issue is prices in urban markets rather than the price earned by farmers.

Some suggest that the urban-rural divide is outdated. They view the rapid growth in urbanisation as a sign of success, another excuse to move to "modern" thinking. That view does not see the forced migration by landless labourers to filthy, crowded slums as a failure. This is compounded by the attack on rickshaw pullers for blocking "their roads." Thus, we complete the circle by demolishing slums, restricting rickshaws, and beautifying the city.

This model of economics works if the air-conditioned supermarkets could import their food at low prices. When it does not, it becomes an issue.

Here is where we come up against the concepts of food security against food sovereignty.

In theory, you can gain food security by buying in, i.e. importing food. If a country can export and therefore earn sufficient foreign exchange, those dollars and riyals can be used to buy rice, wheat, and sugar from India, Thailand, Vietnam, and others.

The last twelve months have shown us that we were not "secure" at all.

That applies to dozens of poor countries, which is not altogether surprising given that they are slaves to World Bank-IMF policies. Why not check how many governments the IMF advised in reducing their stocks of food over the years?

It does make you nauseous when you hear talking heads from those agencies cry crocodile tears about why "something must be done" for the poor. The first thing to be done is to reject their own prescriptions. We need to move the concept to "food sovereignty" rather than "food security."

With food sovereignty, we move our objectives to producing as much as possible within the country, by upgrading the component of subsidies for procurement, i.e. focusing on output more than input.

Allied with that, is also the ability to pay. It is no use having warehouses full of food (produced here or imported), if the poorest cannot afford to buy that food.

Starvation occurs even when warehouses are full.

Take an extreme example. If the country produced 40 million tons of rice in large, mechanised agri-business farms, the national figures would show a surplus of, say, 8 million tons over need. However, if small farmers and labourers were displaced and unable to earn a living, how would they purchase that rice?

The same problem applies to poor consumers (not just urban but in rural areas too). That can only be solved through rationing for the poor, as well as providing jobs for infrastructural work, thereby boosting incomes.

The first thing to be done is to reject their own prescriptions. We need to move the concept to "food sovereignty" rather than "food security."

Note that globally small farmers are not reaping the benefits of the red-hot commodity markets. Instead, look to the giants such as US's Cargill and Monsanto and Argentina's Bunge. The urban middle classes are hurting and deserve support too. However, they need to find a more lasting solution than simply hoping for a bumper boro harvest and food aid. They need to ask how much subsidy and government investment is washing through the system for urban transport, property, power, and water.

One suspects that if commodity markets took a temporary tumble, the issue of food would slide down the list of priorities.

A wider angle

For 18 months, much of the media dialogue has revolved around "will they, won't they." I will attempt to withdraw from all this pointless analysis about whether there will be elections or not.

My final thoughts for this year on that subject are as follows:

I expect the current regime will follow the Thailand-Pakistan model, i.e. elections will be called and the military will withdraw to barracks, though not before introducing the National Security Council. Then, I expect the Awami League to win comfortably, with some collective face-saving regarding the prime minister. Note that Thaksin Shinawatra's party has won, the military have bowed out but Thaksin himself is not the PM. In power in all but name.

What is exercising me is not the identity of our next PM or his or her government. Well before the aborted 2007 election, I said we should ignore the election and focus on the following one (then slated for 2012). I continue in that belief that we should focus on the election after next (assuming we have one this winter).

What I mean by that is not the identity of the future winner, but the basis on which our political debate will be conducted in the future.

The victor of the election this winter will have hell to pay. The new regime will not be able to control the country. Two years into its tenure, it will be in crisis. We can get into the details of that scenario in another article.