

Force has little place in a free market

Some prudent steps needed

THE adviser for food Tapan Chowdhury has told the media that the government would seek intervention from the law enforcement agencies if its efforts to keep prices of essentials under control do not achieve the desired result. We understand the words of the adviser are directed against the hoarders of essential commodities and market manipulators. No doubt, hoarding and manipulative marketing interference must be fended off energetically. However, we would like to pronounce a cautionary note against application of force that is indiscriminatory and can prove counter-productive insofar as the demand-supply equations go, on which basically depends stability of prices.

Notwithstanding all kinds of measures taken by the caretaker government so far, the market remains erratic. There are lessons to be learnt from the experience. Despite an improvement in the law and order and the supposed elimination of rings of extortionists operating in the supply link, no positive impact has been felt by way of declining prices. And then, of course, the well-knit and strong syndicates have yet to be neutralised effectively by encouraging a new breed of importers to come into play.

To keep the prices of essentials in check, the usual methods prescribed by market economists are keeping the wholesale market vibrant, maintaining an unbroken supply chain of essential commodities. The people traditionally involved in the import, stocking, distribution and retailing of essentials need to be given a free play in their day-to-day trading activities. Small kitchen markets in the localities also prove to be effective in making items available to the residents at affordable prices. Above all, the import and distribution mechanisms need to be invigorated through taking the traders in confidence and offering them various incentives like soft-term bank loan, exemption of import duty on certain items and most importantly removing fear of persecution from their minds. The persecution mentality that had developed initially still seems to remain in various guises and this should be removed.

Since we have little or no control over the external factors, such as international price index, shipment schedules and freight charges of foreign shipping lines, we should concentrate more vigorously on streamlining the internal factors that are within our powers to manage.

Voting rights for expatriate Bangladeshis

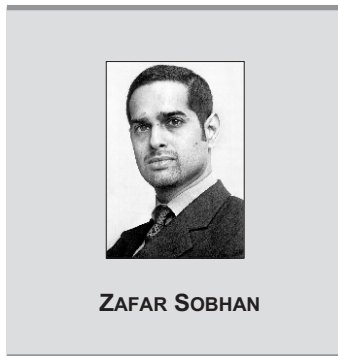
A long-standing demand that must be met

THE Election Commission has floated the idea of giving voting rights to expatriate Bangladeshis. Sohul Hossain, one of the election commissioners, has spoken of a probable move to incorporate our citizens abroad on the voter list to be prepared prior to the next general election. If indeed such a step is taken or implemented, one will surely welcome it. The reason why it will be appreciated is that for a long number of years expatriate Bangladeshis have been demanding their right to vote as citizens. Unfortunately, the demand has always been pushed aside, despite repeated promises by successive governments that it would be looked into.

The Election Commission intends to have Bangladesh's diplomatic missions abroad set up cells with a view to identifying Bangladeshi citizens and including their names on the voter list. What the EC must also do is explain the modalities by which the expatriates will be made voters. A relevant point in this context will relate to their addresses and status abroad. As for casting their votes, the issue of whether or not the expatriates will be able to express their opinions at elections by postal ballot is important. In fact, it is necessary that once expatriate Bangladeshis become voters, they be given the right to cast their votes through such postal ballots. For them to come home all the way from abroad in order to vote will be as difficult as it will be unrealistic. There is, additionally, the matter of what the EC ought to be doing about those Bangladeshis who hold dual citizenship (which is the case about most expatriates anyway). This should not present any problem. Any individual who holds a Bangladesh passport anywhere is our citizen and therefore has the right to vote irrespective of what other nationality he or she holds concurrently.

Expatriate Bangladeshis have over the years made valuable contributions to the national economy through pumping their hard-earned money into development work back home. Abroad, they have earned a good reputation as unofficial ambassadors for their home country. It is therefore only right and proper that the country do something in return for them. Enlisting them as voters and ensuring that they vote will be one way of helping them identify with the aspirations of millions of their fellow citizens here at home.

No quick fix



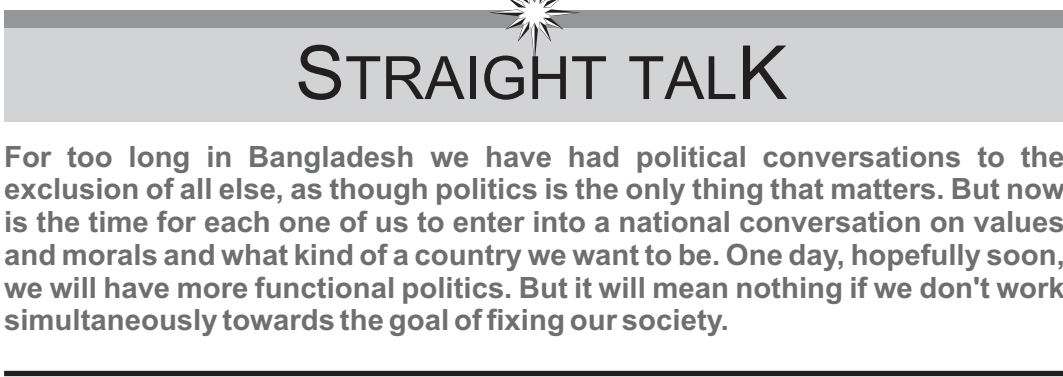
ZAFAR SOBHAN

IF there is one thing that has become painfully apparent to the nation over the past six months, it is that there is no such thing as a quick fix. At least not for this country, not in the situation we were in on January 10 and the situation we find ourselves in today.

It was always tempting to think that we were tantalisingly close to the promised land (of course, no consensus definition for what would constitute arrival): if only we could tweak things a little here, and change the wiring a touch there, that all of a sudden the engine of state would begin to purr smoothly and the country would roll confidently towards its shining destiny.

Indeed, we had much to be proud of. Look at how many things were going right, and the progress that was being made, slowly but surely. GDP growth of roughly 6 per cent. Literacy up. Birth-rate down. There were success stories and these stories were by no means isolated instances.

If only we could eliminate corruption or have free and fair elections



or institute the rule of law or [please supply your own one-size-fits-all solution], the thinking went, everything would miraculously fall into place.

But, of course, if one thing is certain in life it is that nothing is quick and easy and nothing goes according to plan. Eliminating (or at any rate, curbing) corruption continues to prove tricky, and it will take far longer than anyone had anticipated to fix the institutions or establish anything even remotely resembling the rule of law.

Since January 11, expectations and goals for what can be accomplished under the current administration have been dialed down dramatically, in line with the realities on the ground. But it should be noted that it is not enough for those who once dreamed of a brave new world to simply redefine success more modestly and declare victory.

In other words, perhaps comprehensive political reform as once envisioned is not possible, but, in that case, the apparent fall-back option of politics without the two

main party leaders, is not going to be enough, either.

Many argue that Hasina and Khaleda's exit from the political stage is the sine qua non for meaningful reform. Perhaps. But no one can argue with the proposition that, even if such an exit is necessary, it is by no means a sufficient condition for political reform, and what might be planned for after they exit the arena remains to be seen.

What I am cautioning against here is the thinking that fixing the ailing politics of our country is as simple and straightforward as some apparently think.

Of course, the idea that what we need is a quick (or even extended) political fix to our problems is in itself part of the problem. It is this kind of hopeful, wanting-a-quick-fix, wishful thinking, that neatly avoids the real, and much more difficult to overcome, problems in our society, that has brought us to where we are today.

It should be remembered that politics does not exist in a vacuum. The reason that politics in Bangla-

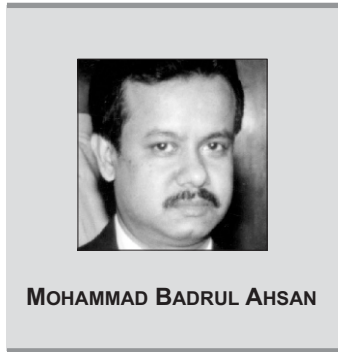
desh is so problematic is that the shortcomings and dysfunctions of our polity reflect the shortcomings and dysfunctions of our greater society.

How often have we heard the lament: Our problem is leadership. If only we had a Mahathir. News-flash: Mahathir didn't all of a sudden appear one day in Kuala Lumpur from nowhere. He was a product of Malaysian society, and that a man of his abilities was able to rise to the top is a function of the health of the Malaysian polity and the society that it is a part of.

Hasina and Khaleda didn't land in Dhaka from the planet Mars. They were drafted in as party leaders because no one else could keep their parties together. They have reigned unchallenged at the top as no one else has been able to command the kind of mass support that they have.

Now, one can argue that this is an unhealthy state of affairs for any country, and one would be right. One can argue that their continuing hold over their party workers and

Circle without centre

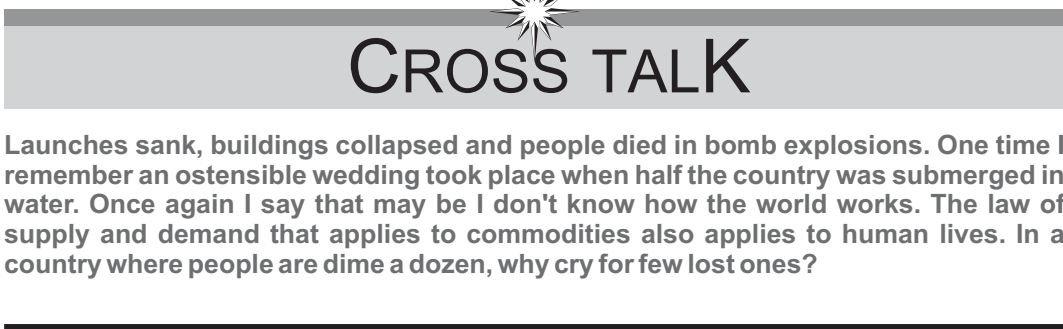


MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

MAY be that is the way of the world. Destruction and creation go hand in hand. Death and birth, union and separation, condolence and congratulation go in lockstep. May be that is why nothing stopped after more than 130 lives perished in the landslide.

The SSC students celebrated their success, books were launched, new political parties were floated, and we welcomed the rainy season with great fanfare. When all of these happened, the dead bodies of victims were still warm in their graves. This country didn't take time to mourn its dead.

May be I am being too sensitive. Time and tide don't wait for the living, let alone the dead. One can't blame the students for their excitement when they did so well in one of their defining exams. In some cities sweet shops did brisk business and ran



out of stock in half hour's time. People who wrote books couldn't wait to share the good news with their readers. Political parties couldn't afford the delay in breaking the news. And the rainy season comes once in a year. How can we blame the culture vultures if they didn't want to miss that chance?

Believe me I am not trying to be finicky here. But this is not the first time, and we have repeated this insensitivity so many times in the past that, I am afraid, it is becoming the new culture.

Launches sank, buildings collapsed and people died in bomb explosions. One time I remember an ostensible wedding took place when half the country was submerged in water. Once again I say that may be I don't know how the world works. The law of supply and demand that applies to commodities also applies to human lives. In a country where people are dime a

dozen, why cry for few lost ones?

Still it bothered me to watch the stark contrasts. It seemed like a nation had freaked out, and its mood swung from extremes of euphoria to extremes of distress. The death looked like explosion in a chocolate factory as the bodies were being pulled out of mud.

They looked like figured cookies dipped in syrupy earth. How unwarily they must have died, clueless that the same hills where they had come for shelter were crashing down to take their lives!

I am not going to write about those who are to blame for cutting the hills and then bringing this disaster, which has taken so many lives. It is just another example of corruption whose flames have engulfed us. It doesn't excite me anymore that we have more bad people. Yes we have them, many more hiding in the nooks and corners of this nation. But this time the good people

bother me, parents who have raised bright children, people who are enlightened enough to write books, intelligent enough to set up political parties and cultural enough to sing and dance. They baffle me because when they have all these good qualities, why couldn't they become better human beings? How couldn't deaths of others diminish them?

Probably that is the only thing that comes between good and bad. It is the capacity to feel the pain of others, which decides if someone has a conscience. People, who take lives, steal from others or put another life in danger, can qualify to be mafia bosses, hired killers or common thugs. Cruelty is two atrocities wrapped in one. It is atrocious once when the cruel act is committed and again when one doesn't feel the remorse.

Those who didn't bother to postpone their celebrations,

the electorate is simply a reflection of the feudal mentality that still exists in too many minds, and that would also be correct.

Now, we are getting close to the heart of the problem. Hasina and Khaleda are mere symptoms of the ailment, and envisioning a future without them, indeed envisioning any kind of purely political fix, does nothing to treat the underlying illness, any more than banning coughing cures lung cancer.

The real problem is the one we have in our society.

Bangladesh remains a shockingly unequal and inequalitarian society that has no respect for simple human dignity, in which people at the bottom end are mistreated with impunity and have no rights to speak of, a society that remains hierarchical and elitist and feudal in its outlook, and in which there is scarcely any conception left of the common good.

If we want to fix the country, we need to look inward and start healing at the societal level. It will be a long and difficult and unpleasant process. Let us make no mistake about it. If we wish to create the good society in this green and verdant land of ours, then, ultimately, we need to change many aspects of how we think and of who we are.

So what should we do right now, at this crucial and tense moment in our nation's history. Right now is perhaps not the right time to be thinking and talking only politics. In the first place, it is forbidden (note to authorities: that's a joke). But,

where do they stand on the moral scale? They have no reason to feel guilty because they are not responsible for those deaths.

They are talented minds who can separate good from evil. If anything they have made the mistake of choosing the wrong time to rejoice over the right reasons. Not much blame goes to them. If one chooses to ignore timing, then they should be even praised.

However, there is perhaps one fine line that connects these good men with their bad counterparts. The people who dug those hills and turned them hollow and brittle were in a hurry. They couldn't wait to seize their moment lest they missed an opportunity.

They didn't care what would happen to people who lived at the foot of those hills. They didn't care how their actions were going to upset the balance of things. They were unfeeling men who desperately wanted to go after their own narrow interests.

It was the same hurry and desperation, which drove others to their euphoria at a time of distress. Could they do it if these deaths had taken place in their homes? Would they have liked it had their loved ones died instead and people wanted to sing and dance in front of their houses? The answer to both questions ought to be an emphatic no.

more pertinently, right now politics is out of the hands of the public and, in any event, is too upended for one to be able to predict confidently where things are going or will end up.

But in the meantime, instead of sitting idle and holding our tongues, we need to start a national conversation -- not necessarily focused on politics as it always is, and third parties, and registration requirements, and term limits, and age limits, etc.

Yes, we need those conversations, too. But we also, and much more importantly, need conversations about the country as a whole and Bangladeshis as a people. We really need to kick-start a national conversation on how to create meaningful and lasting change for the better at the societal level.

For too long in Bangladesh we have had political conversations to the exclusion of all else, as though politics is the only thing that matters. But now is the time for each one of us to enter into a national conversation on values and morals and what kind of a country we want to be.

One day, hopefully soon, we will have more functional politics. But it will mean nothing if we don't work simultaneously towards the goal of fixing our society.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Because there is something called fellow-feeling, which simply means sympathetic awareness of others. This is the law of reciprocity-you must give in order to take, love in order to be loved and care in order to be cared. That reciprocity is the crux of civilization and it reckons that humanity is more than having hairy limbs, scary libido and bleary sense of life after death.

Humanity is about having a soul, which should work like a wide angle surveillance mirror. It should reflect what happens in rest of the store.

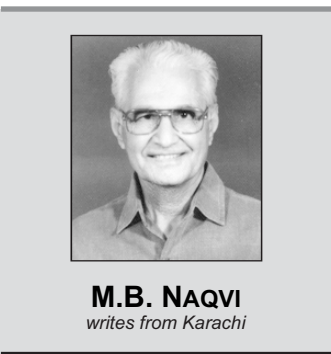
It looked bizarre as if this nation was alternating between smiling and sobbing, a frantic behavior that indicated that, whether enlightened or benighted, there is certain numbness in our heart.

We write books, push politics, excel in education and comprehend culture, yet we fail to feel anything when lives are lost. It was like drawing a circle without the centre. It was all about man, yet humanity wasn't there.

No credit please, I wept. But it was not for the dead but for the living. They have died before their death.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Massive negotiations for what?



M.B. NAQVI

writes from Karachi

LAST week, three senior US emissaries descended upon Islamabad and conducted fairly intensive negotiations with senior Pakistani interlocutors. The subjects of discussion, as disclosed, were deepening of long-term strategic relationship, Afghanistan, and the regional situation.

Pakistan's foreign minister is heading an official delegation which is now in Washington, negotiating specifics with American officials. The emphasis remains on extending and deepening the strategic partnership. Local perceptions are concerned mainly about Pakistan's internal problems. Why so?

The Americans had prepared for these visits for some time. The importance of these negotiations, and of the issues involved, goes without saying. There was a



It is strengthened by their current view of what is happening in the Middle East, and that America is fighting Islam. The Taliban see the latter aim as a Western campaign against their Islamic ideology. The Taliban want that people should live in accordance with the austere Wahabi tenets. They attack music shops, force barbers not to shave beards, and want girls and women to stay at home and not be out alone.

strange campaign in the US media, as well as the pronouncements of congressmen and area experts in the think-tank community and in academia, that came down heavily on Musharraf regime. They wanted Musharraf to do four things.

First, to leave the position of Chief of Army Staff; second, not to get himself elected by the existing assemblies before the general election; third, to hold free and fair elections; and fourth, to resolve the political crisis through Pakistan's own constitutional means, and not resort to repression. These things were clearly spelled out.

What came out of these American demarches? It seems that President Musharraf was bombarded with demands for cutting a strategic political deal beforehand. What remains of the American demands, as far as can

be inferred, is the sole desire for free elections.

What of the other three demands? Negroponte himself said that the question of resigning from the army will be decided by Mr. Musharraf himself. It means, not now.

There is deafening silence about the other demands: There is no mention of the planned presidential election by the soon-to-die assemblies. Nor is anyone talking about a constitutional process to resolve the judicial crisis.

So what of the free election ukase? If memory serves, the US was not among the loudest who objected to the 2002 elections; that did not prevent the Americans from taking Musharraf as their dearest friend and non-Nato ally in the war against terror.

The US calls Iraq and Afghanistan democracies today. Could it be that the mention of a

free election is routine; it is certainly an unexceptionable thing to say. Specific demands are now absent.

That would presuppose that there were specific agreements that have given satisfaction to the Americans, and they are now happy enough to announce \$ 750 million fresh aid for Fata development. With American satisfaction in the bag, the foreign minister's delegation will work out the details in Washington.

It would seem that major propositions have been agreed upon, and what remains is fleshing out of major policies with specific details. It would also seem that Pakistan and America are embarking on a new plan to do some "good and great" things together, and the relationship will be deepened and extended for strategic purposes.

Insofar as Pakistan's domestic questions are concerned, it is now

clear that Washington is satisfied with whatever Musharraf is planning to do.

The real question is, what more is Pakistan required to do, and what "good and great" objectives would it cooperate with the Americans to achieve? The focus from this point onward would be on what the American plans are, in which Pakistan might play a bigger role. The first interest of America is Afghanistan; it has to be pacified. What is the situation in Afghanistan?

It does seem as if the Taliban have fought the Nato forces to what looks like a stalemate. The victory of the Nato forces looks doubtful. No one can say that the West is winning in Afghanistan, and the fragility of the Karzai regime is about to end.

Americans have long wanted Pakistan to be more active in combating and containing the Taliban. The specific demand was that they should not be allowed to use Pakistan territory as a sanctuary from where to go into Afghanistan, make attacks and return. Pakistan has tried, but, obviously, there are limits to what it can do.

The Taliban are not a purely Pakistani phenomenon, though Pakistan had played a decisive role in their formation. They are

now as much an Afghanistani phenomenon as Pakistani.

Behind this imbroglia in Afghanistan is also an ethnic conflict between Pushtoon and non-Pushtoon tribes in that country. The west, in its wisdom, chose to align itself with the non-Pushtoon Northern Alliance, which was earlier being supported by Iran, Russia and India.

Moreover, the Pushtoons had thrown up narco-dealers who supported the Taliban, who were then under Pakistani influence. The geographical part of the war in Afghanistan shows that the Taliban are a force in Helmund province, which is as far as one can go westward into Afghanistan and is not contiguous to Pakistan.

If the Taliban were able to make trouble in Helmund and areas near Mazar-i-Sharif, then it seems that they have bases and sanctuaries inside Afghanistan also. Who can deny that the Taliban cross the Durand Line either way. But Pakistan's role now can only be discreet and minimal, because the Taliban represent a big and growing threat to Pakistan itself.

Large areas of Federally Administered Tribal Areas and southern parts of the NWFP are coming under the Taliban's sway. The Taliban's version of Islam is on the ascendant in various areas of

Pakistan. Factually, there are various versions of the Islamic system that are competing in the field, each representing a specific sectarian interpretation of religious tenets, and its supposed relevance to social and political affairs. The issue is not amenable to the use of military force, and requires a political approach.

This point has been made repeatedly, and all American area experts should appreciate it. The Taliban interpretation is based on Sunni orthodoxy of the Deoband school, on which is superimposed is a Wahabi orientation.

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As for the Americans, their ME designs are in trouble. They have met either reverses or success in Iraq, depending upon how one interprets the American aims vis-à-vis Iraq. However, Iraq is steadily descending into chaos

and disintegration.

American designs are Israel-centric: Israel is to be the American viceroy in the region to control it. Palestinians have to vacate land for more Israeli settlements, and remain subservient to Israel. So should Lebanon and Syria.

That aim has received a clear setback in Lebanon recently, though Israelis continue expanding into what was Palestine Mandate of the 1920s, and easing out as many Palestinians as possible. It almost amounts to a quasi-genocide by stages.

But the Palestinian resistance stands fractured, thanks to the US, Israel, and even EU. The West is refusing to recognise the results of a genuinely democratic election, and supports those who lost the electoral battle. Iran remains a great challenge for America.

Iran will not accept American dictation. The American schemes will remain infructuous if Iran is not contained, and undergoes a regime change imposed by the West. Equally important is Afghanistan's integration into the American power system. This is the strategic aim of the US. Where does Pakistan fit in?

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