

Sanity needed

Since most people are mute spectators, politics, perhaps in its worst form, is a free ground for many whose vision does not go beyond their personal gains. The great potential for progress that was envisaged is fading out, giving in to the chaos and violence everywhere.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the BNP chairperson and her party high-ups alleging that the country has been sold out to India by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her visit to Delhi through signing of a secret pact and the party's reported move to launch street agitation against the government, the political climate in the country is heating up again. Compounding the peace and stability of the country is the gun battle that people witnessed recently in the Dhaka University campus between two groups of the Chartra Dal. Unhappily, even after two years of suffering during caretaker regime, political intrigue, bickering, infighting, and bankruptcy have almost become the norm.

BNP has been saying that the prime minister could not bring even a "litre" of water from Teesta and could not stop the move to build the Tipai Mukh barrage. The funny side is that neither party -- AL or BNP -- has any knowledge about Tipai

Mukh, and the issue at the moment is a battle of words. However, everyone in the country holds the view that with the prime minister's visit, there should be an end to cross-border killings and the settlement of the "Chitmahal" dispute.

Politics is headed towards a chaotic situation that spells disaster for the country already threatened by price hike of food items, production cut in the mills and factories, and crop losses in the agricultural sector. Seldom has this country so desperately needed leadership to steer clear of crises, doldrums and chaos as it does now.

Because of poverty and non-governance, the last few years witnessed a disastrous upsurge of violence that cost hundreds of lives, a steady worsening of the economy and an unprecedented polarisation of the society. The issue of non-governance becomes important when people see that law enforcement personnel and gun-toting student party activists are walking side by side. A report in The Daily Star on January 16 said that

BCL and Shibir clashed in three colleges in Khulna, Meherpur and Dinajpur, which left at least 88 people injured.

The message from all these ominous developments is clear; democratic norms are rapidly disappearing in the society and anarchy is gradually creeping in. Most people feel that if the government fails to contain this surge of violence, the reform measures can never be implemented. Sensible citizenry are wary of the dangerous consequences of the societal breakdown, marking a growing ideological void. At present this void is often filled with the destructive ideas of militancy, religious intolerance, violence, greed and cynicism. The result is partisan clashes, social alienation, and rise of crime that has let loose a terrible wave of lawlessness and civil turmoil.

Before these maladies turn into a catastrophe, a new pattern of politics imbued with sensibility and responsibility, with malice to none but friendship to all is needed. What is needed is a clear-headed sense of democracy's fragility and limitations. This must be backed by a campaign that can fill the minds of millions of disillusioned Bangladeshis with the values and ideals that helped nations to survive and prosper through their days of turmoil. The primacy of human rights and the rule of law, consensus on national issues, and tolerance must be enshrined in the society.

Making these ideas acceptable in a

society torn apart by economic and national crises will not be an easy task. The move for the revival of the society will definitely have to come from within the society itself, from its leaders and intelligentsia who are now at loggerheads with each other. It is largely because of this attitude that we find ourselves in a peculiar situation of being a nation without being able to provide our people with the very basic necessities -- clean air, clean water, clean living conditions, access to schools and healthcare and jobs.

Politics, as our foreign minister said in a recent meeting is not a child's game, or playing with the sentiments of the people. Politics must be oriented to serving the people, lifting the masses from the depths of misery and working for the progress and development of the country.

The most prominent casualty of the political bickering is the badly-needed economic expansion program. As it appears, foreign investors and donors are wary of venturing into an inflammable area, a conflict ridden site that has largely been made so by the politicians themselves, with utter disregard for people's sufferings. Don't they (politicians) see that the turbulence will hasten the disintegration of the country's already fragile political and economic structure and inflict irreparable damage to the growth, or the very survival, of democracy?

In their quest for public office and the perks of power, they have inflamed pas-

sions and used tricks to promote personal gain. They have exploited and manipulated all the weaknesses inherent in a developing society. Social fissures, which statesmen would normally attempt to bridge, have been deepened by some of us seeking short-term advantages.

Since most people are mute spectators, politics, perhaps in its worst form, is a free ground for many whose vision does not go beyond their personal gains. The great potential for progress that was envisaged is fading out, giving in to the chaos and violence everywhere. The country, from Teknaf to Tetulia, remains mired in political unrest, with repression and deception masquerading as populism.

The administration and the leaders of political parties seem hardly aware that the country faces a severe employment crisis and an increasing social dilemma created by a large cohort of educated but jobless youths. Over and above this, most of our people working in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Emirates and Malaysia are reportedly facing a very tough situation as regards retention of their jobs.

With prospects so bleak, it would be irresponsible to continue politics of aggrandisement. Our buoyant hopes for progress and prosperity can still be resuscitated if, without further delay, the country is brought back on track, which can only be done by bringing sanity into our political leadership. As it appears, the system crafted just after liberation of the

country has exhausted its capacity to deal with varied problems that have grown more complex.

There is no use hiding the fact that the parties or the alliances that came to power have done more talking than improving the lot of the vast populace, as evidenced by the nagging power sector, plummeting agricultural production and ailing health sector.

With all the upheavals that the country witnessed during the last seven years, we must see the emergence of new leadership in this critical period when the country is facing a shortage of everything other than greed and violence. The leaders the people are looking for must try and win political allies, seek consensus and avoid vendetta. There has to be a change in governance and style.

The newly elected government has to be more transparent in national development programs, and the opposition must join the Parliament and raise national issues there. Foremost of all, the present government, in the light of past records of malpractice in the corridors of power, must launch a relentless drive against corruption, strengthen the democratic institutions and depoliticise civil administration.

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Embarking on single-child policy

Given Bangladesh's social and religious traditions, the government must put in place the right kind of action plans supported by dedicated and devoted field workers. Motivational door-to-door campaigns and service delivery at the field level would be more helpful in attaining the goal of population control than the city-based media campaigns.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE government's decision to formulate a new population policy, emulating China's single-child families by 2015, to avoid a serious socio-economic debacle due to ever-increasing population is an eminently sensible one. According to the draft policy, couples having only one child will be given preference in all state facilities, including the government's assistance during admission to educational institutions.

China implemented the "one child per couple" policy in 1979, which was the most aggressive family planning policy in modern times. It was aimed at boosting economic development, optimising use of resources and improving welfare of the people. At the outset, most couple had, on average 2.75 children. But this figure had fallen to 1.72 by 2006.

The draft policy, which is reported to be in the final stage with the health and

family welfare ministry, wishes to engage 20 other ministries for its implementation. The health ministry will lead the population control program while the education ministry is likely to include family planning issues in the academic curriculum, while the religious affairs ministry may ask the religious leaders to speak for family planning and the information ministry would direct the media for wide publicity of the program.

A National Population Council (NPC), headed by the prime minister, has already been formed to formulate the policy. The council includes the ministers and secretaries concerned, divisional chiefs, heads of leading NGOs, population experts, sociologists and public health experts.

Bangladesh is not on the right track as far as its population growth is concerned. More than 150 million people are virtually elbowing one another in about 55 thousand square miles. It is the most densely populated country in the world, where more than 1,100 people on average live in

1 sq km. The country will not be able to sustain such a huge population even with faster economic development.

Population growth poses a major social, economic and political challenge to the government, and is a barrier to all socio-economic progress including healthcare, education, accommodation and employment.

Things are growing worse with massive migration of rural people to cities and towns in search of jobs as the rural economy is unable to provide them with the bare necessities of life.

China had to face a series of unwanted events. The major problem among Chinese couples was the tradition in which all families must have a boy to carry on the family name. As there is a preference for boys in Bangladesh too, tighter control on population would that mean more and more female infants would be eliminated before they were born.

The one child policy was enforced in China by imposition of steep penalties in the form of "social compensation fee" for having a second child. This was possible as a communist government was in power. Recent surveys among young urban Chinese show many of them prefer to have only one child because of the cost of raising children and their busy new lifestyles.

Health Minister A.F.M. Ruhul Haque told the Parliament on January 17 that the government was planning to offer various facilities to parents who had only one

child. The government will give a reception to the parents of one child to encourage people to have one child. Only reception is not likely to allure couples belonging to the poor and uneducated section of the society to have one child.

In China those who volunteer to have one child are awarded a Certificate of Honour for Single Child Parent. The Bangladesh government may seriously think of issuing Social Security Cards to the parents of single child to assure them free treatment in public hospitals, free journey by public transports, social security in old age and stipend for education of the child. Millions of couples in Bangladesh are compelled to bank on more children for old age support.

The first population policy was formulated in 1976, which identified the population problem as the number one national problem. Fertility rates declined significantly and the country achieved remarkable success in family planning after implementation of the policy. The population control program is now faltering, and the fatal effects are being palpably felt everywhere in the country.

The new population policy should focus on improving the living conditions of the overwhelming masses in rural areas, and providing them productive employment and other essential inputs to help them get out of their chronic poverty. It must also contain a provision to prevent early marriage and premature pregnancy. The draft policy should be made available



Too much of crowding.

to the public for evaluation and expert opinion.

The population boom in Bangladesh is like a time-bomb waiting to explode sooner than one realises unless drastic actions are taken to arrest it. Extreme overpopulation warrants an extreme measure like the single-child policy to save the country from demographic disaster. But the implementation of such a policy in a country like Bangladesh is a gigantic task.

Given Bangladesh's social and religious traditions, the government must put in place the right kind of action plans

supported by dedicated and devoted field workers. Motivational door-to-door campaigns and service delivery at the field level would be more helpful in attaining the goal of population control than the city-based media campaigns.

As the country cannot afford to bear such a demographic burden, the government should seriously consider setting up a separate ministry fully capable of delivering the goods. Any dilly-dally in doing so will be literally dangerous for the nation.

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China moves forward despite challenges

China's growth story has many chapters ahead. The coming decade will see it cast its own footprint on international relations not only in countries it considers as 'near-abroad' but also in far away regions of Africa and Latin America. It will also pioneer advances in technology and applications pertinent for the growth of renewable energy.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

CHINA has been the cause for envy as well as inspiration. Its steady economic progress has been based on active inter-action with the international community. That has resulted in massive foreign direct investment. It has made it the 'factory of the world'. This gradual flow of economic power from West to East has however also raised questions about the manner in which China controls its economy and the imperatives that are associated with its strategic planning. It has added to scrutiny.

China has recently become the focal point of world attention with two interesting news items. The first relates to China's emerging differences with Google. China is being forced to decide on unfettered web access for 300 million Chinese citizens, in a censorship clash that threatens to redraw the boundaries of the internet. Google, the world's biggest search company, is threatening to abandon operations in the country unless state authorities allow it to 'freely' operate 'without censorship'.

This scenario evolved after Google

allegedly discovered what it has described as a "highly sophisticated and targeted attack on our corporate infrastructure originating from China". The US State Department has waded into the fray because Google investigations have apparently revealed that attempts have been made to access the Google mail accounts of Chinese human rights activists. Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State, has demanded an explanation of Google's allegation and observed that the "ability to operate with confidence in cyberspace is critical in a modern society and economy".

The second referred to China surging past the United States to become the world's largest automobile market -- in units, if not in dollars. Figures released showed that it has also topped Germany as the biggest exporter of manufactured goods. The World Bank estimates also suggest that China -- the world's fifth-largest economy four years ago -- will shortly overtake Japan to claim the No. 2 spot.

This shift of economic gravity to China has taken place partly because domestic economic growth in China has remained robust even as the world's developed



Booming auto industry in China.

economies continued to suffer their steepest drop in trade and economic output in decades. This dynamics however does not appear to have happened by chance. This was facilitated through China's decisive government intervention in the economy (\$585 billion in stimulus money) combined with the defiant optimism of its companies and consumers.

Such propelling of the economy has proven wrong many experts who had predicted severe consequences for China on the basis that its growth was tethered to the health of its major export markets, including the United States. This economic miracle, most interestingly, has been described by the Chinese newspaper 'People's Daily' as also having been due to the ability of its leaders to make quick decisions (unlike in Western-style market-economies) without the fetters of

democratic accountability.

Nevertheless, most analysts agree that China will still have to face a number of challenges associated with its recent surge and its sustainability. It is being presumed that the Chinese policy planners will face both economic and political headwinds as they navigate through troubled waters being generated in the world financial system. China's 2009 boom, in which automakers sold nearly 14 million cars and trucks, and housing prices doubled, is also being viewed as having all the factors associated with an overheated economy at risk of serious recession down the road.

It is being pointed out in this context that the government's decision to flood the economy with cash, has, in all likelihood, created 'speculative bubbles' both

in housing and in lending. It is being suggested that as in the case of the US sub-prime crisis, this could also burst with disastrous effect.

Some are also speculating that to contain future speculation, China will require to raise interest rates and that could, in turn, impact on future investment and industrial expansion that have been the main contributors to Chinese growth.

The steady economic growth of China has also added greater force to another debate -- China revaluing its currency, the Renminbi, as compared to its current low rate against the US Dollar. China, till now, has been shrugging off this complaint from its trade partners with the argument that it is a developing nation and is entitled to a bit of comparative advantage. However, such a line is now being disputed as untenable with the emergence of China as the world's fastest-growing economy with more than \$2 trillion in foreign reserves.

Judged by numbers, China's economy looks 'robust' -- its per capita gross domestic product is expected to exceed \$4,000 this year, a 10 percent jump from 2009. Last month, the value of China's exports has also leaped by nearly a third over the same month in 2008. Imports have also jumped by nearly 55 percent, pointing toward growth in manufacturing. These are good indicators and bode well as Beijing evolves into the second-largest economy.

I am optimistic about China managing its macro-economic policies with some degree of efficiency and caution. They have watched what has happened last year in the United States and will

definitely try to avoid such a meltdown.

The first signal in this regard has already surfaced with its central bank tightening its monetary policy and raising the bank reserve requirement ratio by 0.5 per cent. This will particularly apply with regard to inter-bank loans, the first such hike in five months. This seems to signal concern among Chinese fiscal planners about the economy expanding too quickly.

There might be debate about China and its future surge but one aspect is very clear. China's growing economic clout is important in this interconnected world. We must not also forget that its growing trade arising out of manufacturing is creating jobs and money everywhere. It is also assisting in the process of poverty reduction within the rural Chinese hinterland inhabited by nearly 800 million citizens.

China's growth story has many chapters ahead. The coming decade will see it cast its own footprint on international relations not only in countries it considers as 'near-abroad' but also in far away regions of Africa and Latin America. It will also pioneer advances in technology and applications pertinent for the growth of renewable energy.

It is also more than likely that there will be intensive competition between China, Japan and South Korea. The consequences of this rivalry will in turn impact on growth not only in South Asia but also in Europe and the USA.

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