

The case against minister Latif Biswas

It is a test for both EC and AL government

THE Election Commission has filed a case against Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdul Latif Biswas on the charge that the minister interfered in voting for the upazilla elections in Belkuchi on January 22. Indeed, since Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda made it publicly known at the end of the voting on the day that the minister had violated the electoral code of conduct, Biswas has been under a cloud. Now the suit against him by the EC makes it clear that the electoral body means to see the whole business through.

It is our opinion that the case against the minister and his associates (among whom is his daughter) should proceed to a logical conclusion. It is a test case for the Election Commission in that through prosecuting the charges against the minister, it must convince people that it means business and that in future no one, no matter how powerful or influential, will think of trifling with electoral rules and regulations. In similar manner, the filing of the case will also test the resolve of the ruling Awami League on its pledge to bring about qualitative change in society. The government and especially Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have recently informed the nation that there will be no interference in the course of action the EC might take against minister Biswas. With the case now filed against the minister, the people of the country will want to see proof that the government lives up to its promise through maintaining absolute neutrality in the matter and allowing the EC to do what it must without putting up any roadblocks before it.

An absolute need today is to convince the nation that the various laws in force in Bangladesh can actually be implemented to public satisfaction. It is not important whether a thousand laws are in the statute books, it is rather that a single one of those laws is implemented. In the present instance, if in the ultimate sense judgement goes against the minister and so against the ruling party, it will be evidence of the primacy of the law being an underpinning of governance in Bangladesh. A violation of the electoral code of conduct, like the violation of any other law, is a serious offence. And because it is, we expect both the EC and the government to ensure that the case against the minister sends out the message that no individual or institution can break it and then expect to get away with it. The EC's stance at this point should be regarded as a symbolic act which can rekindle our belief in the supremacy of the law.

As the case gets under way, we must point out that the minister must not be prejudged and must be given all legal measures to defend himself. Additionally, we suggest that in the interest of a fair trial, the minister resign from the cabinet. He can return to it once and if his name is cleared. Such an act will set a new, encouraging precedent for those holding high office in the country.

Launch terminal disorder

Ring leaders should not go unpunished

HOW insensitive public or private service operators touching the lives of ordinary citizens can get to the pressing public need for mobility on the waterways was starkly demonstrated in and around Sadarghat terminal on Thursday. At that premier inland transportation hub such a massive impediment was placed to the movement of incoming and outgoing passengers by feuding groups claiming control over the labour handling business that it led to a five-hour standstill in river traffic. As many as 200 launches could neither anchor nor depart from the terminal causing enormous loss to business and of man hour.

What triggered the spate of mayhem was that the existing lessee of the terminal as far as handling the labourers went, was badly enraged by a new contractor having submitted an offer with the BIWTA for a fresh lease in response to a tender floated by the inland water authority. The original lessee whose term had expired sought extension of the contract which having been refused, he went to court to get an injunction. Subsequently, on the vacation of the injunction by the court the BIWTA was obviously within its right to invite tenders in response to which a contractor dropped an offer with the authority. Other contractors were entitled to do the same. Thus the process was in a preliminary stage; yet, out of sheer desperation, the original lessee and his men reacted provoking a clash with the new aspirant and his supporters.

We would have thought that the BIWTA ground staff must have had the initial information of what was coming, so that they could have tipped off the headquarters and also the police authority for timely intervention to preempt the clashes and the river traffic standstill that followed. The mobile part of law enforcement authorities including their human intelligence outfits should synchronise their activities in such a way that they are able to preempt a trouble that is brewing with speed and effectiveness. Major public service arenas should be constantly on their radar screen.

On the specific incident of public service disruption, we demand a thorough inquiry leading to fixing responsibility and punishing the guilty. If such criminal offences pass off without punishment, it is an indulgent add-on to the culture of impunity.

Davos, the global financial crisis and the world's poorest

In South Asia, economists expect that this will definitely lead to a slowdown, weakening industrial production and reducing growth from 6.3% to around 4.8% of GDP. It is also believed that this grim outlook for South Asia is likely to continue, with a deeper and more prolonged credit crunch, contraction in investment and export growth, a marked fall-off in FDI and weak domestic banking sector.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

MANY in the world's poorest countries had looked forward to this year's World Economic Forum (held every year in Davos, Switzerland) and had hoped that the world's political and financial leadership would be able to provide assurances that the worst of the international financial crisis had passed and that a new dawn was round the corner. It wasn't to be. Things turned out to be different. Instead of the usual celebration of the triumph of global capitalism there was an ambience of gloom and recriminations about the deepening global economic crisis.

Davos this year was replete with apocalyptic assessments. There was also agreement that the free market mechanism does not necessarily fix all problems.

While international bankers and hedge fund managers kept a low profile, the prime ministers of Russia and China blamed the US for the global crisis and called for radical reform of the world financial system. In a manner of speaking, this was a continuation of the war of worlds that had been initiated earlier between China and the US when the new US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner criticized China for 'currency manipulation' that had led to the extremely high US trade deficits.

It was interesting to see Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao place the blame for the crisis this time squarely on the shoulders of the US authorities. In this context he cited 'inappropriate macro-economic policies of some economies and their unsustainable model of development' -- a clear swipe at the low savings and high consumption rate of the US economy.

There was also reference to the failure of financial supervision and regulation. Wen also targeted the banks and blamed them for their 'blind pursuit of profit' and 'lack of self-discipline'. Putin was equally abrasive and pointed out that 'poor quality regulation' had led to the collapse of the existing financial system and the creation of the most difficult situation since the Great Depression.

It was also significant that the Russian Prime Minister raised the question of the world's dependence on the US Dollar. He pointed out that this was 'dangerous for the world economy' and had led to a serious malfunction in the system of global economic growth.

The level of response from the US was low-key given the fact that key US policymakers were busy passing the \$819 billion economic stimulus package through Congress.

Developing countries, including the least developed ones, however watched the proceedings in Davos with great care. Most of them have been particularly badly affected by the global economic crisis, coupled with recent increases in fuel and food prices. Their interest was partially evoked from the anxiety that this on-going crisis could lead to cuts in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) from richer countries, exacerbating the situation. They feel that efforts have to be undertaken to mitigate the impact of the downturn by strengthening international coordination to resist calls for a reduction in ODA.

The poorer countries have been particularly badly affected by the convergence of the three 'fs' crises -- finance, fuel and food. They believe that this might result in cut -- backs in Official Development Assistance (ODA), making

it more difficult for countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This aspect has assumed greater concern because most ODA loans and grants normally have strings attached and part of these funds is "ploughed back to the source."

Discussion in Davos also reaffirmed that the economic crisis will most likely result in the juxtaposition of a sharp decline in poor countries' export earnings and fewer net inflows making the achievement of MDGs unlikely. It may be recalled here that with the exception of the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries, other OECD countries have failed to live up to their ODA commitments.

The current "financial tsunami" has had dire consequences. It has moved from the housing market to banking and then the financial sector and then onto the real economy. In the US alone, this had resulted in a Euro 9 trillion loss of wealth. World trade is also expected to contract for the first time since 1982, with negative growth in 2009.

In South Asia, economists expect that this will definitely lead to a slowdown, weakening industrial production and reducing growth from 6.3% to around 4.8% of GDP. It is also believed that this grim outlook for South Asia is likely to continue, with a deeper and more prolonged credit crunch, contraction in investment and export growth, a marked fall-off in FDI and weak domestic banking sector. In other words, this would constitute as a recession.

Remittances, however, a critical source of funding (in India they constitute 27% of GDP, in Bangladesh about 11% and in Nepal 18%) within the region, are not expected to be reduced significantly for the moment. Partially, because of this factor, despite this gloomy economic picture, the numbers of those living in absolute poverty in South Asia are likely to fall from 595.6 million in 2005 to 403.9 million in 2015 (a fall from 17% to 7% of the total population). Compared to this, in Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty is likely to increase from 356.4 million in 2005 to 388.4 million in 2015 (although as a percentage of the total population this will be a fall from 51% to 37%).

In the light of general concern about the effects of the economic crisis on the

developing world, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has indicated in Davos that the UN could introduce a global stimulus package. Such a step will be particularly welcome because developing countries will be affected as FDI declines and becomes less risk-averse, more concentrated, selective and sheltered. The UN initiative will also be helpful because as international reserves erode through their use as stabilization funds, it will become that much more difficult to access international capital markets amid an environment of possible growing trade protectionism. Borrowing will also be more expensive, making it almost impossible for small entrepreneurs in the developing world to borrow money.

However, while aid to the poorest countries could increase through such a UN package, the focus in this context needs to be on the redynamising of the economy, supporting employment in SMEs and creating stability within foreign trade. The European Union could also respond to the crisis by strengthening bilateral partnerships and programming instruments and refocusing its external policies. The EU also needs to contribute to the reform of the international financial institutions, and be ready to increase resources to support lending to third countries. The EU could also help to mitigate the impact of the downturn on the world's poorest by strengthening international coordination to resist calls for a reduction in ODA.

In such an extraordinary situation one axiom needs to be accepted as universal -- the world will only work better when the world works together. It would therefore be worthwhile for the G-20 leaders to agree (when they meet next time in London later this year) that the way out lies in creating an appropriate nexus between monetary policy and a coordinated global regulatory framework. That is the key to getting the global economy back on track. British Prime Minister Brown has hinted this during his intervention in Davos. He needs to carry it through in London with the help of President Obama.

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Time to strengthen institutions

We have to hope and pray that institution building in Bangladesh, now, would mean that there will be a change from privilege to talent and from accident of birth to accent on calibre. It shall also mean that money is something to be earned rather than to be got or won; it shall mean putting extra effort before extra leisure.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE people of Bangladesh now have the benefit of stewardship of a government that enjoys an overwhelming electoral mandate. Quite naturally, the expectations from such a government are very high thus placing onerous responsibilities on the new guardians. Such responsibilities assume special significance because we are passing through a period that is characterized by a loss of sense of values.

There is a feeling that the inner strength of our people which enabled them to hold their heads high despite economic adversity is in the danger of being lost without durable measures. It is true that in a democracy the majority view should prevail but perhaps that does not mean that the validity of a proposition or the correctness of a strategy should depend on the number of people and their representatives who believe in it. There is an old saying that in the fields of politics and economics, the soundness of a policy is often in inverse proportion to the popular support it commands.

There is equal significance in the belief that the quality of life in our democratic polity is largely determined by the availability of the basic human rights and civil liberties, which are placed in the chapter on 'Fundamental Rights' in our constitution. Without these fundamental rights the quality of life would be gravely impaired. The guarantee of the aforementioned fundamental rights is largely conditional upon the fostering and sustaining of a healthy debate on the country's social and economic problems.

Our institutions are not in total decay, the present crack and all the efforts to create an institutional vacuum notwithstanding. It is true that violence is widespread in our society. The writ of the government does not run in some pockets. In urban focal points there is lawlessness, which has aggravated the feeling of insecurity. To make matters worse, there is the near breakdown of the urban infrastructure. However, for records it must be stated that many other countries have faced a similar situation at various stages

of their history but their educated and privileged classes did not pronounce that their country was doomed. The fortunate in those countries played their part with responsibility and helped in bringing the country back on rails.

There are premonitions regarding the rise of Taliban type militancy. While it has to be admitted that religious fanaticism, bigotry and militancy were on the rise with allegations of foreign supporters and financiers and local protectors, the same definitely does not compare with the phenomenal rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in the recent years. The so-called fanatics or fundamentalists no doubt represent a new underclass with all the potential of causing unrest and turmoil in the country but democrats in our polity have not embarked upon adequate countervailing measures to ensure that the obscurantist elements do not strike deeper roots than the political party and taking advantage of the situation turn people's resentment into a subversive movement. Such a scenario is not unlikely in the background of authoritative indiscretions, the vulgar life style of the new rich and the stark disparities in income distribution. We have to take guard.

The obvious question as of now is, if the problems are not appreciated in depth and the diagnosis made accordingly then how would we arrive at real solutions? There are recent examples which illustrate this inference. Urban unrest is taken merely as a law and order problem and mostly treated as such. Instead of venturing to change the colonial police structure and stopping its use as a political arm of the government, an answer was sought in creating the so-called 'elite' forces, or increasing the number of police personnel. Similar myopia prevailed in the education sector where new institutions were established without ensuring their proper functioning.

One may ask if we are witnessing an institutional crisis of state authority. Black money holders and violators of other descriptions have created centres of power nearly parallel to that of the

state, according to many discerning observers. However, for any programme of social and economic development to be durably implemented, it is necessary to fully establish the writ of the government and make it run throughout the country.

Paramount importance needs to be attached to the repair and rebuilding of vital institutions that nourish and nurture a democratic society. Collapse will overtake our country if our institutions, particularly the political ones, do not acquire durability through experience and tradition.

We have not appreciated that our democracy cannot survive without law and order and that public interest requires the real professional promotion of the entire criminal justice administration and not its denegation and destruction. We continue to forget that crime is not a problem for the police only but for the whole society.

Successful democratic experience indicates that we cannot be truly free without doing away with ignorance. We have to realize that our leaders have to rebuild and also produce the required institutions for doing the needful. In course of time, those institutions will produce the leaders.

One may reasonably ask as to what has happened to our nation-building institutions, particularly the educational institutions that will generate excellence? Some say that in Bangladesh, instead of establishing excellent educational institutions, we have downgraded and devalued the fine universities which existed when we became a republic. It would only be stating the obvious to comment that meaningful democracy would be impossible without literacy and education and that the absence of earnest efforts in this regard will help the vested quarters to continue to benefit from public ignorance.

One would not be far from reality to say that in Bangladesh we have devalued the judiciary, as we have devalued every other important institution. Instead of defending our judges against political pressures and threats and instead of insisting upon integrity and impartiality in judicial appointments we have permitted the executive to supersede judges of calibre and courage.

The politicians and the media complain that higher judicial appointments have been given to persons who are suspected to subscribe to the notions of the ruling party. Therefore, it would be prudent to recognize the underlying moral, political and constitutional implications of such gross indiscretions. It is

perhaps time to initiate corrective measures to effectively halt the irregularities and hold aloft the majesty of judiciary in public interest.

Realists have to admit that cronyism has assumed new heights. Cynics say that cronyism has become an accepted practice, and that at a higher level many cronies get plum jobs. In the recent past, ruling party functionaries including influential ministers have ensured large recruitments in police, education, Election Commission in utter disregard of all rules or regulations. Members of Parliament and other ruling party influentials were allegedly allocated their own quotas for jobs.

It needs to be emphasized once again that the above-mentioned cronyism brings with it the problems of delinquency, incompetence and of course, pliability. In addition, a clique of corrupt courtiers will continue to surround those who wield power. They become the link between the rulers and the ruled.

The above practices give rise to arbitrariness and irrationality. As against institutional development, we had developed a patron-client relationship. A whole network of patronage was built around quotas for jobs, admissions, urban plots, connections for electricity, gas or telephone and dispensation of development funds. The distinction between public property and private gain was totally blurred. Another ominous development is the contempt for rule of law. There was establishment happiness with people who are pliable and corrupt but claim to produce 'results'.

We seem to have forgotten that the foundation of a state rests upon the impartiality and resilience of some institutions; and that the partisan behaviour and attitude of the government and the perilous polarization of our society did marginalize the public services.

We have to hope and pray that institution building in Bangladesh, now, would mean that there will be a change from privilege to talent and from accident of birth to accent on calibre. It shall also mean that money is something to be earned rather than to be got or won; it shall mean putting extra effort before extra leisure; it will mean stopping our society from disintegrating into hostile factions; it will mean enabling our leaders to perceive the truth and empowering them with the courage to say it to the people; it shall ensure that there is no substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life and that persons are appointed to high public offices for their real worth.

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