

Government-parties' informal dialogue

The move should yield results

WE welcome the channels of communication that have been opened between the caretaker government and the political parties. It is a good sign that the government has been talking to the Awami League and has also invited the two factions of the BNP to the dialogue. Though as yet these channels are operating on an informal level, we are quite encouraged by the fact that at long last the government has in its wisdom realised that dealing directly with the political parties is the most effective way of handling the issues confronting the country. A whole range of issues, namely, electoral reforms, polls schedule, effective participation in the elections by the parties, et al, need to be thrashed out. Even though it remains our feeling that the move should have come earlier, we feel that with elections having been promised for December this year, contacts between the government and the parties assume a sense of urgency given the limited time at their disposal.

One must note, at this point, that the agenda before the government and the parties is as heavy as it is intense. With all the developments that have occurred in the political arena since the imposition of the state of emergency in January last year, it makes sense to argue that a conceptual clarity of how the nation proceeds from here is important. Since free and transparent general elections and a transfer of power back to an elected government remain the goal of both the government and the political parties, we cannot but expect the informal dialogue between the two sides to clear the path to a formal dialogue. Both the government and the parties need to be accommodative, keeping the national interest in mind. That ought not to be a hard job given that the government has repeatedly committed itself to a sure and scheduled holding of the elections. Moreover, a paramount need for stability and normality requires that the nation give itself an elected government at the earliest. There is a need today to bridge the gap between the ground situation and the commitment of the government to its electoral agenda.

Let it be pointed out in this context that the talks between the government and the political parties should proceed without any strings attached. The objective, as the nation by and large has noted, is to ensure a smooth return to good and purposeful government. We also note that there cannot be any return to the situation which vitiated politics in the pre-emergency period. Such a condition will not be desirable at all.

The cruel hilsa joke

Adopt measures that were effective last year

IN these days of high staple price, thankfully going down by wee bits though, that we have to bring up the story of hilsa might sound a little ironical; but is it? For quite some time, the fish delicacy has been an elusive, almost unreachable item, particularly to the consumers of limited means.

No amount of imagination is perhaps enough to work out what the price of a rather ordinary looking hilsa could be. It's really baffling to learn that a couple of big hilsa could cost its buyer no less than Tk 4,000! The price spiral is being attributed to the Bengali New Year which will be celebrated next week hopefully in a perfect mood of festivity. Fried hilsa will be part of the day's menu and that explains such rush for the fish now. But then we must not forget that the day was observed in the past also with the hilsa lovers doing exactly what they are doing now. But never did the prices shoot up so abnormally high. After all, a hilsa costing Tk 2,000 may sound like a cruel joke, particularly to those who were once capable of buying it.

Obviously, this is not the peak season of this popular fish. But can the consumers hope that the prices will come down in the days ahead? The government took some stringent measures like clamping a ban on catching of small hilsa (known as Jhatka) and suspending export of the fish temporarily. The moves paid good dividends and people could buy the fish, after a long time. Also it is important that the three major breeding grounds be protected to allow the fish to lay their eggs.

The situation really looks grim this year. Nevertheless, the government has to take the same measures that effectively raised the quantity of hilsa supply to the markets. The law enforcers should be alerted by the developments which show that the supply of the fish at the moment is indeed very unsatisfactory.

As for the poor consumers, are they to strike off one more item from their daily menu. But that certainly is not the answer to the hilsa price hike. The price has to be kept within reasonable limits.

On the horns of a dilemma



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

LITTLE could the chief advisor have anticipated, at the time he was sworn in, the situation he would be facing after more than a year in a job that nobody envies him for. He perhaps couldn't guess that things would come to such a pass as to confront him with a predicament in so far as the proposed election is concerned. It needs no reminding that holding a free, fair, transparent and participatory election was, and will remain till the duration of the government, the major task of this government.

It is regrettable that the three major parties have expressed apprehensions about holding of elections by the end of this year, the time schedule given by the Election Commission, albeit with different nuances, and affirmed by the chief advisor many times, and by the chief of the army staff only the day before. And there are different opinions as to what has compelled them to shape their idea about the prospects of election.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The chief advisor is really faced with the two sharp points of the horn, whichever option he chooses to implement. And to avoid the dilemma he would require the sincere help and positive contribution of the political parties in holding an election that would provide a kind of politics and polity different from what we have witnessed so far, particularly of the type that compelled 1/11.

Two very different views are informing the political debate regarding the next parliamentary ballot. One view is for holding the election by the stipulated time, while the other group is equally determined that the elections should be held as per schedule, but not before promised changes are incorporated so that the country does not run the risk of reverting to the days before 1/11.

The stakeholders in the first option are the two major political parties who have support of a section of the population that are unwilling to countenance an arrangement where the reins of the government are in the hands of an unelected body, albeit constitutional, any longer.

The other group is led by a section of the civil society, and one of the other key political parties, that feel that without appropriate political and electoral changes, i.e. reform of the political parties and politicians, democracy or election would be meaningless.

The worrisome aspect is that some of those that are interested in

election and election only, appear to have lost confidence in the caretaker government's impartiality, as well as its ability, to hold elections timely, ascribing various motives, to the Election Commission as well as the caretaker government, in the modalities being adopted to bring in the changes.

The vital question is, how does the caretaker government reconcile the two demands without prejudicing either election or democracy? A supplementary to it is, why has there been a denudation of confidence in the transparency of the caretaker government to the extent that some are no longer willing to call it "neutral"?

One feels that the chief advisor and his team ought to dwell on why that is so and act fast to rectify the situation. The worst situation that it would like to face now is the loss of its credentials, either on real or perceived grounds.

Let us dwell on why the loss of credentials.

One of the reasons why some are ascribing motives to the various

steps taken by the caretaker government is the perception that not all the policies or actions initiated by it have to do with the parliamentary elections and matters directly related to it. The objectives were far too many than was reasonably implementable within the time frame, or needed to be formulated under the circumstances.

The biggest gripe is that cleansing politics by targeting corruption and the corrupt was not done with the transparency that it deserved. The perception of the government's double standards has much to do with the question being asked about its sincerity. Let us be more specific.

While the anti-corruption drive has been laudable, many are asking why some of those that are known to be corrupt according to what I have termed as PPI (Public Perception Index) have escaped the dragnet so far. And while some are in jail on alleged corruption it has taken more than a year to frame charges against them, while some against whom a prima facie has already been established and FIR lodged are walking about freely.

Public perception about the government's contradictory stance has been somewhat reinforced by its attempt to treat same or similar offences differently through the much talked about truth and reconciliation commission. Very few who are convinced about the usefulness of the proposed commission, and notwithstanding the declared rationale of the government for its formation, one feels that the ordinance will actually reconcile with corruption rather than fight it.

In the same manner the issue of the NSC has created misgivings about the intention of the government behind bringing up the issue now, particularly when it has nothing to do with the elections, and had better be left to an elected government. The matter has been complicated by certain self-styled protagonists of the role of the military in future political arrangement, who are dispensing ideas about the NSC that only help to strengthen the apprehension of those that are convinced that the motive behind reviving the issue is to establish and perpetuate military's role in running the affairs of the country.

The government has been ill served by the spiralling prices, which was initially restricted to essential food items only but has now affected other commodities too. There was first the rice syndicate and now we have the rod syndicate that has caused its rise manifold. Detractors are now

talking about prospect of power sector being taken over by the syndicate with the possibility that we might lose our right to determine the price of one of the very few things that are indigenously produced -- power.

The chief advisor is really faced with the two sharp points of the horn, whichever option he chooses to implement. And to avoid the dilemma he would require the sincere help and positive contribution of the political parties in holding an election that would provide a kind of politics and polity different from what we have witnessed so far, particularly of the type that compelled 1/11. And that was the commitment that the caretaker government had given the people while taking over the reins of the state. And that was the general demand of the people, in the wake of the miserable events leading up to the cancellation of the January 22 election. There is little to suggest that the mood of the majority has changed very much insofar as the election and the political and electoral reforms are concerned.

It calls for highly prudent actions on the part of the current government to see that not only are elections held timely but that the changes envisaged are also put in place. But above all these must be done in a manner that would not bring the motives of the government to question.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Some insights into rural poverty



ABDUL BAYES

BANGLADESH Rural Advancement Committee (Brac) is poised for preparing a report on the State of the Rural Economy of Bangladesh focusing on the impacts of the most recent economic crisis. The base of the analysis would be built around a repeated sample survey of roughly 2000 households from 62 villages of the country.

A stratified random sampling technique was used for selection of households. Drawing upon the data set, I shall attempt to shed some light on the state of economic conditions of rural people. But since data are still being processed, the findings should be treated as tentative and applicable to 44 villages or for two-thirds of the total sample.

Household status

Let us first look at the distribution of rural households in terms of 'self-stated economic status' -- a widely acclaimed yardstick of economic assessment these days. In 2008, of the total sample of 1380 households so far, roughly 15%

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Those who suffered an economic setback, and hence a deterioration in economic condition, primarily pointed to increased prices of essential goods. Roughly half of the respondents referred to this as a prime cause of deterioration. This was followed by flood/cyclone. Among the multiple causes, again, these two factors were cited to be of prime importance.

considered them to be 'rich and middle class.' Those who occasionally move up and down the 'life line' -- labeled as 'lower middle class' -- constitutes another 41%. On the other hand, poor (about 34%) and very poor (about 11%) together claim 44% of all rural households in 2008.

Two observations need to be underlined here. First, the very poor or extremely poor now number roughly 1 crore 20 lakhs. This is, perhaps, not out of line with existing national notion about 'hard-core' poor. These hardcore poor need special care by the government during any crisis.

Second, as said before, the proportion of rural poor is estimated to be 44% in 2008. This compares sharply with about 38% as observed in a similar survey of the same households in 2004. It may be mentioned here that a detailed discussion on this could be found in a Book authored by Dr. Mahabub Hossain and myself (Gramer Manush Grameen Arthonity -- Jibon Jibiker Porjalochona, 2007). However, the figures imply that, as compared to 2004, more of rural people perceive them as poor. Self-

stated poverty has risen in rural areas.

Economic condition

Have economic conditions of the rural households improved, deteriorated or remained same between, say, 2007 and 2008? Understandably, the last one-year can be considered as one of the most critical parts of rural livelihoods conditioned massively by adverse national and international factors. However, before we answer this question, we shall rename the earlier stated economic groups as 'solvent,' 'self-sufficient,' 'moderate poor' and 'very poor.'

We observe that among solvent group (rich and upper middle class), there was no negative change in economic condition over the year under review. In fact, 27% of them posited improvement and 24% reported deterioration, thus, giving a thin edge on improvement side for this group.

This is quite obvious and incontestable too. But the situation seems to worsen as we move down the economic ladder. The 'self sufficient' or 'lower middle class' group faced hardships last one year

or so as evidenced from the fact that only about 20% of them reported an improvement compared to 32% perceiving a deterioration in economic condition. The net change is a negative 12%.

On the other hand, only 14% of the 'moderate poor' reported an improvement and 32% perceived deterioration in economic condition. This gives a negative net change in economic condition by 18%. And finally, the hardest hit of the economic crisis waited for the lowest group -- very poor -- when the net negative change is estimated to be 25%, about 16% improved and 41% deteriorated.

By and large, in aggregate, it follows that there was net deterioration in economic condition in rural areas: about 19% of households perceived an improvement and about 32% reported deterioration.

Poverty syndrome

It indicates that poverty has increased in rural areas over the last one year. But that was not the case during last 20 years. About 57% of the rural households reported an improvement in eco-

omic during last 20 years compared to 18% reporting a deterioration. Thus, there was a positive net change by 38%. Excepting the 'very poor' group -- who witnessed negative net change even during the last 20 years -- all other groups experienced a positive net change.

The message from the survey seems to suggest three things. First, the economic condition of the extreme poor always continued to deteriorate during the whole period of comparison and the magnitude of the negative net change hovered around 25-27%. There was no light at the end of the tunnel for this group, notwithstanding periodic perceptions.

Second, the 'self-sufficient' group slipped down substantially from positive 50% to negative 12%. As said earlier, this group is most sensitive to shocks and it is not unlikely that both internal and external shocks of recent times put them in pervasive perils. Finally, had the sample households not witnessed improvement in economic conditions over last 20 years, the recent crises could make deterioration deeper than it is now.

Reasons for change

Those who witnessed no rough weather during last one year -- claiming improvement -- cited remittances (both local and foreign) as the prime force behind their fortunes. Followed is income from agriculture and business. The multiple reasons cited by them also rank remittances as top followed by income from agriculture and business. It is thus no surprising that

recent rise in prices of agricultural products made the surplus producers reap home a better reward from market swings.

But those who suffered an economic setback, and hence a deterioration in economic condition, primarily pointed to increased prices of essential goods. Roughly half of the respondents referred to this as a prime cause of deterioration. This was followed by flood/cyclone. Among the multiple causes, again, these two factors were cited to be of prime importance.

Government assistance

It appears that various assistance programs of the government cover 7% of rural households. If targeted and subsidised next couple of months, severe food security problem could be averted for 1.2 crore of extreme poor people. But survey data seem to smell a rotten rat into the whole process where non-target households are also reported to have received those facilities.

This implies that a mis-targeting condition in the distribution of government doles prevails. The policy implication is that the current policy of helping the extreme poor such as through VGE, VGD, if properly targeted, could keep the extreme poor on an even keel at this hour of the crisis. In that case, there may not be need for increasing the size of the net involving additional resources.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Expectations from local government commission

The search committee will put forward to the Election Commission 20 names from a cross section, out of which at least 10 persons should be/had been directly involved with local government. Then the Election Commission will hold an election among representatives of local governments for the other six persons. As the parliament is not functioning now, the caretaker government can propose the ten names.

MOHAMMAD RAFIQUZ ISLAM
TALUKDAR

THEORETICALLY, good governance means "Exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs" (World Bank 1989:5); "How people are ruled, how the affairs of the state are administered and regulated -- in relation to public administration and law" (Landell Mills and Serageldin 1991:304); "The manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (World Bank 1992:1); "A judgment on the quality of government" (Jahan 1992:3).

In third world countries like Bangladesh, the concept has recently been accepted through debate and development of sub-sequent ideas.

Good governance addresses governance for the people and by the people, transparency and accountability in administration, efficiency, timeliness and equity

in public service delivery, availability of resources and finance, pro-people planning and budgeting, development of socio-economic affairs including improvement of law and order situation, and ensuring social justice. The aforementioned aspects of governance cannot be manifested without the intervention of a decentralised local government system.

Since the inception of local government in this land in 1870 by the "Choukidari Panchayat Act," many reforms have taken place, unlike most of the reforms that had narrow political motives resulting in a fragile local government system. Even during democratic regimes, many of the administrative and local government reform committees/commissions worked to produce reports manifesting the then government's desire, like the Huda Commission (1992) and Rahamat Ali Commission (1997).

The "Administrative and

Services Reorganisation Committee" headed by late Professor Muzaffar Ahamed Chowdhury, known as "Chowdhury Committee" (1972), and to some extent the "Khan Committee" (1982) and the "Nurun Nabi Chowdhury Committee" (1996), produced high quality empirical findings and recommendations.

But many of their recommendations were not implemented. The "Chowdhury Committee" is noted for the reform of field administration as well as local government, focusing on Articles 9, 11, 59 and 60 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The committee recommended transformation of then mohokumas to districts, and abolishment of the divisional unit from local government structure. It focused on a three-tier local government, consisting of union, thana and district, and the district was addressed as the focal point of

administration.

Though the Chowdhury Committee (1972) emphasised extension of the ministries' and agencies' works to thana level, the Khan Committee (1982) empowered thana level of local government in many cases. Undesirably, the report of the Chowdhury (1972) was not published for the people. Though some reports have been published, proper action has not been taken.

Hopefully, Dr. Akbar Ali Khan, Chairman of Regulatory Reforms Commission, will produce a holistic report addressing both central and local government, and advocate proactive as well as innovative recommendations. But the people's concern is the fate of the likely report. Will it be published for the people? Will it get implemented?

The people are eagerly waiting for a Local Government Commission. UNDP, Bangladesh organised a roundtable discussion on the proposed Local Government Commission Ordinance 2008 on the March 18. Participants from civil society, think tanks, political parties, media, development partners and the NGO sector attended the roundtable. The keynote paper was presented by Dr. Salauddin M. Aminuzzaman, Professor of

Public Administration Department, Dhaka University. The participants suggested that the commission should reflect the expectation of the people.

As there is a Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, the commission should not work in opposition to the government, but should be self-governing. The commission should be both a think-tank and action orientated. The government's role should be promotion of the Local Government Commission. The commission should be accountable to a Parliamentary committee.

The prime business of the commission should be to ensure governance by local governments, which would ensure effective and timely delivery of goods and services to people in a transparent and accountable manner, mobilise local resources and human capacities for development of local economic affairs, and to ensure social peace and justice.

At least 50% members of the commission should come through local elected representatives' mandate. A search committee will propose 10 names, and the parliamentary committee will nominate the chairman and two other members. The secretary of



local government division, secretary of finance, and secretary of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs Ministry will be part-time honorary members. There will be six nominated members, including the chairman.

The search committee will put

forward to the Election Commission 20 names from a cross section, out of which at least 10 persons should be/had been directly involved with local government. Then the Election Commission will hold an election among representatives of local

governments for the other six persons. As the parliament is not functioning now, the caretaker government can propose the ten names.

Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar is working in Local Governance Cluster of UNDP, Bangladesh.