

Reducing the levels of poverty

Political parties should go to people with concrete programmes

A roundtable discussion in the capital has made note of the rise in the poverty level in Bangladesh in recent times. The two reasons that have been cited to explain the predicament are high prices of essentials and natural calamities. One other reason, unemployment, could have been added to these two factors.

That brings us, necessarily, to the question of what needs to be done about tackling the poverty issues. Campaign for good governance, which organised the discussion, has noted that poverty exists more in the rural regions than in the urban areas. That being the reality, it is now time for us to go back to the perennial question of land reforms and especially the issue of addressing the needs of the landless and marginal farmers. There is little question that the numbers of those who own no land or are being compelled to sell off land have in the past few years been going up. Such a situation holds the very dangerous potential of social disorder in the future unless it is handled sagaciously. The government must go seriously into the business of devising social security programmes in a manner that will gradually cover all vulnerable groups in the country.

Providing subsidies to the farmers is a crucial necessity. Apparently the figures for subsidies go up regularly, but to what extent such subsidies actually percolate down to the really poor and needy farmers remains a question. Without adequate guarantees that locally influential and partisan people will not lay their hands on what should be going to the poor, the campaign against poverty will not make any headway.

In a larger sense, poverty alleviation is dependent on grassroots participation in the drive to lift the poor out of their misery trap. Unless the people are involved, through local bodies and other means, in poverty alleviation programmes, a sustainable economic development process cannot be ensured. It is here that the political parties have a clear responsibility to carry out. With the general elections approaching, they ought to be giving out a clear sense of direction through incorporating in their manifestoes specific-based poverty reduction programmes. With the nature and substance of politics hopefully changing for the better, the political parties should be able to understand the realities on the ground and formulate effective responses to them. The realities are simple: unless the poor can find a way out of their despair, progress in all other areas will remain a misnomer.

The sad state of teachers' training

A balanced approach imperative

It is bad news that 78 percent of the seats in the 14 government-run teachers' training colleges are lying vacant, as more and more admission seekers now prefer private TT colleges, the number of which has increased manifold in the last few years.

The development is particularly worrying, given the poor standard of teaching at the school level, which is adversely affecting the overall quality of education. The decision makers have identified the acute shortage of good teachers as the prime reason behind the schools performing well below the desired level. The situation has worsened to the point where the efficacy of the entire system of education can be questioned.

The malady has been rightly diagnosed and the remedy is also not unknown. We need to produce well-trained teachers, capable of imparting reasonably good quality education at the primary and secondary levels. And there is little doubt that the teachers' training colleges have to play the pivotal role there. However, things must have gone awfully wrong at some point or the other. Otherwise, why should the government TT colleges fail to attract the prospective teachers?

The presence of rival private institutions specialising in the same field is a demand-driven reality. In fact, these could have ensured healthy competition by breaking the monopoly of public colleges. But the reasons that have been cited for the poor turnout at the government-run colleges speak volumes of the degeneration that has already taken place in this important field. Obviously, we cannot but feel squeamish if enrolment in private colleges increases only because some of them are engaged in the business of selling certificates. It is far from desirable that the future teachers will not undergo a rigorous training programme to improve their skills. The private TT colleges are reported to be too lax in their approach to the issue of imparting the right kind of training to the future teachers.

The education authorities should go beyond complaining that the private colleges are not performing well. If that is true, how could such a great number of private TT colleges get the permission to operate in such an important area of education? The authorities have to make sure that teachers' training does not become a saleable and cheaply available commodity. If the private TT colleges can be made to comply with the rules and regulations, only then we can achieve our target of educating the future educators. Simultaneously, maximum utilisation of space in the government-run colleges will have to be ensured coupled with quality assurance.

Starting over



ABDUL BAYES

AS the old agricultural strategy outlived its utility in the wake of the recent food crisis? If so, what could be the components of a new order? Prominent economists and practitioners from home and abroad gathered at BIDS conference room recently in a brainstorming session on this pertinent issue. Chaired by Quazi Shahabuddin Ahmed (DG, BIDS), the session was attended by S. Fan (IFPRI), Professor Nurul Islam (former Chairman, Planning Commission), Mr. M. Syeduzzaman (former finance minister), Mahabub Hossain (Bac), eminent economists of BIDS, representatives from NGOs, private sector and universities. IFPRI had long been involved in Bangladesh in supporting indigenous inputs in food and agriculture sector. This time the main objective was to discuss the old strategy -- with distinct theoretical and empirical evidences on strengths and weaknesses -- and set up rationale for new strategy. It is easy to suggest something but difficult to detect what went wrong with past policies. So, a shift of strategy should be followed by sufficient empirical evidence. While there could be a large number of issues to be dealt with, I shall try to discuss below the most prominent ones.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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Improving the information base

The issue of the weak and inconsistent information base upon which agricultural policies had been drawn and implemented needs to be addressed very seriously and immediately. Even government agencies have different estimates of the parameters concerned, which are, sometimes, compounded by further information from donors and researchers.

Not surprisingly, Bangladesh appears to be both a food deficit and a food surplus country at the same time, depending on which sources you have access to. Sometimes, total land and yield information do not justify the projected production as disclosed by the government.

Rampant use of wrong information regarding demand and supply of inputs, costs and returns at farm level had adversely affected policies and performances in the past. Especially, lack of accurate statistics on government stocks of food grains and imports tends to penalise us at times. Since no policy or strategy could be correct under a regime of incorrect information, an exercise on this score could be worth consideration. Recent census/survey data could be collated (and continue to be updated) to arrive at a credible judgment.

Self-reliance vs self-sufficiency

The old strategy stood on the paradigm of "self-reliance" in food grain production -- a paradigm that has been in operation for a long time. The recent food crisis -- which in fact started long before at snail's pace -- opened the door for a second thought, and might drive us towards a "self-sufficiency" paradigm.

But every shift in strategy has its costs and benefits, and it needs to be seen that a reversal is not counter-productive. No less important is the fertiliser distribution system. After serving well for a pretty long time, certain cracks seem to have developed in the distribution chain in recent years. Does it need an overhauling, or minor adjustment with more government participation?

It would be wiser to review the public procurement and stock system of food grains to make it conform to the emerging complexities. We can also work on a value chain analysis of agricultural crops to determine the margins from the plough to the plate, and the actors affecting the spread. In all these cases, the message is clear: proper diagnosis of the disease is called for, paving the way for suitable prescriptions.

Public spending

Admittedly, public spending in agriculture drastically dwindled over the years. Obviously, a large part of that has been due to a reduction in public sector irrigation and withdrawal of subsidy to farmers. Should state subsidy stage a comeback with its old fervour? To address that question, one needs know whom the subsidy is meant for, and for which activity within agriculture. What are the optimal options to see that small and marginal farms actually get them? Further, there may be substitutes of subsidies, which are more cost effective and caring to the poor.

Land reforms vs tenancy reforms

In a country where cultivable land has been shrinking at 1% per annum, what are the issues related to land use pattern? Are there any economic and political points in going for redistributive land reforms in the face of technological and other developments taking place over the last two decades? For example, the tenancy market grew thicker with poor peasants growingly engaged in renting land.

An important aspect here is how to ensure land rights for them so that incentive for increased



Change the age-old system

investment on land could be induced. Likewise, the missed out small and marginal farms -- a legacy of the past policies on agricultural credit -- need to be brought under credit access through developing credit agencies. Especially, NGOs and other innovative institutions should come to help with agricultural credit.

Note from neighbour

New agricultural strategy should take note of the changes in our neighbour's policy, which the old strategy hardly touched upon. India's agricultural policy has decisive impacts on Bangladesh in some cases. We need to know in depth, which policies affect us when and how. We can also work together in the areas of science and technology. A globalised view for the sector is preferable to an autarkic view.

Finally, technological breakthrough across ecological space and dissemination of the technology at farm level, existing yield gap

and ways to reduce it, the climatic complexities and its impact on our agriculture, should be rigorously researched to meet upcoming challenges. The South Asian countries could work together on this.

By and large, a new agricultural strategy for Bangladesh is the call of the hour. The new agricultural strategy will invariably have to be more pro-poor, diversified, equitable, environment-friendly and growth augmenting. Unfortunately, the old strategy -- possibly because of the "doctrine of necessity" -- had to forgo some of them. It is now time to heal the wounds under the umbrella of a new strategy.

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[Correction: In my last article, the interest rate for borrowing from group funds in selected villages under Care Bangladesh in Rajshahi was shown to be about 40%. But, given a longer time period for payment of principal, instalments and interest rate, the rate would drop to a much lower level. Besides, the matching grant is 1.92.]

Obama's foreign policy outreach

NO NONSENSE

America's national security and foreign policy goals are not driven by partisan political considerations. PE Obama has already announced that he will form a bipartisan national security team. For example, speculations are that he may ask Defense Secretary Robert Gates -- a Bush appointee -- to continue.



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

A day before the November 4 presidential election, six time Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah said that the US would "lose a lot of stature throughout the world" if Barack Obama was elected president.

I immediately wondered: How could any US president lessen his country's global stature any more than what President George Bush did during his eight years of ego-centric and arrogant exercise of power?

Most people would agree with Nicholas Kristof, who said that "George Bush's cowboy diplomacy 'defried' the country and turned a superpower into a rogue state. Instead of isolating North Korea and Iran, he isolated us -- and undermined his own ability to achieve his aims (NYT, November 1)."

Philip Stephens echoed the sentiment of the global community. "What his overseas admirers share is a sense that in choosing Mr. Obama, the US has rediscovered the virtues and values that long underpinned its moral authority. In demonstrating the infinite capacity of the US to reinvent itself by

rediscovering idealism, Mr Obama robs friend and foe of their alibis (Financial Times, November 6)."

Among the avalanche of congratulations, a letter from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is singularly noteworthy. He said: "I hope you will be able to take fullest advantage of the opportunity to serve and leave behind a positive legacy by putting the real interest of people as well as equity and justice ahead and above the insatiable demands of a selfish and unworthy minority."

Ahmadinejad's message is refreshingly candid -- a first time gesture from an Iranian leader since the breakup of diplomatic relation in 1979 -- signaling Iranian desire for some kind of relationship with the US if there are "fundamental and fair" changes from Washington.

In his November 7 press conference, president-elect (PE) Obama said that he would review Ahmadinejad's letter and "respond appropriately." Obviously, he isn't president yet -- not until the January 20 inauguration.

However, it's anticipated that the new administration will open a diplomatic interests section in Tehran, in the Swiss embassy -- an

idea already floated by the Bush team. However, no meaningful bilateral relation is forthcoming unless Iran sublimates her nuclear ambition. All past US presidents took a lot of initiatives to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Millions of Palestinians have suffered for over 60 years for a homeland of their own. They're asking if PE Obama's "hope and change" call will embrace the destitute Palestinians also.

On Iraq and Afghanistan, PE Obama is expected to carefully examine the recommendations of General David Petraeus. Iraq is expecting that PE Obama will carry through his campaign commitment of US troop withdrawal within a specified time period. On Afghanistan, General Petraeus is expected to recommend a "surge first," establishing of well defined borders, and then negotiation with the Taliban for a lasting peace.

While the world has congratulated PE Obama, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez failed to clutch the significance of the occasion.

Within hours of Senator Obama's election victory, Medvedev bypassed the customary diplomatic courtesy of congratulating PE Obama -- and delivered his state of the nation address in which he warned that Russia would deploy short range missiles in its Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, bordering Poland, to neutralise the antiballistic missile system in Europe. He also announced cancellation of plans to withdraw three intercontinental ballistic missile regiments from western Russia by 2010.

The fons et origo of Russian infatuation is the US plan to deploy a missile defence shield (MDS) in Poland and other Nato member countries encircling Russia. Moscow dismissed President Bush's rationale that the proposed MDS was aimed at rogue states such as Iran.

Medvedev presaged that the era of American supremacy, after the disintegration of the USSR, was over. "The world cannot be ruled from one capital. Those who do not want to understand this will only create new problems for themselves and others."

These bellicose statements, revealing a cold-war mindset, seem opportunistic and cynically

manipulative, which may have been directed for domestic consumption to divert attention from Russia's ongoing economic turmoil. Since last July, the Russian stock market has lost nearly 70% of its value, which is further complicated by a dramatic drop in crude oil prices from July's \$147 per barrel to a 19-month low of \$60 a barrel on November 7.

As the price of crude oil continues to slump and foreign capital inflows remain bleak (falling by \$50 billion this year, while long-term savings are nearly nonexistent), Moscow's spending spree to keep the economy's wheel running has become a serious concern for economists and businesses, because they feel that the country's cash reserves, ballooned by previously high oil revenues, may soon be exhausted.

Inflation rate is predicted to reach 15% at the year-end, while a majority of Russians still rely on government provided pensions. Given the dreary economic outlook, should Moscow engage in saber rattling and display cold war mentality -- especially when it has very few "precious" friends and is surrounded by unsympathetic former Soviet States, and the global economy is struggling with the ongoing financial imbroglios?

Moscow must not hamstring the incoming US president by threats; instead, it should engage in reconciliation to resolve issues for mutual benefit.

As for the US, not too many of us understand why deploying MDS in countries such as Poland, Georgia and Ukraine, while enraging the Russians, is in America's national

security interest. Besides, the US has many other pressing national and global security concerns to take care of.

Given that America is fighting two wars simultaneously -- in Afghanistan and Iraq -- and the economy is sliding daily into a deep recession (September job loss is 240,000 alone, which adds to over 1.2 million job lost since last December; over 6 million Americans are unemployed now; unemployment rate is predicted to rise to 7% by February or even earlier), America must resolve conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy whenever possible.

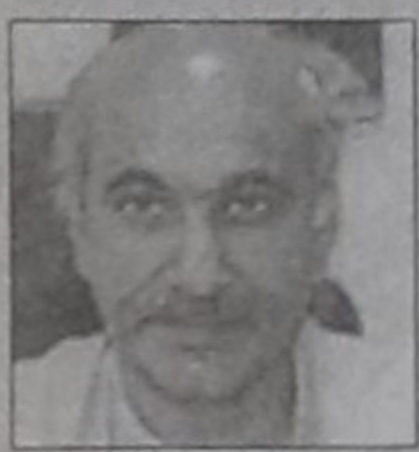
America's national security and foreign policy goals are not driven by partisan political considerations. PE Obama has already announced that he will form a bipartisan national security team. For example, speculations are that he may ask Defense Secretary Robert Gates -- a Bush appointee -- to continue. He is also considering such widely respected Republicans like Senator Richard Lugar or Senator Chuck for Hagel as secretary of state.

To restore its global stature and leadership, Americans want their new president to repudiate unilateralism and name calling such as "axis of evil" and "evil empire" and so on. America must form alliances for cooperation and friendship -- not to bully sovereign countries with the neo conservatives' ill-conceived doctrine of pre-emptive attack -- "bomb first and justify later."

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The paucity of hope

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

The unvarnished truth is that neither India nor the Indian Muslim is ready. 1947 was not a solution; it became the source of a running sore that has not healed. Terrorism, and communalism, threaten to turn that sore septic. But if the Obama phenomenon proves anything, it is that alchemy needs an inspirational scientist.

decades, America has moved from Reagan's good morning to Clinton's saucy, sun-lit afternoon, to Bush's eerie twilight.

Appropriately, it took a dream to end a nightmare. Since success is the father of sycophancy, Obama will now be compared to every icon short of divinity. He reminds me of Paul Newman in a different skin: a Cool Hand Luke, thirsting to break out of the prison that is his destiny, scornful of the warden, and confident of eventual victory long before

the script is written.

Obama rose above the comfort of victim-stature. He had to transcend the traps shackling his own community before he could inspire others to rise with him, on the wings of American democracy.

To the question, then, that has been hovering around the table but cannot find the respectability to join the dinner conversation: when will "Hussein" become prime minister of the world's largest democracy? Indian democracy has the space;

Mayawati has proved this. Why can't Indian Muslims produce their own Obama?

The demographics are similar, roughly 15%. But the narratives are different. No black was invited to the White House before Theodore Roosevelt broke the taboo in 1901; India is dotted with the palaces of Muslims. Blacks were never empowered, and they did not partition the country to create their own enclave. The trust quotient, so necessary for social cohesion and

political mobility, disappeared in India in 1947.

But Muslims are not the only Indian minority to have faced distrust. In 1984 there was carnage against Sikhs across the country. In 2004, a Sikh became prime minister. How long will Muslims have to wait?

The unvarnished truth is that neither India nor the Indian Muslim is ready. 1947 was not a solution; it became the source of a running sore that has not healed. Terrorism, and communalism, threaten to turn that sore septic. But if the Obama phenomenon proves anything, it is that alchemy needs an inspirational scientist. The state and the electorate are passive laboratories until that magic moment when a minority leader produces the touchstone that shifts the dynamic of emotion and judgment to create history.

Obama also understood a fundamental fact: change begins at home. You cannot expect the majority to reach out while pandering to insu-

larity among the minority. The seminal turn in his campaign came when he told his fellow black Americans that the age of alibis was over; they could not blame the white man for all their ills. Black parents would have to switch off television sets and switch on education; that was the only way to integrate into America's success story.

Equally, he did not appease the white man by turning into an Uncle Tom. His nuanced defence of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the pastor at his church who had used volatile language, was perhaps his finest hour; he rejected the language, but could not find it in him to reject the man, or the reasons that had drawn the pastor towards rage. White America heard the anguish, and looked inside; the pivot began to swing.

Indian Muslims do not have leaders; they have pleaders. They plead with their mentors for crumbs; and they plead with their electorate once in five years for

survival. Since they do not serve constituents, they need artificial inducements to get votes, either middlemen who can be purchased, or fear, which can be provoked. They cannot challenge the ills within the community because they need to hide their own venality.

They reach their perch through a nudge from the top, rather than a struggle from the bottom. They are kept in their place, which is on the midpoint horizon. Their principal, though not exclusive, vehicle for transport has been the Congress, which has no room at the top in any case. The satraps who rule regional parties are, if anything, even more calculating.

The Congress has compromised its Muslim "pleadership" into a comfort zone, where corruption is the reward for compromise. A seal has been placed on tongues that dare not be broken, no matter what the provocation. This is not a new phenomenon. You could have heard this

silence all over the country on the day P.V. Narasimha Rao wilfully slept while the Babri mosque was brought down. The reward came in exactly six weeks, when Congress Muslims were promoted or inducted through a cabinet reshuffle.

I recall speaking at a largely Muslim gathering of teachers and professionals in Bangalore. When I suggested that the community should demand facilities like banks that could be sympathetic to Muslim entrepreneurs, the hall burst into involuntary laughter. I was puzzled until someone explained that a prominent net from the city had done just that, and then embezzled all the funds in the bank. This honourable person is still on the list of high-ranking VIPs.

There is no Obama among Indian Muslims because they have surrendered audacity to pawnbrokers.

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