

Budget and the common folks

Come to think of it, what benefits will the common folks derive from the budget? Very little of the increased GDP truly trickles down to them. The debate about whitening black money is not relevant to them. The change of the tariff rates on vehicles also does not directly affect their lives.

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WHILE returning from the Aila affected areas, I watched part of the budget speech of the honourable finance minister in a rural tea stall surrounded by a group of villagers. They were surprised by my rapt attention to the speech and some wondered aloud: What's the use of watching the budget speech? If the wood apple ripens, how does it help the crow? Will we get any share of the crores of taka of the budget?

Come to think of it, what benefits will the common folks derive from the budget? Very little of the increased GDP truly trickles down to them. The debate about whitening black money is not relevant to them. The change of the tariff rates on vehicles also does not directly affect their lives. Thus, the size of the actual budget presented matters little to most ordinary citizens.

In fact, more than three-dozen budgets were prepared since independence, much rhetoric spent on improving conditions of the poor and a lot of money was brought from abroad in their name, yet abject poverty is still a part of everyday life of most rural citizens. They never got a fair shake, and the disparity between them and the privileged class has been widening over the years.

Can anything better be expected this time? To probe into it, let me begin with a crude calculation. The proposed total

budget is for about Tk.1,14,000 crore and the ADP is for Tk.30,500 crore. The per capita share of each citizen in the budget is about Tk.7,600 and Tk.2,000, and the share of a family of five is about Tk. 38,000 and Tk.10,000 respectively. It must be noted that these are their shares, but not their entitlement, as part of the budget goes into running the government to paying for debt servicing to ensuring national security.

Although not entitled to receive them, the citizens have the right to get services (education, health, credit, security etc.) of equivalent amount. Do the common citizens get them? If not, who gets them? In the past, the urbanite rich normally got most of the benefits. As a result, the urban-rural disparity in the country has continuously widened, creating a fertile breeding ground for social unrest and extremism.

If the total budget and the ADP are divided into approximately 4,500 UPs, their average share will be about Tk.25 crore and Tk.7 crore respectively. How much of this money is spent in a union and through the UP?

Several years ago, volunteer-animators of The Hunger Project introduced, for the first time, open budget meetings at the grassroots level, where we tried to estimate the amount of money directly spent by the government in a union. We found that in Fathepur UP under Mirzapur upazila of Tangail, where such a meeting first took place in June 2001, about Tk.1.1 crore was spent via the upazila, from



"Budget" is a meaningless word for her.

which about Tk.23 lac, or 23%, was spent through the UP. Only a puny amount of Tk.3 lac was allocated to the UP from the ADP. Of the remaining Tk.68 lac, nearly 73% was spent on salaries and benefits, especially for the primary and secondary school teachers.

Of their share of crores of taka, if on the average only Tk.1.1 crore is spent in a union, where does the remaining amount go? The remainder is obviously spent, although centrally through ministries, directorates and sub-directorates. A large portion of it goes into paying overheads, another into producing public goods, and still others for public services. A big chunk either falls prey to corruption or is wasted.

It should be noted that little of the centrally spent amount normally leaves the cities, depriving the rural areas of much of their benefits. I have seen the evidence of how the centrally spent money is stolen in Aila

affected areas of Satkhira. The main reason for much of the devastation in the coastal areas of Satkhira was the tidal wave, which washed away the embankments. According to residents, the embankments were first built in 1962. Crores of taka were subsequently "spent" for repairs and maintenance but there was very little improvement because of corruption. The result was damage to crores of taka worth of property.

The lack of a mechanism for ensuring the accountability of the government functionaries at the local level and the lack of people's awareness allowed them to get away with such corruption. An effective system of local government could redress these problems.

A UP's share in the proposed budget is a minimum of Tk.7 crore (from the ADP) and the maximum of Tk.25 crore (from the total budget). If a good chunk, say Tk. 3-4 crore, of this share is directly spent in

each union every year while mobilising and involving the people, there would be significant changes in the lives of the rural people due to improvement in education, health, sanitation, safe water, women's conditions, environment, family planning, self-employment, etc. These problems are local, and they must also be solved locally under the leadership of elected local representatives -- they cannot be solved centrally.

The transparency and accountability of these increased expenditures can also be ensured through legally mandated "gram sabhas" or "ward sabhas." Such an institutional mechanism can also ensure people's participation in solving the problems and a transition to participatory democracy. As our honourable prime minister wrote in 1995 (*Poverty Eradication: Some Thoughts*, Agami Prokashani): "If the democracy is not meaningful for the poor, its foundation is bound to get weakened."

If a large segment of the budget is spent at the grassroots with effective participation of the people, poverty will be eradicated in no time, the common people will get their fair share of the national resources and vibrancy will be infused in rural life. All these are part of the election manifesto of the present government, and achieving them will require massive devolution of power and resources and strengthening of the local government system.

Unless the local government is made the centre of all development activities, the common people will continue to be deprived of their rightful shares of national resources, and the budget will continue to remain the concern of the functionaries and businessmen. Our prime minister had rightly said in 1995: "Only a decentralised state, not the bureaucratic state, can effectively implement the poverty eradication programs

and can ensure the participation of the people in such them. For this reason, a skilled and representative local government must be created."

There is also a practical reason for decentralisation and strengthening of local bodies. Large budgets will not bring any dividend unless they are implemented. Our past experience of ADP implementation is dismal. Only through decentralisation of power and resources can the situation be redressed. Thus, the commitment to "eradicate poverty and halt disparity" will require strengthening of local government and empowering of the leadership of nearly 60,000 elected local representatives. Such a change will ensure equity and social justice, which are missing from the current discourse on the budget. Let us forget, we know the disastrous consequences of a highly centralised state like Pakistan.

Looking at the incentive package of Tk.5,000 crore earmarked for combating the possible impact of the worldwide economic meltdown, we would like to know who will get shares and how its distribution will benefit the common folks. Given the present economic uncertainty, it is important to stimulate the domestic economy and increase internal demands.

Couldn't the finance minister come up with an additional incentive package of, say, Tk.6,000 crore, from which 6 crore poor of our country could be given a cheque of Tk.1,000 each? This would definitely give a shot in the arm to the domestic economy, and at the same contribute to social justice and economic good governance. This would also make the recipients reach a higher indifference curve and gain larger benefits from these transfer payments.

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Revitalising Rajshahi University

The authorities should build the institution as a centre of excellence instead of a centre of politics. During the last seven years, merit was overshadowed by nepotism, favouritism and corruption, which were the main principles in the selection criteria.

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taker government (2007-2008).

Although making changes in the university administration just after change in the central government is not admirable, we can, however, support this initiative considering the political culture of Bangladesh. This is because it is very hard for the university authorities to receive cooperation from the central government if they do not belong to the party in power. For instance, we can refer to the case of US, where a good number of employees are changed with the change of the president. Thus, we can exercise this option in different institutions, especially in autonomous bodies.

Now I will concentrate on RU. The PM wants to bring a qualitative change in every aspect of our country. What does qualitative change in the case of public universities mean? First of all, the authori-

ties should build the institution as a centre of excellence instead of a centre of politics. During the last seven years, merit was overshadowed by nepotism, favouritism and corruption, which were the main principles in the selection criteria.

Since I am a faculty in the Department of Public Administration, I will cite an example from my department so that the readers may judge the situation. In mid-2005, the Departmental Planning Committee recommended the recruitment of three lecturers. As far as I know eight candidates applied for three posts of lecturer. Two candidates had four first classes and the rest had three first classes. The selection committee recruited six lecturers, ignoring the Departmental Planning Committee's recommendation for recruitment of three lecturers.

What struck me most was that one candidate having four first classes were not selected, even though five candidates having three first classes were. Some sources said that the candidate having four first classes was excluded since her father was involved in Awami politics. There were allegations of lots of similar cases during that time.

Apart from teacher selection, 546

employees were also recruited in the same way. If a candidate's political identity is considered in the selection process, how will it be possible to ensure quality education in the higher educational institutions?

The AL government has brought changes in the university administration. Being an ordinary citizen and a teaching faculty, I personally expect something exceptional from the present administration. I have known the VC and Pro-VC for a long time, and they are believed to have a clean image.

What are my expectations from the RU administration? First of all, I certainly expect that they will build RU as a centre of excellence and try their best to restore the image of RU, which had been damaged during the last seven years. While recruiting teaching staff, they should follow merit as the only principle instead of political consideration. They should recruit qualified teachers in place of voters, because there is a common perception that nowadays university authorities recruit voters instead of teachers. They should also follow the merit principle in the recruitment of employees. Even in the case of selecting people for different administrative positions they should consider the candidate's academic excel-



Depoliticise the university.

ence instead of political maturity.

Finally, let me take the opportunity to thank the university administration for setting up an enquiry committee to look into the charges of nepotism, favouritism and corruption that had taken place during BNP-Jammat administration. At the

same time, I would like to request the authorities not do anything in their tenure so that another enquiry committee is formed when they will not be in power.

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Coping with digital revolution

Media scholars sometimes talk about the growing convergence between "old" and "new" media. Converging or not, the spectrum of media channels has vital connections, and the power of old or new media is enhanced by establishing such linkages.

GUOBIN YANG

RECENT events in Iran and China have again demonstrated the global power of the Internet. Iranians used web technologies to broadcast their street protests to the world while Chinese "netizens" challenged a government policy to require computers to pre-install a new filtering software.

In Iran, protesters used the social-networking tool Twitter to communicate with the outside world when journalists' access was restricted. Large numbers of tweeters individually reported the events with photographs, short messages, and links to videos and web sites. The result was a real-time communication network that beamed out information about the current Iranian crisis almost non-stop. This is the power of a new type of CNN -- a Citizen News Network.

In China, the announcement of a government policy to require computers to pre-install a software called "Green Dam-Youth Escort" triggered a backlash

of online protest. The policy was allegedly designed to protect minors from pornography and other "unhealthy contents" online. Although few would object to protecting minors and China undoubtedly has its share of trouble in battling Internet pornography, the new policy raises serious questions about its hidden intentions.

People protested against an apparently intrusive policy suddenly imposed from above without going through any process of public consultation. The Chinese government has not changed the policy yet, but widespread online protest has put it on the defensive.

Internet control and activism are long-standing issues in the global arena. International media opinion typically swings back and forth between hope and despair in reaction to setbacks in control or victories of counter-control activism. News about the Chinese "Green Dam" software instantly set off fears about broadening Internet surveillance. Just as quickly, with a strong outpouring of

opposition, fears changed to optimism. Such giddy change in public sentiments reflects the fluid nature of Internet politics in authoritarian countries. Yet, behind the façade, one stubborn message persists -- the Internet empowers ordinary citizens, especially under politically restrictive circumstances.

State efforts to contain the Internet in China and Iran are widely known. In China, the "Green Dam" policy marks only the latest attempt. What is puzzling is that such efforts have gone on for almost twenty years, and yet online citizen activism is becoming more, not less, powerful. Why?

Obviously, protest reflects people's grievances. The protests in Iran are about possible election fraud and people's demand for truthful information. Bloodshed and police brutality add fire to the oil of protests. In China, the protest against the "Green Dam" policy is about the blunt use of political power to force filtering software on consumers and people's anger with the lack of transparency in the government's policy-making process. Both cases come out of deep-seated frustrations with authoritarian government behaviour. Both events draw crowds, online or offline, because the issues resonate with the public. In this sense, online activism will continue as long as people have grievances.

Increasingly, in China at least, online oppositional power depends on a new type of activist-bloggers. They write about a broad range of public issues, usually expressing dissent. Whenever major events or crises occur, readers can invariably turn to these bloggers for critical commentaries. Fully aware of the expectations of their audience, these activist-bloggers rarely fail to publish their critical responses.

Indeed, the culture of the blogosphere

is such that bloggers are compelled to produce for their audience to keep their names in the limelight. In the Green Dam case, it is these activist-bloggers that quickly became the leading critical voices in Chinese cyberspace. Online activism hardly happens out of the blue, but has found a social basis in these activist-bloggers and their followers.

Further, online activism has sustained its power because it has become a vital link with the mass media. Tweets of protests in Iran would not have become so widely known and influential if they had not been picked up by the most powerful global cable networks. Similarly, online protests about the "Green Dam" software in China were encouraged when even some official media stories questioned the policy. This is by no means to underestimate the power of the Internet.

One might just as well argue that mass media would not have been as powerful without citizens' constant news feeds from their tweets and blogs. The truth is that web power has become part and parcel of mainstream media power. Media scholars sometimes talk about the growing convergence between "old" and "new" media. Converging or not, the spectrum of media channels has vital connections, and the power of old or new media is enhanced by establishing such linkages.

To seize the attention of the mainstream media and the general public,

Internet activists also depend on two mutually reinforcing resources: size and rhetoric. Large gatherings in the Freedom Square in Tehran or Tiananmen in Beijing generate a sense of power. On the Internet, large volumes of traffic are a sign of web power. And just as passionate rhetoric attracts crowds in the streets, so do surging passions online expand participation.

The tragedy of Neda, the young Iranian woman whose death by gunshot during a peaceful protest was captured on grisly video and subsequently posted on YouTube, is a telling example. The #Neda tag in Twitter stays among the top trending topics, because Neda has become a symbolic vehicle for ordinary people to express their political passions.

"Just saw the YouTube video of Neda being murdered in the #iranwahl protest. Absolutely horrifying," goes one Twitter message. Another states: "In memory of Neda. You did not die in vain." When millions of such tweets shoot through cyberspace, their message reverberates far beyond. It is a message about the power of the web and of the people, and in the Internet age, web power is people power.

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