

Keeping prices tolerable

Engage the business community more

THE government is embarking on massive import and internal procurement drives to build up sufficient stocks of food aimed at releasing it into the market with a view to stabilising prices.

Even though there is an interest rate cut on loan for import against the backdrop of zero tariff on import of certain essentials there is little sign of enthusiasm among businessmen over opening LCs. In fact, it has dropped sharply down from the previous level.

Bangladesh Bank governor's emphasis on the need for cooperation of the business community in keeping the prices down strikes a responsive chord. As we see it, he has also hit the nail on the head by saying that it is not possible to lower prices of essentials by imposing strict measures only.

The council of advisers in a brainstorming session on price situation has, along with the steps announced to replenish supplies, decided to enhance market monitoring activities. As for market monitoring exercise, reportedly by the joint forces, we hope this will be undertaken in a way that the normal market operators don't feel put off or harassed. We are all for pursuing those who destabilise the market and laws are there to take care of them. But what we feel is that the monitoring activity should not in any way be perceived as being invasive or repressive. On the contrary, it will be an integral part of an assurance-giving that the honest traders have nothing to fear and everything to gain in terms of social esteem.

Against the backdrop of certain misgivings creeping into the trader's mind about disruption of the normal supply chains and developing cold feet in certain areas, we see the need for confidence building measures initiated by the government through renewed consultations with the trading community on some preset agenda. Let the government take on board some of the ideas of business leaders on how best to obtain their cooperation in containing the inflationary pressures and holding the price line. The government has tried many measures but perhaps this one -- surely worthy of a try.

City roads in disarray

We want durable solution

THE sorry tale of the city roads has been told over and over again and yet the latest one goes beyond comprehension. The roads with water filled craters, potholes and wide cracks cancel out the claim of the city fathers that they have given the city of Dhaka roads it deserves as the capital of the country. Any such claim would fall flat on its face as roads remain conspicuously and hazardously unsafe for motorists and pedestrians with various agencies tearing it apart round the year. And rainwater remains clogged on the main thoroughfares for days together thereby damaging the roads even further. We wonder why the authorities cannot maintain roads that cover only 6 per cent of the city's total land area whereas ideally it should have been 25 per cent.

We believe no story on the bad roads of the metropolitan city will ever be complete without mentioning the role of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). Evidently, these roads are constructed with poor quality materials and the technology that is followed is also obsolete. The roads are hardly maintained properly and repair works is not done in time to avoid greater damage. Furthermore, there are allegations that whatever little money is allocated for repair work most of it gets eaten up by a nexus between DCC officials and contractors.

It may sound amazing but according to DCC, there are 180 potholes covering about 2766.58 square metres of road surface in Uttara alone. This clearly speaks of the conditions prevailing in the rest of the city. What adds to our dismay is that even the engineers of DCC claimed that the bitumen layer of the roads got washed away by rainwater because of faulty drainage system. Here the question that crops up is, did not the engineers know that rain is an integral part of this tropical country's climate and that roads should be built accordingly so that these do not get easily damaged after a little rainfall.

Now that the damage has been done what the authorities need to do is take immediate and effective measures to repair the damaged surfaces to make the roads usable once again. But before undertaking any measures we feel a task force should be given the responsibility to take stock of the situation and suggest sustainable solutions. The DCC also needs to establish a mechanism so that all utility service agencies work in coordination with one another to avoid damaging the city roads.

Let there be light



M ABDUL HAFIZ

POLITICS is no more the arithmetic that it used to be in olden days. There were then discernible patterns in it, and its trend could be prognosticated. It's no more so. One has to wait like a passionate gambler till the last roll of the dice to understand everything.

It is more so with the ruling dispensation we now have in our country. It has kept us guessing as to what is up its sleeve. There are so many inponderables in its conduct that resort to speculation and conjecture is inevitable. But what it does not hide is its apathetic attitude towards the two largest political parties of the country, particularly their top

PERSPECTIVES

There are ambiguities in the dispensing of justice, and absolute eradication of corruption pre-supposes the dispensation's staying longer in power, a proposition fraught with undesirable consequences. Moreover, the meritocracy now working for the salvation of the country is composed of the same human material, liable to commit similar mistakes, and is handicapped by the same limitations.

leaders. There is motivated promotion of the so-called "minus two" formula.

The interim government installed on January 11 with the support of the military claims itself to be the champion of justice and crusader against corruption. It's mission began with a bang, with the apprehending of influential politicians on both sides of the country's political divide.

The public watched with glee the arrest and incarceration of some powerful stalwarts of the immediate past BNP-Jamaat government, including Khaleda Zia's heir apparent Tarique Rahman, on serious graft charges. But the government proceeded carefully with regard

to action, either against Mrs. Zia or against Sheikh Hasina. The first to draw flak from the authority's ire was the voluble Hasina, who was taken into custody a month ago. There is speculation that Mrs. Zia may embrace this fate soon.

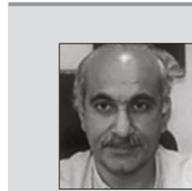
Mrs. Zia led the immediate past government of the country, and broke all previous records of corruption, inefficiency, and misuse of power. Worse, she conspired to prolong her predatory regime beyond the mandated period through a scripted election. She practically pushed the country to the brink of total ruin. If she had her way, the situation would have been further exacerbated. Despite the perdition she had already caused to

the nation, she was left free to carry on with her telephone-politics.

If any drastic step is taken against her at this belated stage, it will be considered as her reaping the whirlwind. But Sheikh Hasina, already battered during Mrs. Zia's five years of imperious rule, did a service to the nation by forestalling the scripted election of January 22 through a vigorous mass movement. Yet, whose penance is she undergoing through her indictment leading to her imprisonment? With her combative politics, she inadvertently created a Frankenstein's monster which is now about to devour her.

That's what the rule of the power game is. Power is a heady

The ambush



M. J. AKBAR

WHAT is human about nature? Bystanders enjoy conflict more than resolution. Partisans may prefer peace, but an audience can be persuaded to pay good money to watch gladiators. Which street in the world ever stopped to applaud a serene couple strolling by, hand in hand? But let a husband and wife begin screaming at each other and a crowd will collect instantly. Let the couple be marginally familiar and a posse of journalists will arrive to turn them into minor celebrities. Such is the law of inhuman nature.

A divorce, therefore, will always get much more coverage than a marriage. Good news has only limited rights over airtime and newsprint. A marriage gets decent attention only at the time of nuptials. You might recall, for instance, the photographs flooded with smiles when the present UPA government was joined together in functional matrimony a little more than a thousand days ago. Such pictures aren't news after 24 hours.

But a divorce can make news every day. There are so many issues to deal with. Who keeps the house after the split? That is a tough one, since the house would

BYLINE

Now that divorce proceedings have begun between the Congress and the Left, the best thing to do would be to make a quick and clean break. The house -- the Lok Sabha of course -- is now unstable. The partnership has become untenable. The one thing that the Congress and the Left will not fight about is custody of the child. In three years, the Manmohan Singh government has produced just one child, the Indo-US nuclear deal. The Left has made it clear that it has serious doubts about the circumstances of its arrival.

never have been stable without the willing consent of both parties. The bickering can get intense over the most trivial detail, and each bicker feeds further demand from an insatiable media. Accusations get hurled across that nasty wrestling pit called a television studio. Mud sticks. Everyone has heard of some happy marriage, for such things are still possible. Whoever heard of a happy divorce?

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This government was elected because a majority of Indian voters rejected the fatuous claim that India was shining. That was a moment tailor-made for a new

economic agenda that shifted the focus from wealth creation to wealth distribution. Instead, this government of World Bank economists insisted that wealth creation was, in a very fundamental sense, incompatible with wealth distribution.

It stuck doggedly to a crumbs-policy. If it ensured a feast for the rich, there would always be enough crumbs for the poor. This, in essence, is the trickle-down theory advocated by the highest in the land, and applauded by all those given a free ticket to the table. One could sense that elections were around the corner when the prime minister rediscovered the poor during his speech on the sixtieth Independence Day. In Indian democracy, the poor get homilies, while the rich get policies.

If Dr. Manmohan Singh had fought for, and staked his government's survival on, an anti-poverty program, no one would have dared to bring his government down. He would have won an election on his record, for the poor vote. How poor is India? Some startling statistics have just been released by a forgotten wing of Dr. Singh's own administration, the National Commission for

Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector. Around 80% of India's working population is in this sector. Nearly 80% of this group earns less than Rs 20 a day and 85% of this sub-group is trapped in debt.

By the usual sleight of hand, we have drawn an arbitrary line to define poverty: Rs 12 a day constitutes the poverty line. This encourages the illusion that 77% of India is now above the poverty line. It isn't that much above in any case. Nor is this poverty line index-linked to inflation. Twelve rupees a day buys much less today than it did three years ago. The traditional poverty groups remain where they were: 88% of Scheduled Tribes and Castes, 80% of "Other Backward Classes," and 85% of Muslims belong to the "poor and vulnerable" class.

If these statistics are lies the government should disown them, sack the author of the report, and produce alternative figures that indicate a different scenario. Dr. Manmohan Singh cannot hide from facts by taking shelter behind silence.

Instead of concentrating on poverty, Dr. Singh concentrated on George Bush. Heads of gov-

ernment who have invested in Bush at the expense of their national interest are on a losing streak this year. Tony Blair has disappeared into insignificance so quickly that his decade in office already seems like a mirage. Any good he might have done for his country has been lost in that colossal and unthinking blunder called Iraq. John Howard, the other great Bush ally, is heading for defeat in this year's Australian elections.

Dr. Singh always misunderstood the nature of the debate on the nuclear deal. That political fault-line has now extended to the parties in his alliance, who did not have much to do with the decision but surrendered (unlike the Left) their independent judgment in order to hang on to office. Lalu Yadav, Sharad Pawar, and M. Karunanidhi will be answerable to voters for a decision that they rubber-stamped without examining the consequences.

For some reason that one has been unable to fathom, Dr. Singh once called protests against the Bush visit to India "communal." If he thought that only Muslims were suspicious of his eagerness to accept any terms imposed by the Bush administration then I presume he has changed his views now. Any investment on such a scale, in both financial and strategic terms, cannot be pushed through by merely the will of a government. It has to be sifted through the process of national debate, particularly in Parliament. If the American legislature has the right to interfere in decision-making, and impose qualifications, why not the Indian legislature? Is the Indian MP less patriotic than the American sena-

tor, or, indeed, more ignorant? The logic of democracy prevails in only one direction: the popular will. The prime minister pushed the pace by presenting his allies with a timetable that they were unable to accept.

There has also been a serious misunderstanding about the nature of government. India's ambassador to Washington, an extremely capable diplomat, Ronen Sen, says that he has been privately assured that Washington will not react excessively if India uses the option to test. Alas, nations last longer than individuals. The life of this deal is estimated at around forty years. Ronen Sen will not be ambassador that long. Bush will not be president after January 2009. What matters is the law of the land, and the written record.

The law of America, by which every president is bound, is called the Hyde Act. It will prevail when a Democrat takes the White House from the Republicans. India's national interest cannot be compromised on the strength of a private assurance. It is astonishing that a senior diplomat should make such a statement, when American negotiators and spokesmen have insisted that the law of their land will determine the course of their actions in any dispute. It is astounding that a government should accept this as some form of guarantee.

No marriage ever survived because of prolonged divorce proceedings. The time has come to go to a higher court than even the Indian parliament -- to the people of India.

drive, there is hardly any improvement in either the socio-economic sphere or in restoration of internal order. The present transitory nature of the administration produces the same kind of minions and acolytes around the power centres, who become the beneficiaries of the regime and the poor people's burden.

It is in the interest of the nation that power be handed over to the elected representatives of the people immediately. Before that, even if reforms are necessary, transparency is essential, so that the political hustlers are not in a position to put into effect their mala fide intention of denying politics to any party or politicians.

If this is allowed, the election will straight away lose its credibility. To put an end to the murky game being played now, there are few alternative to full blown political activism -- like the one that led to our independence and all other noble achievements. Let there be searching light piercing through the dark recesses where the mala fide intentions are born.

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Socially isolating the corrupt



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

DURING his August 10 Channel-i talk show, the ACC chairman, Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, made a subtle reference to a former Filipino premier who had openly questioned how could one do away with corruption in a country where the people had accorded a ceremonious funeral to their most corrupt leader, President Ferdinand Marcos.

Since the publication of my August 13 piece, "Charges Delayed, Crimes Bypassed," in which I quoted Chairman Hasan, I have developed fresh acuties while underscoring some parallels to the aforesaid insanity among our own people and politicians who are courting corrupt leaders even before their funerals.

NO NONSENSE

The Election Commission is devising rules to bar all corrupt politicians from contesting in the 2008 national elections. But what will stop them from supporting the candidates of their parties, and deriving power and influence in wheeling and dealing in the future? Thus, being condemned to prison may not be enough -- socially isolating them, as suggested by army chief General Moeen Ahmed a few weeks ago, may be the most appropriate follow-up.

Consider, for example, the case of former president H.M. Ershad, a man who was once condemned to incarceration for corruption -- now defending himself against other outstanding charges, including gold smuggling. He's still the much-admired leader of Jatiya Party, and the people of his constituency still honour him with a rousing welcome. Indeed, they seem ready to elect him in a national election any time. While reconciling people's support in his constituency is explicable by calling them ignorant and under-educated, what virtues can anyone attach to the so-called educated politicians who still follow his trail?

What more can I say about Madam Khaleda Zia -- other than what I wrote recently? I am baffled

by the extent to which Hannan Shah has deified Khaleda -- his devotion to her leadership appears as fervent as it is boundless, regardless of her being good or bad. After the admission of tax evasion, of course, we now know for sure that she isn't all good. Apparently, such offenses matter little to the likes of Shah.

The extent of Khaleda's irrationality is simply mind-boggling. Her audacity in complaining about the violation of her human rights for being denied permission to distribute relief materials to flood victims is revolting, given that her counterpart is in jail for alleged indiscretions, which, in comparison to Khaleda's she-nanigans, seem like little more than childish pranks.

During a brief teleconference with Rajshahi city party leaders on August 18, Khaleda pleaded with them to "stay united and pray to the Almighty Allah for the people of the country and the party so that we can work together again" (note: indoor politics, but not politics on the air, is banned). Praying for Allah's mercy and help for the people is fine, but why would Allah favour the party of corrupt leaders over AL or JP, whose culpabilities are much less by any stretch of comparison?

Also, what makes her think that she and the people will ever "work together again." How does Hannan Shah know that Khaleda isn't at imminent risk of being hand-cuffed?

In fact, there's a growing per-

ception that the charges of alleged corruption against Khaleda, her sons, and Saeed Eskander, will be obliterated by a presidential pardon on the same premises that allowed her detained son Tarique Rahman to be uplifted from the ordinary criminals' cell to "division" status reserved for VIPs.

As for Sheikh Hasina -- the government has locked her up, and keeps exploring the Supreme Court to keep her that way as long as possible. She's still innocent of all charges until proven otherwise, and her courtiers are well within their rights to hang around the court-house and "chant and do monajat to God" for her release (as if He has nothing else to do).

While the general perception about Hasina is that she must have done some wrong somewhere -- the perception about Khaleda's corruption and illicit activities is now documented after her "haram (black) money" was sanitised by NBR into "halal money."

So, why censure the people of Philippines for what they did for the dead Marcos, when we've smaller living "Marcoses" among us -- smaller only in their scale of

illegal accretions.

Believe it or not, all those who are either serving time behind bars, or will be serving shortly, will likely receive a stirring welcome back to the real world by the people of their constituencies -- possibly propelled by the fear of retribution if the convicts get back to power once again, or because birds of a feather flock together. What to do then?

The Election Commission is devising rules to bar all corrupt politicians from contesting in the 2008 national elections. But what will stop them from supporting the candidates of their parties, and deriving power and influence in wheeling and dealing in the future? Thus, being condemned to prison may not be enough -- socially isolating them, as suggested by army chief General Moeen Ahmed a few weeks ago, may be the most appropriate follow-up humiliation. What did Moeen actually mean by "social isolation?" My best hunches are:

- The corrupt politicians and public servants (PPS) must be properly tagged, lest we forget about their criminality.
- Corrupt politicians' bases must be dismantled to cripple any collective support to any

EC cleared candidates.

- They must be barred from giving political speeches in support of any candidate.
 - Corrupt PPS spouses should also be charged as willing accomplices to corruption.
 - Voluntarily avoid matrimonial relationship with the families of the corrupt.
 - Union council offices should post banners inscribing the names of corrupt politicians from their constituencies.
 - Bank accounts and investment in financial assets should be banned for all convicted PPSs.
 - Avoid inviting corrupt PPSs to parties and other gatherings.
 - Convicted PPS right to passport should be forfeited, unless it is needed for Haj or medical treatment abroad.
 - Finally, corrupt PPS should be subject to some form of spiritual condemnation and religious sanctions by the nation's religious leaders (similar to excommunication practiced by some churches).
- Whether these sanctions can be implemented or not, their mere existence on the books may deter a few would-be corrupt people from yielding to their

pendant for mischief.

I have, of course, some reservations about spiritual therapy. Is belief in God a prerequisite to being a person of high morality? Admittedly, altruism and morality are already ingrained in the human species -- and are not the monopoly of any particular religious sect or belief. Being cruel, dishonest, selfish, and violent is also entrenched in our nature. Therefore, the notion that religion does make its adherents pick good behaviour over bad isn't a foregone one. Otherwise, this world -- which is inhabited by more believers than infidels -- would be a far better place than what it is.

Why do our politicians and public officials engage in immoral and illicit pursuits, given that they go to the mosque, perform their prayers, and observe all other religious rituals? Truly, God-fearing religious people would define them as hypocrites -- not as religious people. Would God then listen to a hypocrite's prayer for party unity, release from prison, or for working together to lead the country to ruin again?

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