

MPs being exceedingly empowered

A blow to the concept of local self-government

It's all in the government's mind. It makes a plan for giving block-allocations directly to MPs for development activities and then pulls back. The lawmakers are now being given the authority to prepare development projects for their constituencies which would be implemented by the LGRD ministry. To the extent that the funds are channeled to the ministry instead of giving these on a platter to individual MPs, it sounds positive. But just. The question is: why these funds couldn't be placed to the elected local bodies themselves with provisions for oversight by the LGRD ministry or the relevant parliamentary committees, if devolution of authority, as envisaged in the Constitution, had to be respected?

Now, the MPs have the decisive say in making development plans, with the elected local government institutions being completely bypassed. This is patently antithetical to the whole concept of involving elected local bodies in matters of project formulation and implementation as far as the local development projects went.

While on the one hand the government has been voluble with its rhetoric for strengthening local government systems and institutions, on the other it is taking one step after another to weaken the chairmen and members of these bodies vis-à-vis the local MPs. The first step it took to de-autonomise such bodies related to making the MPs advisers to upazila parishads and obliging the upazila chairmen to seek their advice and suggestions as a matter of requirement. Then, bills are said to be on the offing to empower the MPs with advisory roles in city corporations and municipalities. And now comes the MPs' prerogative to prepare local development plans.

We see in all of this a systematic endeavour to empower and pamper the MPs to such an extent that this will leave the local government institutions not only vastly weakened but also largely irrelevant. Furthermore, what benefits can the government derive from sowing the seeds of discord in the working relationship between the two sets of elected public representatives?

These are the conclusions one is constrained to draw in the absence of any provision for parliamentary oversight in each matter of the extra-ordinary powers being vested in the lawmakers. What safeguards are built into the system against corruption, nepotism and other forms of malpractice that are bound to creep in with a free rein gifted to the MPs.

Post-election crisis in Iran

Confrontation should be avoided

THE warning which Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has voiced against any violence in the aftermath of the recent presidential elections has had a stern tenor about it. One reads this into his speech on Friday against the backdrop of the controversy centering on the outcome of the election.

For its part, the opposition has appeared determined to continue its protests through organizing a rally in Tehran. Indeed, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the defeated candidate, and his supporters remain convinced that the election was stolen in favour of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and so was not fair. The air is thus rife with confrontationist proclivities. It is our expectation that such an inclination toward a showdown will with foresight be quickly replaced by a mood of reconciliation. Violence can only push Iran into deeper trouble.

It is fairly obvious by now that much internal dissension marks the Iranian political scene today. With personalities like former president Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani taking a stand against Ahmadinejad before the election and now Mousavi unwilling to acknowledge the president's victory, Iranian politics --- and for the first time since the Islamic revolution overthrew the monarchy three decades ago --- is at a critical juncture. It is noticeable that Iran, which has refused to heed western concerns about its nuclear programme, now finds itself in a situation where its election results have come under question. The Iranian leadership must, therefore, now convince its own people that the election results were a fair reflection of the popular will. For the Iranian authorities to do that, it is important that all doubts be removed from the minds of the Iranian electorate about the results of the election. Clearly, the Tehran authorities must inform Iranians how comprehensively the votes were counted. This must be done in a fully transparent way, to the satisfaction of the Iranian voters. The best course open to the authorities seems to be to engage the opposition in a constructive dialogue leading to a peaceful resolution of the imbroglio.

A speedy resolution of the problem is essential. But such an approach can only be made easier if the confrontational position adopted by Ayatollah Khamenei is eschewed in favour of a conciliatory and persuasive position. At the same time, it should be for outside powers to bear in mind that it is for the Iranian people themselves to resolve the crisis. Happily, though, global reaction to the Iran situation has been restrained. It should stay that way, even as earnest efforts are made to resolve the crisis.

In pursuit of middle-income status

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SAADAT HUSAIN

IN 1997 the author wrote as follows: "We cannot lift ourselves to Switzerland, Japan or USA's income level in near future. The more relevant point is that we do not need to make any such effort at this stage. What is really needed for us at this stage is to cross the threshold income of say \$600 or \$700 so that we can meet the basic needs of our people. Countries develop a decent level of respectability once they cross this threshold income. They generate a self-sustaining momentum that keeps the income growing at a high pace." (*The Independent*, May 1, 1997).

At that time, the per capita income of Bangladesh was \$283, that of China and India was \$530 and \$320 respectively.

Twelve years have passed. A lot of water has flown under the bridge in the meantime. Despite many constraints and pernicious happenings, Bangladesh logged commendable performance in terms of growth and increase in per capita income. The latest reports posted a per capita income of \$690 for Bangladesh. In a couple of months, the figure is expected to cross \$700.

Technically, Bangladesh is poised to graduate from least developed country (LDC) status. It will be pacing for middle income country (MIC) status, an ego-boosting happening for Bangladeshis as a whole.

In international interactions, the country will not be treated as a pan-handler, it will be viewed with some respectability, however smidgen that may be. In the past, countries with per capita income lower than the present per capita income of Bangladesh wielded remarkably high power and commanded universal respect because of their stellar performance in other areas of human life. The present per capita income ensconced Bangladesh to a

position from where it can assert its points much more effectively than before.

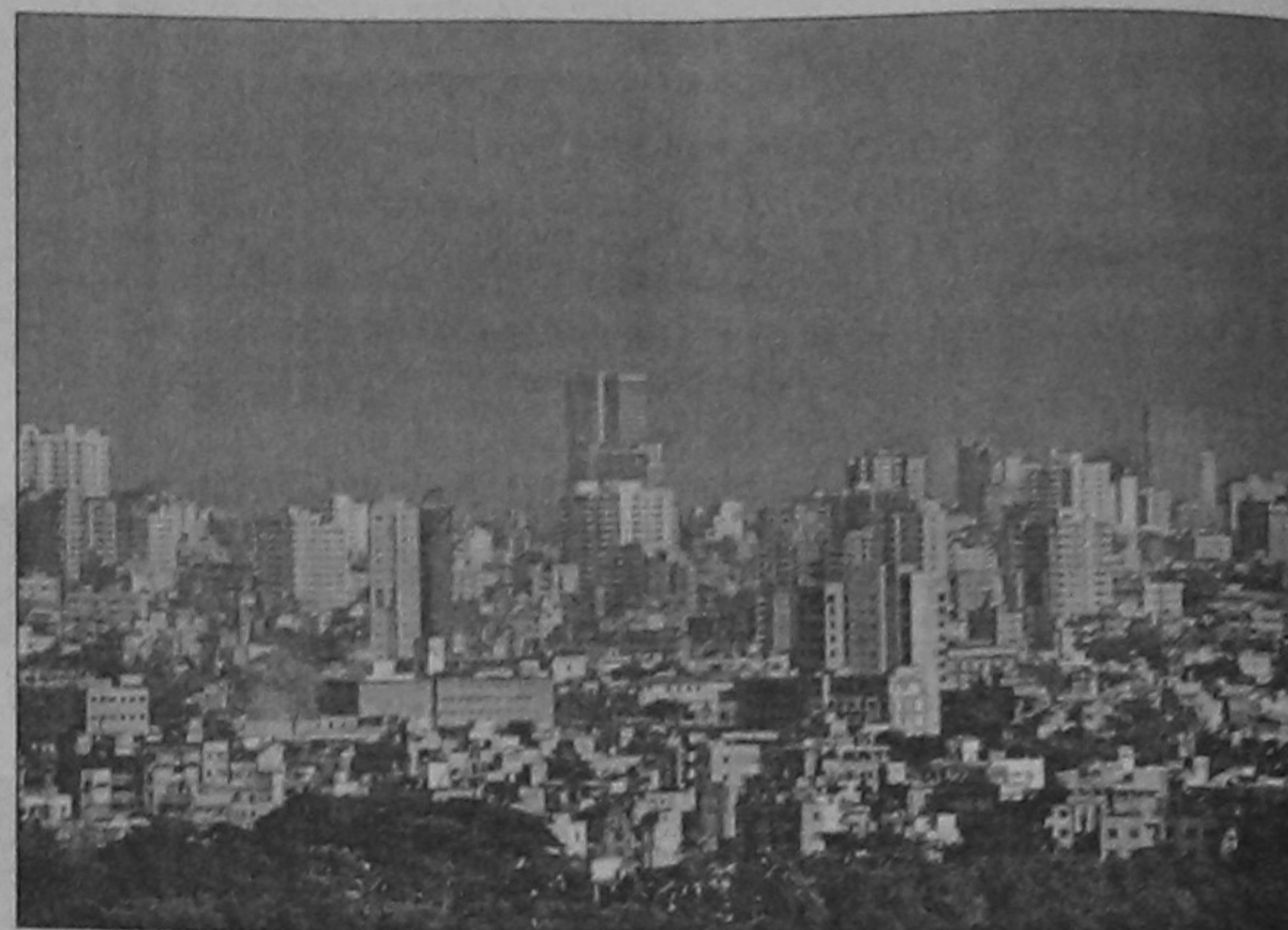
Bangladesh's carriage in the comity of nations will now depend more on its performance in other areas of social and human development. Here Bangladesh can present itself well. In spite of formidable constraints in terms of resource and structure, the country has garnered remarkable achievements in food security, supply of drinking water, immunisation of children, primary school enrolment, mobile phone penetration, and poverty alleviation through micro-credit.

International dailies and periodicals, which got to the habit of depicting a sordid picture of Bangladesh, have changed their stance. Articles and features highlighting the performance of Bangladesh in the area of human and social development abound in the electronic and print media world over. Bangladesh can offer lot of programs which both rich and poor countries can emulate to their benefit.

The challenges that Bangladesh confronts at this time do not emanate solely from low per capita income or its status as a least developed country; instead these are appurtenances of the convoluted dynamics of social and economic forces working within a reticular structure.

Barring a few city-states, the country's population density is the highest in the world. The land-man ratio is simply unsustainable. Overcrowding coupled with unitary character of the government has rendered the principal city, the capital Dhaka, an impossible tract to negotiate. Pedestrians literally elbow out one another on the foot-paths of the city. The streets are no better.

More serious problems are diversion of agricultural land to construction of homestead, denuding forests, stifling flow of rivers through grabbing their banks, and destruction of environment and habitat to meet the need of increasing population.



A growing pattern still in conflict with basic social and economic forces.

The contribution of a productive population, both inside and outside the country notwithstanding, containing the size of population is a daunting challenge which Bangladesh has to address effectively to make the real life of the citizens reasonably comfortable. The absence of strong local government with a robust structure stands in the way of effective decentralisation, a desideratum for good governance in a unitary government.

Two types of variables explain the growth process: real variable and nominal variable. Inflation, accounting algorithm, admissibility of components in the definition of GDP are nominal variables, while production of goods and tangible services mainly constitutes the real variables.

Physical security, environmental coziness, transactional ease, fairness, etc affect the real welfare of citizens though they are not taken effectively in the compilation of per capita income.

With the crossing of the threshold level, Bangladesh will no more be treated as a midjet. The prestige of the country will, however, depend on how the citizens and government conduct themselves in transacting their day-to-day business. The soundness of administrative and economic policy, strategy and application will be particularly observed by other countries to make an assessment of country's status.

The macro-economic stability, the law and order situation, corruption indices, empowerment of people, development of democratic institutions, functioning of administrative and legal institutions and evenness of income distribution are particularly monitored by the bi-lateral and multi-lateral forums working in this area. It will be good for the country to demonstrate its superiority in terms of these criteria.

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Dirty high growth is worse than benign moderate growth. Gross national happiness has therefore got currency in the recent past. If our attempt is focused on improving the welfare of citizens, then we should be more concerned about the status of the parameters alluded to in the above paragraph. If the country does well in terms of these indicators, satisfactory rate of growth will automatically follow.

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A civil war: Obama's gift to Pakistan

In order to receive billions of dollars from US, the Pakistani leadership has succumbed to the caricature of the Taliban and plunged the nation into a civil war with the Pashtuns, the nation's second largest ethnic group.



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A civil war is brewing in Pakistan. Thanks to US President Barack Obama, who is shifting the American war from Iraq to "the real enemies" operating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Cash-strapped Pakistan could not defy Obama persuasion and decided to wage a war against its own people, the Pashtuns inhabiting the Northern Province and the tribal areas of Waziristan.

Decades ago, Pakistan waged a similar war against its own people, the Bengalis in East Pakistan. In 1971, the Pakistani military charged to wipe out Mukti Bahini, a Bengali resistance force, paved the way for the nation's dismemberment. In 2009, the military is charged to eliminate the Taliban, a Pashtun resistance force. History is repeating itself in Pakistan as it frequently does for nations that do not learn from past mistakes.

With a willful caricature of the Pashtuns, who are successfully resisting the occupation of Afghanistan, Obama advisers are forcing Pakistan, a subservient ally, to help win the war in Afghanistan. This help is suicidal for Pakistan. The civil war will unleash intractable sectarian, ethnic, and secessionist forces. As the warfare intensifies in coming months, Pakistan will face economic meltdown. If the civil war spins out of control, Pakistan's nuclear assets would pose a security threat to the world, in which case Pakistan might forcibly be denuclearised.

Pashtun caricature

A failing war in Afghanistan has persuaded American policymakers to generate a make-believe caricature of the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. For all practical purposes, the Pashtuns are now subsumed under the title of the Taliban. The caricature is

simple and compelling: it highlights the Taliban as the paramount enemy without ever mentioning the Pashtun resistance to the eight-year old occupation of Afghanistan.

The Taliban fighters are presented as religious brutes addicted to oppression and violence, who wish to impose a barbaric version of Islam under which there is no concept of individual freedom, particularly for Muslim women.

To further distort the Pashtun resistance in Afghanistan, the Taliban are co-equated with al-Qaeda, an undefined terrorist group allegedly scheming to detonate weapons of mass destruction, particularly against the US. Burqas, floggings, and beheadings are accentuated to paint a repulsive caricature of the Taliban. In this caricature, no mention is made that the American bombings of villages, extra-judicial killings, torture, and secret prisons have failed to subdue the Pashtuns in one of the poorest countries of the world.

Pashtun Code

Credit goes to Obama for rightfully diagnosing the fact that the Pashtuns of Afghanistan cannot be separated from the Pashtuns of Pakistan across the Durand Linea more than 1,600 miles long border that ineffectively separates Afghanistan from Pakistan. Nearly 41 million Pashtuns live on both sides of the border; around 13 million in Afghanistan and twice as many (28 million) in Pakistan.

Concentrated in geographically contiguous regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Pashtuns live in big cities, small towns, and remote villages. Kabul, Kandahar, Peshawar, Swat, and Quetta are their big cities. Going back thousands of years, the Pashtuns are united through culture, dialects, and traditions. Most have embraced the Sunni sect of Islam. Like other cultural groups, however, the Pashtuns have fused Islamic laws with their pre-Islamic honour code, known as the Pashtunwali.

Pashtunwali is the unwritten Pashtun Code that regulates social behaviour and interactions with foreigners. This code belongs to the Pashtuns, not just to the Taliban. Hospitable and gracious, the Pashtuns go out of their way to respect and protect guests and strangers. Invaders, however, are killed without mercy. Nang (honour) is the founding principle of the Pashtun Code.

Khushal Khan Khattak (1613-1689), a Pashtun warrior and a poet, summed up the nang principle in decisive words: "Death is better than life when life cannot be lived with honour." Badal (revenge) is the integral part of honour.

Badal requires that insult be avenged with insult, death with death, and no price is too high to seek revenge. Until the revenge is taken, the Pashtuns are restless, anxious, and uncomfortable with themselves.

Forgiveness is available if the injury were unintentional. No forgiveness is rendered to invaders and occupiers. No enemy is too strong to deserve any exception to the Pashtun Code. Brits, Sikhs, Moghuls, Russians, and Americans, whoever violates the Pashtun Code faces an unremitting resistance until badal has been consummated. Mighty armies have perished in the land of Pashtuns.

Revenge and civil war

Since 2001, Pakistan has been resisting the pressure to join the American war against the Pashtuns. A war against the Pashtuns of Afghanistan is also a war against the Pashtuns of Pakistan, and vice versa. No concept of the nation-state or territorial integrity could separate the Pashtuns across the border certainly not when the Pashtun lands have been invaded and occupied.

No vilification of the Taliban could similarly separate them from their Pashtun tribes, even if the Taliban subscribe to a strong religious ideology. For the Pashtuns, the Taliban behaviour is deeply rooted in nang and badal of the Pashtun Code. The divide and rule policy practiced in Iraq, which pit Sunnis against Shias and Kurds against Arabs, cannot work against the Pashtuns. Discounting the Pashtun Code, Americans continue to ignore this writing on the wall.

Betting on changing the lessons of history, the Obama White House has coerced Pakistan to close the doors of negotiation and begin to kill the so-called Taliban. Pakistani leadership knows that the Pashtun tribes cannot abandon their sons and brothers whether the invading armies label them Taliban, miscreants, or terrorists. The suicide attacks in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi reflect nang and badal of the Pashtun Code. The foremost Pashtun loyalties are to their own people and to their own code. The Pashtun Code, long before the advent of Islam, has been their way.

In order to receive billions of dollars from US, the Pakistani leadership has succumbed to the caricature of the Taliban and plunged the nation into a civil war with the Pashtuns, the nation's second largest ethnic group.

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