

The BNP's alternative budget

A chance for government and opposition to engage purposefully

FORMER prime minister and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia has presented what her party calls an alternative budget to the nation. We welcome the spirit in which she has made the move, given the fact that of late politics in Bangladesh has generally been caustic and stridently adversarial. The fact that the BNP has now come forth with suggestions that are positive and constructive will, we believe, serve the larger purpose of giving national politics a healthy aspect. While one may debate the points the BNP has made in its alternative budget, the truth remains that such a step happens to be the first of its kind in the history of Bangladesh's parliamentary opposition. That by itself is an indication that the kind of positive politics we have always looked forward to could indeed become a reality.

That possibility depends, of course, on where the ruling party and the opposition go from here. The encouraging bit here is Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assertion that her government stands ready to accept any good suggestion which comes from the opposition. Our view is that the opposition has a clearly defined constitutional role to play and as part of that role the BNP has now offered ideas on the budget that ought to be taken seriously by the ruling party. Notwithstanding the fact, however, that Begum Zia has presented her alternative budget at a news conference, we must make it plain to her and her party that such proposals will acquire wider currency and greater credibility if they are made in Parliament. The BNP will not only be doing itself good service but will also help the country realise its democratic potential if it makes it its policy to engage the government on the floor of the House. For its part, the ruling party, because it happens to be presiding over the day-to-day fortunes of the nation, should go out all the way to cooperate with the opposition. Such a spirit will act as a spur to a smoother functioning of the JS and will surely promote the kind of consensus the nation would like to see emerge in national politics on the major issues it faces.

The points the BNP has made in its alternative budget are worth looking at. The party should ensure that it is not a one-off move and indeed that henceforth it will make its position on national issues clear and specific at regular intervals. The BNP's focus on gas exploration, the emphasis on subsidies in such vital sectors as agriculture, an expansion of the social safety net and the focus on climate change-related matters are thoughts that the government should utilize as a chance to provide the necessary space to the opposition. In other words, the government should reciprocate the BNP's move vis-a-vis the alternative budget in the spirit in which it has been made. Let it make sure, though, that its functionaries do not speak in discordant voices on the subject. The last thing we need is pointless arguments and mud-slinging on such a crucial issue. Finally, we urge the BNP that it rejoin Parliament and have its budget-related proposals go through full scrutiny in the House. Let it all be a purposeful exercise on its part.

Minimum working wage for garment workers

An unmet demand putting the sector to avoidable peril

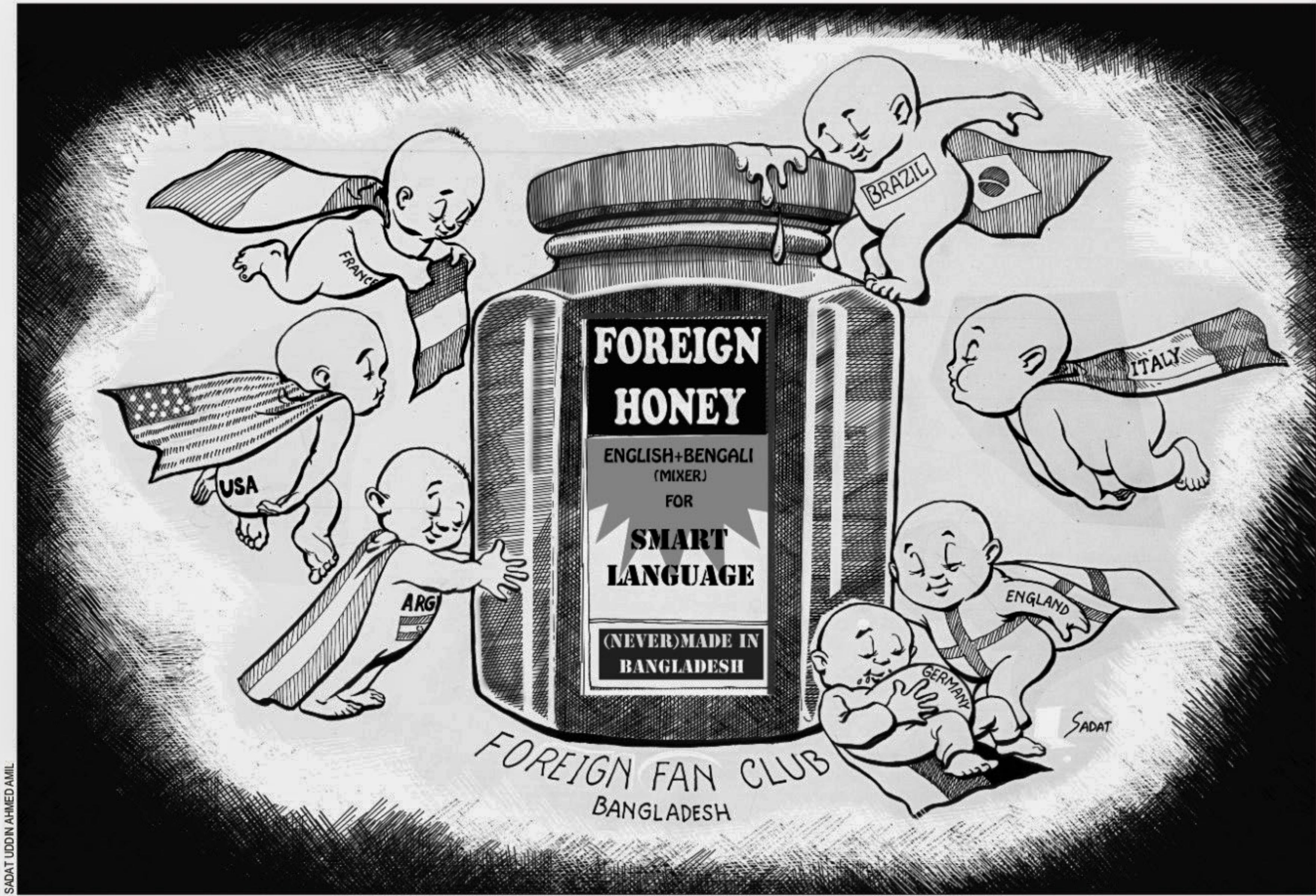
A report based on minimum wage board sources appears quite revealing on important counts. First of all, a comparative analysis of pay structures for workers in ten industries clearly shows that the garment employees are among the lowest paid. Quite decidedly though, the garment sector is the most successful and profitable concern among them. It also employs the highest number of women workers among all industries thereby adding on to women's empowerment.

Thus in consideration of the pure socio-economic dividends yielded by virtue of the sector, those who work in it deserve a much better deal than they are currently getting. But should one add the signal contribution they make to the economy to the tune of 76 percent of its forex earning, how much more compelling becomes the rationale for a better deal to them!

Yet for those who splurge on their hard-earned income abroad, whenever a demand for a pay hike is raised by the workers, garment industry owners and exporters argue that it would undercut their competitive edge vis-à-vis other exporting countries. Actually, those experienced in international trade say the exact opposite: they assert that if workers salaries are raised foreign buyers tend to increase their prices too. The fact of the matter is that the buyers are only too aware of our salary structures and take that into account while offering their prices at the level they do. Besides, the question of compliance with better labour practices which have to do with acceptable levels of performance cannot be trifled with, either.

It is good to know that the government has constituted a minimum wage refixation board in January of the current year. In a meeting of the board on May 30 worker representatives demanded that the minimum salary slab be refixed at Tk 6,200, equivalent to US 90 dollar. But the owners responded by offering Tk 1,989 only i.e. US dollar 29 barely Tk 327 more than that fixed in 2006.

We regard the salary structure announced through a tripartite agreement in 2006 as being inconsistent with the cost of living and rates of inflation obtaining at that time. Even that bit of salary was allowed to fall in arrears. A good news is that the recession-induced decrease in consumer demand is rebounding abroad. So, without much ado, the minimum wage for garment workers should be raised to a remunerative level counting a family of four as a basis. Furthermore, it is equally important that regularity of payment is ensured so that the garment sector, one of the major pillars of our economy, can work to its full potential, free from tempestuous unrest it has often seen.



Flags, football and other wicked thoughts

Now, of course people will have every reason to make their soccer preferences known. The problem, though, is in all that chaos of the flags. You tend to wonder if the rules permit you to hoist the flag of a country not yours at your home.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET me go first person singular today. And I will do that because what I am about to say is something you may not agree with. Perhaps you should not, for every person has the right to dissent. And dissent is not just a powerful sign of democracy at work. It is also a huge spur to informed argument. But let me not digress. I will come straight to the point.

Over these past many days, I have been travelling, with something of intensity if not intrepidity, through Argentina and Brazil, here in the rainy, rather humid soil of Bangladesh. Of course, I refer to the about-to-be-inaugurated football World Cup.

Now, I have nothing against football, having played the game to my heart's content for quite a significant number of years of my life. I stopped playing it when I was ten. And that, I keep telling myself, was not very long ago. You will, I presume, not agree with me.

But let that be. Let us get back to this Argentina-Brazil affair. As things stand in this city today, perhaps in other regions of the country too, there is a ubiquity of Argentine and Brazilian flags hanging from

nearly every window and every rooftop, so much so that you might be lulled into thinking that this country has suddenly been peopled by men and women from those two South American countries.

There would be nothing wrong in foreigners coming to make their homes here. But what does not seem quite right is the sheer electric enthusiasm with which our very own Bengalis have been gathering up the national flags of these two countries as a way of demonstrating their support for their football squads at the upcoming World Cup.

Now, of course people will have every reason to make their soccer preferences known. The problem, though, is in all that chaos of the flags. You tend to wonder if the rules permit you to hoist the flag of a country not yours at your home.

Let me not crib here. It is perfectly all right to back a country in a game, maybe even in international politics. But whether you should assume that it is also all right for you to cover your streets and your cities with foreign flags just because you love foreign football teams is something else. It is quite a serious matter. And it begins to raise eyebrows when someone remembers

that on your own days of national significance you are not quite as enthusiastic about celebrating your country as you are about other countries.

Have you noticed that a lot of Bengalis have also taken to displaying the Argentine and Brazilian flags on their vehicles, which can turn out to be quite a bother? And it is because once you spot such a vehicle near you or approaching you, you are quite liable to think that the ambassador of either of these countries is passing by... until you realise it is one of your own kinsmen happily engaged in sports propaganda for the sporting country of his choice.

Come to think of it, you can't really do anything about it. Ah, but can't you, really? Think of any other country where you will come across such a ubiquity of foreign flags. You will likely spot none. That is when you must get a bit serious. Are there no rules in your country about hoisting foreign flags? No, do not get me wrong. Far be it for me to question anyone's patriotism here. And sports go beyond borders. Anyone who tries to inject politics here deserves to be thrown into the nearest river, unless of course you have other ideas.

But what really puts you on edge here is the thought of these football fans' inability to demonstrate their World Cup preferences in a more subtle way. They could do it through conversations, through arguments if you like. But plastering an entire locality or city with non-Bangladeshi flags is something that raises some uncomfortable questions.

Ah, well! Don't forget that in all these years some idiosyncrasies have crept into the way we think. In our general deportment there is something which speaks to us of the beauty of things foreign or alien. Think of all the people who regularly speak in public, on television or somewhere else. Think of yourself, if you don't really take offence at my effrontery, if it is effrontery.

In our quotidian conversations, the chances are that we will bring in English terms and phrases when we really shouldn't. Don't you find it aggravating when a Bengali, despite being acquainted fully with his own language, deliberately or carelessly injects English words into his conversation? He is supposed to be talking in Bengali. But watch what unspeakable things he is doing to the language. He brings in "problem" and "identity" and "agricultural sector" when there truly are easy-to-remember terms for them in his language.

A television compere hosts a music show. That is admirable, but what disturbs you is her reluctance to find the Bengali terms for "dear viewers." You might think one is being cantankerous here. You would be wrong to look at the issue in that manner. Language, you see, is a matter of delight... as long as you do not corrupt it with insidiously imported alien terms.

But enough of polemics! Let us go see how many more Argentine and Brazilian flags have come up in the neighbourhood.

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Tokyo turns a new page

Analysts say that what is required for Japan is a decisive leader who can take charge and restore confidence, and the new prime minister has a reputation and track record as a strong leader who has good communication skills. He seems to fit the bill for now.

HARUN UR RASHID

NEW Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) -- the country's fifth leader in six years -- has pledged to rebuild his party's battered standings and revive the economy before upper house elections next month. His predecessor, Dr. Yukio Hatoyama, was in the office only for eight months and stepped down on June 2.

In the election on June 4, he comfortably saw off little-known backbencher Shinji Tarutoko, who was seen as a proxy for deposed DPJ secretary and veteran political manipulator Ichiro Ozawa.

Kan's 291 votes to 129 victory is seen by some as a sign that Ozawa's power has been waning, but other insiders believe that Ozawa directed his camp to split its vote to obscure the size of his bloc.

A triumphant Kan pumped his fists in the air and bowed to colleagues after easily winning a leadership ballot of DPJ MPs for the party leadership. *The Asahi Shimbun* said in an editorial: "Japan's politics has turned a new page."

Kan will name his new cabinet and flesh out his policy agenda within a week, although he installed two of Ozawa's strongest enemies, Yukio Edano and Yoshito

Sengoku, as party general secretary and cabinet secretary in a move to further freeze out the "shadow shogun" of Japanese politics.

Ozawa and Hatoyama had been tainted by electoral fundraising scandals before the latter's failure to fulfil his campaign vow to shift the US Futenma base off Okinawa finally finished them as a leadership duo.

Former finance minister Kan is expected to stick by much of the policy platform adopted by the Democratic Party of Japan when it seized power last year, but to provide a far steadier hand at the helm than the dithering Yukio Hatoyama.

Speaking before the vote, Mr. Kan pledged to focus on ending two decades of economic stagnation by tackling Japan's massive public sector debt and poor growth rate.

"I will carry on the torch of reviving Japan that the Democratic Party received from the people," he said.

Kan is expected to honour the accord that Hatoyama was forced to strike with the US in keeping the Futenma marines base in Okinawa, but he has also talked about placing equal emphasis on Japan's increasingly strong trade and diplomatic relationship with China.

The other main elements of the DPJ's platform include deep cuts in greenhouse

gas emissions, the formation of an East Asian community and cutting back of Japan's bureaucracy and wasteful spending.

The left-leaning DPJ heavyweight will need all his toughness to drag the party from the rut the Futenma row and the corruption scandals surrounding the former DPJ leadership have left it in ahead of next month's upper house elections.

Polls on June 5 showed support for the DPJ, which had slumped to 36.1% from 20.5% in late May, and nearly 58% expressed high hopes for Kan.

Kan, the son of a businessman, is seen as being more decisive than his predecessor -- and he has built up a reputation for taking on obstructive bureaucrats. He cut his teeth in public life as a student activist and headed a patent law practice in the 1970s.

He was elected to the Diet in 1980, but he shot to political prominence as health minister in the mid-1990s, when he blew the whistle on a tainted-blood scandal involving his own department, an almost unprecedented move in contemporary Japanese politics that won him public acclaim.

However, the father of two has also battled scandals, including his failure to make pension payments for 10 months, which forced his resignation from the health portfolio. In 2005, Kan toyed with the idea of starting a new party, called the Dankai (or Baby Boomer) Party.

Japan has been facing three issues for a long time, and none of his predecessors could resolve them. They are (a) an unresponsive political system, (b) a ballooning national debt, and (c) a nearly two-decade long economic slump.

Political experts say that Kan is expected

to give his government a clearer sense of direction than his predecessors to handle these issues. He has been a straight talker and will be much more pragmatic and down-to-earth than the indecisive Hatoyama in pursuing his policies.

"My first job is to rebuild the country, and to create a party in which all members can stand up together and say with confidence, 'We can do it!'," a smiling Kan said after his party earlier installed him as its new leader.

Kan vowed to revitalise Asia's biggest economy, which has been in the doldrums since an investment bubble collapsed in the early 1990s. He reportedly said: "I want to create a government that can implement policies to break through Japan's 20 years of stagnation."

Analysts say that what is less clear is how he will handle foreign affairs, in particular Japan's relations with the US. "Japan has a lot of problems, including the North Korean issue," said Kan, stressing that US-Japanese ties remain the "cornerstone" of foreign policy.

He also said that he would maintain Japan's goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25% from 1990 levels by 2020, one of the most ambitious targets of any country, and to seek an EU-style Asian community in future.

Analysts say that what is required for Japan is a decisive leader who can take charge and restore confidence, and the new prime minister has a reputation and track record as a strong leader who has good communication skills. He seems to fit the bill for now.

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