

“Honeymoon is over”

PM's awareness about public criticism is wise. Reaction to critics will reveal actual mindset

SENSING public mood accurately, if perhaps a little belatedly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has come up with words of caution for her colleagues to deliver rather than still bask in the waning sunshine of electoral victory and taken-for-granted invincibility. One cannot but be heartened by her introspectively wise counsel that the AL government now needs to act to deliver over the remainder of its tenure. It has to leave something tangible on the ground to be judged by the people.

The AL government is close to stepping into its third year, so that according to Prime Minister, 'the honeymoon period' or the time for easy praise and self-congratulatory air is over. In the eye of many, however, the honeymoon period may well have been over a long time ago. And judging by some of the early trends in certain areas of governance like, for instance, mishandling of the BCL and Juba League, incompetence, abusive behaviour and favouritism of some ministers and MPs, tainted law enforcement insofar as extra judicial killings went, allowing little space to the opposition in parliament and outside, clipping the wings of local bodies, and above all, a general mode of denial on all these have got imprinted in the public mind. Hence, the job is cut out for the government to firmly roll back the negatives, take corrective actions where due, clear the deck and then steam ahead to deliver on the electoral promises for change.

The prime minister has very rightly said, "The government will have to be accountable to the people for every step in the coming years. People will judge the government very critically and will want output in every step". Nothing could be a more realistic assessment of what the government needs to do from here on. The PM has openly expressed her dissatisfaction over the poor performance of some ministries including their failure to review progress of development work on a monthly basis which she had ordered for them.

Let us not forget, the prime minister has never been short of issuing cautionary and exhortative words to the members of her cabinet, MPs and loyalists of the ruling party but what should make a difference now is the watershed that the AL government has clearly reached. Beyond this, the people will have no patience for nonperformance, even underperformance.

Good words by themselves are not enough; they may just be an expression of intent, a serious one too; yet, unless these are performed they will turn out to be empty rhetoric. To benefit from these words and make full use of them, the ruling party will have to change its mindset in not being dismissive of those who are critical of them; on the contrary, to accept good advice from wherever it comes. That will power the machinery of the government to yield positive results for the nation as well as for the ruling party.

Proposed anti-trafficking law

Tougher laws will require tighter implementation

THE proposed Human Trafficking (Prevention and Protection) Act-2011 -- which has defined human trafficking as "sale or transfer of men and women by force, threats or cheating for sexual and commercial purposes or other forms of exploitation" -- also includes labour trafficking. Under the act, trafficking and related crimes will be non-bailable and non-compoundable and will be tried in speedy trial tribunals in all districts and metropolitan cities. While the initiative is commendable, implementation is another matter. The act is a broad one and enforcement must be as efficient.

Statistics on trafficking are hard to come by, but human trafficking has been identified as the third largest source of profit for organised crime after weapons/arms and drug trafficking. Those trafficked from Bangladesh, which acts mainly as a source country, end up in the sex trade in India and Pakistan, or in the Middle East, either as cabaret dancers or barmaids, or else as domestic workers, also often subjected to sexual abuse by their employers. Children are often forced to beg or are victims of organ trafficking, while male children as young as four years old are made camel jockeys in Middle Eastern countries.

While counter-trafficking efforts have grown and improved over the years, the trafficking syndicates themselves have also become more organised. Directly or indirectly, law enforcers allegedly play a role in the trafficking process, while legal procedures themselves are lengthy and cumbersome. The proposed law stipulates that trials should be completed within 180 days, which is encouraging.

Formerly, the lack of a victim/witness protection act resulted in few cases being taken to court. Perpetrators would often negotiate with the victims. These problems may be countered by the proposed law, which includes a clause on victim protection. By making the crime non-compoundable, it also does not allow compromises in ongoing cases.

The absence of extradition treaties between countries also makes it difficult for source countries to have traffickers sent back and prosecuted, a matter which needs to be addressed. Post-rescue rehabilitation and repatriation measures for victims are crucial.

Finally, there is a fine line between migration and trafficking. Tougher laws and their implementation are needed to prevent trafficking, protect victims and punish perpetrators, but they should not get in the way of safe migration, which is a right.

Why this tirade against Professor Yunus?

For a country like Bangladesh, whose foreign donors routinely withhold aid for alleged governmental corruption, to investigate one citizen who has brought so many honours for us, even though the donor in question, Norway, has said that everything is in order, is laughable. Such acts do not amuse Bangladesh's friends or donors abroad. They know Professor Yunus well enough to understand when a line is being crossed.

FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

TO a certain extent human beings are gullible; they have a proclivity to believe what they are told. At least initially. For many, however, first impression is their last impression, even if facts change. In an unfortunate manifestation of our lingering colonial mentality, this proclivity to believe takes a quantum leap if the message is packaged and delivered by a Westerner.

Bangladesh's lone Nobel Prize winner, and Bangladesh's face to the world, Professor Muhammad Yunus, has been the latest victim of our West-worshipping. By damaging Professor Yunus's image, the Denmark-Norway-triggered slander machine has tarnished Bangladesh's image much more.

The writer has spoken out against the machinations of neo-colonial organisations which takes devilish pleasure in highlighting the deficiencies of the developing nations, such as Bangladesh's corruption. Their surveys never target the horrendous crimes and wars the powerful nations perpetrate against the defenseless, poorer nations.

Bangladesh's corruption hurts only Bangladesh. Economic sanctions enacted by the powerful nations, and wars waged by the powerful nations destroy the economy and kill thousands of people in the poorer nations. Yet, these high crimes are never highlighted by western organisations. Unfortunately, we quote the reports as though they are the ultimate truth, and use those to club each other to death!

Professor Muhammad Yunus has been a public figure in Bangladesh for over 35 years. Of course, he has had his share of critics of his brand of microcredit, but even his harshest critic has never accused him of personal corruption. He is well known for his Spartan life style.

Yet when the Danish-Norwegian documentary questioned the transfer of funds between Grameen Bank and Grameen Kalyan, a matter that was satisfactorily resolved twelve years ago the Norwegians now tell us, without bothering to comprehend what the documentary actually said, the local press jumped all over Dr. Yunus, using incriminatory phrases such as, he "siphoned off" funds, to denigrate him.

Professor Yunus is a known quantity in Bangladesh, while the Danish journalist

and the Norwegian television that aired his documentary are not. Yet, our press had no hesitation in embracing their worst allegations, and adding more negative heft of their own through their own prejudice. It is as though just because the Danes and Norwegians had said so, it must be true!

I have seen part of the documentary. At best it is shoddy journalism. They only interviewed the critics of Dr. Yunus and Grameen Bank, not their supporters. Yet, our naïve press accepted it as the gospel!

One has to wonder whether the misleading documentary offered some of Dr. Yunus's critics with the perfect opportunity to vent some of their deep-seated resentments of his success. After all, Kabi Guru Rabindranath Thakur, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in 1913, had lamented 120 years ago about the fatal flaw in the Bengali psyche, "jealousy!"

Some of the accusations leveled against Dr. Yunus are comical: if microcredit is such a panacea for poverty, why has poverty not been eliminated in Bangladesh? It is as though Dr. Yunus had been entrusted with the task of eliminating poverty in Bangladesh within a few years, and he had failed miserably! The irony is, the government of Bangladesh spends much more money on poverty alleviation annually than does Grameen Bank; this is an accusation the government should be leveling against itself!

Of course, the answer is that microcredit is one of the many tools needed for poverty alleviation. Academic studies have demonstrated that microcredit can be helpful to many people for many reasons, and that it helps the recipients survive long enough so that they have a chance to get out of poverty.

One wonders whether Professor Yunus is a victim of the war that is brewing between microcredit and micro finance. All microcredit lending institutions are not for profit organisations. Some proponents of micro finance want to take microcredit public; trading microcredit organisations in the stock market. This will take microcredit lending back to the days of usury, something Grameen is firmly opposed to. Perhaps Dr. Yunus is paying a price for his opposition to microcredit mutating into micro finance.

To conservative publications like The Wall Street Journal and the Economist microcredit was always an anathema. Targeting the poor for loans, often at subsi-



dised, socially determined rates, runs counter to their true free financial market principals, as do the pumping back of the profits and the poor's savings to reduce rates, and into social enterprises such as education and health.

Grameen's concept of a bank for the poor, whose purpose is not solely to make a profit, is also against the true capitalistic creed. Big business wants to transform microcredit institutions into publicly traded for profit companies, something Professor Yunus has been fighting for the last 5 to 6 years. Big business and others, who share that line of thinking, constitute a significant lobby for micro finance, and against microcredit and Professor Yunus.

Before we decide to take down Professor Yunus, let us recapitulate the implications for Bangladesh. Although microcredit has existed since the days of Adam Smith, the modern incarnation of microcredit is associated solely with Professor Yunus, and through him with Bangladesh.

Over the last ten years, every major textbook on Development Economics has added a chapter of microcredit, with acknowledgment to Professor Yunus and Bangladesh. Hundreds of academic papers are published in the top academic journals every year on microcredit. It is the only major field-level poverty alleviation programme in the world. In the wake of Professor Yunus's Nobel Prize in 2006, the

UN declared 2007 as the Year of Microcredit, clearly to honour the person synonymous with it.

Apart from the Nobel Prize in 2006, President Barack Obama has honoured Professor Yunus with the US's highest civilian award, the "Presidential Medal of Freedom," and both the US Houses of Congress have passed a resolution to honour him. Professor Yunus has also addressed both the Houses of the Indian Parliament. All of these honours have been bestowed on Professor Yunus alone; no other Bangladeshi has won any of them.

For a country like Bangladesh, whose foreign donors routinely withhold aid for alleged governmental corruption, to investigate one citizen who has brought so many honours for us, even though the donor in question, Norway, has said that everything is in order, is laughable. Such acts do not amuse Bangladesh's friends or donors abroad. They know Professor Yunus well enough to understand when a line is being crossed.

Whether we like it or not, Professor Yunus's name has become a significant part of the image of Bangladesh. Simply put, if we take down Professor Yunus we take down a great part of Bangladesh's image, perhaps its biggest part.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed in a Rhodes Scholar

Population growth and effects of age-structure

No matter what we do, the population will continue to increase over the 40 years, that with tomorrow's mother already born, even major fall in family size would mean that many more babies would be born in the following generation than the present one. As such, the age-structure of population is an important field for policy planning and policy implementers to study.

MOHAMMED ABUL KALAM

IN 2001, the median age of Bangladesh population was about 18 years. From 1951, the death rate started declining but with little effect on birth rate. The population increased from 40.21 million in 1951, 89.9 million in 1981, 109.9 million in 1991 and 130.5 million in 2001. As the second phase of the theory of demographic transition has been passing through the composition of census data of 1974, 1981, 1991 and 2001 respectively, show the "baby boom" generation and slight edge of the population in the old ages.

In the context of the present characteristics of young population, the rapid population growth accompanied with the ageing of population has its impact on bio-social and socio-economic aspects of the population. The high population growth rate of Bangladesh is caused not only by current or high past fertility but also by the "momentum" created by the high fertility and falling mortality in the past five decades.

Past high fertility and falling mortality mean that women currently entering the child-bearing age group constitute a large proportion of the total female population, and this proportion will continue to increase in this mid-century.

In Bangladesh, the next generation of adult women will outnumber the previous one. Thus, even if the number of births per woman declines rapidly, the birth rates may stay high and the total number of births may be greater than before. Consequently, the growth rate may remain virtually unchanged. The reasons for this may perhaps be found in the changes that occurred during the previous decades in

the age-sex distribution, which were highly unfavourable to a decline in the birth rate.

In Bangladesh, the potential exists for a second-generation "baby boom" resulting from this changing age structure. Unless compensated for by a rapid fall in the fertility of younger married women, who should be reached by more effective family planning programmes and benefited by other associated socio-economic improvements, birth rates and population growth rates are unlikely to fall. In considering the future policy direction for fertility regulation, it is important to take note of this emerging phenomenon.

During the transition from high to low fertility in Bangladesh, an unprecedented proportion of the population will be between the age 15 and 64 years, which are roughly the working ages. The working-age population will increase at a rate considerably higher than that of the total population, and initially the larger increments in absolute terms will be to the younger half the working ages. The rapid increase in the population in the younger working ages between 2010 and 2020 will pose a serious challenge to Bangladesh to generate sufficient employment opportunities.

In the coming several decades, however, the age structure in Bangladesh will be especially conducive to sustained social and economic development. Between the years 2010 and 2020, the dependency ratio will be low and the number persons for labour-force age will comprise a high proportion of the total population but will be expanding only slowly. The country trends cited above will vary somewhat, depending on her current level of fertility.

In Bangladesh, practically, there will be

an increase in the proportion of the population in the higher age group (65 years and older). Despite such increase, this proportion will remain relatively small. The rapidly escalating numbers of elderly people and their increasing share in the population of the country have given rise to a number of considerations which have numerous implications for policy formulation.

Social and economic trends in the country suggest the possibility that parents will not be able to assume that their children will be in a position to care for them in their old age. In some rural areas, the migration of young adults to the cities raises questions about the care which elderly in the villages can expect. Public housing policies should take cognisance of the need to encourage three- and four-generation households. Policy makers should also consider the kinds of support required by the elderly who are living alone, or by families caring for elderly members, if the alternative of building old-age homes is to be avoided.

Appropriate retirement or employee provident fund schemes should be contemplated to ensure that a growing proportion of workers have a measure of income security when they leave work. Voluntary and charitable agencies should be encouraged to play an important role in caring for the aged. Such activities can be fostered by the government in providing financial and other support to the agencies so as to achieve greater results.

It is safe to assume that future fertility decline will not be as rapid as it was in the last decade. The overall growth of the population as well as the size and proportion of women of child-bearing age and the labour force and dependent age population will be greatly affected by the changing structure.

It is important to note the change in the absolute size of this population because it has many important implications for development and population welfare programmes. This, therefore, calls for a strengthening of the existing national family planning programme in terms of both quality and quantity to tackle the impending "baby boom" and to enable further reduction in population growth rates.

Similarly, the faster growth of labour-

force in the coming years of this century will require long-term perspective planning for necessary adjustment in manpower planning as well as the economy in general. Changes in age structure would also imply changes in consumption patterns and level of saving and investment. Therefore, planning for production, consumption, investment, distribution and so forth should reflect the changes in age structure.

In Bangladesh population age-structure problems remain a priority concern though they have made marked progress in slowing birth rates, but are still grappling with a variety of complex population issues. The situation is disturbingly stagnant in Bangladesh, where population increases regularly block gains in per capita income and defer many needed improvements in the quality of life.

Between now and 2025, the country will witness its maximum population growth. Such growth threatens severe implications not only in the alleviation of poverty but also in such matters as food supplies, employment, housing, health care, forests and other natural resources, and the environment.

Urban congestion, overtaxed infrastructure, pollution and proliferating slums squatter areas have already become serious concerns in Bangladesh, and an expected doubling in the size of large cities in the near future could produce explosive situations. Moreover, the struggle to cope with sheer quantities may divert crucial attention from the larger need to shape a more sustainable future for making.

In conclusion, we can say that no matter what we do, the population will continue to increase over the 40 years, that with tomorrow's mother already born, even major fall in family size would mean that many more babies would be born in the following generation than the present one. As such, the age-structure of population is an important field for policy planning and policy implementers to study.

Mohammed Abul Kalam, PhD, is Principal Scientific Officer & Head Department of Medical Sociology, Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control & Research (IEDCR). E-mail: makalam@btcl.net.bd