

# Losing the people's trust



ANM NURUL HAQUE

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

## 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.

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 short-fall of electricity needed for fuelling 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.

The majority of the people have

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."

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

been repeatedly denying the truth.

The anguished people feel that this denial is adding insult to injury. The acute power shortage is not a consequence of the tempo of development, as claimed by the prime minister, but an outcome of the failure of the government to control the chaotic situation, and the corruption, in the power sector.

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.

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 corrup-

tion 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.

The major political parties did not agree to find a substitute for hartals over the last thirteen years, even when considering the huge damage caused by the hartals. The civil society, and the business leaders, have repeatedly requested the country's mainstream opposition leaders to put an end to the unabated politics of hartal, considering its harmful effects on the economy and on business. But the entire political class did not pay any heed to their request.

The BNP also imposed several hartals during their opposition period, demanding resignation of the AL government, accusing AL of indulging in corruption, alleging harassment of political rivals and failure in running the administration.

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 not a typographical error, two dollars a month is the remuneration.

SAAD S. KHAN

SLAVERY 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 resource natural 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 not a typographical error, two dollars a month is the remuneration.

In both the countries, poverty is rampant and the state exacerbates it by giving wages that are exploitative and imposing taxes that are extortionist. But the first families, the presidents and their near and dear ones, have no compunction in amassing fortunes.

When, Gulnaara Karimova, the daughter of Uzbek President Karimov, got divorced in the United States, she claimed \$5.4 million worth of jewelry in divorce settlement litigation, that had been left by her in her New Jersey house alone. It must not have been the only wealth that she had. Contrast this fabulous fortune of the first family with the abject poverty the ordinary people live in.

The state control over economic resources is so intrusive that every transfer of as little as \$20 or above has to be reported to and approved by the central bank. Nobody is allowed to open a bank account in foreign banks. And painfully funny is the fact that the state declares the national budget as a "national secret" and the citizenry has no clue over how their money is being raised or spent. Little wonder 60% of the economy of Central Asia is black. The formal sector is mainly security services, 40,000 of them in Tashkent city alone, to give one example. It may well be a surprise that education and health are treated as "non-essential" services by the state.

And it was this black economy that had sparked the violence in the town of Andijan in Uzbekistan last year where the traders with neighbouring Kyrgyz villages were tried

for treason that led to anxiety among their families and people came out and were shot. The memory of this grand massacre of unarmed women and children is still fresh, yet Islam Karimov is going on with his shameless crimes against humanity. It is not limited to the mock trials of massacre survivors who are tortured to give evidence against their dead near and dear ones that they had been terrorists. The government is trying to declare all the dead protestors as terrorists, to "close the books." The renowned human rights activist Zainabiddinov became the latest casualty in being sent to long imprisonment for spreading "false and malicious propaganda against the government." He had refused to give evidence saying that the killed persons were armed and that security forces had fired in self defence only. Latest reports say that his whereabouts are not known and his family believes he has died under extreme torture.

Mr. Sanjar Umarov, a prominent businessman, now a US citizen, is another example of state high-handedness. A former ally of Mr. Karimov he fell out with him on his repressive policies. Umarov created a new opposition political party named Sunshine while he was in the US. He then decided to return to Uzbekistan last year to play the role of opposition within the country.

Being a filthy rich man, he thought his contacts in Uzbekistan as well as his US citizenship would save him from arrest, let alone torture, since he was too big and important a political leader, or so he thought. He was cajoled by the state security services to return, giving mixed signals that he would not be personally harmed but Mr. Umarov was mentally prepared for a certain level of harassment including phone tapping, etc. Unfortunately, he had been sadly mistaken.

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 implicate 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.

# Politics makes strange bed-fellows

Revival or return of a fallen dictator is not common in the recent history of world politics. That is probably why Bangladesh is often referred to as a country where everything is possible, where anti-liberation forces who took side with the Pakistani army in committing genocide against the people of this country have been able to stage a comeback, and share state power, only after thirty years of independence, and a fallen autocrat is contemplating a similar feat in only half that time.

CAPT. HUSAIN IMAM

HERE is a saying: All's fair in love and war. The same is probably true for politics in Bangladesh also.

Otherwise, why should a person like Hussain Mohammad Ershad -- a fallen dictator who was thrown out of power in 1990 through a prolonged and bloody mass movement led by the country's then mainstream opposition political parties, including BNP and Awami League, and put behind bars on charges of corruption, tax evasion, and misuse of power -- now be an important person in the political scene?

President Ziaur Rahman was killed in a military coup in Chittagong allegedly led by Gen Manzoor when Gen Ershad was the chief of staff of Bangladesh army. Soon after the coup, Gen Manzoor was caught and killed inside Chittagong cantonment.

It is believed in many circles that Ershad was behind both the killings. Although there is a case against him in the court on charges of conspiracy to kill Gen Manzoor, nobody has ever tried to officially involve or asked for trial of Ershad in the killing of Ziaur Rahman.

The crux of the issue is that Ershad was the beneficiary of the killings. Soon he became the president of the country, seizing power through the back-door, replacing an elected BNP government of Justice Sattar by force.

It is only sixteen years back that people of this country struggled and sacrificed their lives -- Basunia, Noor Hossain Delwar, Selim, Dr. Milon, to name a few -- to get rid of the autocrat Ershad and establish democracy. BNP and Awami League with a number of other political parties in their fold took the lead in that mass movement against Ershad and in the

process Begum Khaleda Zia earned a reputation as an uncompromising leader among her supporters.

It is most unfortunate that Begum Khaleda Zia, for the sake of power, has now become so compromising that, as if it was not enough to have Jamaat and other fundamentalist and anti-liberation forces on her side, she has invited Ershad to her office and asked him to join her alliance to ensure victory in the next general election.

Ershad in return is learnt to have asked her to withdraw all graft and other cases against him and make him the president of the republic, and Begum Zia has agreed to consider most if not all of his demands. The Awami League is also, on the other hand, as we can understand from the television interview of some of its spokesmen, considering Ershad an important factor in the next election and is worried about his joining the four-party alliance.

We hear that politics makes strange bed-fellows, but that the bed-fellow could be a most unpredictable and dubious character like Hussain Mohammed Ershad, who is capable of saying one thing in the morning and just the opposite in the evening, not to mention about his never ending lust for power, wealth, and women, nobody probably ever conceived of.

Politicians are held in contempt, wrote Brendan Francis, an American writer. This may not be all true in the case of Bangladesh. Here politicians, even those who are accused of siphoning millions of dollar to foreign banks, bleeding the nation white, are not for long held in contempt. Ershad is a glaring example right in front of us, though he may not be alone in this race.

Be that as it may, let us turn our eyes to our civil society, specially to

the Nagorik Committee, who are holding seminar after seminar in the divisional and district headquarters, and relentlessly looking for honest and capable candidates for the next general election.

I wonder what will be their rating (in the context of fielding honest and capable candidates) for Ershad who has already served a jail term of more than three years, having being convicted by the Supreme Court in a graft case, with another fifteen or sixteen cases still hanging over him. They might do a great service to the nation if they can come out with a frank and honest opinion in this respect.

We might as well turn our eyes to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and try to find out what they are thinking of Ershad. The other day we saw the ACC head Justice Sultan Ahmed telling the television crew that they are going to look into the present and past record of the intending candidates in terms of their financial integrity and refer the cases to the Election Commission so that corrupt candidates can be barred from contesting the national election.

To start with a simple and straightforward case, why not they take up the case of Ershad and break the inertia they have been until now unable to overcome? Our newly appointed Tax Ombudsman Mr. Khairuzzaman might also find an interesting case to start with in finding how far the print media is correct in reporting that Ershad does not pay any income-tax.

Revival or return of a fallen dictator is not common in the recent history of world politics. It didn't happen with Marcos in the Philippines, Shah Reza Pahlavi in Iran, Pinochet in Chile, Ayub Khan or Yahya Khan in Pakistan. But it has happened with Ershad in Bangladesh.

That is probably why Bangladesh is often referred to as a country where everything is possible, where anti-liberation forces who took side with the Pakistani army in committing genocide against the people of this country have been able to stage a comeback, and share state power, only after thirty years of independence, and a fallen autocrat is contemplating a similar feat in only half that time.

The tug of war between BNP and Awami League to drag General Ershad on their side shows how desperate the two parties are to win the next election at any cost.

Although the BNP high command maintains that they want to stay in power to ensure continuity of their development work, but the critics and in fact most people think otherwise. They think BNP is desperate to stay in power to protect themselves and the huge properties they have amassed during the last five years of their rule (or, more appropriately, misrule).

The reason for Awami League to be desperate to win the next election is also understood. They need to go to power for their political existence, if not for anything else. What is not understood is how the return of a deposed dictator to our national politics, be it in alliance with BNP or Awami League, will help us overcome the present impasse of ensuring a free, fair and credible election and establish a secular, progressive and democratic government in power, given the track record of Ershad, not only as a despot but also as a mastermind of election rigging and media coup.

One more thing that Awami League needs to understand that Ershad's JP is a natural ally of BNP, a fact which Ershad himself admits without any reservation. The best thing for Awami League and in turn for those who wish to see the democratic and secular forces in power would be to leave Hussain Mohammed Ershad free to join his natural ally and try his luck.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

# 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

ON 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 is 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

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 from the Taliban provinces, 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.