

Tac freezing on its tracks?

Commission has produced little as it is

THE High Court judgement declaring the formation and operation of the Truth and Accountability Commission illegal raises a number of questions about the caretaker government's drive against corruption. When Tac was formed, it was given out that because of the heavy load of cases being dealt with by the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Truth and Accountability Commission would be pitching in with help. And that would be by way of having people accused of graft confess to their crimes before the body, return their ill-gotten gains to the state and thus be eligible for pardon. At the time when the Tac idea was floated, misgivings were expressed about both its raison d'etre and its aims. It was pointed out that the commission was far removed from the concept that had gone into the making of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa because the latter involved unifying a racially and politically fractured nation. No such reality was at work in Bangladesh.

As for the aims of Tac, critics of the idea have long argued about the legality as well as morality behind the formation and working of the body. As some eminent legal experts have pointed out, Tac may have been seen as a body that ran parallel to the judiciary and was therefore in violation of constitutional provisions relating to the working of the higher judiciary. The general perception is that having Tac in place meant essentially two sets of laws at work, one that the courts could apply and another the new body had taken upon itself to operate. Whereas the Anti-Corruption Commission was engaged in identifying corrupt elements and trying to bring them to book, Tac seemed to be letting the corrupt off the hook once they had confessed to their sordid past.

We realise that there might be an appeal by the government before the Supreme Court on the HC judgement. Tac's fate rests on how the appeal turns out. It is to be noted, though, that in the months since Tac came into being, not many of those suspected of corruption have applied to it for leniency or forgiveness. And the few who have are individuals whose levels of corruption certainly do not match the heights reached by others. Such a reality perhaps had to do with the fact that those who confessed would be barred from participating in elections for several years. In effect, therefore, Tac was able only to touch a fringe of the corruption picture, if at all.

The fact that the HC has declared illegal all decisions made by Tac in these few months is a pointer to the legal complexities now confronting the anti-corruption campaign.

Imported food items

Standard precautions ought to be taken

WE have been so worked up with startling mobile court revelations, from time to time, about the depths to which food adulteration sank that the need for mounting vigil over imported foodstuffs hardly ever possibly crossed our mind. Otherwise, how could BSTI logo could be used in a merchandise without obtaining clearance certificate from the standards institution or even registering with the Institute of Public Health and Nutrition (IPHN) which is obligatory for those marketing any infant and baby food in particular.

Actually, the banned three infant formula brands had been marketed without authorisation from IPHN. At the same time, another Chinese full cream milk brand named 'Coast' was imported and marketed by a company which had neither obtained safety clearance from BSTI (it used the latter's label all the same) nor mentioned the country of its origin on the packet.

To our mind, this is just the tip of the iceberg; the instances can be multiplied. Thanks to the melamine episode, it has focused our attention on the role that the two watchdog bodies -- the IPHN and BSTI -- haven't been playing in terms of ensuring food safety and thereby protecting the most fundamental of consumer interests.

The exposure of scandalous indifference to public health shown by the designated authorities has spurred on something of a hyper-activity on their part in a bid to make up for their lost image. We believe, however, that any seasonal effort or ad hoc step could at best be a palliative and blowing some hot air at worst amounting to sweeping the festering maladies under the carpet. We need to face the crisis head-long.

People would like to know how many importers who procured harmful products have had to account for their misdeeds. And, perhaps, they couldn't have done so with impunity had the officials meant to checkmate them not colluded with them in the first place. The punishment prescribed in the law is not punitive enough, far less deterrent. When they know, if caught, they would have to pay a fine or endure a prison sentence which is far outweighed by the lure of millions, it is the second option they are likely to settle for.

Bangladesh's way out of global meltdown



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE contagion of global meltdown that started in the US has caught up with the others. The contagion has been caused by the sub-prime lending in the housing sector and the US \$700-\$800 billion dollars annual trade deficit that is paid for by borrowing from other countries. The US is believed to have more than \$10 trillion in external debt. It is estimated that the sub-prime crisis alone may cause a contraction of the US banks' ability to lend \$2 trillion, thus deepening the crisis.

Now that consumerism is down in the US the exporting countries will have less to export to the US, with consequential reduced foreign exchange reserve to finance imports. It is amazing that the largest economy in the world is also the largest debtor simply because an average American citizen is reported to possess five/six credit cards to buy things that he/she takes fancy to. It would be unfair and incorrect to label the entire American nation as profligate as the rich-poor divide is both sharp

and wide and the battle cry of the Obama-McCain verbal duel concentrated on increasing the buoyancy of the middle class. Rightly, the state of the economy outclassed war on terror as the number one election issue. European countries, also being hit by economic difficulties, have got together to salvage their own and other Western economies from a repeat of the '30s depression. Already, the US has been assigned the recession status. China and other emerging economies -- India, Brazil and Russia -- has revised their growth projections for the coming year, and perhaps, beyond.

What then should the least developed countries like Bangladesh do? Ever since the Asian recession of 1997-98, the US has been described as "the buyer of last resort," taking in imports that could not profitably be absorbed in the Asian markets. Our export basket consists of a few items involving low technology, and now with buyers' conservatism, the

GOING DEEPER

But since capitalism both influences and is influenced by political and sociological factors and since markets, due to externalities or imperfections, do not reach perfect equilibrium based on demand and supply, state intervention in both regulatory and enforceable forms would be necessary for countries like ours.

price of our exportables is bound to come down further. The other foreign exchange earner, the remittance from our workers abroad, also faces uncertainty, as no one knows what shape the construction sector will take in the coming months and years. Remittance, with a quarter coming from the developed countries, will shrink.

It is impossible to put figures to these variables, as they depend on the evolving condition of the global economy. The reduction of rate of interest by the central banks throughout the world is to encourage investment. But in countries like Bangladesh interest rate cut to reduce the cost of money will mean reduced rates for different types of deposits, putting the depositors in greater financial difficulty resulting from reduced income from deposits. Devaluation of our currency would make sense had demand elasticity of our exportables been price responsive. It would also make our imports dearer.

Since external factors appear to be unfavourable in the short term, Bangladesh has to develop its agriculture that accounts for 30% of our GDP at present. Monetary policy should be conservative. Tax net should be extended and taxpayers must pay their dues. Corruption that eats away about 3% of our growth has to be brought under control.

Despite former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's claim that the long standing debate between the virtues of economies of free markets and those governed by the rules of centrally planned socialism had essentially come to an end, it has now become debatable whether unbridled capitalism coupled with the lapse of the Praetorian guards tasked with looking after the regulations to keep the "greed" of the capitalists in check of Reaganomics/Thatcheristic variety of capitalism (Alfred Marshall being too ancient) itself has failed.

Some would be inclined to advocate Clement Attlee's transformative democratic socialism, i.e. a strong welfare state, fiscal

redistribution, and some nationalisation be undertaken as a way out of the present muddle. But Bangladesh does not have Germany's Angela Merkel's \$670 billion dollars or Gordon Brown -- Alistair Darling's billions of pounds to inject into the economy to shore up our own.

One of Barack Obama's top advisors Dr. Susan Rice is deeply concerned that today more than half of the global population lives on less than \$2 dollars a day and almost 1.1 billion people live in extreme poverty -- defined as less than \$1 dollar a day -- thus dramatically increasing the risk of civil conflict. She adds that 53 countries have an average per capita GDP of less than \$2 dollar a day, making these countries vulnerable to becoming sanctuaries for transnational terrorism. As country level poverty prevents the government of the day from providing essential human services -- Susan Rice mentions Bangladesh (along with Indonesia and the Sahel) -- international Islamic charities are filling the welfare gap.

Gareth Evans said that the genocide in Darfur was as much a result of drought as it was political. It would, therefore, be incumbent upon the developed economies to mitigate the sufferings of the least developed countries, resulting from the current economic meltdown, through instruments of the World Bank/IMF/ADB. In the case of Taiwan, Botswana, Uganda and Mozambique, foreign aid helped build the foundation of development. OECD estimates that by 2010

ODA flows to developing countries will increase by \$50 billion.

The developing countries could consider adopting Professor Joseph Schumpeter's "creative destruction," meaning replacing old ways with new innovative measures that would increase wealth of nations. But since capitalism both influences and is influenced by political and sociological factors and since markets, due to externalities or imperfections, do not reach perfect equilibrium based on demand and supply, state intervention in both regulatory and enforceable forms would be necessary for countries like ours. No longer can we leave the lives of millions of people to be guided by the profit-making motive of some people.

It is not suggested that we resurrect centrally planned socialism, dismissed by Alan Greenspan among others as inefficient and unable to create wealth, and raise the living standard of the people, but to have in place an amalgam of social equity and efficiency of the market that some would call market socialism. In the ultimate analysis, we should opt for the prescription of Joseph Stiglitz of "moral growth, growth that is sustainable that increases living standard just today but for future generations as well, and that leads to a more tolerant, open society." Without dispersal of economic benefits to all sections of society any election leading to democracy would not succeed in the long run.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

We need change too



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE US goes for change, with the election of Barack Obama as its 44th president. The son of a black father from Kenya and white mother from Kansas, Obama started his political career at the bottom of the tier as a community organiser in Chicago. He is now destined to sit in the Oval Office as America's first black president. It all happened because the US people were hungry for change and Obama promised it.

With Obama's victory, a dream has been realised in the US and for democracy worldwide. Obama was visionary enough to assess that eight years of Bush's administration had made the US the enemy of the rest of the world because of its ill-conceived war in Iraq, which has been costing the Americans \$10 billions a month and whose impact was to bring a meltdown of the US economy in a manner not seen since the Great Depression.

Tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of millions across the world, irrespective of caste, creed and

colour, after Obama's historic landslide victory. It has set people thinking everywhere that they could have an Obama in their country too.

The resounding victory of Barack Obama leaves no doubt that the US people have indeed voted for change -- the most cherished change to spread wealth around. Obama's consistent message of change was appealing when almost nine out of 10 Americans believed that their country was on the wrong track. Electioneering has been kicked-off across Bangladesh for the December 18 polls, as the political parties have formally started their campaign after the Emergency Power Rules (EPR) were relaxed. But the demand of the major political parties for allowing the convicts and the corrupt to run in the polls is surely a disturbing development.

Awami League has recently reiterated its demand for total lifting of the state of emergency to

allow party leaders convicted by trial courts under the EPR to contest polls if higher courts accept their appeals against conviction. BNP has also demanded permission for their leaders convicted by a trial court to contest in polls while his or her appeal against the verdict is pending in higher courts.

The Constitution in Article 66(2) (d) states: "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of Parliament who has been, on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release." The EPR also clearly states that anybody convicted under its rules would not be allowed to contest in any polls.

The special courts set up at the MP hostel in Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban complex to try corruption and extortion cases filed against detained bigwigs have so far convicted 112 persons, including a large number of politicians. Most of the convicted politicians belong to the two major political parties, BNP and Awami League.

The US ambassador to Bangladesh, James F. Moriarty, has suggested that the political parties themselves can decide on the issue by enforcing provisions in their constitution that will ensure that an ill-reputed person cannot hold an important post in the party.

The way things are going for the upcoming parliamentary polls is quite enough for one to realise that the persons of dubious and questionable credentials cannot be barred from contesting in the polls unless the political parties agree to nominate clean candidates. Politicians heavily tainted with corruption charges cannot promise a better future for the country under their leadership.

The chief adviser and the army chief have urged the people to apply their wisdom and judgment in electing competent and honest candidates in the upcoming polls. But the people are quite disappointed as the old faces, most of them of dubious reputation, are showing up with their belied pledges.

Very few people will disagree that we essentially need upright leadership for getting out of the morass we are now in. A qualitative change in the leadership, a demand very close to everybody's heart, will remain a far cry if we miss the opportunity to cleanse politics.

It is sheer bad luck for the nation that elections have hardly helped in changing the people's lot or reflected people's will, except for once in 1970, when people mandated Awami League to seek redress against oppression by the Pakistani rulers. The much-anticipated parliamentary polls may not also fulfill the aspirations of the people unless we can bring a meaningful change in the prevailing political culture.

We need changes in the system of governance too, bringing major reforms in the rural socio-economic sector, including land management, in order to empower the rural people. Change in rules and laws are also needed to establish the rights of the landless people on the fallow lands, and the rights of fishermen on the water bodies, for lifting them out of their poverty trap.

Political rivalry and confrontation between major political parties, followed by hartals and blockades, is a feature of our political culture that needs to be changed too.

None of the major political parties had accepted defeat in the last three parliamentary polls held freely and fairly under caretaker governments. Instead, they alleged vote rigging and tried to destabilise the country by boycotting parliament and imposing hartals and blockades. Political leaders in the country must learn how to accept the opponent's victory from McCain.

The change that Obama promised throughout his election campaign impressed the young voters, who usually bother little about exercising their voting rights. Obama's campaign had been fuelled by the young Americans who volunteered their time to get him elected. Because of the young Americans, the voter turnout has been the highest in the last one century.

With the ninth parliamentary polls around the corner, many young voters are buckling up to exercise their voting right. The young voters, who have enough energy and enthusiasm, can bring a dramatic change by voting out the corrupt and the criminals from the country's political scenario. We need change for a refreshing start for democracy with dedicated leadership.

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Everybody loves America

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Now America is being applauded for something it has done to itself. No one in authority in America made any statement to the world. Obama's election was the silent, yet most powerful statement. No longer can Western Europe lecture America about racial discrimination here, nor tell their minorities that "if you think it is bad here, it is worse in America!"

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

"Ebony and Ivory, live together in perfect harmony, Side by side on my piano keyboard, Oh Lord, why don't we." -- Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder.

JUDGING by the world's reaction, Barack Obama's election as America's president has ushered in a black-white Kumbaya moment for the world, as yearned for in the song composed by Sir Paul. (Isn't it amazing that the compositions of the Beatles duo John Lennon and Paul McCartney have captured the essence of every social transformation from the 1960s to the present day through popular songs?)

New born male babies in Kenya, home of Barack Obama's father, are being named "Barack" or "Barack Obama." Americans living abroad

are coming out of the woodwork to accept the accolades of the natives. Such affection has not been heaped on America and Americans abroad since September 11, 2001.

Of course, America garnered universal sympathy for what was done to it by Al Qaeda terrorists on 9/11. Now America is being applauded for something it has done to itself. No one in authority in America made any statement to the world. Obama's election was the silent, yet most powerful statement. No longer can Western Europe lecture America about racial discrimination here, nor tell their minorities that "if you think it is bad here, it is worse in America!"

As Tom Friedman of The New York Times pointed out, Barack Hussein Obama's victory has turned America's world topsy-turvy. America's enemy was supposedly

Islam and the Muslims. President-elect Obama's father was a Muslim. America waged two Gulf Wars, in 1991 and 2003, to overthrow an Iraqi dictator named Hussein. Now Hussein is the middle name of America's president-elect.

Iran is supposed to be America's number one enemy, a member of the "Axis of Evil." Now, how can Iran be an enemy to an American president whose middle name is Hussein? After all, along with Hassan, Hussein is the most revered name in Shia Islam and in Iran!

(Hassan and Hussein are Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) grandsons, who were martyred in Iraq. They are the sons of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. "Shia" means partisans of Ali; Shias believe that Ali should have been the Prophet's temporal successor.

Before the world gets carried away with Obama mania, it must remember that president-elect Obama will look after America's interests first, whether the world likes it or not. President Bush squandered the world's goodwill by foolishly attacking Iraq, which had nothing to do with 9/11. The first time American missiles hit Waziristan inside Pakistan and kill civilians, or America attacks Iran, the world's euphoria will quickly evaporate.

Internally, Americans are optimistic and feeling good about themselves. While 74% of Americans disapprove of their current president, 70% approve of their president-elect. Even in a recession-ravaged America, two-thirds of the citizens believe that their new president will right the economy in two years. For the first time ever, a majority of African-Americans believe that race relations will improve in America.

The current first family hosted the next first family at the White House on November 10. Michelle Obama scouted possible schools for the first daughters Malia (10) and Sasha (7). The most pressing issue at the Obama household now is which "first puppy" to get for the first daughters. The president-elect explained the Obama dilemma with self-deprecating humour: "Malia is allergic, so it has to be

hypoallergenic. Our preference would be to get a shelter dog, but obviously a lot of shelter dogs are mutts like me."

Ninety five percent of African-Americans voted for Barack Obama, as did 67% of the Hispanics. A plurality of women also voted for Obama. 78% of the Jews voted for Obama. Among white voters, John McCain beat Obama by 55% to 43%. In many of the 28 states Obama won, he won a majority of white votes. It was only in the poor, less educated Appalachian states in the South (West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas) that Obama did poorly among whites, getting no more than 10% white votes in many of these states. Some of these whites cited Obama's race as the main factor in voting for McCain.

These are the only states where Republicans increased their majority over 2004. This is not good news for these states, because Obama has demonstrated that a Democrat can win in a landslide without winning Southern states. For the first time in six years, nominees for president and vice-president on the Democratic ticket were from the north.

A fierce battle is raging for the soul of the Republican Party. Beginning in 1988, the Republican Party adopted Lee Atwater and Karl

Rove's strategy of winning presidential elections through tactics rather than issues. Through fear-mongering and the character assassination of the Democratic candidates, they managed to defeat Dukakis (1988), Gore (2000) and Kerry (2004). This time, American voters refused to be duped.

The Republicans' appeal to their worst demons turned off many Americans, especially the young. Obama's appeal to their better angels resonated with Americans, young and old. Tech savvy Obama campaign enlisted the assistance of millions of young Americans through social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, sent them short Emails and Text messages explaining his positions and upcoming events, and asking for small donations. These contacts will prove invaluable in an Obama administration.

Because of the Republicans' disdain for the elites (read education), they were not match for Obama's internet campaign. While Americans are becoming more educated and more socially liberal, the Republicans' divisive, race-based messages appeal only to the less educated poor of the South. With blacks, Hispanics and young whites deserting the Republican Party in droves, the party is in danger of becoming a regional (Southern) party.