

Empowering the poor

It's about time

THE call to empower the poor so that they could be brought under the social and legal safety net must receive the complete endorsement of all. It is a fact that only every five years the indigents feel highly empowered when even the poorest of them become aware of his or her powers, when his or her vote is sought after by the candidates. Election over, the poor are left to their own devices.

No doubt things must change. Not only must laws be enacted to ensure that the rights of the poor are secured, providing opportunities for self-employment is perhaps the only way that can ensure their empowerment. Naturally, when the state lacks the ability to provide employment to all the needy, the only alternative is to generate conditions that would create prospects for the poor for self-employment. That is the guarantor of empowerment. Unfortunately, self-employment, which in our case covers the informal economy sector largely, suffers from lack of legal support and social safety net. They are considered to be outside the recognisable activity covered by law and thus have no legal access. And this is what we call upon all the relevant agencies of the government and the NGO to focus on.

Since development and growth in Bangladesh, as in most developing countries, lack distributive justice and has very little impact on the level of employment, self-employment will continue to comprise a very large part of the informal economy. And this is what begs the question. Without the support of the law and the continuing absence of adequate legal provisions, the informal sector cannot flourish, nor can the self-employed poor be ever able to break out of the poverty trap.

The statement of the UN Commission on the Legal Employment of the Poor (CLEP), that the majority of the world's three billion poor live outside the ambit of legal support, must move our conscience to act to right the wrong.

For us the prospect is even worse. No matter what our rate of GDP is, poverty is a deadweight which keeps hampering development, unless we reduce it significantly. This is a self-evident statement, but one needs to act so that it does not become a permanent reality.

Sanctions against Iran

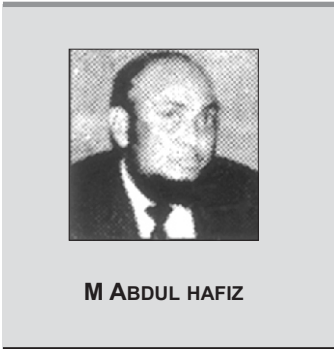
Diplomacy still the best course

IRAN appears to be reaching out to other countries in dealing with the crisis over its nuclear programme. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Saudi Arabia, a key US ally, underscores the seriousness which Tehran clearly attaches to diplomacy as a means of finding a solution to its problems. Iran's recent statement that it is considering American proposals for talks on the security situation in Iraq is important. Overall, therefore, the impression is one of tension being pushed back over the nuclear issue.

And yet there are good reasons to suppose that such an impression may really be a surface truth, owing principally to the fact that the world's major powers remain focused on punishing Tehran given that Ahmadinejad and his government have shown precious little sign of backtracking over the nuclear weapons programme. Of course, the Iranians have repeatedly said that the programme has nothing to do with manufacturing nuclear weapons but everything with producing electricity for themselves. A belligerent United States, for all its troubles in Afghanistan and Iraq, has refused to accept the Iranian protestations at face value. Which is why efforts continue at the United Nations to increase pressure on Iran through stiffening and even adding to the sanctions already agreed upon. The truth, despite everything the powerful nations may be contemplating doing about Iran, is that the diplomatic search for a solution must go on. The matter of the non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, a reason touted to explain the invasion of the country and with such terrible consequences, is still fresh in public minds. For such reasons, extraordinary care must be taken by the United Nations before any definitive action is recommended against Tehran.

The Iranian refusal to suspend its uranium enrichment programme led to a Security Council resolution on December 23 last year. Sanctions were imposed on sensitive nuclear materials and technology. It now appears that the five nuclear powers and Germany are engaged in working out a second resolution to squeeze Iran harder. Serious thought must be given to the repercussions of such a resolution should it be adopted. The road to diplomacy is still the one Washington and its friends ought to take.

The ground reality and beyond



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN 2001, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) returned to power with an enviable two-third majority in the parliament. Such victory usually gives one a measure of magnanimity. Also, traditionally, it is the privilege of the victor to extend the olive branch to the vanquished in a sportsman-like spirit to wash off lingering bitterness, if any, with the latter.

Belying this notion, the BNP took recourse to souring its relationship with its political opponents, particularly the Awami League (AL), its archrival, and rode roughshod over the freshly defeated adversary. In a dastardly repressive measure, BNP chose to swoop down on the AL's support base, especially the minority community, soon after it entered he citadel of power.

As before, it continued to distort the history of the war of independence, and subvert justice with regard to the killing of the Bangabandhu and four other national leaders. The idea had apparently been to cut the AL to size once and for all and wipe out its legacy. As a result, what could have

PERSPECTIVES

While both BNP and AL have their problems, the interim government has its own, too -- the problem of drawing the line and finding a cut-off point in its current undertakings. It has done a commendable job itself, and vows to do more in clearing the debris of past aberrations accumulated due to the omissions and commissions of past regimes. Under the given circumstances it has really to strike a delicate balance, because the country's democratic future hinges on it.

been a golden chance to advance the cause of democracy in this country turned into a wasteful and inconsequential rivalry between the two.

Once saddled in power, the BNP not only gave way to imperious impulses, its swanky stalwarts also strutted the country's political stage in a mood dismissive of any compromise, understanding or mutual accommodation -- the hallmarks of a successful democracy.

The absolute power they mastered corrupted them absolutely. The party then inexorably degenerated and became rotten to its core. The BNP predators along with the Jamaat, its ally in the government, mercilessly plundered the country in the name of governing it.

The BNP and Jamaat together sucked the lifeblood of the national institutions, the power generating plants, the airlines, the railway, the state controlled television, the public universities, the hospitals and so on, all of which now lie in tatters, with the maggots of corruption spread over their festering wounds.

They grabbed anything that came their way -- the Rajuk plots,

the railway land, the khas land, the lakes and waterbodies, and even footpaths and public toilets. The BNP's swashbucklers did not spare even the poor and the destitute and fleeced them by taking the pound of flesh from them through market manipulation and extortion under various garbs.

The ghastly political killings perpetrated during the BNP-Jamaat rule point to the terror tactics it introduced to intimidate the opponents. The killings of the AL's star leaders, and an attempt on the lives of AL leaders, including Sheikh Hasina, in a grenade attack on August 21, 2004, reveals the terrorist character of the BNP which is still a prime suspect in the crime and, yet, absolved of its responsibility in those cases.

With deep mystery still surrounding those gory events the needle of suspicion persistently points to the power wielders of the days. The BNP-Jamaat finally assaulted the rampart of the principles on which our statehood stood by fostering ideological aberration and promoting religious militancy. Still worse, they were about to destroy an important pillar of democracy, the

election, by engineering its process.

Thanks to the political change of January 11, the BNP now seems to be in the dock, with its corrupt and high-handed leaders being rounded up like criminals. Nemesis has finally struck the party, which is now been reaping the whirlwind.

The interim government has unearthed many of its hitherto unknown crimes, horrific in nature. They include widescale theft of relief materials by the former treasury bench lawmakers and numerous cases of grafts, commissions and sleazy deals carried out through a particular power centre by a cabal of power-brokers. Obviously, those hustlers are now on the run, while some of them have already been incarcerated.

The fallout of these episodes cannot be without its devastating effect on the once powerful BNP which held power for the longest period in independent Bangladesh. The top echelon of its leadership is befuddled at the development, and has been licking the wounds inflicted on it.

The question has already been raised, whether a discredited,

humbled and humiliated BNP will be able to withstand the shock and restore its previous standing with the public, which is equally nonplussed at its degeneration. The BNP politicians are, by and large, fair-weather birds whom late General Ziaur Rahman cobbled together to form the BNP in the aftermath of the military putsch of 1975. Mostly opportunists, they came from the extreme left and far right in search of a green pasture, Bangladesh's political landscape. Many wonder if they can survive the emerging crises for the party.

No responsible person should, however, relish the BNP's reversal of fate. The atrophy of a major political party like the BNP can be a prelude to the decline of democratic polity that we all are committed to. It is gratifying to see some senior BNP leaders calling for introspection.

If this sober pronouncement is the result of a period of penance over their past follies and failures, there's nothing wrong in welcoming them back to politics -- subject, of course, to legal clearance by the authority. At the end of the day, the political parties are the essential ingredients of democracy.

The AL had been at the forefront of a protracted movement that finally resulted in the political change of January 11. It took the full brunt of the BNP's repression, but refused to cower before its posse. Its stand for electoral reforms is now vindicated.

It appears that whatever the present interim government is doing under the name of a "cleaning

operation" was what the AL-led grand alliance had demanded during their months of agitation. Yet the AL has a problem whenever its own men are apprehended. It's men may not always be above board -- a fact that the AL would do well to take cognisance of.

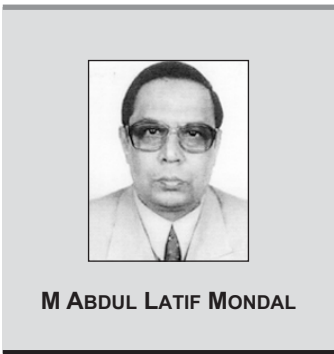
While both BNP and AL have their problems, the interim government has its own, too -- the problem of drawing the line and finding a cut-off point in its current undertakings. It has done a commendable job itself, and vows to do more in clearing the debris of past aberrations accumulated due to the omissions and commissions of past regimes.

In the meantime, there are murmurs for an early poll, although the views on it are sharply divided. There are people who are in favour of withholding the election indefinitely, till the time the reforms undertaken by the government are completed.

The views emanating from the external quarters also vary. The US state department favoured an early poll. Indeed, the interim government is walking a tight-rope. Under the given circumstances it has really to strike a delicate balance, because the country's democratic future hinges on it.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

Why people are vulnerable to price hike of food



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

FOR more than two weeks, price hike of different items of food including rice, flour, fish, meat, pulses, edible oil, powder milk and vegetables has been in the news. The price spiral of different food items is causing untold sufferings to the people of low and middle-income groups.

Official sources and media reports reveal that, in the past two weeks, the price of coarse rice in the retail market increased by at least Tk 2 per kg, while the vegetable market saw the sharpest rise in prices.

The prices of different types of fish have increased by Tk10 to Tk 15 on an average. Five-litre containers of edible oil of different brands were selling at Tk 340-Tk 345, compared with the previous rates of Tk 330-Tk 335. The price of red lentil, commonly known as poor man's protein, has increased by about Tk 2 per kg in the retail market. More instances may be cited.

In his maiden address to the nation over radio and television

BARE FACTS

Considering the fact that food is the most important of all the necessities in human life and per-capita income in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world, no government in the country can avoid the responsibility of making food available to the people, particularly the poor and the ultra-poor, at affordable price, on the plea that the government does not control the prices of commodities, including food items, in a free market economy.

	Average monthly expenditure	Total	Food & beverage	Clothes & foot-ware	Housing & house rent	Fuel & lighting	Household effects	Misc.
National	Tk 5,964	100.00	53.81	5.51	12.25	5.98	2.05	20.37
Rural	Tk 5,165	100.00	58.54	5.54	9.77	6.10	1.80	18.22
Urban	Tk 8,315	100.00	45.17	5.48	16.78	5.76	2.49	24.29

(Source: Preliminary Report on Household Income & Expenditure Survey-2005 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

on January 21 Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, chief adviser to the reconstituted caretaker government (CTG), outlined a number of measures which include, inter alia, controlling the price hike of essentials commodities.

In his recent meetings with the high civil and military officers at Chittagong and Barisal, the chief adviser asked them to take effective steps so that prices of the essentials could be kept at a tolerable level. But unabated rise in the prices of essential commodities, including food items, is one area where his government is yet to deliver the intended outcome.

The issue that this article attempts to discuss mainly is: Why are the people of Bangladesh so vulnerable to the price hike of food?

First, food ranks the highest in

household expenditure in the country. The following table shows percentage distribution of average monthly household consumption expenditure by major groups:

It appears from the above that 53.81 percent of the average monthly household consumption expenditure accounted for food and beverage at national level in 2005. It may, however, be mentioned that the figure varied between rural areas and urban areas.

In rural areas, 58.54 percent consumption expenditure accounted for food and beverage, whereas the same was 45.17 in the urban areas, which means that the rural people spend the bulk of their consumption expenditure on food and beverage.

Second, Poverty Monitoring Survey-2004 of the BBS shows

that, at the national level, monthly income of the households increased from Tk 4812 in 1999 to Tk 5,302 in 2000. The increase is 10.2 percent. Surprisingly, the income of the poor households decreased in 2004 from 1999.

Although in the urban areas per household income for all households increased from Tk 8167 in 1999 to Tk 8857 in 2004, the income of the poor households decreased from Tk 4741 to Tk 4488. Per household income in the rural areas increased slightly in 2004 compared to 1999.

But, household income for the poor decreased in 2004, from Tk3006 in 1999 to Tk 2786. So, the price hike of food items seriously affects the rural poor who constitute 85 percent of the 60 million people living below poverty line.

Third, of all the food items, the importance of rice is the supreme. Rice is the staple food of Bangladesh. Rice provides about 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake, and more than 70 percent of the calorie intake.

Rising price of rice significantly lowers the real income of poor households, as rice alone accounts for about 70 percent of their total spending on food. For the poorest, rise in the prices of food items, particularly of rice, forces them to reduce their food consumption, endangering their very lives.

Fourth, in our male dominated society, women and children in the poor households have less access to food compared to adult males. The situation worsens when the price of foodstuff, in particular of rice, spirals. In the absence of necessary intake of calories, women and children in poor households suffer most.

According to the Asian Development Bank report titled "Millennium Development Goals: progress in Asia and the Pacific 2006," child malnutrition in Bangladesh remains among the highest in the world.

The proportion of underweight children is 16 percent higher than in 16 other Asian countries at similar levels of per-capita GDP. According to the much talked about Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) that the immediate past BNP-led alliance government adopted in 2005, maternal mortality rate continues to be high at 320 deaths per 100,000 live births in

2001. The under-five mortality death-rate stood at 83 per thousand live births in 2000. Apart from loss of lives, there is a heavy loss in work output associated with malnutrition.

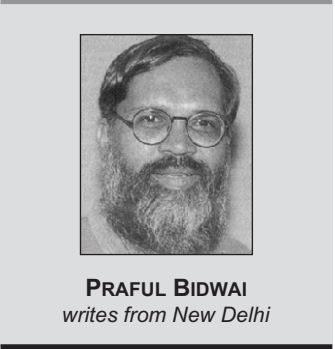
Last, but not the least, rising prices of foodstuff, particularly of cereals (rice and wheat) leads to munga (the famine like situation) in certain areas, normally in the northern districts, in the months of October and November, primarily due to lack of purchasing power of the poor.

The poor do not have the necessary purchasing power to procure food from market, mainly due to lack of employment opportunities during the period. Food shortage and/or famine like situation may cause social unrest, which may even lead to destabilization of the government of the day.

Considering the fact that food is the most important of all the necessities in human life and per-capita income in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world, no government in the country can avoid the responsibility of making food available to the people, particularly the poor and the ultra-poor, at affordable price, on the plea that the government does not control the prices of commodities, including food items, in a free market economy.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is former Secretary to the Government.

Congress gathers the pieces



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

IT was a virtually foregone conclusion that Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav would win the confidence vote which he himself initiated to counter the Congress's campaign for his dismissal. And win he did -- for the 22nd time in 3½ years!

His victory became inevitable once the Bharatiya Janata Party walked out of the Assembly, and the Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal boycotted its session.

Mr Yadav's victory can be explained less by his Machiavellian manoeuvres than by the Congress's ineptitude, the BJP's stupidity, and the Bahujan

Crime thrives in UP on a scale that makes a joke out of the SP's favourite poster featuring Amitabh Bachhan, which claims UP mein dum hai, kyonki yahan jurm kam hai (UP goes strong because there is very little crime here). The criminalisation of UP, as the Nithari case shows, is inseparable from police-politician links.

Samaj Party MLAs' resignation just days earlier.

The confidence vote marks the collapse of the Congress's misguided strategy to topple Mr Yadav. It has emerged badly injured.

Nothing is going right for the Congress. After the UP fiasco came the Punjab and Uttarakhand election results, and the detention of Mr Ottavio Quattrocchi in Argentina. These are major setbacks for a party whose popularity ratings rode high only two months ago.

The Congress was trounced because of factionalism and its failure to address the agrarian crisis, unemployment and rising prices. Setting up Special Economic Zones didn't help.

The Bofors issue shows that

the Congress is again shielding a key figure in the Rs 64 crore payoff. It's hard to believe the Central Bureau of Investigation's claim that Mr Quattrocchi's arrest on February 6 was communicated to it in Spanish; and translation delayed the government's announcement of his detention by 17 days.

Newspaper reports say that the Indian embassy in Buenos Aires told New Delhi about the arrest three days later -- through an English-language communication.

Clearly, the Congress is trying to cover up the Bofors scandal. Its culpability is enlarged because its government failed to report his arrest to the Supreme Court during a hearing pertaining to the de-freezing of Mr Quattrocchi's bank accounts in London.

The CBI is called upon to secure Mr Quattrocchi's extradition for trial in India. It's far from clear that the CBI will do its homework properly, and construct an unassailable prima facie case which can withstand the scrutiny of another legal system.

If experience is any guide, this may not happen -- not only because of political pressure, but out of sheer incompetence.

It bears recalling that of the hundreds of alleged criminals living abroad, against whom the Indian government claims to possess strong evidence, it has, in all these decades, secured the extradition of Abu Salem and Monica Bedi only.

This happened not because the government presented a compelling case to a court in Portugal, but because the

Portuguese government pulled its weight in India's favour.

Bofors is a 21 year-long story of evasion, lies and cover-up attempts -- and the repeated failure of official agencies, even under non-Congress governments, to unearth the truth. In 1993, Mr Quattrocchi was allowed to flee India.

In 2002, the BJP-led government failed to have him extradited from Malaysia. In 2004, the UPA virtually closed the case by not appealing against a questionable, contradictory judgment of the Delhi High Court, which concluded there was "no evidence" of bribery.

The Congress will further damage its image if it plays any more devious games in the Bofors case.

The Congress's plans to have Mr Mulayam Singh dismissed testifies to the persistence of an arrogant and authoritarian trait in its character.

Mr Yadav is no angel who desists from raiding and splitting parties. But the recent Supreme

Court judgment disqualifying 13 BSP MLAs for defection in August 2003 doesn't render his government illegal, illegitimate or unconstitutional.

Congress spokespersons wrongly extended the Court's ruling against the 13 MLAs to another 24 who left the BSP 10 days later. The Court itself treated them separately.

It's ludicrous to demand that Mr Yadav must be dismissed, and not be allowed to remain as caretaker CM when elections are held next month. It's an established convention that even a leader who loses his majority shortly before an election stays as caretaker. This was followed at the Centre in 1991, 1996 and 1998, and in many states on countless occasions.

At any rate, the Election Commission's announcement of the polling schedule demolishes the Congress's move.

This doesn't argue that Mr Yadav has not used unscrupulous means to stitch together a majority, only that the SP isn't alone in

doing so. In UP, all the major parties have indulged in tod-phod kirajneeti (splitting parties). Their culpability should be established under the Anti-Defection Law. The UP Opposition failed to pin down Mr Yadav.

Mr Yadav shouldn't be sacked. But that doesn't mean that his record of misgovernance should be condoned. His government has elevated cronyism to a sacred principle. Mr Yadav has doled out lavish patronage to his buddies in industry, realty and entertainment.

Crime thrives in UP on a scale that makes a joke out of the SP's favourite poster featuring Amitabh Bachhan, which claims UP mein dum hai, kyonki yahan jurm kam hai (UP goes strong because there is very little crime here). The criminalisation of UP, as the Nithari case shows, is inseparable from police-politician links.

Mr Yadav has patronised all manner of bahubalis (practitioners of strong-arm tactics), especially from upper-caste groups.

Most disturbingly of all, he has been hobnobbing with the sangh parivar. As noted in this column in January, he provided lavish hospitality to the BJP's national council leaders. Last month, his cabinet sanctioned Rs 2.52 crores to support the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's third global congress at Allahabad.

All this is likely to dent Mr Yadav's image as a bulwark against communalism, and cost him Muslim support which is crucial to the SP's electoral base.

The Congress can still put up a fight in UP as a staunchly secular party in alliance with other Centrist or Left-of-Centre parties.

As the Congress gathers the pieces, it risks suffering yet more losses -- unless it radically rethinks its policies, and realigns its strategy.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.