

Luck smiling on the RMG sector!

Buying house boom for Bangladesh

GIVING a lie to post-MFA doomsday prophecies for Bangladesh garment sector stuttering on being thrown out of sheltered market of quotas, our RMG products have come to enjoy a high demand profile. Thanks to China's currency appreciating against dollar and her cost of doing business rising due to increase in workers' wages, Chinese apparels' competitive edge over Bangladesh has eroded giving our products a bigger market share. Compared to the high prices of apparels made in China, the Bangladeshi good quality readymade garments selling at bargain prices are widely sought after.

The new-found buoyancy of the garment sector is reflected on two levels: first, the foreign buying houses, including the prestigious Adidas and Tesco are showing an increasing interest in opening liaison offices in Bangladesh. They are already 60 percent of the 200 buying houses that have sprung up in 2008 from 150 last year. Forty percent are local buying houses. How graphic is the rise in the number is proven by the fact that every month six new buying houses are added to the market.

The buying houses are like emporia on which leading manufacturers, exporters and suppliers display their trendiest collections to a huge audience round the year. Their work can be largely complemented by garments fairs staged abroad in suitable locations. The thriving business can be even furthered if we train up merchandisers for employment in both foreign and local buying houses. In a context where Russia and Uzbekistan are becoming newer destinations for Bangladeshi apparels. With the former even evincing interest in hiring skilled textile workers from Bangladesh, we have to have a suitable combined strategy encompassing both export of apparels as well as that of textile-related expertise and manpower. The success should also lead us into thinking out of the box in so far as according greater recognition and value to our garment workers, an overwhelming majority of whom are women.

For their part, the foreign buyers would help the sector even more if they pay higher prices for our products.

Pakistan's fragile politics

A sense of direction is the crucial need

THE replacement of a key Musharraf loyalist in the Pakistan army has led to all kinds of speculation about the future of the embattled president himself. Brigadier Asim Bajwa has been commander of the 111 Brigade, a unit that has been instrumental in enforcing coups, especially in 1977 and 1999, launched by the army. His departure leaves General Musharraf, in the opinion of many, in a lonely state. Indeed, rumours are said to be floating around about the president finally deciding to call it a day. Such rumours have been fuelled by a meeting the president has had with the new army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, at army headquarters in Rawalpindi.

The problems faced by President Musharraf are but a symptom of the larger difficulties that Pakistan itself confronts politically. The new Pakistan People's Party-dominated government has already run into a blind alley with the withdrawal of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League from what was earlier given out as a coalition. Mr. Sharif has of course promised to keep supporting the government from outside, but given the fragility of democratic politics in Pakistan it is hard to see how much longer the two sides can take the strain. At stake is the matter of the reinstatement of the judges, including the chief justice of the Supreme Court, dismissed by President Musharraf when he imposed emergency rule in November last year. Prior to the elections in February, the PPP's Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif reached a deal stipulating a reinstatement of the judges. It now appears that Zardari's enthusiasm on the deal has waned. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the Supreme Court, before the judges were sent packing, was deliberating on the legality of the amnesty granted to Zardari in earlier corruption cases by the regime. Separately, though, the court seemed determined to see the back of the president.

The complexities of the situation are only too comprehensible. On the one hand, it is a lame duck President Musharraf in office (though he still retains the power to dismiss the government). On the other, the elected civilian government is yet to get over its teething problems. Worse is the growing feeling that despite the elections Pakistanis are yet to be given a sense of direction by those who happen to govern them. It is a worry that the two largest parties in the new national assembly, the PPP and the PML (N), need to tackle urgently.

The gathering storm



ONE had hoped that the normal sequel to the talks between the caretaker government and the political parties would have been the parliamentary elections. One had also hoped that the political parties would have agreed to embark on the much talked about political reforms that would have given our politics a new character.

It seems that it is not to be -- now that the Awami League have decided to stick to their condition of no talks without the release of Sheikh Hasina, and the BNP, not surprisingly, following suit with the same demand for release of their leader. It is not surprising that the major political parties will stamp their political clout, since it is they and not the CTG that are supposedly close to the people. It is heartening to see that political parties are according importance to the wishes of their grassroots supporters -- something that one has not been used to seeing them do. One also hopes that this is not a one-off action, an expedient to turn down the CA's request for talks, used as leverage upon the government.

The strenuous effort of our society to find a good government brings to one's mind the universality of the views of wise men, made centuries ago -- on society, government and governance -- whose essence has remained valid both in time and space. It has been said that a "government is the product of our wickedness; that a government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one: for when we suffer,

it has devolved upon an unelected government to seek ways to give the people a government that would be less divisive, since the dividend from a state of being with an elected bad government is a pernicious situation, as bad as being in a situation of being without a government or an unelected one. Unfortunately, people's experiences have been extremely shocking -- with popularly elected government running very close to

ensuring an arrangement that would bring about a political order which, in turn, would prevent the repetition of what we witnessed in the five years of alliance rule in particular.

At least that was what everyone was hoping for. Since those who matter most in holding the elections, the Election Commission, seem to have made holding of elections conditional upon successful outcome of the talks

date all the suggestions in one basket that would allow holding a free and participatory election.

But regrettably, the exercise appears to be heading nowhere.... and the dark clouds of uncertainty loom large.

With the major political parties deciding to abstain from future political processes, we are cast into uncertainty -- once again. Even at the risk of sounding too fatalistic, it must be said that the chances of

brought about through ordinances have little chance of permanence without the firm commitment of the political parties.

One hopes that the political parties are aware of the consequences of shunning the process of political transition. Two things are at stake -- a free, fair and participatory election -- made meaningful only by appropriate reform. One is the complement of the other -- and in the context of our experience of the recent past, cannot operate in exclusion of the other. That is the demand of the people -- which neither the political parties nor the caretaker government can leave unfulfilled. Of equal concern is the possibility of severe flux overtaking the country that the new development might bring about.

One gets to see many speculative reports in newspapers -- about alternative arrangements and about new dispensation -- should elections be aborted. These reports one presumes are feelers to assess the pulse of the people. But the fact that such ideas are being bandied about in a section of the print media suggests that these alternatives are featuring in the planning options of certain quarters.

Nothing short of a free and fair election and handing over of the reins of the government to people's elected representatives will do. The blame for the failure to do so will not lie on the shoulders of the government of Mr. Fakhruddin Ahmed alone.

The columnist is Editor, Defence & Strategic Studies, The Daily Star.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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or are exposed to the same miseries BY A GOVERNMENT, which we might expect in a country WITHOUT GOVERNMENT, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer." Were it not for the fact that these views were articulated more than two centuries ago, in a country 12,500 miles away from Bangladesh, striving for independence from Imperial Britain, one might be forgiven for thinking that it was written with our situation in mind.

While we are not without a government at the moment, we have an unelected one with no compulsion to feel answerable to the people except the qualms of their conscience -- the irony is that

military dictatorship in their popular rejection. It is the demand of the society that in choosing the lesser evil we like to see that we are provided "the greatest benefit with the least expense."

Efforts to hold a free and fair election and give the people a good government have taken a good part of two years -- with little success, sadly. The caretaker government has spent quite a bit of its effort on extraneous issues -- issues that have had very little to do with their major mandate -- holding a free and fair election. A positive step of the caretaker government has been the talks with political parties, which one had hoped would take us towards the fulfilment of the government's commitment --

between the CTG and the political parties -- "failure" has imponderable and, one might add, dangerous potential for the country's political roadmap.

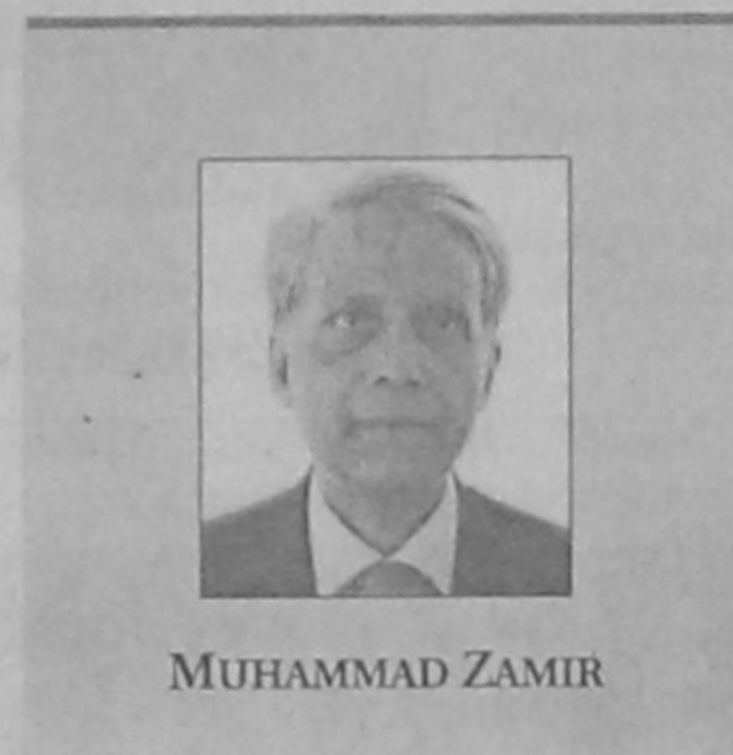
But we are not sure what a successful outcome would look like. Since the CTG had, in its wisdom, decided not to lay down an agenda for the talks one cannot but be apprehensive about talks that are left open-ended.

Just talks for talks without any specifics speak neither of the seriousness nor of the commitment of any party. And that is why we see suggestions running in the dozens being proffered by some of the parties that have participated in the talks so far. And there is no way that the CTG can ever accommo-

election have receded to a great extent. One had the eerie premonition from what one heard of late from the CEC and his two lieutenants, regarding the elections by end 2008, that it might not come about after all. It seems that the misgivings, sadly, might eventuate.

One fails to understand why the CEC linked holding elections with the success of the talks. These are albeit two connected issues, but not inseparable ones. The fact that the CTG, at one time, did not feel it necessary to hold talks, and is now in the process of dialogue without an agenda is indicative of its position on talks and its relation to the election. But dialogue was essential -- since the changes in the political front that might be

The collection, sharing and projection of data



ADVANCES in technology mean people now generate much more personal data. There is also a greater appetite for that data -- the basic raw material in the fight crime and terrorism -- in today's globalised world. However, there is also greater sensitivity about how that data used within the paradigm of justice, freedom and security.

This aspect of our lives has come under serious scrutiny within the European Union and also to some extent in India and Pakistan. Bangladesh, subject to strict emergency provisions for more than a year, has discussed the principles of Right to Information but has not proceeded to the next stage of engagement. The EU on the other hand has developed data protection rules designed to balance respect for citizens' right to privacy with protecting their security.

Recently, Jonathan Faull, Director-General for Justice, Freedom and Security, European Commission has correctly pointed out that thanks to new technology, we live in a world where data is generated every time we switch on a computer, use our credit card or mobile phone. It may be noted in this context that in the EU, because of the 'Schengen' agreement,

which provides borderless travel across many EU Member States, information is shared as an integral part of common management of borders and visas. As a result of all this, there is a great deal more data available than in the past.

In an era of globalisation, such a measure has been agreed upon because data in not only a fundamental factor in law enforcement but also plays an active part in the prevention of international crime and terrorism. This means that the appetite for such information is

initiatives have been taken under the third pillar on police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters. The Council of Europe also has a Convention on Data Protection.

This is a complex process. It is also challenging. European citizens are consequently faced with the conundrum of both data protection and security. Like other citizens all over the world, including terrorist prone states in South Asia, Europeans want to be protected from international terrorism, but do not want their data

reasons for keeping them -- and what counts as legitimate? Such a possibility requires hard decisions. It will also need negotiating the details, and striking a balance between protecting the individual's fundamental right to privacy and the public interest of allowing law enforcement agencies to do their job. This has already led to the identification of a set of common principles across EU Member States, with laws adapted to the national context.

I am writing this week on this

POST BREAKFAST

South Asian countries should try to evolve their own system that can be appropriate in the meeting of their needs. Consensus and dialogue could be the basis for formulation of common rules. For example, this could start with the storing of information related to the biometric identifiers in passports. Modern technology could be used to gather information, which could then be made available on request to enforcement authorities to prevent international or regional crime.

increasing with every passing day. However, there is also great sensitivity about data protection: While agreeing that personal data can be collected, we are sensitive about how and why it is used and for how long. To deal with these concerns, the EU has introduced a sophisticated and interesting system of data protection regulations.

Data protection rules have been introduced under different "pillars" of the EU Treaty: the first (European Community laws) has a 'mother law' on data protection, which has been transposed into national legislation, supported by an EU-wide data protection agency. This system has worked well for more than a decade. Other

made freely available. Consequently, the EU has to balance making data exchange work on the one hand and also, on the other, protect its citizens and regulate how much data EU member states should share among themselves, and with foreign partners.

Accordingly, domestic and international arrangements have been put in place to ensure that European countries only share information needed for the fight against crime, and that this is only kept for a specified time. This has, however, raised some tricky questions. That includes the significant issue of whether telephone company records of phone calls should be destroyed immediately after use, or whether there are legitimate

sensitive subject because of the great interest being taken in Bangladesh as well as in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal with regard to efforts directed towards countering terrorism. We have recently had very high level visits to Bangladesh of senior officials from Great Britain as well as from the USA. Their discussions in our country have underlined the need for Bangladeshi authorities to be more careful in monitoring internal developments. It has also been suggested that both the USA and the UK are willing to extend all possible assistance in this regard. I can understand the anxiety of these development partners. However, I would like to underline the that we should, in addition to the

"very different" from the current one (EC Directive 95 on Data Protection), considering that it works well.

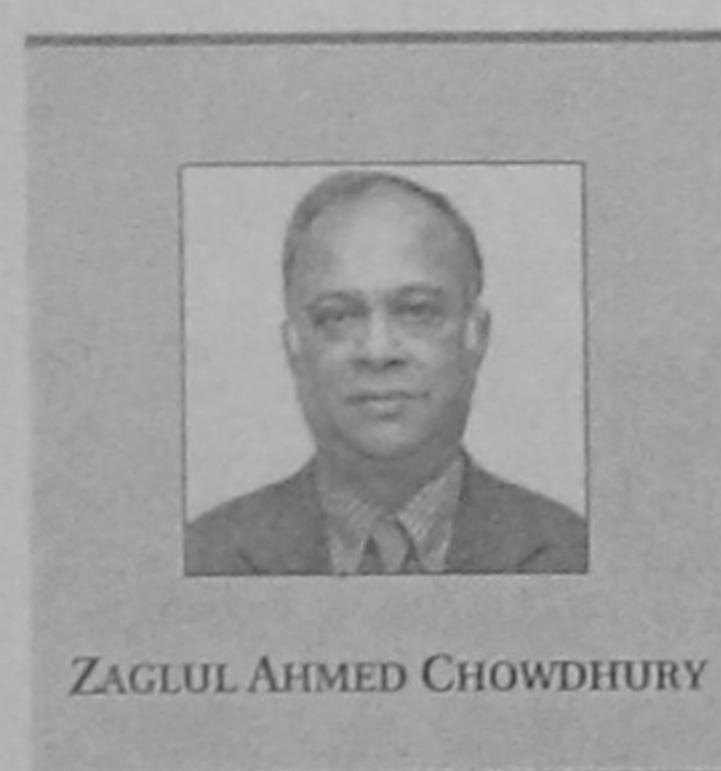
The Council will probably discuss an additional 'third pillar framework' decision on the matter and suggest one change under the new Treaty. In such a changed circumstance, the European Parliament will have a new role as a fully-fledged actor in data protection. It should herald a more accountable, transparent and effective system. It is also anticipated that under this revised arrangement, data would be sent outside the EU to receiving countries only if they have similar systems to protect it when such data arrives on the other side.

The EU is also considering and negotiating other forms of legislation pertaining to data protection rules. This includes arrangements with North America and Australia on Passenger Name Records (i.e. retaining flight lists). The European Commission, in addition, is drawing up proposals on the visa information system, which will provide for an automated processing system for Schengen visas and could provide a "window" for others to access this, under strictly limited circumstances.

South Asian countries should also try to evolve their own system that can be appropriate in the meeting of their needs. Consensus and dialogue could be the basis for formulation of common rules. For example, this could start with the storing of information related to the biometric identifiers in passports. Modern technology could be used to gather information, which could then be made available on request to enforcement authorities to prevent international or regional crime. The focal point for such a common exercise should be the SAARC Secretariat and its Secretary General. We need to view this process with urgency and as a constructive engagement. All members of SAARC should extend necessary cooperation in this regard. The SAARC Secretariat on its part, could also engage with the European Commission and other important Observers within SAARC, and seek not only additional resources and technological cooperation from them, but also request them to support such an effort. This, I am confident, will ensure success.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Nepal: A glorious chapter ushered in



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE South Asian country of Nepal is now a Republic. Definitely, it is big news. The nation has consigned the 240-year old monarchy into history, and a glorious chapter begun for its people when the constituent assembly near unanimously voted for turning the

Himalayan kingdom into a Republic, in line with the pledges that the radical Maoists and the political parties made before the last elections. The Maoists, the surprise winners in the polls, and other major parties like the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), in the landmark first session of the constituent assembly, abolished the monarchy.

MATTERS AROUND US

Whatever be the political scenario in Nepal in the coming days, what cannot be altered is that a glorious chapter has been added in the history of the nation in the form of it becoming a republic. The Maoists and the political parties deserve unqualified kudos for this development.

Indeed, it is a great event not only for Nepal but for the region as well, and also beyond. The abolition of monarchy was in the cards for some time past, and now the last nail in its coffin has formally been driven in, much to the delight of the people. Unquestionably, a new chapter has ushered in, in the topsy-turvy history of a country which has been the cynosure of many eyes in the recent times because of a variety of developments. Turning of Nepal into a secular republic in place of a Hindu kingdom has come as a logical corollary to all these developments that were generally acclaimed both at home and outside.

Not long ago, a remarkable democratic victory was accomplished in Nepal, convulsed by a long-drawn people's agitation demanding restoration of repre-

sentative authority and curbing corruption and misuse of powers by the monarchy. King Gyanendra capitulated and finally agreed to reconvene the elected parliament, which he had dissolved in 2002 in utter disregard to democratic norms.

The Himalayan country admirably introduced Westminster type democracy in 1990, ending the more than two centuries old effective monarchy, but was later robbed off this system. However, some of the politicians were also to blame for the situation as they failed to live up to people's expectations because of their unbridled corruption and abuse of power. The king exploited this situation to grab absolute authority for the throne once again, but his repressive rule and lust for power and wealth once again turned the masses against him and, conse-

quently, Nepal reverted to representative rule.

The seven-party government headed by Prime Minister G. P. Koirala faced two main problems when elected government was restored. First, the monarchy issue as the government was vacillating on the matter. The seven-party alliance carried out the anti-king movement in collusion with the ultra leftist "Maoists", who were totally opposed to the existence of monarchy in any form and wanted to make the country a "People's Republic." The political parties were somewhat at variance with the radicals on this issue.

The monarchy debate posed a big challenge since some quarters felt that the country might continue with the "twin pillars" of constitutional monarchy and elected government, in line with Britain or Japan. Many others

strongly felt that the "monarchy concept" must be scrapped altogether. Secondly, the two sides had some disagreement on the question of status of the Maoist militants and the arms belonging to them.

While the monarchy issue caused some rupture in the Maoist-seven party unity, people by and large felt that the country could move ahead towards a new future if the political parties and the Maoists worked together in that direction. The two sides maintained broad

understanding and agreed for elections in November last for a constituent parliament to draft a new constitution. The "Maoists" also joined the government.

Unfortunately, differences cropped up as the radicals quit the government, charging that the political parties were not doing

enough against the monarchy. True, the government had taken several decisions, including curbing political and financial powers of the king, and was mulling with the idea of nationalising the seven palaces belonging to the royal family. But the Maoists considered these measures as inadequate and opposed tooth and nail the existence of the monarchy in any form. They decided to boycott the November polls and, consequently, the elections were postponed, and were held only when the ultras agreed to participate.

The radicals, a force to reckon with by that time, were sufficiently wooed by the government of Prime Minister G. P. Koirala, who also agreed in principle that the throne would be abolished, but a formal and legal decision on such a major issue would be taken by a constituent assembly that would be formed through popular votes. The balloting that was scheduled for November last year was rescheduled for April this year, and the Maoists scored a stunning victory. The mandate was seen as an endorsement by the people of the radicals' position on the monarchy and then it was only a matter of time when a formal decision would be

taken by the constituent assembly on doing away with the throne.

And now this has taken place! People danced on the streets on hearing the decision by the legislature that the kingship was over, and May 29 was declared as Republic Day. King Gyanendra was given two weeks time to vacate the palace in Kathmandu, which will now be turned into a museum.

King Gyanendra took to the throne following a mysterious palace massacre in 2001, that killed popular King Birendra and most members of the royal family. He and his son Paras, both widely disliked by the people for their corruption and other misdeeds, came at the centre of the conspiracy theories about killing of King Birendra, his elder brother. People heaved a sigh of relief when their powers were curbed and monarchy was turned into a ceremonial one. But most Nepalese were waiting eagerly for the system of royalty to be altogether scrapped, since many viewed the monarchy as the main reason for the perennial problems of the poverty-ridden country. Now that it has taken place, Nepal is looking for a better future, both politically and economically.

The Maoists are expected to form the new government as the winner of the most seats. Other political parties are expected to join the coalition, even though efforts towards that direction may hit some snags for the simple reason that the radicals and the major political parties fought against one another in the last balloting. But the bottomline is that they also demonstrated unique unity in the anti-king agitation in 2006. Whatever be the political scenario in Nepal in the coming days, what cannot be altered is that a glorious chapter has been added in the history of the nation in the form of it becoming a republic. The Maoists and the political parties deserve unqualified kudos for this development.

Hopefully, the picturesque country will move ahead towards political and economic stability. In any case, turning Nepal into a republic, eliminating the monarchy, is certainly one of the single-most remarkable development that has taken place in recent times in the South Asian region.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.