

The law shall rule

There must be individual economic and monetary freedom, with security fully ensured by the laws of the country. Speedy liberalisation of the economy will revolutionise every aspect of our lives, as the Industrial Revolution did for Britain and much of the world.

NIZAM AHMAD

The people said to Gideon, rule over us, you and then your son and then your son's son... but he said to them 'I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you' - The Old Testament.

AN inbuilt human nature is to submit readily to an earthly power or authority. Stronger humans, and arrogant governments, exploit this weakness but exceptional leaders, prophets, philosophers of freedom, activists, and sacrificing individuals have always promoted a message to the people, that neither the strong nor the absolute nor the majority will rule the people -- but simply laws that are just.

Democracy, in no country evolved easily. It took numerous sacrifices and hard work by individuals to motivate people against sovereigns and authoritarian governments.

The Industrial Revolution in the 18th century created greater economic opportunity in Britain. As a result, a new class of entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and merchants had emerged who opposed the absolute power of the landed aristocracy and monarchy.

Queen Victoria in the 19th century did not willingly surrender her sovereign authority for the greater good of the people, but people's discontent led to a series of passages of Acts in the Parliament diminishing her sovereign power, until a modern system of constitutional monarchy emerged during her era in Britain.

Greater economic freedom and progress permitted the common English to assert their individual democratic rights. In the same way, a better off econ-

omy will impel the Bangladesh people to claim theirs.

Presently, and from time immemorial, in Bangladesh's politics and public life, the right to criticise, or to differ, is never without the fear of physical injury or deadly threats. Political activists and prominent leaders dread to differ with their absolute bosses or even their offspring.

For those who dare to speak, the price is high and usually means an expulsion, physical terrorisation, or both. Only independent but efficient courts, a well-paid police force free from political control, and an open media can guarantee the vital voice of dissent. Mere elections, however widely participated or accepted at home and abroad, will not create a secure environment where politicians and their organisations would be legally bound to tolerate dissent, or sufficiently punished when violating it.

Dr. Kamal Hussain deserves praise for saying rightly, and bravely, that he refuses to worship any political leader even if the whole country were doing so. He is the first important politician to say it, and people would one day remember him and reject the idolisation of the powerful. However, improvement in economic matters is necessary to trigger a process of change in people's intellect. Years ago, Dr. Hussain paid the price when he and the Awami League had to part ways due to his differences with the party supreme, Sheikh Hasina.

Political reforms, as attempted after 1/11, could succeed, but a deteriorating economy has become a barrier though an opportunity it rightly undertaken.

Government's benevolence, or the largest budget in our history,



S.M. GORUM/DRINKNEWS

will not speed up economic progress unless the economy is broadly liberalised. People must be free of control and excessive authority. There must be individual economic and monetary freedom, with security fully ensured by the laws of the country. Speedy liberalisation of the economy will revolutionise every aspect of our lives, as the Industrial Revolution did for Britain and much of the world.

Price spiral is certainly controllable but not by conventional policies. Our theoreticians are firm believers in conventional economics. They ignore the "informal" side of the economy that universities in the West, whom we follow, seldom teach. Their systems are adequately open not requiring thriving informal sectors to combat restrictive poli-

cies. Global inflation, or the boom and bust phenomenon, will end -- but only when the US monetary system will collapse or when they choose to reform it radically. Our self-doubting leaders and economists will surely wait for direction and only then advocate change -- not before.

It is possible to stabilise our market prices but we need to abandon the present monetary order, or allow parallel and competing monetary systems to operate liberally and freely. But, do we have the courage to do so -- and do our economists have the understanding about what economic laws the people want or the country needs?

Nizam Ahmad is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Privatise or subsidise?

The nation has to decide whether to continue subsidising these white elephants or utilise the money by building schools, universities, medical colleges, bridges, culverts, power plants and gas pipeline. There is a saying, "if you are praying for rain, you should be somehow ready to accept some mud."

MAMUN RASHID

OUR state-owned enterprises (SoEs) have become white elephants, adding nothing to national wealth, poverty reduction or state management. This observation, however, may not be received well by the exponents of state control and market intervention, since we still get to hear some economists and political leaders emphasising on state-owned enterprises and aspiring to make them profitable to bring in balance in the market. However, the reality is that mills and factories under state control could never be profitable mainly because their officials, employees and workers under-performed because of systemic factors like lack of appropriate performance management structure, and absence of a proper management and accountability framework etc.

There was no way other than privatisation to save the country's ailing state-owned mills and factories. The state of affairs in the country's public sector, which has been greatly reduced over the years with the principles of market-oriented economy gaining ground, is a story known to everybody. The level of inefficiency in the SoEs has been astounding. Corruption and mismanagement are the hallmarks of these enterprises. All these vices together have taken a heavy toll since the early days of the country's independence, when the then government made a policy choice in favour of a state managed economic system in the circumstances prevalent at that time. Some SoEs have a good track record as far as their financial performance is concerned. Besides, for reasons technical or otherwise, the government has little option but to keep certain operations under the state control.

The private sector started gaining control over various segments of the economy, following a major policy shift, particularly in the early '90s, in favour of deregulation and decontrol to facilitate the growth of a competitive economy. Thus, the sector has gradually emerged as the main engine of economic growth, playing a dominant role in manufacturing, external trade, the services sector and employment generation. The private sector, in spite of many still-lingering impediments to its efficient functioning, has done well. Even many of those who were proponents of state intervention on a large scale now recognise the need for creating an enabling environment for the private sector-led growth.

There is no denying that the performance of the private sector operators is yet to reach the expected level, mainly because of some factors beyond their control and also because many entrepreneurial capabilities have not yet

fully being developed. Some entrepreneurs tend to be guided by opportunism and cronyism -- characteristics commonly observed in many emerging economies. However, establishment of transparency and accountability at all levels of national life, specially building up of appropriate regulatory and watch dog institutions, can ensure improved performance on the part of private entrepreneurs.

In line with the steps taken by the governments since the early '90s, the present caretaker regime has put emphasis on the divestment of public sector entities. Some of the SoEs have been partially divested and some others are awaiting the process. However, there is still hesitation on the part of the government, especially civil bureaucracy, as far as the acceleration of the pace of the privatisation program is concerned. It has been observed that unless pressurised by some influential outsiders, policymakers

hesitate in taking firm decisions. The bureaucracy, having a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in the SoEs, allegedly tries to stall the privatisation program. But it is high time for the government to get rid of the SoEs that have been giving rise to serious fiscal imbalances.

The fiscal deficits shown in the national budgets, or the revised estimates thereof, are not the real ones, as the finance ministers of the populist governments were always reluctant to share hard facts with the people or the development partners so far as financing growth was concerned. Competent sources engaged in the budget process said that the subsidies in the present budget could exceed the size of the annual development plan (ADP), because of losses in BPC, BCIC, BADC. The nation has to decide whether to continue subsidising these white elephants or utilise the money by building schools, universities, medical colleges, bridges, culverts, power plants and gas pipeline. There is a saying, "if you are praying for rain, you should be somehow ready to accept some mud."

Mamun Rashid is a columnist for The Daily Star.



AMRUL RAHMAN

Political merry-go-round

The people certainly do not want to see a political merry-go-round. The message is loud and clear, no reform, no politics (political parties' constitution in mind). The EC should be empowered and must be allowed to draw the line on political parties and ensure participation of all genuine democratic forces in the election without fear. Let us hope, unlike America, another generation of ours does not need to suffer after December 2008.



MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

AFTER Sheikh Hasina's release from the sub-jail, the AL made it clear that it would participate in the December election. When a party like the AL is in such a mood, the road is clear enough for the EC to conduct the election without problems. Having said this, it is time now to re-visit a little history.

After the calamities of 1975, in which the father of the nation with most of his family members, and the four national leaders, were brutally murdered, the death warrant for this nation had been issued by the enemies of liberation.

The nation was crippled by its enemies even before it had started crawling. Why was this the case? This is because many of those who had seen closely the gruesome atrocities committed on the nights of March 25 and December 13, 1971, and August 15 and November 3, 1975, have held power in the past three decades.

What have we seen under these leaders? They have presided over the adulteration of politics for a very, very long

period of time, more than quarter of a century combined. Some of them even presided over the destruction and distortion of the history of the war of liberation and directly participated in bringing down the portrait of the father of the nation in the parliament. These leaders, once again, it is feared, seem to be getting ready and pressing their suits and dresses for a comeback in December. After witnessing all these, how can we say that the current situation is not a political merry-go-round?

Thirty-six years is a very long time and, in the meantime, we have managed to rehabilitate the murderers and the enemies of independence. We, the general public, witnessed these happenings silently. The crunch time has arrived, again people's power must join hands with the CTG to destroy the enemies of independence and plunderers of national wealth through the ballot box to live with dignity and pride.

During the time of such an upsurge and solidarity towards defeating corrupt politicians and the enemies of independence, it is not unusual to see

some infiltration in the rank and file. In the present environment, we can see once again that the TV screens have been inundated by well-known cronies and sycophants. They have been trying again to paint the pre-1/11 period as a time of milk and honey for the nation. I do not want to go into this debate in the rest of the commentary, but would like to raise some issues which seem to be gradually getting erased from our memories in the present environment.

The world has changed since 9/11. The so-called "war against terror" together with a doctrine of "either with us, or against us" has made many genuine neutral countries nervous. These countries had to follow too many orders against their will. Contrary to this, many governments have taken advantage of such a doctrine and tried to appease the leaders of the war against terror to gain some personal blessings at the expense of their people.

In the process, we have seen a once prosperous nation, Iraq, being destroyed, initially by the coalition forces, and now by the so called insurgents, although this nation had nothing to do

with 9/11 or with weapons of mass destruction. In the process, over a million Iraqis were killed and more than four thousand coalition soldiers have died. Moreover, experts have put this as a three trillion dollar war for America. The mistake of the war will cost the Americans at least a generation to bring normalcy both in politics and in economics.

Locally, we have seen the atrocities against the opposition during the Khaleda-Nizami regime, which ultimately brought for the nation emergency rule for almost 24 months. When the nation witnessed almost 500 bombs going off in the space of half an hour in 64 district towns.

There was an attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina on August 21, 2004. Also, dozens had to give their lives and a few hundred injured in this unprecedented atrocity committed during the regime of Khaleda-Nizami.

Was there any meaningful protest against this? Unfortunately, there was none. This shows how authoritarians had captured the seat of power through 2001 election. Finally,

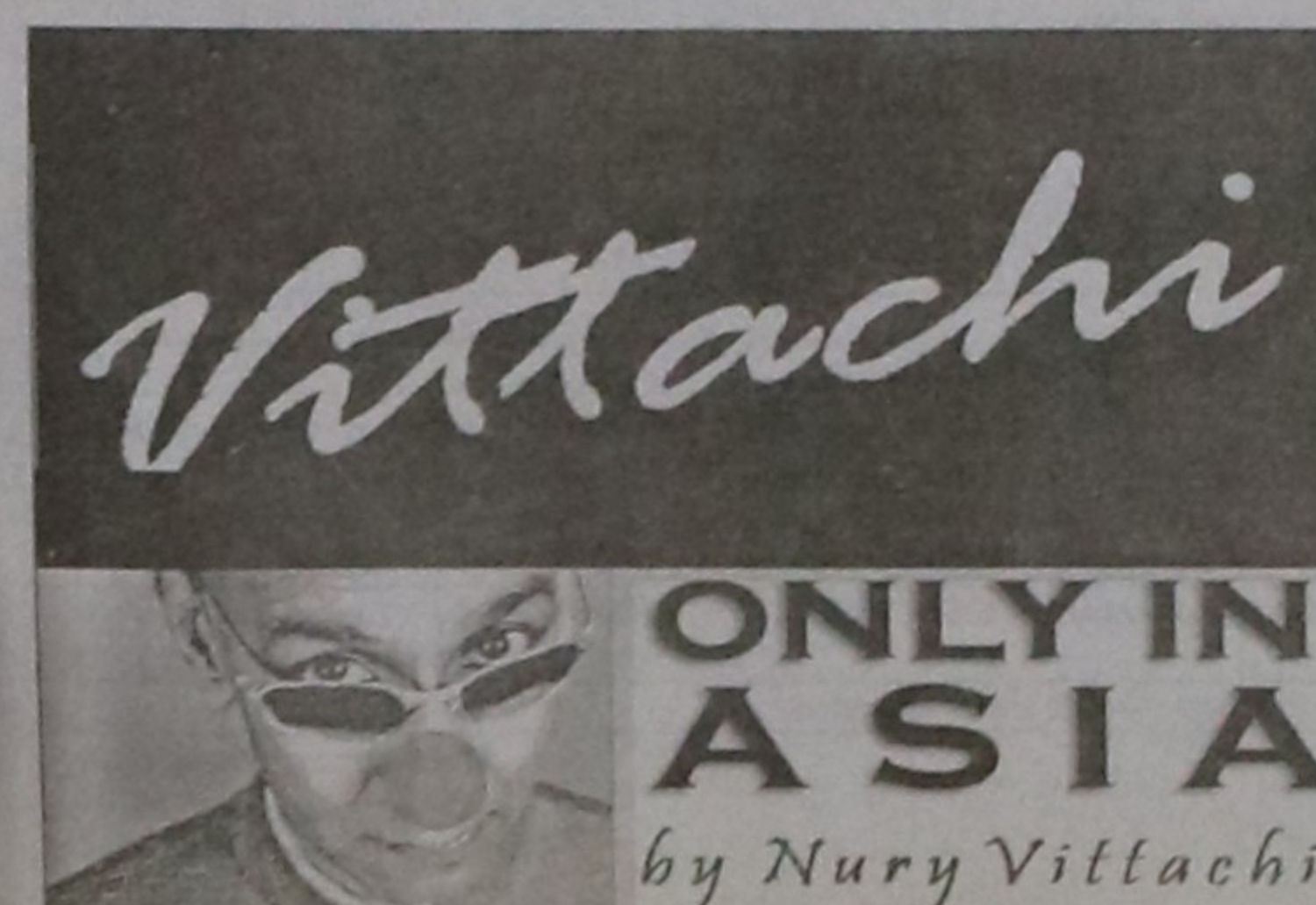
the same force wanted to capture power again by money and muscle in the name of election on January 22, 2007.

Having refreshed our memories with these words, we certainly are at a crossroads, after crossing so many bridges to reach this point since 1/11. In my final words, I would like to express without reservation that there is no going back. The people will not accept any resolution that puts the back at the mercy of the makers of crisis over the last three decades.

The people certainly do not want to see a political merry-go-round. The message is loud and clear, no reform, no politics (political parties' constitution in mind). The EC should be empowered and must be allowed to draw the line on political parties and ensure participation of all genuine democratic forces in the election without fear. Let us hope, unlike America, another generation of ours does not need to suffer after December 2008.

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Nazis are alive and well and running car parks in Asia



MY wife got a parking fine the other day. Yet she had parked within the white lines, heaped money into the meter, and returned well before expiry time. What was the deal?

It turned out that parking spaces on that street had been designated as "vans and trucks only," and those on the next street "cars only." However, the owners of the parking spaces had made sure there was no visible information about this.

For years there have been running battles between people with cars and people with parking

spaces. I stopped at one parking garage recently, which displayed a big sign at the entrance: "ONLY \$6." I nipped in and stayed just a few minutes. On the way out, officials demanded \$24.

"But the sign said six dollars," I complained.

"Six dollars for 15 minutes," the official said. "Minimum stay one hour."

A week later, officials put up a large disclaimer on the car park wall: "The owners of this car park take no liability whatsoever for any theft or damage or any other occurrence concerning your car,

whether caused by directly or indirectly by us."

If you think about it, this disclaimer actually gives car park staff full permission to break into your car, steal your stereo, and leave notes sneering at your taste in music. Knowing the officials who work there, it's probably only a matter of time before they do. (I just hope they take my wife's Carly Simon CDs.)

I saw one disclaimer that was even worse. In the car park at Mughal Gardens, Srinagar, India, there's an extra line: "No Responsibility for Explosions." So

they can blow up your car if they feel like.

The following week, officials at my local car park added three new layers of control. A computer records the time you enter. An automatic camera takes a time-stamped picture of your car on the way in. And a little man in a uniform writes down your number plate and arrival time in a log-book.

After lunch one day, I went to pick up my car and discovered, to my horror, that I had lost my entry ticket.

The car park official was thrilled. "You lost ticket, you pay

24 hours' parking fee," he grinned. I explained that I had only been there an hour.

"You got no proof," he said. "True," I said. "But you do. You have a computer record. AND you have a photo record. AND you have a Logbook kept by a Little Man in a Uniform record."

He looked horrified. It was true. There was now a mountain of evidence protecting the driver.

He went into a huddle with other officials. They eventually decided that instead of asking for the cost of 24 hours' parking, they would demand the same money but call it

a "Lost Ticket Handling Charge."

So I had to pay it. But it was almost worth it just to have tormented them for a few minutes.

I heard of a case in London recently in which a driver returned to his parked car to find that officials had painted a white "Disabled Parking Only" box on the ground around the vehicle, and then attached a parking fine to his windscreen.

Which is why I now carry grey paint in the boot of my car. This is war, you know.

Fighting a war maybe preferable to visiting our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.