

Participation in upazila polls

Grassroots opinion should be taken note of

IT is interesting to note that the supporters at the grassroots level of major political parties, like the Awami League (AL) and the Jatiya Party (JP), are expressing their desire to take part in upazila election scheduled for October. They are doing so in spite of the fact that their top leaders still remain opposed to polls of any kind before the national election. Media reports further reveal that sections of supporters of BNP at grassroots are also awaiting go ahead signal from the party bosses for taking part in the upcoming polls.

This by all means is a significant development in the country's political arena and it deserves a deeper analysis. According to the buzz going around, boycotting the polls might result in serious discontent among the workers and supporters of the major parties. They believe the decision might have a negative impact on the party's preparations for the national election. Therefore, the question that the party policy makers are faced with at the moment is whether they should listen to the voice at the grassroots or stick to their top-down, unilateral decision. With the city corporation and municipality elections passing off peacefully and successfully, it is evident that the workers and supporters at the local levels have become more enthused to test party popularity through contesting in the electoral process. This we feel is a positive aspect in our struggle for upholding the democratic process in the country. This needs to be mentioned here that the Election Commission is not going to hold elections to all upazilas but only in less than one fourth of them before the national election. So, there is no ground for attaching any ulterior motive to the exercise.

We believe party supporters' stand has put party stalwarts in a tricky situation, which they will have to face tactfully if they want to make all stakeholders happy. If leaders remain confused and fail to give their prudent decision, and if supporters at the grassroots level insist on going for the polls it might put the credibility of the respective parties at stake.

Impeachment moves in Pakistan

Put country's interest above everything else

PAKISTAN'S President Pervez Musharraf is certainly feeling the heat. With the partners in the ruling coalition finally agreeing put him through impeachment, Pakistan's politics is now in a new critical stage. When a new, elected government took over earlier this year, it was expected that a fresh new dawn had arrived for the country. Regrettably, though, the present crisis appears to be belying that hope. However, there can be no denying that much of the responsibility for how conditions have been turning out in the country must be borne by General Musharraf himself. His seizure of power in a coup nine years ago was a blow against Pakistan's fragile democracy. But what has made matters worse for his country are the steps he has taken in recent times to consolidate his hold on authority. His long reluctance to give up his position as army chief of staff and the brazen manner in which he went about dismissing the chief justice of the Supreme Court as well as nearly sixty other judges were moves that added to Pakistan's political instability.

In the present circumstances, the president has virtually been reduced to the position of a non-functional head of state. That is no cause for happiness, especially, because it shows up the hostility between him and the government now in office. But the ruling Pakistan People's Party and its Muslim League (N) allies do have a point when they accuse Musharraf of having harmed the national interest in order to cling to power. For the president, therefore, these present times could be an opportunity to redeem himself somewhat. He has an option before him if he does not wish the impeachment proceedings to vitiate politics in the country. In his own interest as well as in the interest of Pakistan, he can resign. Alongside such a step, the government of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani needs to be pragmatic on its part. It certainly should bear in mind that impeachment being a serious constitutional issue (and with the president wielding authority over such issues as dismissing the government and imposing a state of emergency), there is a need for the two sides to find an honourable way out of the crisis. Musharraf's enemies need not be vengeful but instead let him leave office with dignity. If that approach is taken, Pakistan's democracy will have taken a new step in the right direction.

Of course, Musharraf can choose to fight it out in Parliament. Again, his desperation might make him do things that can damage Pakistan further. No one, in Pakistan or outside it, would wish either of these to happen. Whatever is the case, all concerned must put the interest of the country above their own.

When poverty is propelled by high prices



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We reckon that such a substantial rise in rice price might have pushed a larger proportion of people below the poverty line as they spend half of their budget on rice and they are mostly \$5 a day households. If the estimated poverty line is Tk. 6, 244 per household per month, suffice it to say, a 20% rise in rice price has removed up to Tk. 2,500 from the kitty of the poor households.

THERE is a significant saying in economics that the answer to high prices is high prices. It means, only higher prices could contain demand and augment supply. In consequence, the prices could go down.

However, as far as staple commodities are concerned (e.g. rice, wheat, etc), the hypothesis so postulated has been rejected outright by economists and policy makers on the grounds that demand for such goods is inelastic and that high prices of such commodities pinch the poor.

Besides this, the supply of a commodity like rice is said to be not as price-responsive as other non-rice commodities because the staple foods are mostly grown for home consumption. Only about one-tenth of world production of rice (and roughly one-third of Bangladesh production) enters into the respective markets.

At the country level, higher food prices hit the net importers

most. At the household level, surging and volatile food prices hit those who can afford it the least -- the poor and food insecure. As Joachim von Braun (IFPRI) has rightly remarked, at the household level, for a five-person household living on \$5 a day and spending 50%-60% of their overall budget on food, a 50% increase in food prices removes up to \$1.50.

Growing energy costs also add to their adjustment burden. Therefore, we can possibly say that a rise in food price could cause a rise in income poverty. And impacting upon nutrition and education, in the face of reduced real income, it could also lead to non-income poverty. The question today is: to what extent has that happened in Bangladesh?

Up, down and up

We all know that Bangladesh witnessed a decline in poverty levels for a pretty long time. This has been revealed by macro data released from the documents of

the government and the donors. Particular mention may be made of the decline in rural poverty as observed by a repeated sample survey of households in 62 villages in Bangladesh for three time periods: 1988, 2000, and 2004.

Mahabub Hossain and I have empirically shown that, on average, rural poverty declined annually by one plus percent between 1988 and 2004. Be it head-count index, poverty-gap and squared poverty gap, the trend talked of a reduced poverty level within that time span.

Surely, it is a news of comfort, if not of complacency. But it seems that the days of comforts are over; the nights of nightmares began. The recent data (post-2004) tend to show that poverty level in Bangladesh went up almost by the same magnitude between 2004 and 2008 as it declined before. Let us then look at hard facts.

The Brac-backed survey of 2010 households in 62 villages show that rural poverty level perked at 55% in 2008 compared to about 49% in 2004. That is,

within the last four years or so, poverty has increased by 1.5 per cent per year. At a disaggregated level, extreme poverty rose from 15% to 20% and moderate poverty from 34% to 35%. We see that among the poor, the share of the extreme poor has increased at a faster rate than that of the moderate poor.

This could be due to the fact that, compared to the extreme poor, the moderates have more mobility and malleability for the labour market to smoothen income and consumption. By and large, the bad news is that 55% of the rural population in Bangladesh lies below the poverty line. The level was 68%, 54%, and 49%, respectively in 1988, 2000, and 2004. After a monotonic decline for about two decades, poverty levels picked up again in recent years to cast a hostile horizon.

Price-led poverty

At the moment I have no econometric tool at hand to trace the causal factors that propelled poverty. Poverty is a multi-

dimensional concept and has multi-faceted roots of origin. But I would like to correlate the rise in poverty with the rise in rice prices. The results are tentative but persuasive. From the recent survey (2007), we notice that the rural price of rice reported by sample households was Tk 9.19/kg in 1988, Tk 11.59/kg in 2000, Tk 13.18/kg in 2004, and Tk 24/kg in 2008. In other words, rice price increased by 2.2% per year between 1988 and 2000, by 3.5% between 2000 and 2004, and by about 21% between 2004 and 2008!

Needless to mention that increased rice prices also go to push up prices of other commodities. We reckon that such a substantial rise in rice price might have pushed a larger proportion of people below the poverty line as they spend half of their budget on rice and they are mostly \$5 a day households. If the estimated poverty line is Tk. 6, 244 per household per month, suffice it to say, a 20% rise in rice price has removed up to Tk. 2,500 from the kitty of the poor households.

That means, real income went substantially lower than before, thus fueling a fall in food consumption, nutrition, productivity, and hence in income. Allow me to call it a price-led poverty. Most of the poor households tend to postpone expenses on productive pursuits to divert money to buy food. Income and non-income poverty gripe these households.

Policy actions

Quite obviously, the policy implication of this trend is to arrest the upward movement of rice prices. The formidable option to this effect is to make food cheaper to the deficit-poor who constitute roughly 70% of rural households. That is, to augment rice supply in the market either from domestic or from foreign sources.

The crisis seemingly teaches us that we should change our mind-set from being "self-reliant" to becoming "self-sufficient." This emerging new situation calls for policy actions in three areas: (a) comprehensive social protection and food nutrition initiatives for the poor (short and medium term solutions); (b) augmenting supplies through investment in agriculture particularly in agricultural sciences and technology and market access (long-term solutions) and (c) a revision of the developed countries' bio-fuel and agricultural trade policies.

As far as (a) and (b) are concerned, Bangladesh government should see that positive steps are taken with commitments to implement them. Mere allocation of resources may not serve the purpose unless materialised through proper utilisation at the quickest possible time.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University and welcomes feedback at abdulbayes@yahoo.com.

Identity wars



M.J. AKBAR

IDENTITY wars are raging both on and just below the surface of India. A few acres of land for pilgrims to Amarnath is not the real issue. The hyperventilation of Kashmir's valley politicians is even less so. These politicians, whose concern for Jammu is, to put it politely, less than emotional, are merely seeking to fertilise the shrunk seeds of a now arid insurrection. What we are seeing is street wars over rights and possession in a multi-ethnic, multi-polar state that has gone flabby with complacency at the top and corruption from top to bottom. Competing identities, released from any discipline by a democracy where appeasement has become the key to electoral success, are constantly trying to encroach across political and psychological boundaries.

To a certain degree this is inevitable. Competition is an integral part of freedom. But, as always, it is the degree that becomes the problem. Democracy cannot be digested when raw, and turns poisonous when over-ripe.

After 1947, free India realigned itself around language. India has always been a mix of linguistic regions, but there had never been political empowerment around

linguistic identity. A linguistic region, Rajasthan or Orissa, might have dozens of principalities; conversely an empire might stretch from Punjab to Bengal and govern in a state language that belonged to no one, Persian or English.

Indians relished the post-feudal-colonial states as a historic gift. We know how possessive they became about language in the South. But even Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, sharing much linguistic and cultural overlap, have developed completely different politics. Until the early eighties, they shared the same political mood, but now their regional parties have no influence in the neighbouring province. The formation of smaller states like Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh proves that the Indian polity retains the elasticity to accommodate fresh identity-pressures without injuring the whole.

But two powerful identities could not find political space in modern India, the Dalits and Muslims. The principal reason was that there was neither geographical nor linguistic consolidation in these two communities. In that sense, Dalits and Muslims can be called the two national communities of the country. Kashmir might be Muslim-majority, but Kashmiri Muslims

never identified with Muslims in the rest of the country, and Muslims elsewhere returned the dubious compliment. This is why the Jammu agitation does not carry the spark of communal violence that can spread into the Ganga-Jamuna belt. The best that the few acres would elicit from non-Kashmiri Indian Muslims would be a shrug. Similarly, Nagaland might be a Christian-majority state, but the other Indian Christians do not see it as part of any common identity. Indian Christians do not have a specific political space either, but they are too thinly spread. Sikhs, in contrast, are in a consolidated area with a specific language and thus have successfully wrested a state that was denied to them in 1954, when linguistic states were chalked out.

The linguistic realignment of India became an effective bar to the rise of new leaderships, since states are the natural cocoon for emerging leaders. No one sought this deliberately, but even accidents have consequences. Muslims, in any case, were never going to be trusted easily after the creation of Pakistan, and the continuing hemorrhage in Kashmir. If India is determined about anything today, it is about its unity.

Dalits had one advantage; they

were above suspicion. And so their first genuine leader, Kanshi Ram, could energise a dormant community through radical slogans that might have provoked violence if it had come from anyone else. Kanshi Ram, a genius, found a brilliant successor in Mayawati. She knitted an amazing coalition that made her Chief Minister of India's most important province and empowered Dalits to an extent that can change the social dynamic of Indian society.

The Congress used to recognise the need for creating for what might be called artificial political space for Muslims. Ms. Indira Gandhi was far more conscious of this than her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. She always tried to keep a Muslim or two in the Congress mix of Chief Ministers. She gave Bihar its only Muslim Chief Minister, Abdul Ghaffoor. Her most daring experiment was to make Abdul Rahman Antulay Chief Minister of Maharashtra in 1980. Antulay underestimated his opposition and overplayed his hand. Maharashtra is not going to get a Muslim Chief Minister again.

Neither Dalit nor Muslim has been able to grow at the pace of the Indian economy. For Muslims this is especially frustrating because they remember their past as a success story. The Muslim

stereotype used to define all the pleasure of high living: great cuisine, a fine dress sense, education, high poetry. Unable to afford their traditional self-image, they are now seeking identity-assertion through visual metaphors of faith: short pyjamas, long beards, rimless caps, spotted male foreheads. For those who might wonder about the last, an increasing number of Muslim men create a dark spot on their foreheads to suggest that they are saying the namaaz so often that a spot has formed. It is a pious fraud, of course, but prevalent nevertheless. (Muslims do not wear rims on their headgear because a rim would prevent the forehead from touching the floor during namaaz.) There is also a new hum around shrines: travel east and west of Delhi and you will see fresh building activity around shrines, mosques and madrasas.

All this is public activity. The Hindu sees it, accepts it, and carries on with his own life and religion. There is an equal upsurge in Hindu religiosity, whether on evangelical television or in the number of Kanwariyas going barefoot to worship Lord Shiva. There may even be an unstated competitiveness, but the Muslim and Hindu tides take care not to flood beyond their own territory.

But there is always a flashpoint lurking in the subconscious, waiting to explode. The trigger is hurt, a grievance that emerges from a perceived sense of injustice. The Hindu who has quietly watched mosque and dargah expand around him, explodes when a few acres are denied to pilgrims on the arduous trek to

Amarnath. He has seen Haj Houses sprout around him for Muslims on their way to Mecca. These Haj Houses are not loaned to the community for the two months involved in the two-way journey for Haj; they have become community centres all year round. He asks a question: why should he be denied a place for tired feet on the way to Amarnath?

There is fundamental disconnect at a critical seam: the Muslim sees himself as a victim, the non-Muslim views him as a perpetrator of turbulence and injustice. The image leaps across time, bypassing inconsistencies, ignoring facts. Foolish politicians like Lalu Yadav, who seek the mass by pandering to the extreme, do Muslims great harm. His latest, in which he has the company of Mulayam Singh Yadav, is to offer SIMI a certificate of innocence even while the government of which he is a part goes to the Supreme Court to ban the organisation. If Lalu Yadav has the courage of his convictions then he should resign on this issue. If not, he should keep his garrulous tongue under control. The extremist Muslim, of course, takes comfort in such contradictions, and retreats to his haven convinced that between corruption, complacency and appeasement his excesses will remain unpunished.

This is a moment that demands sagacious leadership. The government is lost in gazing at its navel, or in the manipulation of currency notes, with neither the language to soothe a wound, nor the will to confront an aggressor. An individual can afford the luxury of indifference. A nation cannot.

M.J. Akbar is the Chairman of the fortnightly news magazine *Cover*.

Rising from the ashes



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE recently held elections to the posts of mayors and councilors have been peaceful, shorn of the irregularities that have been the hallmark of the many elections held in the past. The interim caretaker administration and the Election Commission feel that as the elections were held under the state of emergency, the mischief mongers aided by money and muscle could not interfere with the fair and impartial manner of the elections. The political parties and the Western powers,

Bangladesh needs "re-branding", as some scholars have suggested, from its traditional face of being a poor, corrupt, and natural disaster prone country, to one holding promise to be an effective member of the international community in the 21st century. The next government would have to take sincerely its task of rebuilding the nation so that the country does not ever slide back into the anarchic conditions prevailing before the declaration of emergency on 1/11.

however, continue to insist on the withdrawal of the state of emergency for the next polls being held leading to the final transition to participatory democracy.

There appears that an implicit contradiction remains between the CTG and the political parties about the preference to be given to constitutional liberalism (defined by Princeton University Professor Josiah Ober as being predicated on the protection of individual liberty and the rule of law) vis-à-vis participatory

democracy (the rule of and by a socially diverse citizenry).

Understandably, the CTG and the people at large do not want the institutional changes made by the present administration by reforming the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission, by separating the judiciary from the executive, or through a host of other reforms to check future governmental power, so as to prevent abuses similar to those committed by the BNP-Jamaat alliance government.

But given the understanding that the 1/11 power transition would not have been possible if it were not for the support of the people as well as the movement by progressive political parties against the misdeeds of the then alliance government, the suspicion that a freely elected government would lead the country to the brink of anarchy can by itself be regarded as an insult to the democratic credentials that any future government would carry.

It would appear that political acts of some would have greater

epistemic value than those of others in contradiction to the notion of having equal political influence, defined as insulation of political influence from differential wealth and social rank. Such a system can be interpreted as being the rule by the elites who can claim to be more educated and competent than the peoples' representatives, who in countries like Bangladesh, are elected because of their popularity and perceived knowledge of the needs and aspiration of the people they represent and/or the popularity of the political party they belong to; but they are less educated and possibly less competent than the elites who want to rule.

It is too early to predict whether the next government would bring about a qualitative change in politics sought by the current administration by shedding the practice of conducting public affairs for private gains and truly addressing the needs of the people. Since optimisation of

socio-political gains can be achieved through evolution and not through revolution, it is possible that the appropriate political system may not be achieved in one or two elections.

Logically it can be argued that, barring the likes of the crimes committed by the BNP-Jamaat alliance in their five year mal-governance, the future governments in the short term may not live up to the expectations that have now been built in people's mind. If that is indeed true, then the question that has to be addressed will be about the threshold of tolerance of the people and other forces regarding the limit to which they would allow the elected governments to stray from the path of good governance. Other possible ways of social cohesion can be found in the inclusion of dissenting voices and their reflection in the governance of the country.

Basically the next government would have to decide on the

priority areas given the many challenges Bangladesh faces in the short, medium and long term. It would have to decide whether political liberalisation should be given a free hand, though it may adversely affect the economic growth of the country. It would have to decide whether hartals and violent agitations should remain as vehicles of venting opposition to the government, or whether student wings of political parties should continue to function at the expense of excellence in education in a globalised world that demands highly skilled people to pave the way to development.

The claim by the current government -- that the food crisis and the stagflation afflicting the country is being driven by international factors and is therefore beyond governmental control -- is not entirely convincing. The price gap of essentials between the producers and wholesalers and the price ruling in the retail

market has pushed a large number of people (in fixed income groups) from the lower middle class to the poorer classes, keeping people wondering about the reasons behind the CTG's failure to control the market, despite that even the capitalist system or free market economies work under regulatory systems and do not favor laissez faire practices to rule the economy.

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Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.