



## Connectivity the key

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SYED REZAUL KARIM

NEVER since 1975, the year of catastrophic change in Bangladesh's political leadership, has Indo-Bangladesh relationship struck such a cordial cord as it is apparent today. The relationship was warmed through Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Delhi, and has engendered prospects in the area of infrastructural connectivity between the neighbours. However, this august beginning has not gone without comment from the opposition political leadership and policy pundits.

Are their concerns genuine? Or is it the usual Indo-phobia that clouds the vision? What are the costs that Bangladesh has to bear, and what are the benefits Bangladesh has to reap if regional connectivity and integration is put into shape?

Sheikh Hasina's government is only 15 months through its tenure. Meanwhile, the opposition has already launched its "movement," ostensibly to foment unrest and create

disaffection against the government. While launching the movement in Chittagong and later in Khulna, Begum Khaleda Zia came down heavily on the government's plan to allow Chittagong and Chalna ports for transit of Indian goods and for the purchase of power from India.

She said something like: "Chittagong port has been given away, Chalna port has been given away, transit has been given away, and yet the government has not solved the problem of Dharagram enclave." She also criticised the plan to purchase power from India instead of producing locally.

Begum Zia was twice in power; but the enclave problem remained intractable during her tenure also. However, to tag the regional infrastructural connectivity with the enclave issue is to miss the wood for the trees. Was it not also a vision of late President Ziaur Rahman who spearheaded the establishment of Saarc? And was not India given transit by river through Bangladesh during her period?

It is not the transit of goods through

Chittagong, Chalna and Bhairab that matters. The bigger picture is the regional connectivity involving India, Nepal, Bhutan and ultimately China. Bangladesh has to have access through land to all these countries as much as these countries will have access through Bangladesh.

Trade and commerce has to flourish freely in the region by removing the psychological and physical obstacles. The gain for Bangladeshi ports, whether sea or inland are obvious -- they will be able to utilise the economies of scale, jobs will be created and services will expand. The railway and road communications will improve.

The importance of economic prospect is not missed by the international development agencies. Asian Development Bank "will seek to step up support for developing regional transport connectivity, power exchange and port development, among other areas."

ADB will give \$23 million for sub-regional transport project preparatory facility in 2010, \$120 million for regional transport connectivity in 2012, \$335 million for regional power generation and transmission in 2013 and \$275 million for transport corridors in 2011 and 2013. Bangladesh economy will get a big boost if this investment in infrastructure is properly managed and utilised.

Do we subordinate our sovereignty by giving transit to India or any other country? Let us look at history. Netherlands, a tiny European country was occupied by Germany in 1940 and

100,000 of its citizens, all Jews, were consigned to concentration camps. 23,000 Dutch resistance fighters died fighting the occupying Germans. That was in 1940-1945.

Today, Germany the third biggest economy of the world is intricately and indistinguishably linked with the Dutch economy, through trade and transit. The port of Rotterdam in Holland handles the German trade in oil, steel, etc. Have the Dutch subordinated their sovereignty to their giant neighbour?

Is there a real risk that India will utilise the transit route to ferry weapons to its restive north-eastern states? Let us take another illustration. In the Bangladesh War of Liberation, did India transfer its weapons, tanks, cannons, vehicles, etc. through the then East Pakistan? The Indian armoured columns moved from Agartala and Assam into Bangladesh. Why do they need Chittagong port or our roads to do that now?

We should, in the greater interest of the country, forsake the politics of "zero sum form" and "toxic politics" -- phrases used by Mr. William B. Milam, ex-US ambassador to Bangladesh, characterising Bangladesh's political landscape. (Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia, William B. Milam).

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## Sweet sixteenth?

The region now needs to be reintegrated within the context of greater political harmony as it has entered into the second era of Saarc regional cooperation (Safta and beyond).

HASANUZZAMAN

THE 16th Saarc Summit, scheduled for April 28-29, coincides with the 25th anniversary of the Association's founding.

Inaugurated twenty-five years ago by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, joined by Afghanistan in 2007, Saarc should have by now become an important entity among the global trading blocs.

With the proliferation of bilateral free trade agreements in South Asia itself (where India is the key actor), Saarc's role, however, has been weakened. So what can one expect from the 16th Saarc Summit Declaration of 2010?

More plans will be put forward to fulfill the vision of a free trade regime in South Asia. It may be recalled that the 15th Saarc Summit Declaration of 2008 incorporated issues that were vital from the regional integration perspective in the context of operationalising the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (Safta) by 2016.

Of all the issues mentioned in the Saarc Declaration 2008, establishment of the South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (Sarso) was the most strategically decisive one since it will play an important role in ensuring compatibility of standards among the various countries.

Sarso is similar to the European Committee for Standards (CEN) and the European Standards Coordinating Committee (CENLEC), both of which were mandated to take measures by "reference to standards" in order to streamline technical standards (such as low-voltage) across Europe. However, it was not until the famous judgment on the case Cassis de Dijon by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in 1979 that gave new impetus to the Commission's work on harmonising standards across Europe.

Without a strong dispute settlement mechanism such as the ECJ alongside elimination of customs duties as required by Safta, the agents (Saarc members) will not be tested for their standards of products where Sarso will be the principal tester.

The 16th Saarc summit is taking place at a

time when the political impetus for advancing the Saarc agenda seems to be high in South Asia. Saarc foreign secretaries have now finalised the proposed agreements on Safta trading services and environmental protection.

All the possibilities of reaping the economic benefits from greater regional integration have been stimulated as a result of the Indo-Bangladesh summit in New Delhi in January. The Indo-Bangladesh summit declaration offered the north-east Indian states access to Chittagong port as well as to Mongla port.

In turn, India indicated its willingness to provide unrestricted transit to Nepal and Bhutan, not just for their bilateral trade with Bangladesh but also to use its ports for third country trade. In the case of Bangladesh, according to Prof. Rehman Sobhan, the government will prefer to use the patronage of Saarc (perhaps through Sarso) in order to facilitate the regional connectivity agenda.

To conclude, though South Asia inherited an integrated transport system from the British, it was fragmented not only by the partition of India but also by its political aftermath. The region now needs to be reintegrated within the context of greater political harmony as it has entered into the second era of Saarc regional cooperation (Safta and beyond).

Thus, the 16th Saarc Summit embodies much hope for South Asian countries if they are to remain competitive, both in their respective markets and in the foreign markets. In Asean, Mercusor and the Comesa, economic benefits have successfully trumped political impediments, and the former remains the driving force behind decisions on enhancing the process of regional integration.

After a long time, Bangladesh's political leadership is demonstrating an awareness that the future is impinging on its present much more rapidly than it did in the past. Their main challenge may, therefore, be to seize the moment and lead the way into the future rather than being content with the prevailing status quo by allowing economic interests to trump political considerations.

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## The Bhola test

This election has revealed that unless political parties refrain from using muscle and show some respect for voters' mandate, all the good efforts of the Election Commission will be ineffective.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THOUGH there was a lot of speculation about the result of the by-election of Bhola-3 constituency we were not clear about the role of BNP in the election. Nomination of a rebel (reform group) BNP leader created some doubt about the quantum of interest of BNP high command in the contest.

To some, defeat in the election would enable the BNP to create the issue of vote rigging against the government. In fact, BNP is seriously contemplating launching a movement against the government to oust it. Its attempt at creating an issue of the outage of power, gas and water appears to have failed because the present crisis of electricity, gas and water had been created mainly by the 4-party rule due to lack of proper attention to those sectors. Now, its only hope is creating an issue about vote rigging in Bhola-3 constituency.

It is interesting to note that the BNP, though it rigged the elections in Magura and Dhaka-10 elections by flouting all norms of democratic government, is now trying to play the role of conscience keeper against the AL-led government. No doubt, politics is a dirty game.

The following may be the reasons for AL's victory in Bhola:

- AL won the national election, held under a caretaker (non-party) government, in this constituency. This election was accepted as free, fair and credible both by national and international monitoring agencies;
- During his tenure as minister for irrigation Major (retd) Hafizuddin could not show his proficiency in handling the issue of distribution of river waters with India;
- In the national election of 2001 there was large scale violence against minorities, especially women, and inconceivable abuse (cf Brotee Election Observation Report);
- In the Bhola union election 2003 there were 117 incidences of attack on workers

and supporters of the party in opposition by cadres of the ruling party (BNP);

- Much larger participation by minority voters in 2010 election; and
- Nomination of Major (retd) Hafizuddin was not welcomed by a large number of BNP activists for his dubious role during the confinement of Begum Zia in 2007-08.

The Bhola-3 election, as reported by various monitoring agencies, was held in a relatively peaceful manner and the election was credible and more or less free and fair. However, the fact that the BNP candidate received 40,000 fewer votes than in 2008, but the AL vote was more or less the same invites further scrutiny.

As expected, BNP has rejected the result of the election. They have asked for resignation of the Election Commission.

In our political culture we cannot accept defeat, though we want to set up democracy. Surprisingly, we have not yet learnt about the difference between the interest of the party and that of the voters. The parties/party that win must take care of the people who vote against them, because we have to learn how to compromise and adjust. We must not try to force others to accept our viewpoint.

We are glad to learn that AL is not going to celebrate the victory through distribution of sweets. This is certainly a good gesture by AL. We are also happy to hear that slowly and gradually peace and normalcy are returning to Bhola-3.

This election has revealed that unless political parties refrain from using muscle and show some respect for voters' mandate, all the good efforts of the Election Commission will be ineffective.

The Election Commission is one of the most critical statutory bodies for establishing democracy on a firm footing. For strengthening of democracy in our country we pay due respect to it. Strengthening of EC means establishing better democracy.

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## Notes in my defence

For most politicians, politics is still and will always be a noble profession. But to point out that many politicians in Bangladesh are corrupt and self-serving is only to state the obvious.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

DR. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir's book Notes from a Prison is a perfect example of what all writers should avoid -- personal attacks and name-calling -- especially when no one would dare challenge the writer's accounts of the events.

Referring to the 2001 CTG chief adviser, Justice Latifur Rahman, MKA writes: "[N]eutrality and fairness as matters of principle were unknown to him."

He calls 2007 chief adviser, Fakhruddin Ahmed, and all the other advisers "showboys."

He profiles an ACC officer as, amongst other things, having a "dirty appearance [...] seemed to be a made-to-order crook of the first degree."

Numerous others, including Dr. Kamal Hossain and Dr. Yunus, did not escape MKA's name-calling and denigration.

The comments about me were also made in a casual and cavalier manner -- and are inaccurate:

"Similar condemnation was found in comments of one Professor Abdullah Dewan of Eastern Michigan University congratulating the military-led government of Bangladesh for arresting corrupt politicians. He tried to capture the days by saying that all politicians of Bangladesh, past and present, were corrupt; none of them contributed anything for the development of the country."

"During the days of political government about nine months back in the very same newspaper [The Daily Star], I found the professor proclaiming support for the freedom and people's rights with an overtone of support of the Awami League. It was painful for me to observe a professor prone to raw opportunism unbecoming of his profession. It was all the more painful to see the professor deviating from the principle of dispassionate analysis before writing something; a professor by writing something could not twist confusion to serve his selfish purpose or serve his own predilection."

In fact, I always wrote "alleged corrupticians" and never in any of my articles ever claimed that all politicians were corrupt or that none of them contributed anything for the development of the country.

I have a keen interest in politics and political commentaries but no proclivity or aspirations to serve a government in any official capacity. Thus, accusing me of being an "opportunist" and driven by "selfish purpose" is baseless. Similarly, I don't see how my columns could be twisted to serve my own "predilection."

Like multitudes of people at home and abroad, I welcomed the CTG to pave the way for a free and fair election to restore people's rights and aspirations. Like others, I didn't see any other way out of the embroiled political impasse to achieve those goals without throwing the country onto the pyre of partisan flames -- and I was right.

Even today I believe that the CTG saved the country from an inevitable bloody clash, fixed BNP's totally politicised Election Commission and government machineries, and thus recalibrated the bureaucracy to a non-partisan functional state for the next elected government.

In the process the CTG attempted to weed out some corrupticians from the political process. But even before the book was published, many of us believed that the CTG had wronged in many instances -- criminalising people based on hearsay and perceptions.

MKA argues in the book that his prosecution and eventual jail sentence was driven by personal vendetta for his opposition to the CTG and other administrative issues. His account of his innocence is compelling.

I have no basis to question MKA's accounts of his innocence. But can he really say that there are no corrupt politicians in Bangladesh?

Just because a government withdraws corruption cases against politicians "as being politically motivated" this does not exonerate them as being innocent of the charges.

Just because a prosecutor failed to provide pertinent evidence against an official charged with corruption doesn't always mean that he/she did not commit the crimes.

Just because some politicians and public officials aren't charged with corruption (even though their lavish living style and amassed wealth are not supportable by their sources of income) they cannot necessarily be considered as being not corrupt.

There's no alternative to democracy, politics, and politicians to realise people's rights and aspirations. For most politicians, politics is still and will always be a noble profession. But to point out that many politicians in Bangladesh are corrupt and self-serving is only to state the obvious.

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