

A cosmetic sign of improving living standard

Still a long way to go in quality and numbers

BETTER lifestyle, improved standard of living, increased welfare and reduction of poverty have been inter-changeable phrases as far as laymen's understanding of economics goes. As a matter of fact, economists themselves are still immersed in expressing each of the indicators of development in measurable terms. That is when our understanding of what is going around in our life's conditions is enriched.

A welfare monitoring survey (WMS) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reveals that those below the poverty line have dropped to 31.9 per cent in 2009 from what was 40 per cent in 2005. Although the assumptions differ between both calculations; the 2005 measure was based on household income and expenditure surveys while in the WMS poverty figure, self-claims of the respondents formed the basis.

Even though clearly in terms of clothing and footwear, things have improved and, more importantly, access to TV, radio, electricity and cell phone has increased, a vast majority are still deprived of basic needs, such as water, sanitation, healthcare, literacy and old age security.

The government has stood by the ultra-poor through 100-day seasonal employment and other safety net programmes but these are largely confined to calamity affected backward areas sometimes suffering from opaque distribution mechanism to top it off.

An increasing number of people, 61 per cent of the respondents, borrowed money to meet food expenditure adding a poignant dimension to low-purchasing power or erosion of real income which basically means being entrapped into poverty. A somewhat consumerist culture also seems to have permeated the lower stratum with people borrowing money, a little like in the West.

Whatever may have been the average changes in lifestyle indicative though it is of a certain jest for life, yet in terms of human development and vulnerabilities indicators we have a long way to make the mark. The checklist reads daunting enough: well under 40 per cent completed primary education, only 1.9 per cent have computers and 78.1 per cent mothers delivered babies at home through assistance from midwives.

The overarching fact is that while we have had a demographic dividend through better food harvest, yet GDP growth dividends have not reached the vast majority of our people. It is the wealth distribution pattern riddled with corruption, expropriation and flight of capital that has increased the gap between the rich and the poor, which if it yawns further could only disrupt social stability to the peril of our polity. The sooner we realise it and roll back the negative trend the better it will be. Indeed, that is where our litmus test lies.

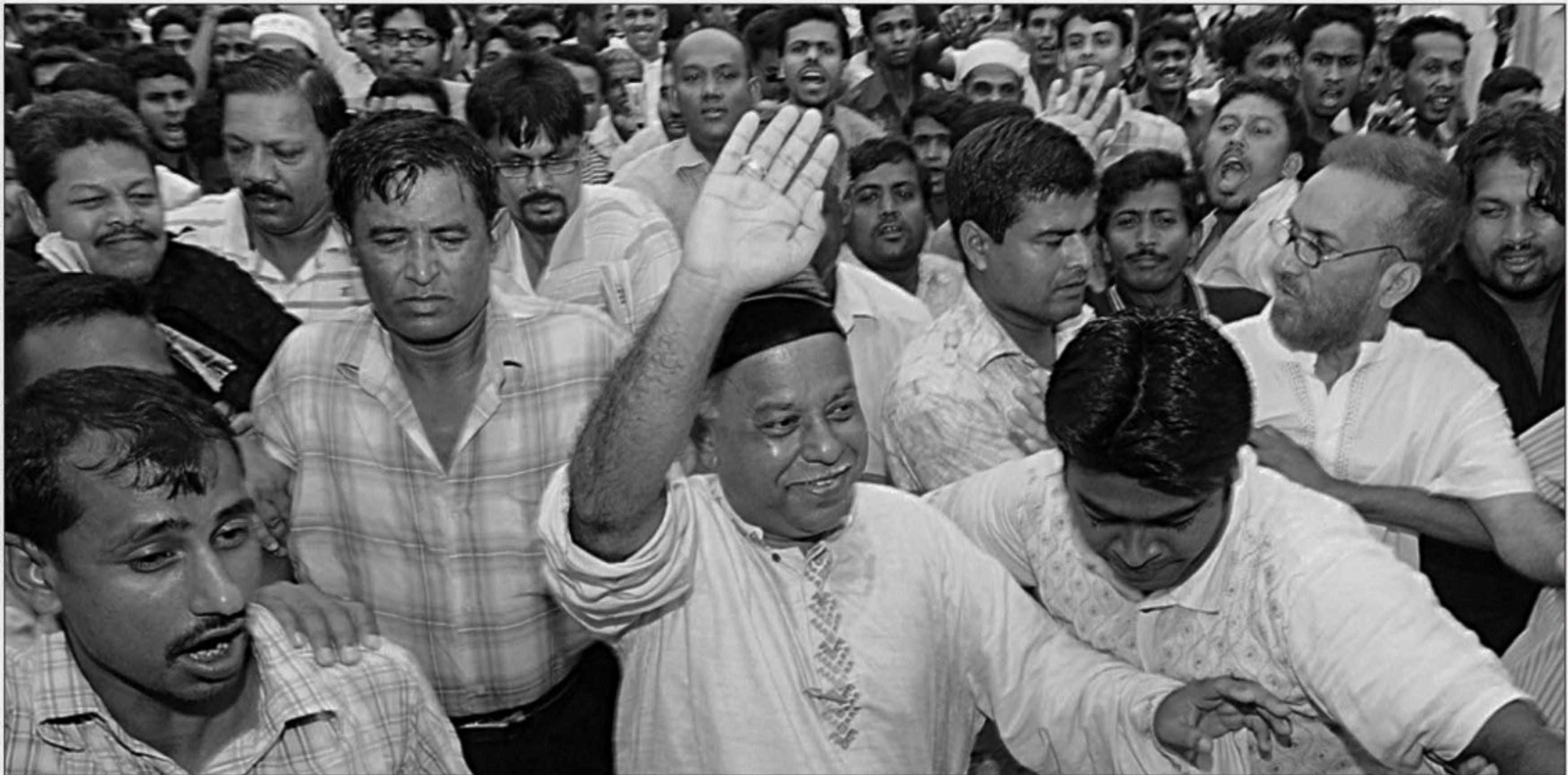
Rajapakse's rejection of UN demands

International probe into war crimes can help heal wounds

SRI Lanka's leader has come down hard on demands for a probe into war crimes allegedly committed towards the end of the conflict between the government and the LTTE. President Mahinda Rajapakse does not think that the Sri Lankan army committed any crimes or excesses, but he does believe that the criminality the United Nations wants to be inquired into came from the defeated Tigers. It is a position that will not sit well with the global community. Nor does it help that the president has described such demands as a demonstration of sympathy towards terrorism. The record does not show that the international community and global bodies have at any time been supportive of terrorism anywhere and have on the contrary been vocal against any individuals or organizations engaging in violent means of changing politics anywhere.

The Sri Lankan president's comments come a year after his government finally laid the LTTE low in a conflict that in its entire course claimed the lives of no fewer than 70,000 people. It was particularly in the final phases of the war that the ferocity of the conflict was demonstrated through the battering Tamils in the LTTE-held north and east came under. With the government refusing to allow the media into rebel territory it recovered, it became difficult to assess the reality on the ground. But, again, reports did begin to emerge of both the retreating Tigers and the advancing army killing unarmed civilians, with even footage of some soldiers shooting Tamils coming to light. Now, the point here is that when an organization like the United Nations notes that war crimes may have taken place and therefore should be investigated, the allegation cannot be discounted altogether. The Colombo authorities would, of course, like to have their own people inquire into the alleged crimes. That would be pointless. And just why it would be pointless is something which comes from Rajapakse himself. He has categorically stated that the army committed no crimes in the Tamil region. He has thus already taken a position, which is all the more reason why the UN should be going ahead with the formation of the secretary general's advisory panel on Sri Lanka in the next few days.

The Sri Lankan government will be doing itself a favour if it cooperates with the UN in an investigation of war crimes. With tens of thousands of displaced Tamil civilians yet forced to live in camps set up by the army, and in squalid conditions, it is extremely important that the international community as well as Sri Lanka inquire into what actually happened in the final days of the war and thereby make it possible for all Sri Lankans, Sinhala and Tamil, to begin a new era in national life together. The government's denial mode does not help. It is in the interest of Sri Lanka itself that the UN should be permitted to draw its conclusions on the end of the conflict. President Rajapakse and his government must have the magnanimity to place everything out in the open if the old wounds are to heal.



The people have spoken.

CCC elections: Eye-opener for megalomaniacs

While the political leadership of AL and BNP would do their own analyses, the self-important political leaders of the country, who have so far nourished the mistaken belief that they are invincible, must now start believing that their days are numbered.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

WE are familiar with the adage that courtesy costs nothing but buys everything. We now have to come to terms with a new saying which should be read as: Audacity buys nothing but costs everything.

If I am told to sum up ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury's crushing defeat in the Chittagong City Corporation mayoral polls in one sentence, I must say that it is his audacity coupled with his party men's lack of sense of proportions that cost him the crown which he once won of his own accord.

Insofar as election-day affairs are concerned, the elections took place in an overall free and fair manner. Anomaly in the form of long-standing false-voting was almost non-existent due to a voter list with photographs which has once again proved its worth.

One must say, if the database is updated with making the photos a little more clear, manipulating the elections in future will become extremely difficult. Meanwhile, the level of intimidation was also almost non-existent in most of the centres while barely minimal in a few.

First time introduction of electronic

voting in Jamal Khan ward in the city corporation elections saw a very good beginning of this endeavour. The system was more or less user-friendly. More publicity should have been in place. People, however, observed how easily election results got out by this system.

Interestingly, had the full elections been held under electronic voting system, the late night results-related skirmishes might have been avoided following a full-day peaceful election scenario.

The message is, however, crystal clear that the people who embraced Mohiuddin just four years back despite all odds have now forsaken him, silently but decidedly.

Last time he played on the people's emotions. This time around, however, he and his canvassers pricked the people's emotions by continuously poking at the rival candidate and taking the electorate for granted. Maybe, the Awami League leadership took the elections too lightly only to pay too heavily.

Otherwise, they should not have made derogatory remarks like the one that appeared in a local daily newspaper: They have taken away our baby goat only to turn it into a scapegoat.

The end result is that the guru has lost his mastery to his disciple which cost his party

as well as it would be regarded as a barometer of the incumbent's popularity.

The fact is, however, that the loss is less a result of AL's direction in running the country and more a result of Mohiuddin's ever-increasing pride and AL's child play with the nomination as well as the campaign.

The AL leadership should have considered the issue that Mohiuddin created many foes in his own party by being unnecessarily rude to them. He also gave rise to public reactions by publicly insulting and harassing many people including a woman councillor of his own corporation.

He and AL leadership must have thought that they would carry the day despite such an unhealthy background. It has, however, again been proved beyond doubt that they have miscalculated the simple math and that is: Elections can be won by winning people's hearts, not by circumventing them, and disgruntled people will not always vote against their will.

Though Mohiuddin Chowdhury was a towering personality and more or less a successful mayor for long 17 years, he has lost to his one-time disciple who was rather low-profile in Chittagong city's political landscape.

Many big shots of BNP politics should take a lesson from the Monjur Alam triumph that simplicity might still buy many things in modern-day politics. There, is however, the danger that Mr. Alam might become a plaything in the hands of BNP big guns and overzealous intelligentsia of Chittagong city. Hopefully, the new city father would be able to ward off such ele-

ments in his own right.

On balance and on reflection, Mohiuddin Chowdhury did not bag less votes despite the negative ambience he created by his type of behaviour pattern. In fact, many people believing in the spirit of liberation war just could not vote against him despite their personal dislike for him. Or else, the margin would have been all the more harrowing for him.

To be frank, the result could have been different and positive for the ruling party had the Mohiuddin-created image problems been solved earlier. Instead of sorting out the problems created by Mohiuddin, the party leadership almost turned a deaf ear to the wailings of various groups and sufferers.

The result of the Chittagong City Corporation mayoral polls should provide a number of lessons to political gurus and should influence the future political course of the country.

While the political leadership of AL and BNP would do their own analyses, the self-important political leaders of the country, who have so far nourished the mistaken belief that they are invincible, must now start believing that their days are numbered.

The bottom-line, however, remains as usual: It is the people, not the leadership, who have the final say in turning and dislodging heroes, and they would invariably have this magic wand in the days to come, too.

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Death of polity

By shouting down every critic, the ruling Congress underlines its arrogance of power. It must own the responsibility and offer apologies to the nation. At least, it can take immediate steps to rehabilitate the thousands of victims still in the cold. The Congress must learn humiliation.

KULDIP NAYAR

DEMOCRATIC polity in India was again exposed when details of the Bhopal gas tragedy came out. There was a nexus between the judiciary, the executive and the bureaucracy. All the three joined hands to let chairman Warren Anderson of Union Carbide, the company which owned the gas plant, escape from India. They also scaled down the compensation that the company had offered and delayed the court judgment by 26 years.

This was like the emergency a decade earlier, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi battered the polity on June 25, 1975, denying even the fundamental rights. It was the same story; the judiciary, the executive and the bureaucracy falling in line to justify an authoritarian rule. Scant attention was paid to the democratic constitution. In fact, the organs of the state were part of the tyranny perpetrated.

On both occasions, the ruling Congress was in power at the centre and in Madhya Pradesh, where the gas plant was located. And on both occasions the prime ministers, Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi, became law unto themselves and inflicted deep wounds on the democratic structure, which is still recovering from the staggering blows it received.

Rajiv Gandhi is said to have told state Chief Minister Arjun Singh to let off Anderson, which what a top Congress functionary characterised as "US pressure." Rajiv Gandhi consulted the cabinet subsequently, if he at all did. Mrs. Gandhi too imposed the emergency on her own,

consulting the cabinet only subsequently.

By the time she did she had already detained without trial thousands of people. She went even further; she gagged the press. The media has done more than its duty on Bhopal. But for its campaign, the Congress party headed by Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi's wife, would not have been as defensive as today.

Both happenings show that the army does not have to walk in to make the judiciary, the executive and the bureaucracy toe line. Prime ministers who can concentrate power in themselves can flout all the norms and rules which necessitate accountability.

Mrs. Gandhi had the Supreme Court upheld by 5 to 1 her authoritarian rule in the emergency, like Pakistan Chief Justice Munir who justified the takeover by General Ayub through the "doctrine of necessity."

Such instances indicate that the judges are as much dictated by "other considerations" as civil servants. They are just afraid to stand up to the government's aggrandisement. Chief Justice A.H. Ahmadi diluted the section under which the perpetrators of Bhopal gas tragedy were booked, from section 304 of the Indian Penal Code, which laid out a punishment of 10 years, to section 304-A, where the maximum sentence given was two years.

As far as the bureaucracy, including officials of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), is concerned, it has become too hapless and too obliging, ready to "serve" any party which comes to power. Over the years, it has got over the qualms of

conscience, if it had any, and high ideals of service without fear or favour.

Mrs. Gandhi issued illegal orders, and they were obeyed without demur by all civil servants. This is the reason why Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan, who led the movement for morality in politics, asked the bureaucracy, police and the army not to obey illegal orders.

It was comical to see that the same deputy commissioner and the superintendent of police who put Anderson under arrest on arrival for the gas tragedy escorted him to the airport to fly out in a state plane. The chief minister's orders had made all the difference. Neither of the two stood up to the oath they had taken to uphold the constitution and the country's integrity.

I have seen similar things happening in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The ruler counts, not the rules. The ethical considerations inherent in public servants have become generally dim and, in many cases, beyond their mental grasp.

Anxiety to survive at any cost forms the keynote of approach to the problems that come before them. The fear generated by the mere threat, and without its actual use, is so pervasive that the general run of public servants in the entire subcontinent acts as willing tools of tyranny.

Accountability is the only way to ensure that those who violate the norms followed in a democratic system do not go scot-free. I have never seen an erring judge, a tainted minister or a delinquent civil servant getting punishment. They are chips of the same block, using all methods if and when they are even arraigned before any tribunal.

Mrs. Gandhi did not get any punishment for all the excesses and atrocities she committed during the two-year-long rule under the emergency (1975-77). Rajiv Gandhi was not even asked questions about Anderson's escape.

Now his secretary, P.C. Alexander, says that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi must have been informed. Why was Alexander

silent for all these years? And it is not surprising that the old leaking US plant was installed at Bhopal during the emergency. All objections to that were rejected by Sanjay Gandhi.

In fact, the Congress has put all the blame on the then chief minister, also a Congressman. Even if the party is able to deflect the blame -- as it did when it came to saving Mrs. Gandhi -- there is something called the value system. True, political parties have substituted it with power. But then they must be prepared for the violent, desperate forces like that of the Maoists or the Taliban.

What hurts me is to see in the Indian central cabinet some ministers who were part of the emergency. Pranab Mukherjee, Kamal Nath and Ambika Soni, senior ministers of the Manmohan Singh cabinet, were among those who were instruments in the hands of Sanjay Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi's son, an unconstitutional authority during the dark days of the emergency.

Home Minister P.Chidambaram, appointed by the prime minister to preside over the Group of Ministers and look into the Bhopal gas tragedy, was trying, as finance minister, to push through a decision that would absolve Dow Chemicals, which had bought Union Carbide, of responsibility.

By shouting down every critic, the ruling Congress underlines its arrogance of power. It must own the responsibility and offer apologies to the nation. At least, it can take immediate steps to rehabilitate the thousands of victims still in the cold. The Congress must learn humiliation.

Yet, if the nation has to preserve the fundamental values of a democratic society, every person -- whether a public functionary or a private citizen -- must display a degree of vigilance and willingness to sacrifice. Without the awareness of what is right, there may be no realisation of what is wrong.

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