

Time to do the not so popular

Weak democracies always rely on the implementation of the issues which are popular among the urban middle class, as they are always afraid of being overthrown. They provide "bread and circuses" to the political constituencies to win their support. This is very similar to the "rent-sharing" policies in ancient Rome during its expansion. The current government, being non-political, has no need to "buy off" the urban population by focusing too much on their demands. Therefore, it is expected that they will take the unpopular but necessary steps.

MD. ABUL BASHER

HOPEFULLY, no vehicle will be stalled this year in the streets of Dhaka, facing a procession for or against the announced national budget. But surely the media will be swamped by the experts' opinions as usual, before and after the budget. Probably, the economists and the experts of the talk shows have already marked their calendars.

If we disregard the ritual value of these practices for the time being, will it be possible to stumble on any other contribution by all this rhetoric? Being an economist, and also a close follower of the so-called sagacious opinions of the experts on the budget, I am very skeptical.

But it has been very popular practice to invite the economists to different pre-and post-budget seminars. The current government is also following the foot-steps of its predecessors. But this is the most auspicious time to do the unpopular, but realistic, thing.

Very little has been accomplished so far by the statements of the experts, excepting filling some space in the newspapers, and air time of the television stations. Not doing enough homework, and too much focus on grabbing the attention of the media through the use of mesmerizing words by the econo-

mists, may also be a reason.

The budget is a multifaceted document reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of social and economic development, and implying that economics as a discipline should be read in terms of several sub-fields. Nobody can be a real expert on more than one sub-field, let alone all the fields. But in our country, one becomes an expert in all aspects of budget.

What an economist says sometimes is guided by his/her training in the western schools. Economics as a subject is not free from value judgment, which evolves with the level of development. Needless to say that the economic concerns in a developed country, as defined by their values, are different from ours.

While developing countries are yet to solve the problems of human suffering from hunger and poverty, they are not an issue at all in developed countries. They are rather more concerned about the wellbeing of their pets, for example. Therefore, the economic issues, as shaped by their problems and values, may not be benefiting for a developing country like Bangladesh.

Sometimes the economists of our country, who are well-linked with the west, forget these differences. As a result, they wrongly prioritize what needs to be done in our budget. While our country

badly needs infrastructural development more than anything else to create the possibility of sustained economic growth, every year some economists and experts scream more for other issues pertaining to western values, like gender-friendly budget, for example.

The importance of the issues pertaining to western values cannot be denied. But they are not more important than meeting the very basic human need, three meals a day for everyone. Who cries for a gender friendly budget? The urban upper class. Who is the victim of gender discrimination? Undoubtedly, it is the female member of poor families where every member cannot be adequately fed, so she becomes the residual recipient of food and other things.

Creation of the opportunity to generate enough income to have adequate food is the prime condition for a discrimination free society. We should not be influenced by what developed countries are doing today, but should examine what they did 100 years ago.

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The real stakeholders in the budget are the producers; unfortunately, they have never been adequately consulted. This is the time to do that. I would like to propose the following five things for consideration in the next budget:

- Instead of having a series of meetings with different groups of people mostly based in Dhaka, invite some farmers from remote villages. For example, invite 100 farmers randomly from different agricultural zones of the country, and listen to their problems.
- To make sure of their attendance, arrange their trip to, and stay in, the capital. Rather than involving researchers as middlemen to learn about farmers' views, let them be heard by the budget formulators directly. Please don't invite any member or chairman of the union council. Their socio-economic status and problems are not representative of the ordinary farmers of the country. Similarly, rather than talking only with the leaders of the different manufacturers' associations, invite some entrepreneurs from all kinds of industry, i.e., large, medium and small, and listen to them. Let them say what is the main hurdle for them, and ask them what can be done in the budget to eliminate that hurdle. Sometimes the experts give the textbook solution of a problem, but these real people will give the real solution of their own problem.
- The next thing I would like to propose is what will possibly be the most unpopular thing, even to mention. Given the fact that, in the last couple of years, the number of students passing the SSC and HSC examinations has significantly declined, there is no urgent need for any new capacity creation at undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Therefore, this year, any allocation for such capacity creation can be diverted to infrastructural development. More specifically, rather than giving any money to finance a new public college, or extension of the existing ones, allocate this money to the overhauling of the electricity stations.
- A substantial amount of the development budget goes to the construction of the rural roads, bridges and culverts through the local government. Most of the money is wasted, as it is used to keep the party cadres at the grass-root level happy. Let's take a bold and sacrificing stand this year; don't allocate any development funds for this sector.
- Instead, allocate half of this money to the generation of more electricity, and half to rural electrification. So there will be no new road, bridge or culvert built in the coming year. I hope our rural people will not mind making this sacrifice, which will benefit them as well as the whole country in the long run.
- If this experiment really results in some positive changes, then we can repeat it once every five years, the year of national elections, which is usually marked by use of huge amount of state funds to buy political support for the sitting government.
- The employees in the armed forces



buy the essentials at a highly subsidized price. There has been no reform in this system so far. Any kind of subsidy contradicts the basic principle of free market economy, which has been promoted and used as an explanation to remove the subsidy on a number of agricultural inputs, and closing down of a number of state owned enterprises in the past.

Rather than arbitrarily deciding the prices of these subsidized items for the armed forces, the government should link them with the market price. For example, the government may decide that employees of the armed forces have to pay a certain percentage of the market price, and

there should be a gradual increase in that percentage over time. In this way the burden of any price increase, which has become a routine phenomenon these days, will not be passed on entirely to the government. This year is the right time to carry out this reform.

- One sensitive issue in our society is the funding of the educational institutions, both private and public. The government should include a clause in the coming budget, allowing these institutions to mobilize funds from alternative sources. Collecting donations from their alumni, or any other source, should not only be made legal but should also be encouraged.

To that end, the government can declare in the coming budget that every educational institution will receive a gift from the government to match the collected donations, and the donors will get tax credit for their donations.

There is no doubt that some of the things I mentioned above will be highly unpopular, but please do the unpopular things, at least for once, as the popular things have failed to bring any good to the country.

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Comment on Umbrella Act

If the government and the UGC want to do something, keeping in mind the long-term improvement of our university education, it will require rethinking the entire issue with great attention and rigorous study. We have to keep in mind that the proposed law will have serious impact if it is not properly designed.

OMAR MOHAMED

THE present caretaker government has taken an initiative to reform the Public University Act. The UGC is playing the lead role in making a draft of the proposed law. The main objective of the law is an introduction of some new rules regarding the selection of vice-chancellor and dean, and the appointment of teachers at the entry level. Another objective is to stop students' and teachers' parties from being branches of national political parties.

the sense that it fails to take into account the nature of public universities in Bangladesh, where the majority of them are "Teaching Universities." Except for some technical universities, most others do not have the resource or infrastructure to develop into "Research Universities." The position of RA will be of no use under the present situation in the public universities.

There should be sufficient research projects in the universities, in which the senior professors will lead and the newly appointed research assistants will work in a scholarly environment. The senior professors will not only

Assistant" why don't we think about "Teaching Assistant?"

I can mention here the National University of Singapore (NUS) as an Asian case. Apart from the direct appointment of assistant professor (with PhD and scholarly publications as mandatory conditions), NUS recruits its brilliant students as "Teaching Assistant (TA)." The newly appointed TAs work under different professors who teach undergrad and grad courses. In the meantime, they have to apply for higher studies (preferably PhD) in different universities in Europe and North America.

versities (some critics say that it is already present in our universities on an informal basis).

There should be reform of the present teaching and grading system to accommodate the role of TA. The UGC can review the practices of universities in other parts of the world to get an idea for involving TAs in the teaching and grading system.

Why don't we think about direct appointment as assistant professor, with a PhD as mandatory qualification? (We know that there is a huge number of professors in public universities without any degree, apart from their basic MA degree obtained from home universities, although they supervise MA and PhD research. This is possible only in Bangladesh).

Can we make assistant professor as the entry-level appointment? This is the norm that is followed by the major-

the universities, maybe another source of politics, like the case of the recruitment of residential teachers in different dormitories.

I expect that the UGC will consider the entry-level appointment very seriously, and that they (under the leadership of the newly appointed chairman) will consult with our senior professors and educationists who have vast experience of the issue.

I am not confident that the UGC -- as an institution with a chairman and some members -- is capable enough to perform such a huge task without taking help from others, at least voluntarily. I am sure that our educationists will be happy to contribute in this nation-making project.

This law, as its name suggests, is huge and needs thorough consultation.

People, power and perception

If we are serious about democracy, we need to start a vigorous discussion about some of the everyday concepts we use -- most importantly, people and power. Politicians, journalists, opinion makers in general, and the citizens of Bangladesh must be aware that a people-focused politics leads to populism, not democracy. Populism empowers the politicians; democracy empowers the people. A good strategy for the politicians will be to focus on the ideals of truth and justice and leave the people alone.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

VERY often in the political discussions of Bangladesh we hear about the people. In the heady days of political turbulence, the party in power often used to claim that whatever they did -- whether conspiring to hold a rigged election, or carrying out some nefarious scam in the name of development -- they were doing so for the people. In one sense they were right.

Suppose, in the name of issuing a tender for a much needed power station, they were skimming money which went to the offshore banks of certain top officials (many of them are now in jail. God bless the caretaker government); these officials, their cronies and families are also people.

Opposition leaders organised huge political rallies, and fought street battles to unseat the government. And, of course, they did everything for the people. And when certain television channels featured "ordinary people" in their various chat shows, or interviewed them on the streets, they (the people) criticised both the then ruling party for corruption and misrule and the opposition parties for creating disorder.

Even before all these political upheavals began, I used to be somewhat puzzled by the pronouncements of my NGO activist friends claimed that they were working for the people. And again, when "people" speak through television channels they do not seem to be highly impressed with the NGOs either, and some even want "reforms" in NGOs demanding that they should be accountable. Accountable to whom? People, I guess.

As students of sociology, we often find the word "people" unsatisfactory, if not disturbing. Check any fat sociology introductory text, you will most likely not find the word "people" in the index.

So who are the people? Why is everyone trying to do something for the people where the people are not keen on being helped one way or the other. The people -- it seems -- want to be left alone. But how do we know what the people want? But, before that, who are the people? The UN Declaration of Human Rights does not talk about peo-

ple.

However, the US constitution begins with the statement: "We the people of the United States..." Here, people referred to everyone who lived in the United States of America, except the American Indians, the Blacks, and perhaps all the women.

In national constitutions, people refers to the entire nation -- all the people living within the national boundaries, and sometimes beyond. But again, in practice, many remain excluded. It would be useful to keep in mind the problematic nature of the word "people." When the communist regimes claimed that they were practicing "people's democracy," they indeed denied most of the minimum conditions of democracy -- again in the name of the people.

We have good reasons for being sceptical about the people. In society we have classes, status groups, professionals, but not people -- it is a vague concept and we are better off without it.

What about power? Politics is all about power. When two or more political parties compete, they compete over access to power. Power comes with privileges and prestige. When the opposition parties, in late 2006, fought in unity and defeated the conspiracy for holding a sham election many people felt relieved, but some people who were going to win the fabricated elections were very disappointed.

When all the major political parties came together to oppose the planned political scam, it was clear that it was not just a power play between the two rival political parties but that something greater was at stake.

So when the latest caretaker government took over, it was not simply a group of people interested in holding political power. Many thought (and continue to think) that this will benefit the people. How do we know that? Was there any systematic opinion poll carried out? No social scientist can take the phone-in surveys of the newspapers or television stations, or opinions of "random" (in fact, quite biased sample) office goers in the morning, as scientific.

In fact, such pollings are deceptive. Many people, including talk show hosts, often start mouthing the same phrase that becomes the phrase of the day. One such phrase of the day is "the two ladies." Sometimes people use these phrases unreflectively.

Politics has a lot to do with perception. Most common people, the average bloke if you will, have some ideas about something or some people or some leaders. They are often too busy dealing with the everyday problems of life to analyse the political situation. A mother from Malibagh taking her daughter to tuition, braving afternoon traffic, or a rickshaw puller in Bagerhat worrying about his son's medical treatment, or a nurse complaining about rising prices of onions, or a fisherman worrying about a new government regulation does not have much time to analyse politics, people or power.

In the absence of hard and reasoned analysis, perception becomes a useful recourse. Sometimes these perceptions are based on facts, but more often on the discussions they watch on television, or the newspaper headlines they read, or what they hear from their significant others.

Some of our perceptions are shaped by our deep-rooted prejudices. Yet, in electoral democracy, these perceptions matter a lot. Perception based politics must be replaced by politics based on facts, and here opinion makers can play an important role.

If we are serious about democracy, we need to start a vigorous discussion about some of the everyday concepts we use -- most importantly, people and power. Politicians, journalists, opinion makers in general, and the citizens of Bangladesh must be aware that a people-focused politics leads to populism, not democracy.

Populism empowers the politicians; democracy empowers the people. A good strategy for the politicians will be to focus on the ideals of truth and justice and leave the people alone.

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I don't have the expertise to comment on the overall scope of the proposed law, but I would like to comment on a particular aspect of the proposed umbrella act. Please note that my comment is based on the information that I got from different media reports on the proposed law. The issue is the appointment of teachers at the entry level.

It is proposed in the new law that there will be no direct appointment of lecturers. This is a good idea. Under the new system, a candidate will be appointed as "Research Assistant (RA)." After confirmation of the job as RA, he will be appointed as "Lecturer." The chairman of the UGC said that teachers have been appointed directly only in Bangladesh. He also said that teachers are appointed first as "Research Assistant" in Sri Lanka.

This new proposal is erroneous in

work as "mentors" of the RAs, but will also ensure the quality of the research and its academic implication, in the sense that the research output will be used in preparing different course modules.

Students will be taught by using the research findings produced in the departments. In some cases senior students will also be part of the research project, depending on their research interests. Do we have such an academic opportunity in the public universities in Bangladesh?

Moreover, Sri Lanka cannot be the ideal case for us. I hope that the experts at the UGC will review entry-level appointment in a number of universities in Asia, Europe and North America. Considering a South Asian case as an exemplar is not a wise decision. Instead of "Research

After finishing PhD, they return to the university (which is mandatory, following a contract between the TA and the university) and join as Assistant Professor. However, this is not their tenured position. They are appointed as assistant professor for a period of six years, and after fulfilling conditions regarding teaching, research, and scholarly publications, they will be given the tenured position and be promoted to associate professor.

There is another problem with the idea of TA. Under the present teaching and grading system, there is no work for a TA. What will they do once appointed as TA? Is it that they will just work as assistants of the professors without having any job description? If yes, then it will create a formal patron-client relationship in the public uni-

ity of universities in Europe and North America. And there should not be any tenured job at the entry level. Assistant professors will be hired on a contract basis, initially for two years.

Upon successful completion of the initial period, their contracts will be renegotiated, and if satisfactory then that will be extended for another two to four years. This will continue for not more than six years, and during this period the person will do scholarly publication, research (provided that there is enough research funding for them), and improve the capacity of teaching.

However, to ensure transparency and accountability, we first need a policy to absorb all these new issues in the old framework. Under the present corrupt system, who will ensure that the qualified candidates have been considered for tenure? I am afraid that this would create another problem in

We do not need any external consultant to do the job. The EC hires foreign consultants, who do not have any expertise, for preparing voters' list. The funny logic given by the CEC is that we do not have the technical expertise to do that job.

If the government and the UGC want to do something, keeping in mind the long-term improvement of our university education, it will require rethinking the entire issue with great attention and rigorous study. We have to keep in mind that the proposed law will have serious impact if it is not properly designed. I urge the UGC to consult with our educationists before finalizing anything.

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