycotting parliament, turning it into a one-side show.

Eventually, it is the nation which

pays the price for this. The people

are really tired of watching the same drama year after year.

The manifest truth is that most of

the people in Bangladesh have

already lost trust in politics due to

prolonged absence of charismatic

leadership. As a result, voters'

verdicts are no more in accord with

any particular party in the national

election. Voters are now very

divided.

The nexus between crime and politics has given a boost to criminality in all the tiers of society. Populism, as so often demonstrated by the political parties at their public rallies, is mostly nothing more than hired people. Votes are now bought, not won. As a result, stakes are high in politics. People are losing trust in the politicians due to this predicament in our sham democracy.

It has become quite customary for our politicians to promise to wipe out corruption, bring down price of essentials, improve the law and order situation, and make pledges for the well-being of the people. But they forget all the pledges once they are sworn into public office. They will remember, and repeat, the old pledges again only when they lose power.

It is a vicious cycle of hypocrisy that we are living through, and the good politicians are driven out of the political arena by the bad ones following the economic theory that bad money drives away good money. To bring it all to an end, we must devise the kind of political system where the well-being of the nation is at the core of the system.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## Uzbekistan: Where terror rules

**Cotton used to be the most important production of the central Asian republics even during the Soviet times, but then, fifty percent of the work used to be done by machines. Now the machinery left by the Soviet Union has rusted and is almost entirely out of order. The security forces evacuate village after village taking the people, including doctors, engineers and other professionals, to do manual labour in the fields. Even the schools are closed and all the children get transported to the farms where they spend well over one-third of the year. For this work, they are paid \$2 a month; yes, this is not a typographical error, two dollars a month is the remuneration.**

SAAD S. KHAN

**S**LAVERY ended in most of Europe during the middle of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. In the United States, it took a bloody civil war to end slavery in the 1860s. Central Asia, however, is a different matter.

There, two things are rampant at an industrial scale: slavery in the cotton fields and torture of dissidents in the state security prisons. It is the first that I will address in the column and then touch on the recent developments on the second issue.

Cotton is the staple crop in most of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The former is rich in two of the most precious resources gold and uranium, while the latter is endowed with the world's largest deposits of a key energy resourcenatural gas. Yet wanton corruption and rampant mismanagement has left the ordinary population of the two nations high and dry. The revenues from natural wealth are mismanaged and the people are made to work on the farms for several months each year.

Men, women and children are taken on forced labour to the cotton farms where the working conditions are dismal, and it would not be far off the mark to compare them with banana plantations in Latin America where slaves were kidnapped from Africa for forced labour. Cotton used to be the most important production of the central Asian republics even during the Soviet times, but then, fifty percent of the work used to be done by machines. Now the machinery left by the Soviet Union has rusted and is almost entirely out of order. The security forces evacuate

village after village taking the people, including doctors, engineers and other professionals, to do manual labour in the fields. Even the schools are closed and all the children get transported to the farms where they spend well over one-third of the year. For this work, they are paid \$2 a month; yes, this is not a typographical error, two dollars a month is the remuneration.

ANM Nurul Haque

## A plan for Afghanistan

**Like it or not, the overwhelming majority of Afghans are conservative Muslims, and it is shortsighted to view economic development as a purely technical enterprise. For this same reason, part of the funds for building the Afghan economy should be earmarked for reconstructing the mosques and religious centers destroyed during the decades of war, particularly in major cultural and religious centers such as the western city of Herat.**

ANATOL LIEVEN AND RAJAN MENON

**O**n his recent trip to Kabul, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pledged that America was not disengaging from Afghanistan, where the Taliban have staged a bloody resurgence in several southern provinces. But the more telling comment may have come from the man standing beside him at the time, Afghan President Hamid Karzai. When asked whether he would request more US

troops to quell the insurgency, he replied, "Yes, much more, and we'll keep asking for more, and we will never stop asking."

The danger is not that revived Taliban forces will defeat NATO or US forces on the battlefield; there is no chance of that. But if the Taliban's resurgence and Afghans' economic misery are not ended, a government capable of surviving if Western troops withdraw will never emerge in Afghanistan. And that means that the West will have to fight in Afghanistan indefinitely. Is that something the US electorate

will tolerate? The Taliban and al-Qaeda are betting not.

More troops and more money will not solve the problem. What's also needed is imaginative thinking. To begin with, it's facile to treat Afghanistan as a geographical and economic island. The only hope of developing the country is to spur growth in its surrounding region. One way to do this is to create new transport links through Afghanistan from Central Asia to Pakistan and India. It is shameful that we have succeeded in rebuilding only one stretch of highway since toppling

He was arrested and beaten the moment he landed at Tashkent airport through a commercial flight. In the prison, he was stripped naked, heavily drugged and severely tortured so much so that he has lost his mental balance. This year a kangaroo court has found him guilty of treason and sentenced him to 14 years in prison. The foreign human rights activists who saw him in his cell testify that he is kept naked and that he is now mentally unbalanced.

Mr. Umarov's family is in US, but mind you, in Uzbekistan, imprisonment does not usually end at being locked in jails alone; forced labour, routine torture, emotional torment, gang rape and harassment to family is part of the package, though not written down expressly in the kangaroo court verdicts. The prisoners of conscience are made to stand out in the sun every morning and to shout: "We are thankful to President Islam Karimov, our benevolent leader for this food that we would receive." Any refusal to do so results in electric shocks being delivered.

Prisoners who pass half their sentence are then made to sign confessions of "activities against the state" and are forced to implement an immediate relative as co-conspirator, and then made to sign a plea of mercy addressed to the president. Most people break under torture, do the bidding, get released, and the next of kin, on their testimony, is apprehended to go through the same experience for the next few years, only to come out after signing a confession and plea for mercy and implicating yet another relative.

There is a dawn after every night, goes the saying. But the dark night for the people of Central Asia is getting longer with no end in sight.

When the whole world has embraced democracy, why the people of Central Asia are living like slaves? Russia is openly grooming the Uzbek billionaire Alisher Usmanov as a successor for Islam Karimov, in case of his death. But the people want themselves to be sovereign, not the Kremlin to be their kingmaker.

The writer is the Middle East Editor of Cambridge Review of International Affairs and a widely read analyst on politics, governance and human rights in the Muslim world.

the Taliban. We ought to have finished a road network and to be well into the creation of a railway linking the South Asian and former Soviet rail systems, not least because by far the greater part of the track would traverse regions secure from Taliban attack.

A regional strategy should also involve a new approach to Iran. Up to now, the Bush administration has put massive pressure on Karzai's government not to develop economic and other ties to Tehran. Yet, like it or not, Iran has influenced (indeed, often ruled) Afghanistan for some 2,500 years. It has the capacity to act as a spoiler, and has good reason to do so as the war of words between Washington and Tehran heats up. There is a basis for cooperation in Afghanistan, however, because key Iranian interests there are congruent with those of the United States above all when it comes to

fighting the heroin trade and preventing a return of the savagely anti-Shiite Taliban.

Within Afghanistan, we need a development program that brings tangible benefits to ordinary people. True, sustained programs to promote development are well-nigh impossible in areas Helmand, Kandahar, Oruzgan, Zabol and Kunar provinces where Taliban attacks are frequent. But we can pursue them far more robustly than we have in provinces, particularly in the north and west, where there is greater tranquility. Success there would create a "demonstration effect," showing Taliban supporters the benefits they would receive by ending the violence, proving to ordinary Afghans that the United States and its allies are serious about lifting them out of poverty. Construction projects would also create jobs for migrant laborers who

would send remittances home.

Construction is the keynot just for transport but for urban housing, and for basic rural infrastructure including schools, roads, medical clinics and sources of potable water. We will have to plan, and fund, this construction over decades if it is to be more than a Band-Aid solution. The role of international donors in building schools has been touted by the Bush administration and the Karzai government, and it is a worthy achievement. But generating large numbers of educated young males without prospects for decent employment is not only pointless, it is dangerous. As we have seen repeatedly, such graduates are ideal recruits for Islamist extremists.

With its budget deficits, inflated by bills from the war in Iraq, and with a substantial gap between the aid pledged by donors to

Afghanistan and the funds actually received, the United States needs to do more with less something that the cost overruns of projects in Iraq make all too clear. To economize, we need to employ, as much as possible, companies from the region. Indian and Turkish firms, in particular, have extensive experience with construction projects in the developing world. So do companies from the Middle East, and involving them in the business of rebuilding Afghanistan can create jobs and tap local expertise, showing in the process that America's avowed policy of reaching out to the Islamic world consists of more than rhetoric.

Like it or not, the overwhelming majority of Afghans are conservative Muslims, and it is shortsighted to view economic development as a purely technical enterprise. For this same reason, part of the funds for building the Afghan economy

should be earmarked for reconstructing the mosques and religious centers destroyed during the decades of war, particularly in major cultural and religious centers such as the western city of Herat. These proposals will take money, time and imagination to work, and there are no guarantees of success. But quite apart from what we owe the Afghan people, we owe it to ourselves not to fail; as September 11 so cruelly demonstrated, we neglect Afghanistan at our peril.

Anatol Lieven is senior research fellow at the New America Foundation and Rajan Menon is a fellow at the foundation and Monroe J. Rathbone Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University. © 2006, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.