

Blaming the BBS is not enough



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ASJADUL KIBRIA

FOR any government in Bangladesh, achieving a higher rate of economic growth along with lower rate of inflation is a must. The underlying assumption is that high growth-low inflation is a reflection of the government's success in development activities. Drop in growth or surge in inflation rate is considered as a negative achievement, no matter what the reasons are.

In fact, the high growth syndrome is basically driven by political consideration, as decline in growth becomes a tool for the opposition party to bring the government under fire. So, the government is not interested in providing such an opportunity to the opposition party.

Whatever the politics may be, the task of calculating the growth rates and other indicators of the gross national income is solely designated to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The BBS submitted the preliminary estimation of

national income to the finance and planning ministry during the last week of May.

The media is, however, able to make the information public. It shows that GDP growth rate in current fiscal year (FY10) dropped to 5.54%, from 5.67% in FY09. The decline in growth is mainly due to decline in farm output. Production in the crop and horticulture sub-sector, a major contributor to the agri-sector, registered 2.77% growth from 4% last year.

After the figures were published, there was sharp reaction from some top policy makers, including agriculture minister Matia Chowdhury and the central bank Governor Atiur Rahman. They questioned the methodology and alleged that flaws in methodology were responsible for such low estimation of agricultural growth. When such top-level policy makers question the estimation of the national statistical institute, one should take it seriously. But the way the disappointment and anger were expressed sent some wrong signal also.

Firstly, one can interpret it as the government's less-acceptance attitude towards reality, especially when things are not in favour of the government. Secondly, one can construe that the government wants to manufacture growth statistics in its favour. Thirdly, it has questioned the overall efficiency and capacity of the BBS.

If we go further, the first two propositions appear trustworthy due to the budget speech delivered by the finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhit in the Parliament on June 10. The finance minister doesn't mention the primary estimation of the GDP growth for FY10. He only mentioned that growth would be 6% in the current fiscal year.

If he had expressed his expectation that growth rate would be 6%, things would have been clearer. There is a scope to revise the preliminary estimation before finalising the national income data because of updated data on different sectors after 2/3 months. There is nothing wrong with such revision as long as it is done methodically.

Lack of capabilities and efficiencies in the statistical bureau is not a new thing in Bangladesh. Successive governments ignored the importance of this organisation and, thus, turned the BBS into a weak national institute. The agriculture minister and the central bank governor should be aware of that fact. Blaming and blasting the BBS will not solve the problem unless proper and comprehensive initiative has been taken to address the core deficiencies of the organisation.

The BBS was formed in 1974. In 1975 the statistical division was set up in the planning ministry to supervise the BBS. The secretary of the division was also the director general of BBS. But little effort has been given to turn the national statistical organisation into a professionally skilled body.

In fact, over the years, negligence by the government has weakened the structure of BBS. Instead of professional statisticians, typical bureaucrats have dominated the bureau over the years. Thus, assembling, calculating and estimating statistics in the recognised scientific manner sometimes couldn't be fully done, and the quality of many statistics comes under question. Differences between technocrats and bureaucrats sometimes hinder the activities of the BBS.

Nevertheless, it is the BBS that continued to conduct different surveys and prepare estimation on different socio-economic indicators that are crucial for policy making. Without having a good statistical-base it is difficult to adopt right policy. But, negligence in strengthening the BBS shows that

the government is not serious about developing a comprehensive statistical base.

A significant downgrading of BBS took place in 2002 when the government abolished the statistics division. BBS then came under the planning division. An additional secretary to the government was made the director general of the statistical bureau. In India, the secretary of the statistics division, under the ministry of statistics and program implementation, is the country's chief statistician. And a state-minister is in charge of the ministry.

The incumbent government, however, revived the statistics division in the planning ministry and a secretary-ranked official has given responsibility for the division. So, we can expect some qualitative change in the near future. The BBS has also been brought under the division.

The financial capacity of BBS is also weak, hindering the strengthening progress of the organisation. The current year's budgetary allocation for the statistical bureau is around Tk.62 crore. Budget constraints sometime force the bureau to curtail the budget as well as area of operation. The budget for FY11 has allocated some Tk.76 crore for the BBS while the statistics division as a whole will get around Tk.121 crore.

Funds released by some development partners and international organisations against different projects give some backup to the statistical bureau time to time. But, such projects sometimes also compel the BBS to generate data whose relevance is limited. Thus, data are compiled in line with the requirements of the international financial institutions and not necessarily to serve the country's socio-economic policy requirements.

Lack of manpower is another major obstacle to generating qualitative data in time. In fact, the time lag of data release is sometimes quite long. Preliminary census reports are usually published within five-six months while district census reports and analytical reports are published within two to three years of the census operation. And survey reports are usually published one/two years after the survey.

In India, there is an autonomous and powerful statistical commission tagged with the ministry. The commission has lot of authority regarding identification and development of the country's core statistics. Professional statistician and academician are involved in the commission. Bangladesh can review the Indian experience as well.

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Humanising Human Right Commission

Under the new legislation, the Commissioned is empowered to investigate the violation of human rights perpetrated even by government officials or members of the armed forces or law enforcing agencies. The concept of equality before law has been established, at least in the words, though not yet in practice.

ERSHADUL ALAM

WITH the appointment of Dr. Mizanur Rahman as the new chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, we, the simple citizens of the country, hope that the Commission will begin its journey with new vigour and views because it has got a dynamic personality with deep legal and human rights knowledge. With his appointment, the government has reconstituted NHRC formed by the previous caretaker government in 2007. The government has also appointed six other members as per the provision of the law re-ratified in the parliament in 2009.

The appointment, de-jure, is made by the president as per the Provision 6 of the NHRC Act of 2009. But, the chairman and all other members are appointed de-facto by the executive order of the state, i.e. the prime minister. It is laid down in Provision 48(3) of the Constitution that the president shall act in accordance with the advice of the prime minister except in the appointment of the prime minister and the chief justice.

Many argue that conferring the power of appointment to the prime minister could make any authority or institution dependent and politically biased. They forget that the prime minister is an elected member of the Parliament and also elected by the members of the Parliament as the prime minister (Article 56(3)).

However, the issue of human rights violation is a most discussed one, and concerns every citizens of the country. Since before independence, the people of this country have been struggling to achieve nothing but the protection of their right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

Why did we want to come out from the fetters of the tyranny of Pakistan? It was not to become rich or powerful. The people wanted equality, human dignity and social justice, nothing more than that. This was the principle of the Mujibnagar Declaration of Independence adopted on April 10, 1971. We hope that, under the leadership of Dr. Mizan, the principle of equality, human dignity and social justice will be followed.

With the appointment of the members, it is expected that the government will strengthen the Commission. In addition to this, the government has added more provisions in the Act with a view to extend the range of its jurisdiction to bring the perpetrators to book.

Under the new legislation, the Commissioned is empowered to investigate the violation of human rights perpetrated even by government officials or members of the armed forces or law enforcing agencies. The concept of equality before law has been established, at least in the words, though not yet in practice.

The ordinance of 2007 was promulgated by the president, and its purpose was to protect, develop and ensure human right for the people of the country. It is not possible for a three-member commission to fulfill all those purposes, even if it is empowered and made independent. Shortage of manpower was evident in the earlier Commission. It is said in the Act that the Commission will be an independent one.

But independence does not only mean allowing someone to do what he likes, but also making arrangements for him to perform his duties and enjoy his rights. How far the Commission is independent is a question of fact and of law as well. Without making sufficient arrangement, declaring any authority independent is a mockery in deed.

Since the beginning of its operation, we have not observed any significant change. A lot could be and should have been done. But we still see gross violations of human rights in almost every corner of the country. We hope, this time, this Commission will raise voice against the violators whoever they may be. We do not want this Commission to exercise its right to keep silent.

The latest amendments made to the Act are closer to those of Indian Protection of Human Rights Act of 1993, which was amended by the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act 2006 in respect of members of the committee, select committee and other areas.

It is positive sign that at least one woman will be appointed as a member of the Commission. Women are largely victims of human rights violation. To protect their rights, a member from the women folk in the Commission is call of the time.

And what is more positive is that any person having contribution in education may be appointed as the chairman of the Commission. This has been done by appointing Professor Mizanur Rahman, a teacher of law, as the chairman of the Commission.

I, as a backbencher in his class, could hear his voice very clearly from the last bench in the corner, and every time I tried to hide myself from his glance, I failed. I hope that his voice will be heard by the aggrieved from the remote corners of the country.

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Food insecurity

The country attained self-sufficiency in food production in 1999-2000, and the present government wants to achieve food autarky by 2012. But the efforts too fall short of negating the grim reality that millions in the country are still plunged in food insecurity.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT gives one no comfort to know that nearly 40% of the households in the country still live in food insecurity. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted a Welfare Monitoring Survey (WMS) earlier this year, which depicted a grim picture of the country's food security situation. The survey also said that members of most of those households often live without food, or borrow to meet their need for food.

According to the WMS report, 54% of the households managed their crisis by starving, 49% by borrowing, 49% by eating less of their favourite food and 39% by taking less food. The facts and figures of the WMS, covering 14,000 households (8,400 rural and 5,600 urban), certainly do not reconcile reasonably with the impressive GDP growth that could not contribute to improvement of the living condition of the masses.

The objective of the WMS was to collect some core welfare indicators for assessing the poverty situation in the country, excluding the income and expenditure dimensions of poverty assessment. It revealed that poverty of around 37% households increased over the years while poverty of 40% household remained the same for several years.

The areas that have been covered in the WMS are household and housing characteristics, population characteristics, health situation, self-assessment of poverty, clothing and footwear, crisis coping, credit and investment and participation in social organisations.

Poverty is a widespread and burning problem in Bangladesh. According to World Food Programme (WFP) four children are born every minute, of whom one is extremely poor. More than 30 million people in the country are facing hunger and malnutrition and at least 200 children die everyday due to malnutrition, while 28 million people do not have access to enough food.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen said that famine did not mean shortage of food, it meant lack of the capacity to purchase food. The situation in Bangladesh testifies that he is

right as millions in the country are facing food insecurity despite the bumper production of food grains. There are many people who skip eating for a night, not because of scarcity of food in the markets but because they do not have the money to buy it.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said that producing more food did not guarantee access to food, rather it was the purchasing capacity which has to be increased. She said this while addressing the inaugural ceremony of the two-day Bangladesh Food Security Investment Forum on May 26.

A tragic aspect of our national life is that many people have to starve because of their inability to buy food, although bumper production of food crops for the last couple of years has contributed to the food security of the country.

The country attained self-sufficiency in food production in 1999-2000, and the present government wants to achieve food autarky by 2012. But the efforts too fall short of negating the grim reality that millions in the country are still plunged in food insecurity.

According to the Bangladesh Economic Survey of 2004, the income differential between the poorest 10% and the richest 10% increased to 24.5 times in 2004 from 20 times in 1999. In 1999, only 1.7% of the national income went to the poorest 10% of the population, while 33.9% of the national income went to the richest 10%. In 2001-2002, the richest 10% had control over 40.72% of the total national income, while the poorest 10 percent had access to only 1.84%.

The Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09, launched on July 24 by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, also presented a grim picture of extreme poverty in the country. According to the report, around three crore people in the country live in extreme poverty. Another survey by the BBS last year found that the number of landless people was growing alarmingly. The current rate of increase in landlessness is 12.84% in rural areas while it was 10.18% in 1996 and 8.67% in 1983-84.

These findings clearly suggest that there is a flaw in the development model that the



Will she get a meal tomorrow?

successive governments pursued over the years. GDP growth, no matter how impressive it was, never contributed to any tangible benefits for the mass but accumulated more wealth into the hands of a few. If the national wealth is not distributed equitably among people of all social strata, it will never lead to wholesome development.

The number of chronic poor in China decreased to 23.6 million in 2005 from 250 million in 1978 after implementation of its Poverty Reduction Programs. In the mid-1980s the Chinese government started systematic mass poverty reduction and development efforts. As a result, the number of impoverished people without adequate food and clothing declined from 30% to less than 3%.

In the pursuit of poverty alleviation and development, China charted its own path, suitable for its own conditions, which involved government's leadership, social participation, self-reliance, an orientation toward economic development, and an integrated development approach. This approach is very relevant for Bangladesh as the country is still searching for a program for poverty alleviation.

The Indian government and the NGOs have initiated various poverty reduction programs, which include Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program (RLEGP), National Rural Employment Program (NREP), Jawar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), and

Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP). These programs have helped eliminate famines, cut absolute poverty levels by more than half, and reduced illiteracy and malnutrition.

But more than 56 programs in different names, such as Vulnerable Group Feeding, Food for Work, Cash for Work, 100-days' work and old age allowance, taken up so far by the successive governments could not reduce poverty of 60 million poor of the country. Most of these programs were not fully implemented due to lack of genuine political commitment and institutional mechanisms.

Given the gravity of widespread food insecurity and its implications on 60 million chronic poor of the country, the government should quit its existing development model, which essentially caters to the few and ignores the need of the masses, and adopt an egalitarian one. The government should be adequately prepared with a long-term vision, focused on better practices and massive investment in agriculture for strengthening purchasing power of the poor to ensure their food security.

The government should also consider reintroducing the property tax in order to check the growing disparity of wealth. Such a tax was introduced for first time in the country in 1966, but NBR was forced to abolish it in 1996 because of weak enforcement.

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