

Challenges before the EC

A more concrete action plan needed

THE Chief Adviser has reiterated his government's determination to hand over power to an elected government as early as possible. Once again, we welcome his statement and hope that he and his team will reach the goal they have set for themselves. Meanwhile, we also note that the Election Commission has been speaking of exploring alternative ways of working on the issues before it, should the ban on indoor politics not be lifted any time soon.

There are, as we can see, two sets of challenges before the Election Commission. The first of these relates to what it eventually plans to do about a voter list. With nearly five months having elapsed since the imposition of the state of emergency, the EC has remained in a straitjacket regarding its course of action. Despite talk of an updated voter list, a fresh voter list with photographs attached, national identity cards, et al, a strong element of indecision has seemed to characterise the EC's approach to the issue. Not even the suggestion from the army that it can help in the preparation of a photograph-attached voter list (the suggestion was made in February) has met with any response so far. In other words, the signals that have been coming from the EC have been mixed or confusing or both. Till today, despite their expectations of the forthcoming elections being conducted on the basis of a credible voter list, the people of the country quite do not know how many lists the EC has been mulling over in its polls-centred programme. For such reasons, the EC must now address the issue publicly and make its position unequivocally clear.

The second set of challenges before the EC centers on the question of political party reforms. The current ban on indoor politics, as the commission argues, has kept it from pursuing its aims in this regard. The government seems reluctant to lift the ban on indoor politics any time soon. That, however, does not appear to have stopped some individuals from coming together to exchange views on the formation of a new political group or platform in the full public gaze. One cannot dismiss general concerns about such individuals, drawn largely from the BNP, LDP and JP, being free to talk politics inside hotel lobbies while at the same time the established political parties are prevented from doing the same. We at the Daily Star believe that uniform rules must be applied here. Unless that is done, there will be all the signs of double standards being at play, even if they are resorted to unwittingly. For the government, it becomes important that no discrimination be shown in handling the indoor politics issue. Unless a level playing field is ensured for everyone, there is a good chance that politics will get into more of a bind than it is in already. Obviously, it will be the reforms agenda that will get sidelined if the priorities get mixed up.

Counter-terrorism agenda

International cooperation welcome

THE visit to Bangladesh of two senior counter-terrorism experts from the United Nations is significant on two counts. First, it recognises the extent of the problem of terrorism in the country and second it brings forth the imperative of international assistance in containing the problem. It is encouraging to note that the visiting UN experts have given assurance for providing technical assistance and building training facilities to fight the menace. We believe such partnership would make our intelligence agencies and forces in the field more adept in facing the challenges of the militant groups who often use sophisticated weapons and explosives.

Bangladesh's commitment towards uprooting terrorism from the country is manifest in the well-coordinated drive by the law enforcing agencies against the obscurantist elements that are driven to destructive methods by exploiting religion for ulterior gains. The authorities earned the appreciation of the people at home and abroad after they successfully nabbed some of the top leaders of JMB and banned some clandestine organisations in different parts of the country. The present government's decision to let law take its own course with their trial and sentencing was appreciated by people at large.

This however needs to be said that the authorities will have to dismantle the remaining networks with a firm hand. We have reasons to believe that some madrasas are going beyond the approved curricula to press their hidden agenda. At the same time it has been reported that Bangladesh chapter of Kuwait based NGO Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) continues to work covertly after its registration has been cancelled by the authorities. What appears more disquieting is that some local NGOs are implementing the agenda of RIHS under various guises. All this needs to be looked into on an urgent basis.

Terrorism or armed militancy in any form and name works to negate the social, economic, educational and cultural heritage and ethos of a nation. The proponents of such philosophy are a tiny minority who can be neutralised through an anti-terrorism campaign based on international cooperation and understanding.

Hand that rocks the cradle



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

No Nonsense

The adage: "The mother that rocks the cradle rules the world" may be amended in the context of Khaleda to read, "The mother that rocked the cradle ruled a country and raised two criminal sons, and ruined a party along with the country." If Zia-ur-Rahman were reincarnated today, he'd possibly strip his name from Khaleda's, for all her alleged illicit activities.

not be over emphasized. It's no coincidence that human history is replete with a plethora of anecdotes of the role of mothers.

Whether it's Rebecca in the Old Testament or Kunti in Mahabharata, mothers have been recognised for playing the primary role in the premise of each story. Even Kaikeyi in the Ramayana is granted a place of imminence as the mother of Bharat.

Napoleon Bonaparte, the great French military general, and one of history's most astute military tacticians, is known to have said: "Give me a good mother and I will give you the world."

Jackie Kennedy (Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy Onassis) once said: "If one fouled up motherhood then nothing else matters." However radical the statement may sound, Jackie is right on the money, and most appropriately so in case of BNP's Khaleda Zia.

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try." If Zia-ur-Rahman were reincarnated today, he'd possibly strip his name from Khaleda's, for all her alleged illicit activities.

With reference to dynastic politics she recently claimed: "The position I'm in today hasn't been achieved overnight by means of family influence. It's because of years of struggle on the streets, merit, and support of the people." She also claimed that her family members and relatives occupied positions in the party and in the government by virtue of their qualification and competence.

At first blush, Khaleda's claim that she became the leader of the party and the premier of the country by merit seems comically absurd. But while I first laughed and laughed like others at this mindless self-assertion, it suddenly occurred to me how this notion of "merit" may have gotten stuck in her brain.

Why shouldn't she feel she's smarter than the rest in BNP, given that so many Ph.Ds, barristers, lawyers, retired civil and military officials in her party granted her their unreserved support?

My friends and I aren't the only

ones who are at a complete loss to explain how these people still honour this woman as their leader, after learning about her shenanigans from the government and from the media.

In his January 7 interview with Mathew Rothenberg (Washington Post columnist), former BNP lawmaker Nazim Kamran Chowdhury (NKC) said that after democracy was restored in 1991, Khaleda led BNP to victory and was elected prime minister.

NKC added, "We thought she believed in the ideals we had. But the moment she became prime minister she was more interested in the trappings of power rather than the exercise of power. There was no discussion, no policy initiatives."

NKC categorically depicted that Khaleda had no conception of what democracy was about, and that she was only interested in ruling the country and liked to decide who got what job and which business contract.

Despite these withering indictments from a politician of BNP's inner circle, she continued to enjoy the supremacy of her position, both

as prime minister and the party's unchallenged leader. Today, many of her courtiers and accomplices are distancing themselves from her simply because she is not only empty-handed but also waiting to be handcuffed.

While she must not escape indictment for her mischief, others who were her advisers should also be indicted for the role they played in her administration's myriad corruptions.

Instead of having any semblance of remorse for her mischief and misrule, she's barely faced trying to rehabilitate her political image. In a direct challenge to the call for ending dynastic politics, Khaleda elevated her brother Syed Iskander (alleged to have amassed millions) to the position of BNP's vice-president to consolidate the party's command. Whether this is an audacious display of her pig-headedness, or an affront to the army-backed government, is yet to be deciphered.

Everyone knew all along that Khaleda, her sons and other family members were looting the country, but no one could appreciate the monstrous scale on which this plundering took place until her right hand man, Lutfuzzaman Babar, detailed it.

Immediately after last week's sweeping arrests and house searches, Law Adviser Mainul Hosein proclaimed that all arrests were not corruption propelled -- some were necessitated by the need for gathering information and evidence, while others were booked for gross misuse of power

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Now, pursue the equity agenda!

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

PRIIME Minister Manmohan Singh's admonition to the Confederation of Indian Industry against sky-high corporate salaries and the need to keep "profit maximisation within the bounds of decency" hasn't come a day too soon. Nor has his warning that "vulgar display (of wealth) insults the less privileged" and causes social trauma and despair.

Eleven Vidarbha farmers committed suicide in the week Dr. Singh said this, taking the number this year to 400. This sadly underscored the extreme polarity between the world of CEOs, with their multi-million incomes and glitzy lifestyles, and the peasant-farmer's grim, debt-laden, reality. This terrible polarity should shame India into corrective action.

Dr. Singh told CEOs that the "growing number of Indian billionaires," Indian companies buying multinationals, and soaring CEO compensation, all mean "you have benefited from growth ..." But growth must become "more inclusive."

This was a frank acknowledgement

There are three strong reasons for drastic correction. First, regional disparities are becoming explosive. There isn't one, but at least three Indias: rapidly growing pockets in the South and West; stagnation in much of the Centre, North and East; and regression in the Bimaru states (with Assam added). This will have disastrous political consequences.

ment of the skewed nature of India's post-1991 growth. Dr. Singh exhorted industry to develop "healthy respect for your workers," "discourage conspicuous consumption," employ the underprivileged, and adopt environment-friendly technologies.

Some exhortations might sound naive, even "goody-goody." They ignore the Indian corporate sector's less-than-enlightened notion of self-interest. But the emphasis on obscenely high salaries is necessary where 40 percent of people survive on less than \$ one a day.

Today, there are about 100,000 super-rich Indians with wealth of \$1 million-plus. Some 100 corporate CEOs earn Rs 1 crore-plus -- several more than Rs 4 crores. CEO salaries are annually growing at 30 to 40 percent -- as against 9 percent GDP growth.

At least 194 Indian corporate employees are sitting on stock options of Rs 1 crore-plus. Some have options worth Rs 100 crore-plus -- Tech Mahindra's Vineet Nayyar (Rs 216 crores), L&T's A M Naik (Rs 165 crores), and Infosys' Mohandas Pai (Rs 134 crores).

There's a gross disproportion

subsistence-level incomes of most Indians. But Dr. Singh's ideas have been savaged in India's mainstream media.

Many editorials have treated his warnings against inequalities as economic heresy: He's going "back to the past," and endangering "prosperity." Capping CEO salaries will "shackle private enterprise." Some commentators trivialise Dr. Singh's warning about inequalities by saying that buying Mercedes-Benz cars doesn't cause backwardness in Bihar!

Yet others say his concern about "conspicuous consumption" is a new-fangled obsession, which militates against his earlier emphasis on growth, "individual initiative and enterprise." Another writer tendentiously claims that the poor just "don't have the mind-space" to bother about how much the rich get.

Such reactions come from a standpoint that's worse than ultra-conservative. It's explicitly, vulgarly libertarian: it holds that it's wrong in principle to limit the freedom of enterprise; the market is democratic and must never be curbed. Libertarianism celebrates greed and castigates all concerns with equity and justice as "the

politics of material want."

Let's leave aside for a moment the moral chasm between this and the Gandhian view of the poor as Daridra Narayan, or the respect many fine economists have for the community-based "moral economy of the poor."

The point is, libertarianism totally misrepresents the market. The market equates unequal agents (e.g. starving workers and rich employers) despite their vastly asymmetrical bargaining power.

Markets don't work spontaneously. They have to be organised and made to follow certain ground-rules. In classical capitalism, the state laid these down. It legislated the minimum wage and the working day, set taxes, regulated profits, and encouraged or banned certain activities. In neoliberal capitalism, that role is appropriated by private corporations. This undermines democratic decision-making.

Libertarians take a morally monstrous position by contending that those with vastly different starting-points (e.g. in access to property) will end up in equal places because the market is "free."

This is nonsense. Markets are

normally unfree, and competition imperfect. Unequal information is available to different actors, there's unfair pricing, poor demand-supply adjustment, and other distortions.

In India, the argument for changing the direction of growth is overwhelmingly persuasive. India's post-1991 growth has produced disparities worse than during the Victorian period of mass impoverishment that Dickens described.

Economists quantify inequality by a measure devised by Corrado Gini. If the Gini coefficient is 0, it means a society is totally equal. If 1, it's completely unequal. India's Gini coefficient is estimated at between 0.32 and 0.48, but there's unanimity that it has sharply risen over a decade. In China, an even smaller rise sets off an alarm.

India should be especially alert to distress signals: the suicide of 100,000 farmers in a decade, declining organised-sector employment, and growing social disaffection, public anger and restlessness.

There are three strong reasons for drastic correction. First, regional disparities are becoming explosive. There isn't one, but at least three Indias: rapidly growing pockets in the South and West; stagnation in much of the Centre, North and East; and regression in the Bimaru states (with Assam added). This will have disastrous political consequences.

Second, growing crime and lawlessness have come to haunt the elite, which alone benefits from neoliberalism. Crime is rooted in rising inequalities, absence of

social opportunity, and collapse of the credibility of the powerful. High walls and barbed wire won't really protect the rich against crime. The only long-term solution is justice and social cohesion.

Third, the disproportionate power wielded by the corporate elite has permeated politics and government and is distorting democracy. Democracy, India's greatest achievement, can only be rescued if the elite's power is tamed. This can only happen if the rich are heavily taxed, and there is serious redistribution of the fruits of growth.

This can be best achieved through a comprehensive incomes policy, which doubles or triples wages and imposes the same level of taxes (e.g. 80 percent-plus) on the rich, which they pay in Scandinavia or Japan (and until recently paid in most Western countries.)

Dr. Singh has said sensible things. Will he muster the courage to legislate them? He unleashed the neoliberal genie. He must put it back into the bottle -- for democracy's sake.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

and credible election in a peaceful atmosphere.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

Announcing schedule for election

In a developing country the need for reforms in various sectors is always there. For carrying out reforms, time and resources are most important. Now is the proper time, resources may also be available, speed may be greater (because of non-accountability), yet we are not sure about the extent of the people's desire for reforms. Thus, it is desirable that the IG assesses the actual situation carefully.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

No conscious citizen of Bangladesh will argue against the withholding of the election which was scheduled to be held on January 22. Surely the interim government (IG), backed by army, has done some really good things -- things which were ignored by the past governments between 1972 and 2006. Among the good deeds are:

- Bringing the issue of separation of judiciary to the penultimate stage.
- Reorganising the Election Commission.
- Reorganising the Anti-Corruption Commission.
- Freeing government land from powerful land-grabbers.
- Taking measures to improve port facilities.

Identifying some well-known extortions and corrupt politicians. However, its failures cannot be overlooked either. They include inability to control prices of some essential items and failure in resolving the power crisis.

At the start, this government felt very encouraged by the spontaneous acceptance of the common people who were totally frustrated by the failure of the elected democratic governments. Within a short time it was obvious that the work plan of the government was not prepared on a realistic basis. Thus, we see an inclusion of some over-ambitious (but certainly beneficial for the country) programs. Among them are thorough reform of the Election Commission, reform of the police department, reform of political parties, and change in the

Rules of Business etc.

Though the advisers of this government are fairly experienced and capable they could not assess properly the environment and capability of our administration, for reasons best known to them. It would have been advisable for the advisers to correctly categorise the major problems in holding a free, fair and credible election.

It is puzzling as to why the IG did not consider the points discussed below before taking decisions:

Bureaucracy influences the formulation of policies at almost all the stages in the case of a least developed country, because of historical reasons.

Without full cooperation of bureaucrats, particularly the top ones, the elite (political masters) are almost helpless.

Unfortunately, when the question of punishment for any wrong-doing is raised, it is the politicians who bear the brunt.

• The highly politicised bureaucrats can never see both sides of an issue. They fail to identify the true need of the country. Moreover, as they concentrate more on satisfying their own needs they do not have enough time for their official work.

• Quick and effective implementations of programs needs capable hands. There is serious dearth of efficient and intelligent bureaucrats due to retirement, loss of attraction for government jobs due to less compensation as compared to private sector, and leaving of jobs by a large number of experienced and competent personnel.

• The existing personnel cannot cope with the new demands.

We are uncertain about the depth of the military's influence in the decisions of this government. Generally speaking, the military wants implementation of decisions in a straight-forward manner. In civilian administration some adjust-

ments are needed for better implementation. Allowing even limited political activities during emergency is not a good decision. However, emergency must be lifted as early as possible.

The government must remember that the people of Bangladesh are highly conscious politically, and love freedom. Already we have seen street demonstrations in some places.

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If the election is to be held at the earliest, emergency must be lifted without further delay to enable the political parties to start political activities. Measures regarding curbing of corruption, or increase of production, or procurement of

electricity, should not delay the election.

The apprehension of deterioration of law and order in case of lifting of the emergency does not appear to be well-founded,

For carrying out reforms, time and resources are most important. Now is the proper time, resources may also be available, speed may be greater (because of non-accountability), yet we are not sure about the extent of the people's desire for reforms. Thus, it is desirable that the IG assesses the actual situation carefully.

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