

Bangladesh on the horns of a dilemma



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

We in Bangladesh are like Alice in Wonderland, where we have to run all the time to remain in the same place. Unless we increase our pace of growth (at the same time ensuring that the path to higher growth does not lead to economic exploitation), Bangladesh, created at enormous cost, will remain an insignificant dot in the history of mankind.

The business of human trafficking

Time for a global approach to tackle it

WE welcome Bangladesh's stand on trafficking and child labour in a meeting of the UN Global Initiative to Fight Trafficking held recently in Austria. It has helped frustrate the efforts of an international lobby to paint Bangladesh as a country where child labour, exploitation of workers and human trafficking are rampant.

However, the situation regarding human trafficking in Bangladesh is a matter where we cannot feel self-satisfied, even if we have graduated from tier 1 to tier 2 in the list occurring in the "Traffic in Persons" Report, published by the US State Department annually. This indicates an improvement in the anti-trafficking effort of Bangladesh.

Our somewhat better ranking is hardly a solace for those thousands of women and children who are either lured or coerced or forced into virtual slavery across international borders. There are those that, in seeking employment abroad, choose the shortest path to greener pastures, only to find themselves duped and forced into immoral acts. And even when there is legal or safe migration, many of our workers, particularly female workers in certain countries of the Middle East, find themselves in conditions of involuntary servitude having to face restrictions on movement, endure non-payment of wages, and physical and sexual abuse.

It is futile to split hairs on the actual number of persons that are trafficked across the border and beyond, annually. Admittedly, there has been marginal improvement in this regard because of the corrective measures employed by the government like raising awareness, but much is left to be desired, particularly bringing to account those agencies that indulge in fraudulent recruitment and enforcing criminal penalties on them.

While there are many aspects of this problem, economic, legal and social, in the immediate term our imperative should be to develop a regional network in order that the international borders are made impervious to the human traffickers.

While human trafficking can only be checked through removing the causes of it at home, in the era of globalisation it stands to reason that more free and wider movement of labour should be encouraged i.e. allowing safe and legal migration by the developed countries, to stem a phenomenon that has come to be epitomized as modern day slavery.

A crisis of confidence

Pakistan's politicians must do better for themselves

THE element of uncertainty which has been a feature of Pakistan's politics since its general elections on 18 February persists, in a number of ways. That has, of course, little to do with the regime of General Pervez Musharraf, who has already called the newly elected national assembly into session. So far the president has given little cause for anyone to doubt his intentions, even if the election results have not been to his advantage. The problem, though, comes from within the Pakistan People's Party. As the single largest winner of seats, though not an outright majority, the party is poised to form the next government in alliance with the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif. Improbable as the alliance between these old rivals may seem, the fact remains that in the circumstances it is the only credible option before the politicians opposed to President Musharraf.

But an exercise of such an option now has run into difficulties with the growing tension within the PPP on the issue of who will take charge as the new prime minister. In terms of political pragmatism, that individual should be party vice chairman Makhdoom Fahim Amin, for it was he who kept the organisation going in the years Benazir Bhutto stayed abroad in the face of the corruption cases against her and her husband. In light of Ms. Bhutto's assassination in December last year and in view of the PPP's good show at the elections, it was assumed that Amin would lead the next government. Of late, though, the pro-Zardari elements in the PPP have been working against him, one reason being that they would like Asif Zardari to be the new prime minister. Rumours, all malicious, were spread about Amin's closeness to the military regime. It was a refrain even Nawaz Sharif and his people picked up last week. It is small wonder then that Pakistani politics today is in a state of confusion.

Pakistan's politicians, and that means everyone who has waged a long battle for democracy to return to the country, will be doing themselves much credit if they can tide over the crisis of confidence they are now going through among their own ranks. Besides, to what extent the reputation of an already troubled Pakistan will take a dive should Asif Zardari lead the government by pushing Makhdoom Amin aside is a thought that might sadden many, and not just within Pakistan.

thinkers would be seen as only a very recent phenomena. So recent that even the post-1945 period, when the Cold War divided the world into the Manichean structure of good and evil (western capitalism being "good" and the communist world being "evil") and gave rise to a struggle in which the "good" had to be victorious over the "evil" (President Reagan once described the then Soviet Union as an evil empire), would be considered as yesterday's event.

The history of Bangladesh since 1975 and that of Pakistan since 1947 are not too dissimilar, in the sense that extra-constitutional powers on various occasions intruded into the domain of civilian politics.

But if one were to go deeply into the history of the world in the light of its cosmic age, that would stretch into billions of years, and even if one were to delve into mankind's history in pre-modern times, when Hobbesian life was nasty, brutish and short -- then the Renaissance, the French and American Revolutions, and the emergence of western liberal

ushering in a period of unipolarity, encouraged Francis Fukuyama to declare that mankind had reached "the end point of ideological evolution."

After experiencing imperialism, nazism, fascism, absolute monarchy, dictatorship, etc, people have assembled under the banner of liberal democracy and market economy that Fukuyama describes as the "final form of human government and as such constituted the end of history."

Though the thesis has been revised since, as having been prematurely arrived at, the general consensus remains that democracy and market economy are constant factors in human development.

One may recall that both Alfred Marshall and Karl Marx had in principle a common thread in their thinking, that the ultimate aim of the capitalist class is to reap maximum profit and, therefore, public regulatory mechanisms have to be installed to rein in the runaway horses of

inflation, abnormal profit and a host of defaults that accompany economic activities, a task in which the present administration in Bangladesh has been found wanting.

Bangladeshis are confronted by daily increase in the price of essentials that has gone beyond their means. It is sad to note that the authorities are directing the governmental agencies now to find out the reasons behind galloping rise in prices when our media and the general public have been complaining for months that the people are unable to make both ends meet.

Almost everyone is aware that syndicates and cartels are mainly responsible for the abnormal rise in the price of essentials. To quote The Daily Star of March 12: "A commerce ministry survey has found that the price of edible oil increased on grounds of price hike in the international market, although no new consignment of edible oil reached the country between February 25 and March 9. The

price of edible oil rather decreased in the international market last week but it had no effect on the local market."

It is incredible that the authorities are still weighing options like reducing duty on oil import, and allowing TCB and BDR to import the commodity when the lives of the people are in such dire straits.

The burden of guilt of rice scarcity has been shifted to the Indian government's decision not to allow rice export at prices less than \$650 per ton. It is not readily understood why the authorities, even after two floods and Sidr, failed to anticipate the food crisis that was looming on the horizon.

The interim government should be well aware that popular acceptance of this unelected group of people has been mainly due to people's disgust at the mal-governance by those they had elected before.

It is, therefore, logical to expect of the interim government that has earned the people's appreciation for cleaning up the mess in the Augean stable left by the previous administrations to primarily devote themselves to the welfare of the common people whose share in national income dropped from 6.5% in 1992 to 5.3% in 2005.

Had it been a regular caretaker government of three months duration, whose only task would have been to assist the Election

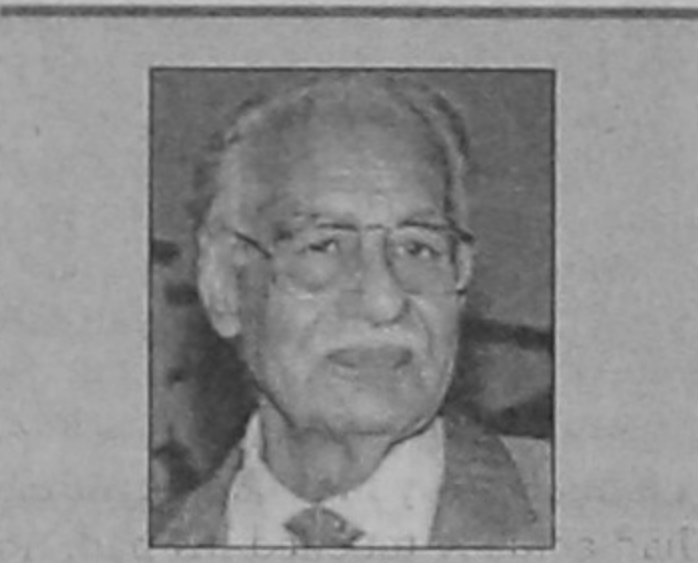
Commission in holding a parliamentary election, then the people's expectations mentioned above would not have been relevant. But the circumstances under which the interim government had to take over the reins of administration, albeit with the tacit approval of the people, are so different that the people's expectations are not limited to casting ballots in the elections but to seeing the establishment of the foundations on which democracy can be sustained in future.

For sustenance of democracy the country has to prosper economically, not only to bridge the widening gap between the rich and the poor but also to make the fruits of development available to that class of people who are not only marginalised but are also non-existent because they have no power to make themselves heard by the rich and powerful.

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Sonia knows best



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

BETWEEN THE LINES

Zardari may not have so many problems to tackle if he wants to be a Sonia Gandhi. But he will prove the point if the prime minister he selects consults him before making any move. He has already devalued the office by naming Amin Fahim first and then thinking of someone else. Sonia has at least backed Manmohan Singh to the hilt. It is another matter that she has used him as her stalking horse.

I want to be a Sonia Gandhi." So says Asif Zardari, co-chairman of Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The remark brings no credit either to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh or to Congress president Sonia Gandhi. Yet, both should realise the significance of the remark, which is louder in India than in Pakistan and elsewhere. The general impression is that she does the back-seat driving while Manmohan Singh is at the wheel.

Because of such thinking, top people, whether in business, politics or the bureaucracy, have tended to seek equation with her or someone close to her to get their job done. Any problem, dispute or claim which is difficult to solve evokes the stock question: Do you know 10 Janpath?

That is where she lives and that is where the buck stops. It is well known by this time that even membership of a routine-type commission needs her nod. This is not to speak about the senior positions.

Her favourites, even though incompetent, get the appointments and extensions. It is a trait she has inherited from her mother-in-law, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who destroyed the institutions to such an extent that they have not yet recovered from the blow she gave.

I know that Manmohan Singh commands great respect in the world of economics. His integrity is beyond reproach. Even his worst critics are full of praise for his ability. Still, he has found himself helpless whenever the word from 10 Janpath was different from what he wanted to do. Left to him, he would have dropped some from his council of ministers for their involvement in sordid deals. He could not do so. She did not approve of his recommendations. What matters is her say.

Maybe Sonia Gandhi is guided by the coalition dharma, its compulsions of keeping the flock together and agreeing to what the allies demand. But this charitable explanation does not cover all her acts of omission and commission. Yet, it is Manmohan Singh who has paid

the price in terms of prestige and power since the advent of his government.

"Can you tell this to Sonia ji?" is Manmohan Singh's plea whenever someone complains to him about his corrupt minister. Manmohan Singh knows he cannot ask him to go, however strongly he may feel. The prime minister sulks, but does very little beyond that. The fact is that she rules. He only governs. This has been the arrangement from day one, when the Congress party pressed Sonia Gandhi to be the prime minister and she, in turn, gave him the position. He is indebted to her. But he does not realise that she had no other dependable person. Once she realised that her Italian background would keep India's polity unsettled, Manmohan Singh was the obvious choice.

That she has mastered the art of exercising power from behind the scenes goes without saying. Rules and regulations are interpreted or amended to suit her wishes. This amounts to wielding power without being accountable. She enjoys the role. Indeed, she has added new

vocabulary to the lexicon of politics: power without responsibility.

When Zardari says he wishes to be a Sonia Gandhi, he wants to pull strings from behind. But this requires a lot of patience, as Sonia Gandhi's stay of 10 years as party president suggests. Zardari is already tempted to the office of prime ministership because of the fuss and the fanfare which it demands. She has never had second thoughts about the position; nor has she wanted to replace Manmohan Singh.

It is possible that, if the Congress returns to power in the next election, Sonia may herself become the prime minister. After all, she nearly occupied the office some years ago when Samajwadi party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav did not support her with 13 crucial votes that would have given her a majority in the Lok Sabha.

Since then, she must have realised the difficult role Manmohan Singh has played. He has taken all the slings on himself and acted as a shield to save her the embarrassment of facing

the critics. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was particular about the sanctity of office. UN Dhebar was then the Congress president. Nehru had to combine the post of party president with the office of prime minister because he found a parallel line of authority developing. Mrs. Indira Gandhi held dual positions of prime minister and the Congress president from the beginning of her rule. She did not want a wrong message to go.

Sonia Gandhi has, however, done better. She has concentrated all power, executive and organisational, in herself. Manmohan Singh goes along the way she paves for him. He even anticipates her wishes and carries them out without being told. The day she designated her son, Rahul Gandhi, to campaign in the UP election -- he was not yet the party's secretary general -- Manmohan Singh said that he (Rahul Gandhi) was "the future of India." Manmohan Singh's humility, modesty and simplicity are endearing traits, but his approval of everything that emanates from 10 Janpath has given him a title of a "yes man." Still, he plods along sincerely and untiringly.

In fact, the four years of the tenure of Manmohan Singh, which finishes in May, has registered some achievements of the Congress-Rural Employment Act which ensures work for 100 days to every rural family. The Right to Information through legislation

is another achievement.

On the other hand, Sonia Gandhi with all her secular credentials has not fought against communalists as forcibly and relentlessly as was expected from her. The Congress-led Maharashtra government has not taken any action against Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, although the Justice Sri Krishna report had proved his hand in the killing of Muslims in Mumbai some 15 years ago. Bal Thackeray is now out to revive his parochial agenda of ousting north Indians from Maharashtra. Sonia's nominee, Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, has taken things lightly when they challenge the very unity of India.

There is nothing in the horizon to suggest that Sonia Gandhi may drop Manmohan Singh. It looks as if both will go to the polls together. What may create some problems is the rising cost of living, which influences the voters. The Congress is losing support on this count and she is worried.

Zardari may not have so many problems to tackle if he wants to be a Sonia Gandhi. But he will prove the point if the prime minister he selects consults him before making any move. He has already devalued the office by naming Amin Fahim first and then thinking of someone else. Sonia has at least backed Manmohan Singh to the hilt. It is another matter that she has used him as her stalking horse.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Obama's race and religion front and centre

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Ms. Ferraro: Is it remotely possible that Obama's qualifications -- a Columbia University graduate, Harvard Law Review's first African-American editor-in-chief, four-term Illinois state senator, author of two best-selling books (written by himself), a US senator from a predominantly white state, a brilliant and inspiring orator and politician who is defeating the Democratic party establishment represented by the Clintons, and is spearheading post-racial politics in America -- have something to do with his appeal to young and old, blacks and whites, rather than the pigment of his skin?

FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

WITH Barack Obama running off eleven straight primary and caucus victories after February 7, fattening his seemingly insurmountable lead in pledged delegates, popular votes and states won, Hillary had a decision to make: To "go gentle into that good night" or "rage, rage" (with apologies to Dylan Thomas). She

engaged. In their last debate on February 26, a pugnacious Clinton went for Obama's jugular. Adopting the "kitchen sink" fusillade strategy, she threw everything at Obama, hoping something would stick. When Tim Russert asked Obama to comment on the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan's unopposed endorsement of him,

Obama denounced Farrakhan's previous anti-Semitic statements. Not the right word, protested ("Jewish voters: See, I am the true supporter of Israel") Clinton. "You have to reject it," demanded Ms. Semantics. Obama acceded: "I denounce and reject."

Knowing that Obama detests knife fights, Hillary aimed to knock Obama off his pedestal and

engage him in mudslinging. She ripped open the slightest slip by Obama and told the world: "See, he is not the God you thought he was!" When a frustrated Obama supporter, Harvard professor Samantha Power, called Hillary a "monster" who would stoop to any level to win, Hillary cried foul and had her fired. Hillary's objective is to provoke Obama into committing a blunder and driving up his negatives.

Hillary complained that the press was soft on Obama. To assuage her angst, the press quickly changed the narrative and accused Obama of guilt by association with some supporters -- indicted realtor Tony Rezko, Farrakhan, and incendiary remarks of Obama's pastor, Rev. Wright. For three Saturdays running, "Saturday Night Live" ran pro-Clinton opening comedy skits.

Orlando Patterson, another

Harvard professor, believes that the ad: "It is 3 a.m. The phone rings at the White House. Who would you like to answer the phone?" that Clinton ran in Texas had subliminal racial overtones. The ad shows white children sleeping peacefully at 3 a.m. when the mother comes to check on them because an intruder (black) may be hiding in the bushes. If a black man (Obama) picked up the phone, the children would be really scared! According to Professor Patterson, this is reminiscent of D. W. Griffith's controversial 1915 movie, "The Birth of a Nation," which revived the racist terrorist organisation Ku Klux Klan.

After Hillary successfully lowered the bar for attacking Obama, an avalanche of attack came from the bigots. Hillary had tap danced around whether Obama is a Muslim, leaving some plausibility that he is! As if on cue, on March 7 Iowa

Republican congressman Steve King predicted that terrorists would celebrate if Barack Obama were elected president: "His middle name Hussein does matter. [Obama will] certainly be viewed as a savior for them. That's why you will see them supporting him, encouraging him. [If Obama is elected president] al-Qaeda would be dancing in the streets in greater numbers than they did on September 11 because they would declare victory in this war on terror." McCain supporter Rev. Rod Paisley chimed in: "Islam is a false religion." Thanks to such smear tactics, 13% of Americans now believe that Obama is a Muslim!

The clincher came from Geraldine Ferraro, Walter Mondale's running mate in 1984: "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman, he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And

the country is caught up in the concept." So, being a black man is an advantage in America! Obama responded with restraint and civility: "Being an African-American man named Barack Obama is not the quickest path to becoming US president."

Before resigning from Hillary's national economic committee, an unapologetic Ms. Ferraro added: "Any time anybody does anything that in any way pulls this campaign down and says, 'Let's address reality and the problems we're facing in this world,' you're accused of being racist, so you have to shut up. Racism works in two different directions. I really think they're attacking me because I'm white." Really?

Ms. Ferraro: Is it remotely possible that Obama's qualifications -- a Columbia University graduate, Harvard Law Review's first African-American editor-in-chief, four-term Illinois state

senator, author of two best-selling books (written by himself), a US senator from a predominantly white state, a brilliant and inspiring orator and politician who is defeating the Democratic party establishment represented by the Clintons, and is spearheading post-racial politics in America -- have something to do with his appeal to young and old, blacks and whites, rather than the pigment of his skin?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.

Corrigendum

In the post-editorial column "Pilloried police and pompous platitudes" by Muhammad Nurul Huda published on March 14, the second line of para three but last shall read as "In addition the opportunity cost of being corrupt is low and thus the obvious rational choice is often the acceptance of bribes."