

A broad spectrum of decentralisation

The leadership should think of wedding their fortune with the prosperity of the people, instead of self-aggrandisement. Bottom up policy of the administration may inspire people to concentrate on developing their own areas. This policy should be homespun and tailor-made to local requirements.

Z.A. KHAN

THE proverbial address of Abraham Lincoln after the Gettysburg battle stressed on the need to focus on power for the people. It is known that only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. The principal subject of politics is people.

Unless the people can exercise their right to choose their leaders, they will remain indifferent to this most vital component of power, which will hamper individual, social and national growth. Let us not forget that politics is for people, and we should not use them as tools for politics.

The conviction that public institutions can contribute to development has generated people's enthusiasm, and even if the institutions may be a part of the problems, they can also be a part of the solution.

We are more focused on responding to requirements for global development, forgetting the inherent structural weaknesses in executing the global prescription for local development. Events that take place in our country often appear to be unrealistic and perverse, but they are actually responses to organisational patterns and incentives. So it is necessary to determine what kind of change is needed to empower our people to be partners in development.

Civil society is getting dissatisfied with the democracy practiced in Bangladesh, where deprivation and poverty are perpetuated at the behest of stakeholders. We should explore ways to lift the burden of poverty of our rural folk and remove the

barriers to development of rural Bangladesh.

We have to seek a new cure for the old epidemic called exploitation, or else the political leadership and their backers in administration may be the next victims of public rage. The leadership should think of wedding their fortune with the prosperity of the people, instead of self-aggrandisement. Bottom-up policy of the administration may inspire people to concentrate on developing their own areas. This policy should be homespun and tailor-made to local requirements.

Modified institutions of administration should be accompanied by genuine political direction to accomplish sustainable development. Most of the political actions and institutions were often used as instruments to legitimise authority, which has been exercised not as a trust but as a source of privileges and opportunities without accountability.

Although decentralisation helps development, there was reluctance of the political leadership to accept it as such. Forces that have worked in the quest for a new cure are:

- Disillusionment with central planning as it failed to alleviate poverty and to provide justice to those who cannot come to Dhaka;
- Implicit need for local participation in development to conform to the growth with equity strategy;
- The realisation that, with the expansion of government activities and resulting complexities, it is difficult to plan and administer development activities from the centre;
- The government rules the entire

country from the centre, which keeps opposition political parties uninvolved with development planning -- even in the constituencies where ruling party does not have presence;

- Parties with near equal popular support do not get proportional seats at the Jatiya Sangshad. BNP got only 30 seats at JS despite getting 33% of the votes, while AL got 230 seats after getting 48% votes. Most surprising of all is that JP got 27 seats with only 7% votes;
- This skewed pattern of voting has left some regions underdeveloped because of deliberate negligence by the ruling majority;
- The quality of MPs indicates the parties' indifference to quality of parliamentary dispensation as many of them obtain nomination not for their commitment to the nation, their constituencies, or even the party, but for money and power;
- The desire of parties to form the government receives priority over their consideration about the nominee's ability to contribute either in the JS or in planning and implementation of schemes for development and good governance;
- Planning for development and for ensuring justice cannot be efficiently made at the JS as there are no experts in vital fields.

Our nation is yet to witness any move by any government to encourage a shift of administrative power or political control from the centre maybe because of the organic weakness of the local government institutions and pliant political hierarchy. Not a single political party ever appreciated the necessity to share political power with leaders at the grassroots level.

Arguments to justify that decentralisation is essential in politics and governance are listed below:

- It can facilitate mapping of development plans which will accomplish growth with equity. This will enable local political leaders, the local

administration and the people to identify development priorities and problems;

- It can increase national unity and political legitimacy of the government by providing equal opportunities to people of all the regions, regardless of the party position at the centre;
- It can be a mechanism to involve local experts for local problems and thus reduce the concern of the centre about implementation of political strategy and development schemes;
- It can enhance cooperation as it would promote integration of opposing political elements in the political and development forums at the centre;
- It can lead to efficient and timely delivery of services as it will reduce unnecessary delay in the movement of files and the debate to justify the essentiality of the schemes;
- It can increase the flexibility of the central government as local problems can be handled by local leaders and administrators quickly and efficiently.

Development of polity with stability and continuity under commonly agreed procedures for exercise of political power within multiparty system, according to Hasnat A. Hye, can overcome the apprehension over devolution of power. This will strengthen local government institutions, which can be perceived by the parties as an integral part of political process.

Bangladesh still carries the legacy of central control in both the political and the development spheres, therefore, none of the major political parties will lend support to any scheme that may empower the grassroots leadership.

Parties in power should lend unstinted support to the Election Commission, which should ensure that elections are held on schedule so that all concerned get used to power transfer without grum-



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bling. Only transfer of power is not good enough. It should be suitable to local needs, which is possible if regional leaders focus on local aspirations and ethos.

We can decentralise political power and administrative authority by invigorating the upazila and restoring zila parishad to play greater political and development roles. I suggest integration of a few geographically contiguous districts, to be called "provinces," which should have their own parliaments.

When provinces have their own parliaments regional parties may emerge under local leadership, as we see in neighbouring countries. This will greatly reduce political pressure on the central leadership. Thus, the national capital will not have to bear the brunt of political chaos, which will enable the national government to function in relative peace.

The central government will deal mainly with defence, finance and foreign policy. Development of the regions will become the concern of the regional political parties, who will not need the central leadership for nomination etc., as it will

be the responsibility of the local leadership. Members of regional parliaments will feel obliged to develop their own regions, thus the development of the country as a whole will not be hugely disproportional.

A federal parliament should have proportional representation from the provinces on the basis of population only. JS should be bicameral. The upper house should have reputed professionals, intellectuals of fame and retired renowned civil and military officials.

Extent of devolution of authority can be decided by holding a referendum, which will be participated by citizens of the age of 20 years and above and who have passed Higher Secondary examination. This will enable the MPs to focus on national issues, and members of the provincial assemblies will concentrate on the provincial subjects. This is how democracy can flourish and good governance can be ensured.

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Rise of the middle class



The middle class has risen and said "yes" to the good life. There has been a definite shift in the financial capacity as well as attitude towards life in the people of the capital and maybe a couple of other major cities during the last couple of years.

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TRIED booking a flight on your way to a neighbouring country this November adjacent to the Eid holidays? Wherever you call, the answer is the same -- overbooked. Trying to make a trip on business, I was pleasantly surprised at getting refusal from all major airlines recently. Of course, my assistant did not share my "pleasant" surprise for obvious reasons.

One of my old friends wished to have a quiet *iftar* with family during the Ramadan. He went to Westin only half an hour before *iftar* time. Bad luck for him and good luck for the hotel management, people without reservation had to return to home to grab something to eat. There was not even enough place to stand on the stairs. You could notice the same thing in Radisson, Pan Pacific Sonargaon and Sheraton.

When I met my good friend the next

day, he asked me: "What is happening? Are we missing something"? I can cite several examples like this and I am sure many of you have personal experiences to share with me as well. You cannot even get married on a short notice because all the venues are pre-occupied 6 months back!

The middle class has risen and said "yes" to the good life. There has been a definite shift in the financial capacity as well as attitude towards life in the people of the capital and maybe a couple of other major cities during the last couple of years.

Economic definition of demand suggests that you have to have ability plus willingness to call it demand for a product or service. As for the ability part, Gross National Income (GNI) converted to international dollars using purchasing power parity rates is a reasonable measure of real purchasing power of a population.

Bangladesh's PPP GNI per capita has steadily increased. In 2009, the number reached 1,580 in current international dollar with 5-year Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) at about 9%. Polarisation has been a part of our economy for a long time, so not everyone can be judged by this number. Besides, there are numbers beyond statistics also.

Call it a layman's approach or a more practical one, let us look at the number of private cars in town. From 2003 to June 2010, about 220,000 motor cars, jeeps and micro-buses were registered with Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) in Dhaka. Fast rising

fuel cost, grid-locked roads and import duties could not limit the number of privately owned vehicles despite the government's implicit discouragement toward private transport sector.

People are increasingly spending more for food, clothes and life style management. \$5 billion equivalent reportedly changed hands during the month of Ramadan alone. This time, the spending spree was observed even in remote northern or southern districts. Multi-storied shopping malls are coming up at upazila (sub district) level.

"The rise in overseas spending by the middle class and cash transfer to foreign countries have pushed the supply-demand gap in the green-back to an all-time high," says an article in *The Daily Star*, October 31 issue. Statistics and reasonable estimates suggest that there are 1 million people in the capital city who fall under the annual income bracket of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Although the number of people with greater than Tk.10 million wealth has been reported at 13,000 plus, the real number is estimated to be much larger. The flourishing number of private schools, private universities, private medical facilities, expensive restaurants and parlours all support the assumption.

What is the profile of this segment? The popular misconception is that they are the multinational corporation (MNC) crowd -- freshly coming out of business schools -- forming a joint-income family, and purchasing a car and a small apartment within 5 years of

graduation.

In reality, the MNC crowd is being marginalised by the new entrants in the Gulshan/Banani/Baridhara area in Dhaka. The segment I am talking about are the proprietors of small and medium businesses, who had a piece of land in a good location in mainly Dhaka, Chittagong or Sylhet or made huge profits in the stock market and decided to lead a comfortable life using the profit generated from real estate price hike and share market boost-up. They are moving from other areas of the city or other cities to live near their children's schools. A car is a must-have now for the children's and the earning members' transport. They are the rising middle class of the country.

A generation-wise upward shift has taken place as well. The 2nd generation of many lower-middle income households has shifted to middle-income or upper-middle income bracket.

The psychological shift has taken place somewhat silently. "I have to live for others and not for myself: that's middle-class morality" -- George Bernard Shaw's definition holds no more. From a savings-oriented and conservative culture, we have moved towards a more life-style oriented culture.

Just to clarify here, I am basing the profile more on the expenditure structure than on the earnings structure. As long as the positive attitude towards materialism is not pressuring the corruption index, why feel bad in leading a comfortable life. While we have not

exactly made significant progress in the corruption indices, we have not gone down in the score either.

A sizeable middle class with strong purchasing power and appetite for amenities is good news for business. It is one of the indicators that say an economy will flourish. The business houses get the signal that there is a viable target market for their product, which makes it worth their while to penetrate the market. This segment (almost 30-50 million people in number) is much higher than the entire population of some African or Eastern European countries in terms of purchasing power and expense pattern. JP Morgan Chase has opened its representative office recently. This is a fantastic market for consumer banking too, the credit card business being one of the most profitable products for commercial banks. KFC and Pizza Hut in Dhaka are much larger than the same franchises in our neighbouring countries in South Asia. Tesco, Seven Eleven or Carrefour have reportedly started to talk to the seniors re: Bangladesh.

"Upper classes are a nation's past, the middle class its future," the saying by Ayn Rand, the famous philosopher, is becoming increasingly true for the emerging middle class around us. However, how far they can protect or forward the age old social fabric of the nation may be a big question mark and may even come up as "who cares?"

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You are feeling sleepy



MODERN people get up at 6.40 am but don't feel 100 per cent awake until 9.55 am, scientists working for Philips, the Dutch appliance firm, reported last week.

Nine-fifty-five? I'm lucky if I'm *compos mentis* by lunch.

People wake later in Asia, I reckon. Here, one regularly sees people going out in their pajamas. I once took my child all the way to school in my pajamas. I mean I was in my pajamas, not him.

And I can't count how many breakfast meetings I've missed, since my brain is only ready to process a complex thought such as: "Do you know, you are a walking talking sentient being with a breakfast meeting at 7 am?" until I am on my second coffee at 10 am.

At work, an overweight friend told me that she had the same problem, but much worse.

She suspected she had parasomnia, a sleep-eating disorder where you eat huge amounts of food in the middle of the night and have absolutely no memory of it.

"Except I don't have it at night, I have spells of it all day long," she said. "It's tragic." I pointed to her left hand, which was reaching for a bar of chocolate and said: "Oh look, you're having one now."

In *Reader's Digest*, I read about a guy who is living my dream. Student Scott Braun is returning from morning lectures to

find his roommate Alex had slept through his first three subjects.

"Hey, Alex, you've just missed your morning classes. Do you have any others?" Scott asked.

Alex yawned and rolled over to go back to sleep. "No," he said. "I'm done for the day."

This guy has the right attitude. A European guy in the office told me that Parasomnia Girl and I should enter the annual Siesta Championships, held in Spain. The finals for this year were held last week.

More than 300 contestants lay out at a shopping mall in Madrid and lay down on sofas, to attempt to get as many minutes of sleep as possible in 20 minutes. A doctor checks that people are really asleep.

The 1,000 euro prize went to Pedro Soria Lopez, 62, an unemployed security guard, who snored at 70 decibels for the entire 20 minutes. His secret weapon? A

big lunch.

A techy guy in the office overheard our conversation. He told us about a new gadget he reckoned could help us.

The Eyetracker is designed to watch your eyes from four angles. If you nod off to sleep, a loud alarm starts winking you up.

I didn't like the sound of this. It was designed for drivers, but how long will it be before it becomes cheap enough for bosses to buy them for their desks?

Or worse still, for wives to buy them for their husbands?

Trust me. This could be really really bad. Wife: You never listen to me. Husband: I am listening to you. Wife: Good, because we really to talk. Eyetracker: Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Sometimes I hate technology.

