

## Observe what and by whom?

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JUST before the 1991 Parliament Election of Bangladesh a newly formed election observation team was visiting Chittagong to put together its local chapter. A meeting of local 'neutral' civil society members was called by the founder President of that organization to discuss preliminary organizational matters. No doubt the intentions were good at that time as Bangladesh was moving into a new chapter of democracy after about a decade of autocratic rule by Ershad. I rose up and thanked the organizers but expressed my skepticism as to the success of such a venture. I asked them whether they can monitor the election developments in the Raigan constituency till the day of election and come back in one piece. The team leader wanted to know why that should be difficult. Well simply because that happens to be the constituency of the infamous Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and he has his own of way getting elected by intimidating the vast number of minority and poor low income voters. The organizers had no clue as to what happens there and they would be the election observers. Things have not changed much in Raigan and similar constituencies in other parts of Bangladesh. Sure enough that same

election monitoring team certified that the election in all Chittagong constituencies went on fine excepting few minor incidents and irregularities and certified that the results should be accepted. Well so far for neutral election observation and monitoring teams and their activities.

Before the 1991 general election people in Bangladesh did not know much about the election observation and monitoring concept. Perhaps the nature of election that we have had did not need one as the results were totally predictable excepting the 1986 election where the Awami League was slated to win and Ershad managed to stage a highly innovative media coup and overturn the results. Today not only we have our own home-grown election observation and monitoring teams but also teams coming from outside, fielded by different NGOs and international bodies. According to the Brussels based International Crisis Group the coming general election is likely to be the most closely observed in the country's history, with over 165,000 domestic observers, primarily from EWG (Election Working Group), which will also field around 42,500 observers for the upazila polls. Around 330 EU and US observers, as well as organizations such as the Asian Network for Free Election, will be present. The UN has sent a high-level expert mis-

sion to assess preparations but will not have a formal observation role. Domestic and international monitoring teams are expected to provide an objective and independent assessment of the quality of the election(s). Normally on the day of election after the polling is closed or the day following, these teams certify as to the acceptability of the results of the polls and everyone goes home. The local observers are normally funded by some foreign agencies and the foreign teams get the funding from their own organizations. What ever is the quality of election everyone makes some living out of the exercise. Nothing wrong with that.

Let us talk a bit about the quality of these foreign observers. These observers are picked by their sponsors from different profession and diverse background. Some of them are totally inexperienced. Some come from countries where people of those countries can not spell the word 'democracy'. Few come from countries where their own people are busy killing each other in civil wars for last one decade or so.

Once I came across an observer who was surprised that our candidates and officials spoke English! In the 2001 general election I happened to know the co-coordinator of a very important and a powerful nation's local election team. Just before the election he went to South Bengal and monitored his team's activities in the region till the day of election. Later they certified that everything was fine and people exercised their right to franchise in a very peaceful manner. The team members had no clue as to the extreme intimidation of the minorities that took place during and after the election. Their certificate was very important

as their country is considered to be our guardian angel.

Most of the foreign observers depart for their work station immediately after arriving in Dhaka without any orientation as to the local culture, norms and customs. They often do not understand how the chemistry of local political system works or how the political parties are organized. In the election of 2001 I met at least one observer who did not understand the rationale behind having permanent symbols allotted to political parties. Recently one foreign observer team came to talk to one of my friend who happens to be a very senior journalist of a leading national daily. Both the team members did not have the basic working knowledge of English and had no idea of election process in Bangladesh.

Perhaps Bangladesh needs local and foreign observers as we are still in the process of rebuilding our democratic institutions. Moreover, anything that has a foreign certificate has a wider acceptance in this country. But to have a meaningful exercise of election observation and monitoring the parent organizations need to orient the observers thoroughly from the local norms and customs to the election chemistry. They have to be told that observing an election in Zimbabwe and Bangladesh are two different things. But in the end what the nation needs is to have its democratic institutions, such as the Election Commission function properly where their competence will not be questioned by any one in any place.

The author is an educationist and a concerned voter.



## Who gains at whose cost?

What is recession? Will it affect our life in Bangladesh? These are the questions asked by my friend who belongs to the fixed-income bracket. He is happy to see the price of oil plummeting to less than \$50 a barrel.



SAADAT HUSAIN

it is, how will it affect the ordinary citizens of the country? In order to answer these questions we have to read the structure of Bangladesh economy.

Despite remarkable transformation in matters of different sectors' contribution to GDP, Bangladesh may still be classified as a semi-agrarian economy. Food security is the most important target pursued by all governments irrespective of party affiliation. Prices of food and essential commodities dominate all other factors of economic life. Reduction of unemployment or protection of employment has its importance, but it is not an overriding issue in Bangladesh context. Directly productive manufacturing activities are not very large in Bangladesh.

Too many people in Bangladesh feel the same way as my friend. They read about recession in daily papers and magazines. They enjoy the stories. They were badly mauled when commodity prices soared, inflation spiraled, their purchasing power evaporated, and their prospect for savings dried up. Reversal of the situation has brought some relief to them.

Decline in production is not due to some unforeseen external shock, it is due to sharp decline in the effective demand. Consumers cannot afford to buy enough goods and services because they have suffered income loss for some reason or other. It could be due to some internal or external shock affecting them. Production may suffer because of some systemic glitches. Once there is planned cut down in production, employment is adversely affected.

Workers are laid off, new jobs are not created; panic soon spreads to homes and locality to dampen consumer spending. A vicious circle of less demand, less production, less employment, and less income whirls, creating recession in the economy. Those who are employed are also haunted by the spectre of job cuts. Once an economy is in the grip of recession it is difficult for such an economy to come out of it. It takes lot of efforts to bring the economy back on the track.

Where does Bangladesh stand vis-à-vis recession? Is recession impending? If

When recession hits the developed countries, the rich plead for reducing interest rate on lending and in turn on deposits on the plea of protecting production and export. One sees a clash of interest between rich borrowers and small depositors in an impending or perceived recessionary environment. The depositors are happy with the fixed income from their savings and declining prices of the imported consumer goods. Borrowers fret about future production and income and would like to persuade the decision makers to reduce interest rate even if that spells disaster for the small depositors.

Thanks to overwhelming number of depositors, the Bangladesh banking system is not likely to be seriously jolted by the financial melt-down in the developed western world. Moreover, the banking control measures in Bangladesh might have been effective to ward off possible anarchy in the financial arena of the country. Such control mechanisms should continue unabated in order to maintain the integrity of our financial system.

A good number of the employed in Bangladesh are salaried people, farmers and their workers in the informal subsistence sector, petty businessmen with hardly any forward linkage, and self-employed individuals providing personalised services to customers. Their activities do not transcend national limits. Their most important consideration is the price of consumer goods.

They are content if prices are stable or are declining. Recession in the western world does not affect their employment situation adversely. Big exporters might be affected by recession in highly industrialised countries. Workers of the export-oriented firms may also be threatened.

The other sector of Bangladesh that might be affected by recession in the rich countries is remittance. Bangladeshi workers abroad may suffer from actual or potential job loss and consequently remittance flow may slow down. This is likely to tell on foreign exchange reserve of the country.

Beneficiaries from remittance will be adversely affected. Foreign exchange reserve may not decrease because of huge savings in the import bill of petrol, oil and lubricant, food grains, and other essential commodities. Impact on remittance is not as yet visible, but may follow in the next few months.

Common citizens of Bangladesh are at the moment concerned about the price of food items and other essential commodities. They would like to see improved law and order, they are keenly interested in good governance and a smooth transition to a democratic polity.

Economists hold that there is a trade off between inflation and unemployment. Common people, however, believe that inflation has to be contained at all cost, employment consideration notwithstanding.

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## Adjusting faith with politics

It is time for an enlightened and constructive engagement with those in our country who profess faith-based politics and think of themselves as the guardians of faith but transpose their religious ideology into political discourse.

SYED REZAUL KARIM

HERE are some among us who dismiss the role of religion or faith in politics. They see the role of religion restricted to individual life as an instrument of moral and spiritual upliftment. But a realisation has dawned the world over that faith is proving to be a vital element in determining the mundane, be it economics or politics.

God and faith have come to stay as reminder to those who once thought that religion did not matter, that God is irrelevant, and that religious matters are purely personal. It is time for an enlightened and constructive engagement with those in our country who profess faith-based politics and think of themselves as the guardians of faith but transpose their religious ideology into political discourse.

A cursory look at world events will amply demonstrate how faith or religion has proved to be a vital decisive element and is still playing an agitating role in shaping the course of politics and history.

Pakistan was created purely on the basis of religious identity. The problem of Palestine persists because the Jews think that God only has given them the right over the Holy Land. The Shah of Iran was overthrown through a revolution led by a Shia Imam. That country is still overseen by a religious leader, the

campaign that the conservative right sought to depict him as a Muslim at the initial campaign. Any whiff of air confirming that he was a Muslim would have destroyed his hopes of being elected as the president. The late President John F. Kennedy too was worried that his ancestral root in the Irish Catholic faith could alienate the predominantly Protestant voters.

It is no wonder, then, that Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia have kicked off their electoral campaign after beseeching the blessings of saints in Sylhet. They cannot depend on their popularity alone for victory; they need something extra to win. No such conspicuously auspicious opening of the campaign was seen among faith-based political parties. Probably, they felt themselves a little closer to God compared to the other two political ladies.

When Bangladesh emerged independent after a bloody civil war, its founding fathers proclaimed four pillars of state ideology: secularism, socialism, democracy, and nationalism. These proclamations, after 37 years of the country's existence, look wishful and have come to naught. Elements opposed to secular democracy survived; mutated manifold in different colours in the murky waters of Bangladesh politics. It would be a long thesis to go into the reasons for such evolution. Generally, the suffering of the com-

and prosperous society by secular means and the conspicuous corruption by business, bureaucrats, and politicians combined have alienated a section of relatively well-off students community to take refuge in faith-based ideology as the panacea for all ills the society is affiliated with. Vast majority of madrassa-educated men are either underemployed or unemployed. They have not acquired any life skill. They are the foot soldiers of the faith-based political parties.

If the faith-based political parties have to have a tryst to serve the nation, it has to bring in liberalism in them which is prescribed by God and prophets. If liberalism is defined as the mental and intellectual development of the self without prejudice to others' way of thought or action, then there is ample space for dialogue and debates on issues that need to be addressed urgently.

"He who knoweth his own self, knoweth God," said our Prophet (SM). We are a knowledge-poor, immature society. The backwardness of the Muslim societies around the world, rich or poor alike, display a pathetic lack in science and technology. The Muslim glory in the middle ages rested on their achievements in science, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine.

Faith-based political parties in our country have to shun their prejudice to embrace every branch of knowledge, as the prophet of Islam said fourteen hundred years ago: "Go in quest of knowledge even unto China."

No nation can progress if half of the population -- the womenfolk -- remains backward and inactive. A woman has every right to self-development as a man. Our



Supreme Ayatollah. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is ruled by hereditary monarchy, but the council of ulama who are staunchly Wahabists in tradition, guide and oversee the Sharia law in that country.

The American press has reported that Barack Obama would like to retain his middle name and will take oath as the president of the US as Barack Hussein Obama. In the New York Times recently a columnist commented that the name "Hussein" would appeal to Shia rulers of Iran and it might help in creating a rapport with them in starting a dialogue to defuse the American-Iranian tension.

The religious identity of Barack Hussein Obama was so crucial in the presidential

monarch under the various shifting regimes created a climate of fatalism driving people under the spell of faith-based exhortations. This was reinforced by foreign interventions through aid and ideas to keep the people away from the attraction of an egalitarian secular society.

The demographic explosion in the last four decades has enlarged the poor, underprivileged class in the society. The poverty stricken parents sent their sons to the madrassas -- the religious schools which were funded by charity, foreign aid, and sometimes by the government. Two objectives were served: unloading a liability to feed and dedicating a ward to the service of Allah.

The disillusionment to achieve a just

religion gives highest respect to women and this is part of "sunna."

"Whoever doeth good to girls, it will be a curtain to him from hell-fire," according to the Hadith. Therefore, discrimination against women and abuse of women's rights are contrary to prophetic tradition and that should be the basis of social development as well.

Islam considers minorities as "amanat" of the ruling majority. "God is not merciful to him who is not merciful to mankind," said the Prophet (SM). Instead of clashing over ideology, both faith-based and liberal democratic forces should work together to serve the suffering humanity in the best possible manner.