

Jewel in the BNP crown

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KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

HE has once again proved himself a formidable and, in the end, invincible person. He was given a brief breather through a posting to Mymensingh, away from the metropolis. In fact, he was a bit tired at flexing his muscles (with absolute impunity) on the erstwhile opposition party leaders and workers. That was a brief respite granted to him by those in power. It could even be a crooked ploy to offset the mounting demand from the opposition political parties for taking strong punitive measure against the man. After a short while he showed the strength of his pull with the power centre. Eventually, he was brought back to the metropolis and was soon posted as a deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP). He came back with his older self, yet far more tormented by the spirit of vengeance against his adversaries. He waited for his opportunity, and it came soon, on Monday, November 13.

A huge crowd belonging to the Awami League led 14-party alliance converged on Sonargaon Hotel-Panthapath crossing around

the Saarc fountain on the first day of the second phase of their blockade program. Many among them were sitting on the road, waiting for the meeting to commence. A temporary platform was also erected for the leaders to speak from. All of a sudden, the policemen on duty pumped hot water on the people thronging there. A little later a blue truck drove by at high speed, practically running over the crowd on the road. One person was fatally wounded and another critically injured. The spraying of water and the reckless drive of the police truck, said to have been laden with meals for the policemen on duty in the streets, happened almost concurrently. No one had any such apprehension, even seconds before it happened. The architect of this tragic episode was away from the scene. He gave orders over walkie-talkie to his subordinate officers at the site. By courtesy of the electronic media, the commanding officer was soon seen at the place of occurrence. The photo-journalists and reporters were seen asking him how such a dastardly act could be perpetrated by his men, and at whose order. The man was seen claiming that he had no idea how it

happened. He was repeatedly saying that he was away at some other place when the incident took place. He was good enough to advise the inquiring pressmen to ask the officer-in-charge of Tejgaon Police Station. He promised to look into the matter later. Deputy Commissioner of Police Kohinoor Mia has indeed been a unique example of loyalty to his powerful benefactors in the administration. His dedication, devotion to duty, and faithful adherence to the desire of his bosses, for taking all conceivable measures against their political adversaries on the public thoroughfares, are unparalleled. The press and electronic media people covering the 14-party alliance blockade program at Sonargaon Hotel junction had no idea that the large contingent of police force was under his direct command. The killer truck, which instantly took the life of Awami League grassroots level leader Wajullah, was also made to run over the seated workers, very much at his orders again. He was seen trying to convince the pressmen that he was not at the site when all this happened. He also tried to shift responsibility to some-

one else at Tejgaon Police Station. He couldn't, however, escape action by the concerned adviser of the caretaker government. He was awarded a punishment transfer to Rangamati to take care of the armed police battalion. As soon as the order of his transfer to Rangamati in Chittagong Hill Tracts appeared in the press, the Awami League declared him persona non-grata and, as a mark of protest, a full day hartal was observed there. It is yet to be seen what alternate action is taken by the police headquarters. We have yet another queer instance of abusive patronage dispensed to a contractual employee posted at Bangabhaban during the previous government. Since all the contractual employments were to be immediately terminated, the incumbent press secretary to the president also had to leave. This gentleman was earlier reported in news media as being too intrusive. At times his unsolicited intervention in the proceedings of the advisory council of the caretaker government was also alleged to have been embarrassing to most of the advisers. On the contrary, he continued to enjoy the blissful patronage of the president-cum-chief adviser. The president, all on his own, elevated the man to the position of adviser to the president, with the rank and status of a minister of state. The most intriguingly controversial memorandum on army postings issued by the home secretary, under his own signature, to the

deputy commissioners across the country can be cited as a preposterous episode setting an ignominious precedence. Such an act on the part of the home secretary was reportedly done without prior approval of the adviser-in-charge of the home ministry, that is the chief adviser himself. The matter was brought to his notice by the council of advisers. The memorandum was to be cancelled immediately thereafter. Even to this day there persists a confusion about such cancellation. In the meantime, the message most surreptitiously desired to be passed on to the general public, and the political parties now in movement in the streets, had already compounded their doubts. Excepting, perhaps, the BNP-led 4-party alliance, all the political, social and cultural bodies in the country had been continuously asking for the removal of the CEC and his entourage, and for a totally reorganized Election Commission. The president-cum-chief adviser had earlier appointed a 4-member advisory committee to hold dialogues with all the political parties. That exercise concluded, the committee reported its findings to the chief adviser. An executive summary was also prepared for submission, but the president-cum-chief adviser was totally unresponsive to the urgent necessity of sitting with the committee members. When, at such a critical juncture, the whole nation was literally gasping for a breather, the chief adviser was sullenly silent. The ever aggra-



ating situation in the country, on the most burning issue of the removal of CEC Aziz and his three ECs, and total reorganization of the Election Commission, has roused deep concern beyond the national boundaries. The European Commission's parliament has taken a resolution, pursuant to the most vocal deliberation of at least seven powerful members, on the present crisis in Bangladesh. The resolution was reported to be very categorical, and in agree-

ment with the demands of the 14-party alliance and other political parties. It was said to have also resolved that the EC parliament would convey its concern to the caretaker government with a request to reorganize the Election Commission by removing the controversial CEC and others. They were reported to have been convinced, from the feedback they received, that under the present CEC, there couldn't be any free and fair election in Ban-

gladesh. Now, the CEC is reported to be on his way out, but when this will happen, and whether the rest of the demands for reorganization of the EC are fulfilled, remains to be seen. The faint ray of hope can either fade away or get brighter by the day..

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Toys then and now

FARIDA HUQ

THERE were these little plastic hens which, when pressed with your thumb, laid little white plastic eggs! Awestruck and mesmerized, we watched the little white plastic balls spill onto the table. Along with them were other little plastic toys, the size of your finger or perhaps a little bigger, each figure so distinctive in appearance that they looked so very real to us! My Mamu usually bought us all the new plastic toys that came to the market. To the delight and amusement of the children, my uncle would demonstrate the special trick each one was supposed to do, and that they did so deftly! The whole thing propelled us to the seventh heaven! But the happiness was ephemeral, as my judicious mother would not let us to handle them, let alone play with them. Without losing much time, she would quickly tuck them in the showcase. We could only watch the little plastic

toys snugly settled in their glass cage, with the nagging desire to take them out and play. But alas! In the glass showcase, along with those little plastic egg-laying hens were the tea-set with little cups and saucers, teapot, sugar pot, and milk pot, the various kitchen utensils, and in the plastic menagerie -- along with elephants, tigers, and lions -- sat a beautiful little cuddly doll staring at us, sometimes blinking her cute little eyes. She wore the most beautiful frilled frock, white socks, and a pair of white plastic shoes. This doll was a gift from an uncle who had brought it from overseas. The doll also remained totally out of bounds for us. We had actually never played with any of those "modern toys." Did we have the gall to do anything my strict mother would not want us to do? No way! Not that we didn't have anything to play with. We played with earthen and aluminum "hari patils" (pots and pans) -- in fact my mother was quite lavish in keeping a ready supply. Among

the more sophisticated ones were the little wooden pots and pans (red on the outside and white on the inside) that came in little boxes of woven cane. Of course, all through our childhood the "putuler bakso," the shoebox that stored all our rag dolls and their accessories, remained our proud possession. The dolls were specially made by using little scraps of cloth -- rolled, folded, and bound with thread at two places -- the little space at the top was for the head and the middle space for hands. The hands, perpetually stretched sideways, were made by rolling another little piece of cloth passed through the center loop. The rag dolls had long black tresses made from threads drawn from my mother's sari borders. The "putuls" had a huge collection of dresses, all prepared impromptu. Long strips of cloth for saris, and small pieces of cloth folded and cut in an A-line shape with the top snipped for the head to pass through. Done, sari and blouse, no

stitches, nothing! My Bubujan (my mother's aunt) made us even better kinds of dolls -- exquisite pieces of art! Stitched and stuffed with cotton, they were specially made with much care and craftsmanship -- the face round, eyes black, eyebrows arched, nose long, and lips red. They wore proper dresses -- sari and blouse. The ensemble included jewelry: bangles, earrings, nose pin, and necklace. My mother also helped with ideas in preparing them, she even stitched pyjamas and kurtas for the male dolls. During "putuler biye" -- inter-marriage of our dolls with those of our cousins or friends of "pasher bari" -- the wedding ceremony was an occasion replete with back to back rituals and functions celebrated with much razzmatazz! It involved several visits to each other's houses on the occasions of "paka katha," "gaye holud" and as "bor jatri." Assured of full cooperation and participation of our mothers and aunts, we

enjoyed donning colourful dresses, eating polau, korma, and having music and "gan-bajna." Although we never dared to play with the little plastic toys adorning the showcase, things changed after my brothers were born. The plastic toys were replaced by the mechanical toys -- the ones my brothers received on their birthdays, though sometimes my parents purchased them. The new toys were smarter, activated with the winding of the butterfly keys hidden at the back or underneath. The drummer boy alternately beating the drum with tiny little sticks, the monkey somersaulting all over the place, the yellow bird swinging in his cage, cooing and singing. My mother didn't stop my brothers playing with their toys -- they played to their hearts' content, to the extent of dismantling and breaking them. My mother argued that sons "are inquisitive and want to know what is inside." But soon they out-grew their smart toys and started going out,

playing football and cricket. When my daughters were born, toys were galore. My own deprivation, not being able to play with the beautiful foreign and other toys, made changes in my perceptions. Obviously, I gave my girls full rein to play with their toys. From their very childhood they were showered with toys, the girlie ones of course, and those filled my entire house. They also had stuffed cuddly animals -- starting with the ubiquitous teddy bear followed by the panda, the koala, the pink panther, to mention only a few. They never got tired of playing with Barbies and other dolls of all shapes and sizes until the dolls' hair were sticky and grimy, and their pretty faces looked ugly! With the more treasured collector's dolls I had to intervene, I just couldn't let them play with them and spoil them, so I made a doll's house to keep them. My daughters are in the states, they are gone but the doll's house is with me in my new apartment. I look at them only to wipe tears

and walk down memory lane. My grandson reigned supreme over his plethora of toys -- GI Joes, Batman and his highly sophisticated car, Spiderman, innumerable varieties of battery-operated cars, and also helicopters and airplanes. His huge airplane needed much space as it taxied before "take off" -- actually just little short of taking off -- succeeding in creating that "willing suspension of disbelief!" The high-tech toys are recent, and even somebody from the village has some familiarity with them, and nothing creates any awe or excitement. Perhaps that is the reason that the very famous Toys-r-Us in the States is not doing good business. Computers have captured the imagination of the kids, the "technologically advanced" (not "technologically challenged" as my grandson likes to call me as I always seek his help with the computer). Watching all this terrific advancement in the realm of toys, I cannot help but wonder

that children and innocence are no more synonymous! I still love toys and like to buy them. Every time I visit my daughters I explore the toy stores to buy toys for my driver's kids. My daughters fill my suitcase with toys for them and help me in choosing new ones in case they are duplicated. My grandson will also buy some special toys for them. I love to see the glitter in the eyes of my driver as I open the suitcase and take them out one by one. "See this doll boro apa gave for your daughter and this match-box cars choto apa gave your son. And this special police car from your 'boss' (as he calls my grandson) for your son!" Then I also bring toys for my bua's nati, her grandson, and my maid's nieces and nephews. I love to hear them all chant together. "Thank you!"

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Reining in the rebels

It is unfortunate that the houses and other properties of the rebels were damaged or destroyed by BNP cadres. Some of the rebels are even receiving death threats. A rumour says that Barrister Zia has been offered a huge amount for his return to BNP. We were told by the barrister that ex-State Minister Milon tried to persuade him to return to BNP a number of times ever since his resignation from the party

ABMS ZAHUR

DISINTEGRATION of a major party is not a big surprise in this sub-continent. During the last 59 years (1947-2006) we have seen such developments in Pakistan and India. In Pakistan, Muslim League was divided into Muslim League (Conventional) and Muslim League (Ayyub). In India, Congress has been divided into three, Congress (Indira), Congress (Mamata), and Congress (Sharad Pawar). In Bangladesh, it could have been Awami League and BNP, but such division was successfully stopped by Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, respectively. With the inclusion of a large number of businessmen from the youth wing and the student wing, the BNP became a big party which various people joined with different motives and interests, which do not necessarily coincide with the party's interest. This has resulted in an increase in the size of the party, but has not strengthened its base. It appears that the high command of the party did not carefully screen the antecedents of the new entrants. Thus, the new entrants got an opportunity to organize themselves to capture power as quickly as possible, and to elbow out the old guards in certain cases. Even some founder-members started losing their status. The constitution of a huge cabinet to accommodate the upcoming members of the party could not operate well. In its quest for satisfy-

ing the younger members the high command had to exclude some senior, efficient, and dedicated members from the cabinet. While some able senior members suffered frustration and despair some of the young members allegedly grabbed the opportunity to make their fortunes as quickly as possible. Naturally enough, the seniors felt undermined and were angry. Another cause for their frustration was their inability to compete financially with the luckier ones, because only higher payment to the party's fund can ensure good positions. Financial contribution is regarded as the most important to the party. It is said that Tareque Zia's office at Hawa Bhaban determines the problems and prospects of a member (even of a cabinet minister). Such a discriminatory treatment of members by the high command cannot continue for long. After all, members of the party also have their own respective ambitions. To Hawa Bhaban, allegedly, blind loyalty, obedience, and financial strength mattered most. Thus, we saw that a dismissed government servant (dismissed in the first regime (1991-96) of Khaleda Zia) was included in the jumbo cabinet. It has become common knowledge that some of the members of the BNP are directly or indirectly maintaining mastans to strengthen their political power. As such, BNP is promoting mastan culture. The rapid ascendancy of Jamaat-e-Islami is not well viewed by some moderate BNP members, particu-

larly the freedom fighters among them. Though JI held less than 20 seats in the parliament, their influence in the administration was clearly felt. It is also true that some of the BNP members had to sacrifice their constituencies in favour of JI members for the greater interest of the alliance. The rise of Islamic militancy because of Jamaat connection was also not liked by the moderates of BNP, to whom the image of the party was no less important. The sudden rise of Tareque Rahman, eldest son of the chairperson, was not liked by some veteran members because they found no justification in following a novice in politics. In fact, Tareque's meteoric rise in politics happened to be a crucial factor in the disintegration of BNP. Total concentration of power in the chairperson, who ran the party like a dictator, has not been received well by some followers. They wanted their voices to be heard, and their recommendations properly examined and evaluated. At the grassroots level the dissatisfaction is due to selection of candidates for election without consulting the local leaders conversant with the local conditions. BNP's process of disintegration started with the formation of a new party, Bikalpa Dhara, by Dr. Badruddoza, a founder member of BNP. Next to come out of BNP was Major (Retd) Mannan, once a close associate of President Zia. Not only was he defeated by foul means in the by-election of Dhaka-10, he had

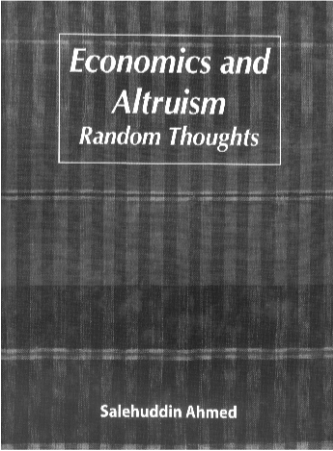
to incur a heavy loss due to destruction of his property at Savar. Next to leave BNP was Col. (Retd) Oli Ahmed, a veteran freedom fighter, one of the founders of BNP and a close associate of President Zia. Oli and Badruddoza founded the new Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on October 26. Dr Badruddoza became its chairman and Col. (Retd) Oli Ahmed the executive chairman, and since then it is reported that a large number of leaders and activists from BNP would be joining LDP soon. It is unfortunate that the houses and other properties of the rebels were damaged or destroyed by BNP cadres. Some of the rebels are even receiving death threats. A rumour says that Barrister Zia has been offered a huge amount for his return to BNP. We were told by the barrister that ex-State Minister Milon tried to persuade him to return to BNP a number of times ever since his resignation from the party. When persuasion failed, Milon went to Zia's residence to forcibly take him to Hawa Bhaban (in a press statement, however, Milon denied the allegation). It is indeed unfortunate that, though BNP claims itself as a democratic party, initiating restoration of multi-party democracy, it is not acting in the manner it is preaching. Its harsh handling of Dr Badruddoza and Major (Retd) Mannan has caused some damage to its image. Instead of chasing or punishing a rebel, it would be advisable for BNP to redress the various grievances of the existing members. Such a step may halt the process of disintegration for the time being. It is wrong to assume that a member remains a hero as long as he is in the party, and becomes zero when he becomes an outsider.

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The not-so-dismal science

ALI AHMED

THE social perception of the role of economists and of economists preaching and practicing has undergone so much change over the course of the last couple of centuries that it may really be termed as a sea-change. From the derogatory epithet of "dismal science," economics, in modern times, has graduated to the enviably admirable position of virtual arbiter of national and international policies. The status of economists has gone up concomitantly, and practically every aspect of life, whether private or public, calls for an economic appraisal somewhat like the consultation with priests and astrologers in olden times. Despite this pervasive nature of the role of economists, or rather because of this, all of it does not deal with social welfare. There are purely theoretical analyses of certain aspects of the social behaviour of humans, whether individually or collectively, often needing the rather dry tools of mathematics which are apathetic to the impact they create on society. There are, on the other hand, aspects of economic policies and tools that deal with the welfare of the people inhabiting a society. This is broadly termed as welfare economics, or economics of altruism. This branch of economic enquiry and interpretation deals with the impact of certain economic activities on the welfare of the people of the particular society in which such activities are carried out. Dr Salehuddin Ahmed's book, "Economics and Altruism: Random Thoughts," as the title declares, deals principally with altruism or wel-



Book Review

Economics and Altruism Random Thoughts

by Dr Salehuddin Ahmed

fare of society and, naturally, of its people. We say "principally" because the author has incorporated in this volume a few articles which do not deal at all with altruism, and fall under the non-altruistic sub-heading of the book, i.e., Random Thoughts. The author, an economist by training, after a short stint as a teacher of economics at the University of Dhaka, and a slightly longer dalliance as a civil servant, went abroad and came back with higher degrees in economics, only to find himself as a civil servant of a different kind, although he had formally bade goodbye to government service before. But the series of responsibilities that he was entrusted with, like that of the Director General, Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development (BARD), Comilla, NGO Affairs Bureau, Cirdap, PKSF, were, in no way, comparable to the humdrum generally associated with civil administration. These responsibilities afforded Dr Ahmed, a highly trained economist as he is, a unique opportunity of watching economic policies as they unfolded into practical action in the fields of co-

operatives, micro-credit, etc. This is, indeed, invaluable experience for one who has learnt, and for a short while taught, theories, to see their practical application. Dr Ahmed, therefore, is eminently qualified to speak and write on economics of welfare, or altruism if you please, and he has done so in the present volume. The welfare-oriented activities of the NGOs is too well known to need fresh recounting, and their supervised funding calls for continual evaluation of their activities in the field of micro-credit management. The Academy of Rural Development also deals with peasants and artisans in their efforts to come out of the poverty-trap. Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, before being made governor of the Bangladesh Bank, where he is now working, headed all these organizations in turn, and has observed first hand how these agencies operate, especially among the rural poor of the country, in their attempts at alleviating poverty through the operation of micro-credit, as well as co-operatives, as in the case of BARD. Most of the articles incor-

porated in the present volume are the direct outcome of these observations and involvement of the writer. While gathering this invaluable experience, he must have observed, along the way, some mismanagement and abuse of these funds, and has advocated, as in his articles on Regulatory Framework for Micro-finance Institutions as well as his advocacy for institution building, for the management of development. The author's articles on economic inequality, and reflections on ethics and policies, speak volumes about his concern for the underdogs in society. As the author notes in his preface to the book, it is intended for professional economists, but non-professionals having some interest in the subject, especially in development and poverty alleviation issues, will, no doubt, find the book instructive and useful. The author would, however, do better if the articles on pure economic analysis were separated from those on his thoughts on, and experience of, different development issues in Bangladesh, and incorporated in a separate volume. That, in our opinion, would have made the book more attractive to the general body of readers. The author, of course, cannot be blamed, as he has, in the preface, stated that it is meant primarily for professional economists. But readers with some interest in development issues, as I have written above, will find the book no less interesting.

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