

New export policy

Some welcome features

GOVERNMENT has announced the National Export Policy, 2006-9 in the shape of a three-year export strategy paper without featuring any yearly projection of earnings. It is a clear break with the hitherto unbroken tradition of annual target-oriented export policies.

The finance and planning adviser Mirza Azizul Islam who is also in charge of commerce ministry tried to explain the departure from the customary policy saying yearly projection target hardly made any difference when the private sector is the main driving force in the export arena. Nevertheless, projections give targets for both public and private sector players to work for and measure their success and failure against a certain criterion. Doubtless, private sector is the main engine of export, but the various government agencies have to play the role of facilitators for it to meet certain national goals. From that perspective, setting some targets would have been useful. Besides, Bangladesh missions abroad are supposed to be tasked to meet some export targets in pursuit of economic diplomacy in their areas of representation.

That said, we welcome some of the features of the new exports policy framework. At the same time, we suggest a few things for consideration of the government -- albeit in consultation with business community leaders.

There is no question about the need for our exports being diversified. Although the number of exportables in the last fiscal reached 176 from what used to be only 25 in 1972-73, the fact is that 76 percent of the export earnings is accounted for by the garments sector followed by frozen food, leather and leather goods.

And from urea and entertainment products like music albums, drama, feature movies, nine promising items have been identified including frozen fish production and processing, handicraft by people from hill regions, electronics, non-refined diamond, herbal medicine et al. Even in the garments sector we have scope for diversification.

We particularly single out the emphasis on pharmaceuticals as a very good augury. Even though our reputation in pharmaceuticals is well known, we are yet to take advantage of the WTO waiver on production of certain life saving drugs up to 2015 as far as intellectual property rights go.

The withdrawal of the provision for pre-shipment licences will facilitate uninterrupted movement of export goods. The new policy also allows continuation of the cash incentive facility but in what form it will be would be clarified in the forthcoming budget.

It is common knowledge that trade within the SAARC region is negligible compared with trade outside South Asia that countries of the region transacted. So, there is a vast scope for trade diversification within the SAARC region itself.

Remuneration for RMG workers

Why the delay in implementing tripartite agreement?

THE 10-point tripartite agreement which was signed on June 10 last year by the stakeholders in the garment sector -- the owners, workers and the government -- has not yet been implemented, though almost a year has elapsed since the violent outburst of labour unrest in a large number of garment factories. It seriously affected production in the country's premier foreign exchange earning industry.

The workers demanded a just and remunerative wage structure, better factory environment, regular payment of overtime bills, a weekly holiday, and security of service. There is no doubt that they were not asking for too much, considering the pittance that they get as salary in contrast to the rising prices of essentials. Despite the turbulence in the sector, good sense prevailed and the owners and workers could strike a deal under government supervision which promised better, but still not good enough, service conditions for the workers. But many owners have failed to give even what they had agreed to, citing reasons which sound far from convincing. For example, they have claimed that their business has been affected by the chaotic political situation prevailing in the country up until January this year. But that can by no means justify non-implementation of the agreement with the workers when garments have been a profitable sector. One can hardly overlook the fact that implementation of the agreement was not a guarantee of a decent life to the toiling men and women; it would merely have eased their struggle for survival.

Clearly, owners have failed to go by their own commitment. They have ignored an issue which is essentially humanitarian and involves a basic right of the workers.

The owners will have to bear the responsibility of anything untoward happening in the sector in the near future should they fail to implement the tripartite agreement. The government, as a party to the agreement, has already stressed the point saying action will be taken against non-compliance with the term of the agreement. The defaulting owners better pay heed.

Democracy and women's representation in JS



DILARA CHOUDHURY

has identified eight eligibility conditions for the political parties in order for them to register and contest the elections.

All eight eligibility conditions are noteworthy, especially the EC's attempt to make politics transparent and inclusion of one-third women at every tier of political parties' internal structure. The EC act is indeed commendable but we feel that it has not demonstrated enough sagacity in its attempt to empower women in

effectiveness, the measure, introduced soon after liberation, was not only maintained but given a new lease of life through the Constitution (Fourteenth) Amendment. The bill was bitterly resented by women leaders and organisations, who wanted direct election to these seats. They, as well as the patriarchal state of Bangladesh, knew very well that instead of making the system a "training" arena for the women, the legislators from

and aspirations of their constituents. Consequently, in the context of virtual non-existence of women in the national power structure, they have not made significant advance from lower levels of professional and corporate ranks into positions of power and leadership.

As a result, it is hard to gauge how women, without gaining leadership, expertise, knowledge and tools, will be able to "play a brokering role for change through a

election. Here is an area where state intervention is a must and the EC can play a commendable role by ensuring a certain percentage of nomination for women as an eligibility condition so that the political parties are bound to take steps to improve women's peripheral situation in the political arena.

Such mandatory provisions exist in Nepal, where every political party is bound to keep 5 per cent of nominations reserved for women. Such provisions also may not be enough as male politicians are adroit enough to make sure that women are given nominations in those constituencies where the chances of winning are indeed precarious.

Unfortunately, at present, when we are talking of a new beginning in Bangladesh, not much is said about this vital issue either by the political parties or the EC or civil society.

We really cannot expect an operative democracy, not to speak of a successful one, if the country's women are not given any opportunities to make their voices heard and are unable to bring any influence to bear on the policy formulation of the government. It is simply not possible to enhance the consolidation of our nascent democratic system without broadening the democratic base, which again can happen only with the mainstreaming of women into the system.

PANORAMA

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politics.

It is discerned that the presence of women in the political parties' internal structure would help them to influence party policies, including the nomination process. But one needs to do more than simply include an agenda that may turn out to be non-effective.

The EC should have made a condition for political parties' eligibility in giving 25 per cent (it is negotiable) nomination to women candidates from the general seats. We know that such a proposition is an anathema not only to the major political parties but, perhaps, to civil society members as well, especially in the context of constitutional provisions allowing 45 reserved seats for women, who are indirectly elected in the Jatiyo Sangsad.

In this context, one is tempted to look back at the history of women parliamentarians from the reserved seats. Even at the cost of repetition, one notes the irony involved in such a system, and how despite volumes of writings about passivity and non-

reserved seats basically served as a 'vote bank' for the majority party and remained satisfied by playing a secondary role to their male counterparts.

Effective participation by women in the legislature, as such, remained a far cry because of their mode of election (rather selection by the winning party stalwarts) and despite the fact that Bangladesh is a signatory to all international conventions, such as Beijing Platform of Action, CEDAW and Harare Declaration by the Heads of Commonwealth countries.

It was never analysed whether or not these parliamentarians would be able to achieve success with regard to the gargantuan tasks that lie ahead in the 21st century against the backdrop of globalisation and its negative effects on women. Although a little deeper look and a thoughtful analysis reveal that when the women do not have a geographically designated constituency from where they are elected, it is impossible for them to discern the hopes

synergy of partnership with government (states) and with civil society so that the market forces can be shaped to work in favour of women and gender equality."

Against the above backdrop, isn't it absolutely necessary that women get elected directly and become legislators through a process? It is also obvious that the patriarchal state of Bangladesh has a ready-made answer to the question posed above: The answer would be that nobody is preventing women from contesting from the general seats. However, such a statement will reflect an ostrich-like attitude. As if we do not know what it takes to get elected? How difficult it is without money and support from the party machinery to win elections! The fact is that even to get a nomination one needs huge funds. How then can women, who are resource poor, have a chance to be in the electoral process? Nomination of women as candidates by the political parties is thus essential.

But if history is a witness, then we bring about societal change, especially with regards to women's issues, who entered the electoral process when democracy was reestablished in 1991, dwindled. From 36 independent women candidates, who lost the contest in 1991, it has come down to nine in 2001. In the meantime, the country's leadership kept on boasting with a handful directly elected women representatives along with show case ones, that Bangladesh is a progressive country with 10 per cent women legislators in parliament. In reality it has always been cosmetic.

Obviously, then, it is about time that we recognise that the system of indirectly elected women representation in parliament is not working.

Ways must be found so that women can be directly elected with each of them having a constituency of her own. Women's organisations and women leaders have come up with various formulas and numbers but the bottom line has always been in favour of replacing the existing system with the system of direct

will most certainly seek to ease tensions between the two countries. This team is also expected to underline that two friends can think differently.

It is anticipated that Bush will be meeting Sarkozy this month during the next G-8 Summit and will be able to discuss with him not only about compassionate conservatism but also Iraq. It is however uncertain whether Sarkozy will emerge from the meeting as Bush's 'best new friend' in Europe (after the exit of Tony Blair).

France under Sarkozy will also be under watchful scrutiny of the countries in the Middle East. Under Chirac, France was recognised as a 'dear friend' who had the 'courage' to stand up to the neo-conservative lobby in the United States. Sarkozy on the other hand is already being hailed as a 'friend of Israel'. Sarkozy's team has pointed out that he believes in the traditional French position on Palestine (the two-state solution through bilateral negotiations) but some Arab governments are worried that French policies might no longer be as 'balanced' as before. 'Saudi Gazette', published from Jeddah, has reflected this when they observed that with the equation neutralised in favour of a more US-centric Europe, the Arab-Israeli conflict might now see a change.

In any case, the next few months will be interesting for France and even more so for Europe. It will also cast its long shadow in other areas of the world.

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Nicolas Sarkozy's new France



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

Such a hands-on approach by the French President can only be described as being a great departure from that pursued under former President Chirac.

He has, as already expected, also named his friend, jogging partner and campaign adviser Francois Fillon as Prime Minister. Analysts have described this step as being contrary to past practice -- where Presidents used their Prime Ministers as shields who could be

hard work ethic that worked so well among blue-collar voters, even in the traditionally leftist-voting former industrial region of northern France.

It is understood that Sarkozy's party

plans to field centrist allies and even candidates with leftist credentials in some of the constituencies to fend off efforts by the Socialist party and the new centrist movement aimed at depriving the right of a majority. These elections will be the first hurdle in the path of the new

take place before the crucial EU Summit this month. He is hoping that he can break the deadlock over the European constitution following the earlier French no-vote in 2005. European Commission President J M Barroso has welcomed this. He has expressed hope that Sarkozy will play the role of 'motor' in helping to overhaul EU institutions.

Leaders across Europe have welcomed Sarkozy to centre stage in Paris but some like Germany, have

interpretation of secularism within his government, will be watching Sarkozy with care. He has already gone on record expressing his anxiety that he does not want the inflexibility of Sarkozy to be the cause for 'affecting our bilateral ties'. At the end of the day, Sarkozy's foreign policy agenda could ultimately depend on two things: whether the Franco-German alliance can again become the driving force inside the EU and whether

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Any analysis of a future France under Sarkozy will however remain incomplete without reference to the US-French relationship and the changes expected under the guidance of an unabashedly pro-American leader. Sarkozy has appointed Bernard Kouchner, a Socialist by temperament as Foreign Minister. Kouchner will probably temper Sarkozy's exuberance for the USA but will most certainly seek to ease tensions between the two countries.

sacrificed in times of political crisis. Such a move by the new French President will be followed with great interest, as the reality of the next few months might by very complicated and complex.

Sarkozy's first battle will be the two-round legislative elections on 10 and 17 June where his party, the Union for Popular Movement (UPM), will need to win a majority to enact the laws his advisers had prepared before the elections in May. This includes a possible Bill that will eliminate payroll and income tax on overtime in a bid to water down the issue of the 35-hour working week.

Another would grant universities more autonomy. A third draft law is expected to mandate minimum service during strikes in the public transport sector. Sarkozy aims to put all such legislations to vote in the new legislature by the end of August this year.

It is expected the Sarkozy like US President Ronald Reagan will try to stress on his tough-cop image and

President and his hopes to implement his proposals for reform that he promised during his campaign.

These upcoming elections have assumed particular significance given the threats issued by the different Unions, particularly the powerful CGT, that they plan to take the protests to the streets. At this point of time, the UPM is still ahead in public perception with an estimated 34 per cent as opposed to 29 per cent for the Socialist party, but the street has always played a significant part in French politics.

As compared to Chirac, the new president has chosen a leaner 15-member Cabinet with more women on a proportionate basis. It also includes Raschida Dati, a French woman of Moroccan descent.

Sarkozy, since the election, has been meeting European leaders. It has been claimed by the Office of the new President that he has been doing so to have an agreed blueprint for institutional reform of the European Union. He wants this to

tempered their enthusiasm with caution. Quite correctly, they have questioned some of his protectionist policies given the delicate stage over future negotiations within the unfinshed WTO process.

Some, including the USA, have also voiced concern over his strong and open opposition to Turkey joining the European Union. They feel that this view might eventually divide the 27-member bloc. Sarkozy's posture of Turkey, shared by German Chancellor Merkel, is not acceptable to many other members of the EU, including Britain, Spain and many member states from Eastern Europe.

It will be interesting to see whether Sarkozy, now that he is President will actually halt the opening of further negotiating chapters. It may be recalled here that Chancellor Merkel has refused to support full membership but has never blocked accession negotiations.

It may be noted here that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, already under domestic pressure over

Gordon Brown, the next British Prime Minister can re-engage with Europe.

Russia's reactions till now have been muted. They, for obvious reasons, are continuing to carefully watch the evolving situation in Europe, particularly in Germany, Italy, France and Britain (where there have been changes in political leadership). Such a dynamics has raised the factor of 'unpredictability' in international relations for the Russians. It has also become that much more important given the fact that the Russians are also expecting a change of leadership next year.

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OPINION

The all-devouring avarice

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

I don't know what others feel about it, I myself have been terribly shocked at watching a pitiable muddled scenario at her wit's end. She must have realised that her own children have been the principal architects of her ever-compounding misfortune. As alleged by the law enforcing agencies, and ACC, their mad race for unearned income and for minting money recklessly would account for her tragedy.

At this point some old stories about the children of such VIPs in the sub-continent creep in offering scope for comparison. Those would tell us about the instances of blatant and bizarre exploitation of power centre by the children of the incumbent President/Prime Minister. We

may recall in this connection the massive net of exploitation laid by Gouhar Ayub under the nose of his father Field Marshal Ayub Khan during his Presidency of Pakistan in the sixties. Conversely we remember the attitude of the constant boozier General Yahya Khan during his term as President and CMLA of Pakistan towards his own son in his tricky pursuit at amassing wealth exploiting his father's name, Yahya Khan, despite his universally acknowledged notoriety, was reported to have taken his son to task for such an attempt. He was severely scolded in harsh language. Indeed, this was the only known example of morality that was attributed to Yahya Khan by the news

media. Even in the truncated Pakistan we have some names linked to a sort of diabolic corrupt practices. For instance, one indulged by none other than the husband of a Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Asif Zardari. Greed for money and wealth has been an age-old human vice and malady irrespective of their respective social and economic status. Likewise, 'power' too has been a veritable menace to its targets in the lower echelons. There have been unmet instances children of the actual 'powerful' would make him/her pitifully subservient. In this context we may find a ready semblance of our recent scenario around the power centre to that of

India during the time of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Her son Sanjay was flambouyant and aggressive. He used to overlay his own role and behaved at times that he was the Prime Minister. He was so very reckless in his words and attitudes that elder leaders of Indian Congress found him intolerable. At the height of his playful gamble he bulldozed some of the 'busties' in Delhi to contribute his part to the development programme of the government! On this particular issue Mrs. Gandhi had to swallow many a bitter pill from the opposition not to speak of that such excess ultimately contributed to her fall.