

Dream of an ordinary citizen

The dream of an ordinary citizen can come true only in an environment of peace and harmony, where the citizens make relentless efforts to improve their living conditions and their leaders act with responsibility and selflessly, while governments change periodically on the basis of free and fair elections. Let us hope the dialogue the government and the opposition have embarked on after confrontational politics of a decade and a half would lead us to such an era of peace, harmony, and prosperity.

GHULAM RAHMAN

I have a dream. The dream is that of an ordinary citizen. The dream is to have the right to the basic necessities of life -- food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, etc. The dream is to have the right to work with provisions for reasonable rest, recreation, and leisure. The dream is about a decent living for all of us. The constitution has provisions to guarantee them. My dream is to see them realized in my lifetime.

Bangladesh has a per capita income of \$500. Its economy is growing at over 6 per cent rate per annum. If the growth momentum could be pushed by 1 per cent annually, by the year 2010 the economy would grow at 10 per cent. If this could be maintained for the next 15 years, by the year 2015 the country would be out of the club of 49 Least Developed Countries (LDC), and by 2025 would become a mid-level developing country, with per capita income of about \$3,000.

The country would reach the threshold of a developed nation with per capita income of over \$12,000 by 2040 if the same growth rate can be maintained for the next 15 years. That can happen only if almighty Allah is very gracious. The underlying assumption, however, is that the population will remain stable. In reality, the population is likely to grow for a few years and then would stabilize for sometime before it starts declining. The actual per capita income, therefore, could be somewhat different than stipulated.

I am not daydreaming. Some nations, including China, the most populous country in the world, have shown that double-digit growth is attainable. Such a high growth rate seems to be within the reach of neighbouring India, which has already attained almost 9 per cent growth. What is needed is a vision for the future and single-minded relentless efforts of the leadership and the populace to reach those goals. It could be much easier for us than others to reach these targets as we have a homogeneous and young population. Once we commit ourselves to these goals, various strategies could be chalked out to attain them. I have one, which I would like to designate as 9E strategy.

For the country to prosper, the first and foremost requirement is accountability and transparency in governance. This can be achieved through periodic credible elections to select the stewards to lead the country and the communities at the national and local levels. Thus election is the first element of 9E. Only a democratic polity can provide good governance and create lasting environment of freedom and innovation for uninterrupted progress and prosperity.

The second prerequisite is empowerment of the downtrodden and disadvantaged groups. A society marches ahead in an environment of fair competition with equal opportunity for all. Every citizen should be on a level playing field. Therefore, empowerment is the second element of 9E.

For attaining excellence and

glory in the community of nations we must educate citizens about worldly subjects to develop their skills to engage in productive occupations, to excel in science and technology and other arena of scholarly pursuit of arts, ethics, history, religion, etc. Education is the third element of 9E.

The wheels of production rotate with energy. Energy makes life comfortable, easy, and hassle-free. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to ensure adequate supply of energy -- gas, oil, and electricity for every-day comfort as well as for long-term improvements in citizens' living conditions.

However, the situation is precarious now. We are using our limited gas reserves to produce electricity, possibly not the best possible use for this scarce resource. Already few precious lives were lost in brutal governmental action during mass agitations triggered by the government's failure to ensure adequate supply of energy to its people.

However, the region we are in is rich in hydroelectric potentials as well as oil and gas reserves. Energy cooperation among Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, and Nepal is likely to give a boost to the development of the entire region. All these countries, particularly Bangladesh, can reap huge benefits from affordable hydroelectricity from Nepal, Bhutan, and India, coal from India, and gas from Myanmar, and at the same time can share its own energy resources with the neighbors to put them in best possible use. In 9E strategy, energy is the fourth element.

The development of a country benefits its people. Again, it is the people who develop it. While the government creates the environment conducive to progress, it is entrepreneurs who push the wheels of development and put the nation on a higher growth rate trajectory. Fortunately, the garment sector while growing in an environment of "MFA restrictions" has created a group of world-class entrepreneurs and professional managers in Bangladesh. The entrepreneur class is likely to get enlarged in a growing economy. Thus, entrepreneurship is the fifth element of 9E strategy.

Since the Second World War, several East and South-East Asian countries achieved unprecedented social transformation and economic growth, initially based on export expansion and then with concurrent increase in domestic demand. Production of goods and services depend on "effective demand." A nation is poor because its people lack purchasing power which oils the wheels of production. In the present LDC status, it would not be possible to break the "vicious circle of poverty" without opening of and a breakthrough in markets abroad for products and service produced in Bangladesh.

This is why the current Doha Round of WTO negotiations is so important for the country. Despite all pervasive corruption and wide spread governmental failure in almost every sector, Bangladesh economy is showing good prospects due to expansion of garment industry and manpower export. The economy is benefiting in multiple ways from these two sectors. In 9E strategy, export development is the sixth element.

Welfare, income, and employment have close correlations. Employment gives income and income promotes welfare. A modern state exists for the welfare of its people. In this scenario, employment is the most important of the nine elements. All the policies and

programs of the government should be geared to generate and facilitate employment. Broadly speaking, of the country's total workforce, about 50 per cent should be engaged in manufacturing, construction, and mining sectors; 25 per cent in agriculture, fisheries and animal husbandries, and the remaining 25 per cent in services and other sectors.

For orderly expansion of the economy, a few corridors of development, say, one from Teknaf to Dhaka, another from Mongla to Banglaband, and still another from Dhaka to Tamabil, etc. and about one hundred or so hubs of manufacturing and service activities, with population ranging from a few hundred thousand to several million, may be created with the right facilities. The development in these hubs should be more vertical than horizontal. The picturesque rural character of the rest of the country should remain undisturbed.

The urban population may gradually increase to 80-90 per cent, while the rest would continue to live in villages. Every sector of the economy should grow in a competitive environment, should be nurtured by a highly productive labour force and should run on sound commercial principles.

The country should generate not only enough employment for the new entrants in the job market but also for the absorption of 30 million or so unemployed labour force in the next couple of years and attain full employment by 2015. Simultaneously, the efforts to raise labour productivity through skill development and adoption of improved modern technology should continue unabated to give the country an edge in global competitiveness.

In this age of globalization, no country can progress in isolation. Economic integration, particularly with the neighbouring countries, is pivotal for ensuring uninterrupted long-term progress. European Union, Nafta, and Asean are some



of the examples which show how living standards of people can be made better by opening each other's markets and harnessing and sharing each other's resources.

We must work together with India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan, and even with China, to develop water and energy resources and to develop infrastructure -- road, railway, and river communication network. By developing Chittagong port and making it an efficient regional hub, the country's GDP could be raised by at least 1 per cent and create a million new jobs. Economic integration is, therefore, the eighth element in 9E strategy.

Everyone in society should have access to good education, healthcare, decent living environment, public transportation, and security of life and property. Everybody should enjoy equal rights and freedom of thought, action, and religious belief, and none should impede others' rights. All would be equal in the eyes of law

and justice. Rule of law should prevail in all spheres and corruption should bear the worst stigma. The society would give equal emphasis on creation and distribution of

wealth and create an egalitarian environment. Thus, equality would be the final element in the 9E strategy.

The process of economic and social transformation is a complex phenomenon. There is no precise explanation as to why some countries are rich while others are poor. Many African countries with abundant natural resources are poor and on the other hand resource-poor Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are rich.

Human endeavour and ingenuity perhaps play a decisive role. With right policies and leadership, a country could make great strides in a short period, as the countries of South-East Asia exemplify. The 9E strategy, if pursued vigorously, I believe, would create conditions which would make Bangladesh a

mid-level developing country by 2025 and raise it to the status of a developed country in about 40 years.

The dream of an ordinary citizen can come true only in an environment of peace and harmony, where the citizens make relentless efforts to improve their living conditions and their leaders act with responsibility and selflessly, while governments change periodically on the basis of free and fair elections. Let us hope the dialogue the government and the opposition have embarked on after confrontational politics of a decade and a half would lead us to such an era of peace, harmony, and prosperity.

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Power crisis

SALEQUE SUFI

BANGLADESH is reeling under severe power load shedding -- the worst in its history. People of all walks of life are agitated. Even the major cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna are having 10-12 hours brown-outs regularly.

People have started coming out in the streets and taking the law into their own hands. This is an ominous sign for everyone, let alone the government of the day, caretaker government, or the incoming government.

The power generation and supply system appears to have completely collapsed. The national grid cannot meet even 50% of the average demand. Against a coincident peak demand of about 4,900 MW the generation has come down to a little over 3000 MW.

It is a shame, it is a disgrace. It has not happened over a day or a month. Non-professional attitude and massive corruption has culminated in this misfortune. There has been practically no addition to power generation over the entire term of the 4-party alliance government.

The lone so-called peaking plant at Tongi has become a liability. The coal operated plant at Barapukuria is already sick, like the coal mine. Many of the ageing plants at Ashuganj and Ghorashal are long overdue for overhauling. Some of these have outlived their economic life and should have been replaced by this time.

No major new plants were set up and very little maintenance was carried out. So instead of increasing, power generation has gone down. On the other hand, demand has increased in geometric progression. The country's power sector will

remain in trouble for a long time into the future. Consequently trade, commerce, and even civic life are in total chaos and jeopardy. So what are the remedies?

As conscious citizens, no self-respecting Bangladeshi should keep their fingers crossed and wait for divine blessing. The civil society must diagnose the failures and come up with possible remedies to alleviate the ongoing sufferings.

I remember that I had an opportunity to help prepare the minutes of a high level meeting at the PMO sometime in 2005 while working as director (operations) of the national gas grid. My friend, Aminur Rahman, director (operations) of TGTDC, and myself had some ideas for load management which could have been effective during that period. But I believe that the situation is much worse now.

Staggering the peak load over different slots may not work now. In many countries, super-markets are open only during the day on weekdays. They do not have power generation crisis, but they still do that, but in our power-starved country we keep our super malls open till midnight. Is this not a luxury?

We have developed this culture and cannot easily come out of it. But civil society must create public opinion about shopping culture during the day and on week-ends. All shops and markets, excepting food and medicines shops, must close by 6 pm on weekdays. This will save a significant amount of power during peak time.

There should be a massive drive for disconnecting unauthorised and illegal connections during caretaker government's tenure. A sufficient amount of diesel must be kept reserved for the upcoming irrigation season for relieving the national power grid from a significant load,

and avoiding the possibility of another Kansat-like incident.

The national gas grid has now crossed the Bangabandhu Jamuna multi-purpose bridge. We must allow private sector investors to set up small off-grid power plants at various growth centres to relieve the national grid. I remember that in 2002, in a seminar, the finance minister categorically confirmed that government would not hesitate to approve as many as 40 small off-grid power plants if such proposals were available. He even proposed to arrange financial support for such initiatives. Forty 15-20 MW off-grid power plants would have saved the government a lot of hassle, and could have been an invaluable investment for the ensuing election.

The Sirajgonj power plant would have been up and running by now if the Summit-PDB joint venture had got the final approval. The author is aware of this initiative. It can be guaranteed that Bangladesh will never receive a cheaper option than this again. The new government must not make the mistake of scrapping fair contracts for narrow political gains.

All the dubious and non-transparent power deals must be scrapped, and fresh tenders must be invited in a transparent manner within the first 100 days of the new government. The list should include Meghnaghat Units 2 & 3, Sirajgonj 450 MW, Fenchuganj, and Chandpor.

The complete overhauling and replacement of existing plants at Ashuganj and Ghorashal must receive priority. Any addition to power generation at Meghnaghat will require a new gas pipeline from Bakhrabad to Demra. This should proceed simultaneously, keeping a provision for extending this line across the Padma river

over the future Padma bridge.

Coal mining options must be given serious thought, and every coal mine must have mine-mouth power plants. Power from municipal waste can be an option for Dhaka and Chittagong. The solar power option must get priority attention. The bio-diesel alternative must be given serious attention. Plants can be made to run on bio-diesel.

A regional power grid can be a viable option. Last year, in New Delhi, the author had the opportunity to meet senior executives of the ONGC and the Mittal group. India is planning to set up large power plants at Tripura, a stone's throw from the Kasba border. If this happens, Bangladesh may exchange power with India. We need power during peak hours, and can sell during off-peak hours when all our effective generation is available. The surplus power from captive generation plants can be made available to the grid at peak hours. This will relieve the national grid of some load in the industrial belts.

Well, these are just some wild thoughts. But it is my humble appeal to patriotic nationalist forces to seriously think and act for finding ways and means for relieving the people from the pains of the power crisis.

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MD. AZMAL HOSSAIN

STRONG local government is a basic precondition for women's empowerment. But in Bangladesh we are yet to achieve this goal. Local government is the lowest tier of our administrative system. But we tend to forget the magnitude of local government which is essential for maintenance of local administration as well as the local atmosphere.

The history of local government in our region is very long and merits serious attention. Subsequent governments have made pledges to improve local governments but things are still in the doldrums. Actual development of local government in Bangladesh is less discernible. The phenomenon of women entering local government started essentially in 1976. Till that time there was no concept of women's empowerment in the decision making process. We were far behind in the world scenario at that time.

After the pronouncement of 1983 UP (Union Parishad) Ordinance, the situation improved marginally. But the overall mechanism was almost the same as the system developed during the British colonial regime and the subsequent Pakistani regime under Basic Democracy order. The situation drastically changed when the four successive international conferences on women were held and their implications compelled us to give consent as a signatory of treaties like CEDAW.

In 1996, the Beijing Conference was the biggest ever conference on women and under the guidelines and indicators of the Beijing Conference, women's empowerment issues impacted the whole world. Countries like Japan and India have taken steps to fill the quota for women in parliament. A significant number of women are

represented in their parliament through direct election or through reserved seats.

In Bangladesh the situation is the reverse. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the leading women's rights organization, has demonstrated for direct election to reserved seats in parliament for more than three decades. But last year, the present ruling coalition did a notorious job in retaining the power to select women outside of election, and they also increased the number from 30 to 45. This was a major blow to the women's community.

After three decades of opposing women's empowerment, in 1997 the government approved National Women Development Policy (NWDP) which was a landmark event in the history of Bangladesh. Women felt relieved, having attained their target after a long struggle. But luck has not always been on their side.

The present ruling coalition has changed some key elements of the 1997 NWDP without any discussions in parliament. They did not consult the women stakeholders or the women's rights organizations. It was done very mysteriously and surreptitiously. Ministry of Women and Children Affairs of Bangladesh has been unable to give a good explanation regarding the major changes in the NWDP. It was a very controversial event.

1997 was a major threshold for women because women participated in the local government elections at the UP level for the first time. The response that this political move evoked in women was very enthusiastic and spontaneous. That election opened our eyes to the fact that women are not interested in confining themselves to household chores only but would rather like to enter into the decision making process as well.

The following elections also showed similar results and 22

women were elected as UP chairpersons. But, sadly, women members are not treated fairly by their male counterparts. They were deprived, mistreated, misled, and they had to face physical abuse, mental pressure, and verbal castigation. This is very unfortunate. Our patriarchal attitudes are really a great hindrance to women's authentic empowerment.

The majority of men are not psychologically or emotionally prepared to share the multifarious tasks of nation-building with their female counterparts. They treat women as though they are only fit for household matters. So, our mindset should be changed radically.

As part of the empowerment of women movement, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad organized a two-day workshop a few months back in Dhaka with huge participation of women local government leaders from City Corporations, pourashavas, and UPs throughout the country. More than 300 elected women representatives participated in the workshop.

The workshop hammered the fact into us that local government women representatives are eager for an equal sharing of power. Their bold voices were very hard to defy. In recent times they fought for equal rights in Khulna and Sylhet City Corporations and finally won the case, thanks to the wise decision by the High Court.

These two events send out the message loud and clear that women can be equally dexterous and conscious regarding their political empowerment. They also gave some concrete proposals to the government:

- Monthly resolution will be adopted in the presence of the women members.
- Regular budget meetings have to be ensured with the consent of the women members.
- Transparent environment will

have to be created so that women member know all policy issues regarding the local government ministry.

- Taking forced signatures from women for unscrupulous deals has to stop immediately.
- Women members shall be informed of the financial management of UP.
- Proper assignment of all development activities will be ensured and allocations for women should increase three times.
- Chairmen have to be deterred from concealing the circulars.
- Interference from the MPs at the UP level has to be checked, political favours have to be abolished, and finally, equal sharing of power has to be guaranteed.

Finally, if we want good governance then we should give emphasis on local government and create an environment for smooth functioning of their day-to-day affairs. Decentralization and devolution of power will not work if we fail to give them their rightful political power and guidance.

Local government is now in a feeble condition. Frequent circulars from the central government also create an unwholesome situation for local government. So, we have a long way to go before the local government achieves the autonomy it needs to function smoothly. Political will, on the part of women is a must in this regard. Women should be ever mindful of the fact that previous development only happened due to their political will.

MD. Azmal Hossain is Program Director, Advocacy, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

'We don't want to see any nuclear weapon in our neighbourhood'

Turkey's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, was in New York recently and spoke bluntly with Newsweek's Lally Weymouth about how the Turkish government sees the situation in Iraq. He warned that if the Iraqi Kurds did not curb the PKK terrorist group, Turkey may take matters into its own hands.

Weymouth: Recently, Iraq's President (Jalal) Talabani said that if Turkey continues to meddle in Iraq's affairs, the Iraqi Kurds will support opposition movements of other countries.

Gul: I was surprised, because Turkey is the one country that has really contributed to the Iraqi (Kurds). Turkey is the country that protected them when there was a chemical attack in Saddam's time. I think Talabani's statement was unfortunate and unwise. He is not the leader of one of the tribes now; he is the president of Iraq. So he has to be careful in his statements. **Was Talabani suggesting sup-**

porting the PKK?

The PKK is a terrorist organization. The Americans will (ultimately) withdraw, and he will be living with his neighbors -- so he should be careful.

Recently, Talabani told me that Iraq had convinced the PKK to announce a cease-fire and that a new chapter would soon open in relations between Turkey and Iraq.

What is the new chapter? Turkey is one of the main countries that has stressed the territorial integrity of Iraq. We are protecting their territory.

Do you think there is about to be a cease-fire with the PKK?

We cannot bargain with a terrorist

organization.

Do you think the Kurds could control the PKK if they wanted to?

If they don't, we have the capacity, ability and determination to fight to the end. PKK terrorism has increased. Also, the PKK has a new source of weapons. They have obtained weapons and explosives from the Iraqi Army. They bring them into Turkey and use them with remote-control devices.



Are the Iraqi Kurds working hand in hand with the PKK?

I don't want to say this, but they are not doing enough. The PKK terrorists feel relaxed to move about. We are expecting serious cooperation on this issue from all Iraqis as well as from the US. In the past, the leader of the PKK lived in Syria, and that regime was the enemy. Now the leaders of the PKK are in northern Iraq, which is controlled by the Coalition forces. **So, would Turkey invade northern Iraq to bring the PKK under control?**

We will do whatever is necessary to fight this organization. I want to give the message that if our friends don't help us, we will do the job ourselves.

The White House has announced that PKK terrorism is on the agenda of the meeting President Bush will hold with (Turkish) Prime Minister Erdogan.

We appreciate that several times President Bush has declared that the US will take serious steps to

fight terrorism, but we have to see the results.

When President Talabani was in the United States, he painted an optimistic picture of Iraq.

Since the beginning of this year, 16,000 people have been killed there. There is an escalation of the violence. Sectarianism is getting worse and worse. **In the United States many people believe the time has come to withdraw.**

How can you leave a vacuum over there? Then, what will happen? All the neighbors of Iraq and the US should work hand in hand with the Iraqi government and the different tribes in Iraq to bring stability. I think it is possible. There is no other way. You have to put things in order. **Here people are asking, why doesn't Iraq split into three parts?**

The neighboring countries will not accept this. That idea should be forgotten -- it should not be an option. Those (who favor it) don't

know Iraq or the region.

You said previously in Washington that you thought Iran might respond positively to nuclear talks. What is your assessment now?

A good package has been given to Iran. During my visit to Iran in August, I met with all the leaders and they said they appreciated the package -- I learned this from (Iranian President Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad. He said that this package is different than previous ones. With good intentions, I think there can be a solution.

Why doesn't he suspend nuclear activity?

They say that when they are guaranteed delivery of all the things in the package, then they will suspend. Both sides lack confidence (in each other). As a neighbor country, we want to see a peaceful solution. We don't want to see any nuclear weapon in our neighbourhood.