Getting Back on Track

In more ways than one, Bangladesh is on the brink. Whether it is to be on the brink of success or failure only the next elected government can truly know. Their actions will shape the future of the nation along with the lives of 150 million people. Now, if only they can set their agenda straight, the rest should fall into place. But that is a lot easier said than done, they must first truly understand the needs of our nation and then work in a bipartisan way to meet them.

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Addressing poverty should be the greatest challenge for the next government, but they must look at the problem as one linked to numerous others. With a conspicuously low unemployment rate, that masks large levels of underemployment (a situation in which a worker is employed, but not in the desired capacity, whether in terms of compensation, skill or experience) Bangladesh desperately needs to find a way to provide its people with a proper means of living rather than a handout. While the answer seems simplistic enough implementing it is a whole different problem.

There needs to be a concerted effort to provide permanent jobs for at least one person from each disadvantaged family and this is just touching at the very surface of the problem, other issues such as inflationary pressures and the rising costs of essentials has exponentially increased levels of poverty. The 2008 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission has found that the wholesale and retail prices of coarse rice has increased by 78 and 82 percent respectively between June 2006 and 2008, so much so that now up to 7.5 million *extra* people are categorised as 'Absolute Poor', while the number of undernourished people has increased to 45 percent. All of these statistics point to a worrying trend in Bangladesh, where the poor have become poorer not only due to a lack of employment but also due to the seemingly uncontrollable price hikes.

A tangible employment policy has to be made. Labour-intensive industries have to be developed in monga-prone areas where seasonal unemployment exists.

Evicted slum dwellers have to be provided with alternative housing. A ration system for industrial workers and workers in the informal sector needs to be introduced to lessen the burden of price spiralling of essentials.

While the last ruling party claims that the country experienced a 'flood of development' during its tenure the truth is that the only development that occurred was in the personal wealth of corrupt politicians and their cronies leaving millions poorer than ever. A decentralised government is crucial to Bangladesh's progress and the next government must go all out in developing the districts, shifting factories and plants to underdeveloped areas, creating jobs in the villages and improving infrastructure in rural areas.

Agro-based industries and small-medium sized enterprises have to be developed by relaxing terms and conditions (such as lowering interest rates) of loans.

Industries such as jute, tea, handlooms and shipbuilding have to be given special attention. A comprehensive coal policy has to be formulated.

Infrastructure needs an accelerated boost as improving communications in and between cities, villages, upazillas and districts is key to economic robustness. Developing the Padma and Karnaphuli bridges as well as the Asian Highway and Asian Railway are good starting points.

It is an irony that the very people whose votes each ruling party has depended on, have always been the most neglected.

It would be impossible to tackle poverty without looking into food security and the prices of essentials; one must understand the pressure they exert not only on the ultra poor, but everyone above them as well.

Like many other sectors in Bangladesh, the food sector suffers from a bit of an anomaly. While rice production has steadily increased due to both technological progress and private enterprise investment in small-scale irrigation, there is still a disproportionately large number of Bangladeshis consuming less than 1800 kilocalories, the minimum standard for nutrition as set by the World Food Program. Why is that? The answer is simple: while rice production in Bangladesh has gone up, the same has not happened for the major rice producing countries. Thus when we import rice to make up for what we can't produce domestically, unwittingly we found ourselves importing more expensive rice and as a staple food, we are now in a situation we cannot back away from.

Rice makes up a large share of the total expenditures of the average Bangladeshi. If they were better off (which they have not been because of increasing inflation), they would have preferred to eat less rice and more of other things such as meat and fish. But because they are not, they will continue to consume the same if not more amounts of rice. Thus when the price of rice rises it