

## Two years of AL-led government

*In year three, it will be under severe scrutiny*

THE honeymoon period for the Awami League-led Mohajote government is truly over now that it has stepped into its third year in office. These past two years have been time enough for the government to fulfill the expectations it had aroused in the people through its promise of change. Before we go into the business of dwelling on whether or not the government has indeed made a difference in the lives of citizens, we need to make it clear to the prime minister and her colleagues that in this third year in power, judgement on their administration will be solely based on how they perform from here on and until the next election. The government will henceforth be under the most rigorous scrutiny and public support or disapproval of it will depend on how it goes about conducting business in this third year.

At the outset, let us be fair in our assessment of where the Awami League-led government has made a difference. There are certain areas where palpable degrees of difference can be noticed. Obviously the most significant area where the government has acted with a firm hand is in handling religious extremists. It has demonstrated, by its firmness here, its difference with its predecessor and a clear determination to press ahead with the job of keeping up the pressure on the extremists. That apart, the government has done well in agriculture, through an uninterrupted supply of fertilizer and a happy flow in the production of foodgrains. Its policy on education certainly deserves commendation because of the universality upon which it is based and accepted by the nation at large. In the last two years, regional connectivity has happily been a special focus of the government. Alongside that, exports of Bangladeshi goods have maintained a satisfactory pattern. In foreign policy, a proactive pursuit of diplomacy has seemed to redefine Bangladesh's place in the global community.

Notwithstanding its successes, however, the government has clearly fallen behind in some core areas where it ought to have made a difference. For all its vaunted pledge of bringing about change in the country, it has been unable or unwilling to reach out to the political opposition. Where the opposition has repeatedly been adamant in its refusal to cooperate with the ruling party, the government has sadly been abrasive in its attitude toward the opposition. The feeling among government circles that it needed to match the behaviour of the opposition in equal measure has done it little good. The result has been a dysfunctional Jatiyo Sangsad. Where positive change was the expectation, the government only left the nation feeling disturbed over the way in which it clipped the wings of the Anti-Corruption Commission. Likewise, local government, one area where this government could have deepened democratic roots further, has sadly been diluted through the pressure exerted on the ruling party by lawmakers.

In this third year, we must remind ourselves that in the past two years prices have played havoc with citizens' lives. The government is yet to come to grips with gas and power, issues that it inherited from its predecessor. Additionally, rule of law has taken a beating, basically because of the recklessness of the Chhatra League and Jubo League and with no sign of firm action against such elements. One of the more regrettable acts of this government has been a politicisation of the administration on a scale that has affected the civil administration structure.

Our overview of the state of things, as the government steps into its third year, is that it is beginning to fall prey to an arrogance of power which has effectively held it back from reaching out to the nation as a whole. Worse, a growing tendency to regard all dissent as mischief is a sign of the government's intolerance of criticism.

In this third year, such attitudes call for change.

## Navigability in the Jamuna

*Efficient river training and dredging called for*

THE report that 30 cargo vessels have been stranded over a week at the Shibalay point in Manikganj in the river Jamuna is a cause for concern. Unless dredging, which is now under way at the river point in question, is done speedily and effectively, the delay in the supply of the goods that those vessels are carrying will contribute to raising their carrying cost as well as leave its knock-on effect on their price and the overall productive activities in the districts they are bound for.

The Shibchar point is one of the 12 vulnerable points in the Jamuna, where the rate of siltation is very high in the lean seasons of the year so much so that a shoal may spring up in a matter of hours. Whereas this is a veritable obstacle to early prognostication of the spots needing immediate dredging, as pointed out by Chief Engineer of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), that should also provide a more compelling reason why there should be constant survey of the intensity of siltation and levels of water at the vulnerable points in place and more dredgers ready for action as and when it is required. But the way the dredged up mud is being reportedly allowed to pile up near the navigation point being cleared of the silt, it is again clogging the river lane in question.

As it appears, the problem lies in homing in on the appropriate spot for the dredging where there is also suitable place for dumping the mud. The dredging authority, BIWTA, needs to take these points into due consideration to facilitate their dredging operation.

The cargo vessel operators, too, have to remain alert to the declining navigability of the river route under scrutiny so that the weight of their goods-laden vessels itself may not become a barrier to their passage through the shallow waters of the siltation-prone sections of the river.

Since the major river routes for transporting vital cargoes to the northern districts are fast choking up with silts and shoals, it calls for emergency action including regional coop-

# Challenges before the government

HUSAIN IMAM

THE year 2010 is gone. A new year has set in and with that the Awami League-led grand alliance, as the ruling alliance under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, has completed its two years and embarked on the third year of its five-year term.

Some of the events of the past year that the people of Bangladesh can rightly take pride in are: the conquest of the Everest by Ibrahim Musa (the first Bangladeshi to do so), white-wash of New Zealand cricket team by the Bangladeshis Tigers and the two historic judgments of the apex court of the country canceling the fifth and the seventh amendments of the Constitution, thereby declaring the two martial law regimes of General Zia and General Ershad and all activities under them illegal, unlawful and unconstitutional.

The government of Sheikh Hasina can boast of executing some of the self-confessed killers of Bangabandhu, initiating the trial of war criminals of liberation war, setting in motion the much needed reform of the education system of the country and ensuring food security by increased food production. The year itself can boast of presenting a favourable weather, paving the way for bumper harvests.

Yet, for the people of Bangladesh at large, the past year hasn't been that good as one would have expected. They had to confront too many odds on too many fronts at a time. Price hike, or for that matter inflation, is one such front that has kept them worried all the year round. One cannot be too sure either of what is lying for them in the days ahead.

In spite of the fact that the government has been greatly generous in providing subsidies to the farmers in way of giving fertilizer, seeds, and electricity in time and at highly subsidised rates, and the farmers in return reciprocated by giving bumper harvest, they had to sell their products at less than cost price and buy their essentials at unaffordable cost because of manipulation by unscrupulous traders on one hand and lack of adequate price control measures on the part of the government machinery on the other hand.

The commerce minister has been

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prominent more by giving warnings to traders than actually taking effective measures that could actually keep the prices of essential commodities under control. No doubt he has been persistently vocal against price spiral, but to no effect. The business people seemed to have got used to his benign uproars and continued with their agenda. The minister should have, as many an analyst thinks, strengthened the TCB that could have acted as a lever on price control. That did not happen for reasons best known to him.

Price hike of food and other essential items was one aspect that had affected the people at large. Acute crisis of gas, water and electricity and lack of adequate transport facilities along with horrific traffic congestion were other aspects that had been nagging problems for the urban population during the entire period of 2010. For the capital city in particular, it has been a frightening experience.

Awami League came to power with a charter for change. They promised a changed Bangladesh, where the people would be able to live in peace and harmony and enjoy the basic amenities of a decent life in the 21st century. It will be a travesty of truth to say that the ruling party has not fulfilled or tried to fulfill any of its election promises. It can, on the



contrary, take satisfaction in fulfilling many of its promises, some of which have already been mentioned above.

Construction in progress of Jatra baril-Gulistan flyover and plans under process to build Padma Bridge and elevated expressway, and relieving the country from the mess in the power and energy sector created by gross negligence, misrule and corruption of the past regimes may be cited as other examples of fulfilling or trying to fulfill its commitments. Massive expansion of safety net for the marginal people of the country is another field which the ruling party can rightly take credit in.

Yet, there remains a lot more, some of them most vital in our national life, that need to be addressed in true earnestness. It promised a government that would protect the fundamental rights of every citizen, narrow down the wide gap between the rich and poor and free the society from all-pervasive corruption that has stood as the biggest obstacle to any sort of progress and development of the country. It promised good governance, an exploitation-free society, and a people-oriented administration.

Can anyone, even in the government, say for sure that they have ensured good governance, established a people oriented administration, protected the fundamental rights of every citizen, narrowed down the gap between the rich and the poor or made any serious attempt to stem the tide of corruption?

It is immaterial to the people to know which sector is more corrupt. The fact is that almost every service sector of the country is corrupt. The people have to, in one way or other, pay bribe to get the service and the present government, like its predecessors, has remained indifferent in dealing with the issue despite the fact that stemming corruption was one of the top agenda in its election manifesto.

The canvas for a changed Bangladesh is possibly set the way Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has thought of. She has had the sketches drawn in accordance with her choice. If everything goes well as she planned, the country should be self-sufficient in food production and generation of electricity by 2013. It all depends on how efficiently and honestly the team she has with her can handle the job.

What she is going to do with the transport sector including traffic management of the big cities or how she is going to handle the more important issues like population control and corruption still remains murky. Hazier still is her plan to handle the political turmoil the country is likely to see in the not too distant a future. Reshuffling of her cabinet, strengthening of her own political party, preventing the front organisations of her party from committing mischief may be other issues that she has to address sooner rather than later.

**Capt. Husain Imam is a retired Merchant Navy officer.**

## Why rice price hike during harvest?

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

A visit to the website of the state-owned Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) shows that the price of coarse rice in the market on January 2 varied between Tk.34 and Tk.36 a kilogram (kg). One year ago, the price varied between Tk.26 and Tk.27 per kg, which means price hike of 32.08% in a year. The price of coarse rice has been taken as indicator of rice price hike because more than 75% of the people eat coarse rice. Secondly, the Food and Disaster Management ministry's (MOFDM) website generally shows rice price in terms of coarse rice price.

The price hike of rice has led to the price hike of flour. According to the TCB, the price of flour on January 2 was between Tk.33 and Tk.34 a kg. One year ago, the price varied between Tk.22 and Tk.23 per kg., which means price increase by 48.89% in a year.

The price hike of food grains (rice and wheat) has also influenced the price spiral of other food items such as vegetables, meat, fish, pulses, etc. Generally, the people enjoy different varieties of winter vegetables between December and February at comparatively cheap prices. But that is not the case in the current winter season. Hardly any vegetable is available at a price below Tk.30 a kg. So the poor cannot afford to purchase vegetables to supplement rice.

The prices of onion, garlic and ginger are very high. Due to very high price of onion, which reached Tk.80 a kg about two weeks ago and varied between Tk.45 and Tk.55 per kg on January 2, the ultra-poor cannot even afford onion in their life saving "pantha." Pulses, known as "poor man's meat," are already out of reach of the poor.

Many market watchers are astonished to see the rising price of rice during the ongoing aman harvesting season. The price of rice in the market generally shows a downward trend during the harvesting period and the government goes for internal procurement of rice to keep the price stable. But this has not happened in the current aman harvesting season.

Why is there such a situation?

If we go by the government statistics of annual food grain production and food grain consumption, we do not find shortage in domestic food grain supply. According to government sources, in

2009-10, production of food grains, inclusive of 10 lakh tonnes of wheat, stood at 331.58 lakh tonnes. After deduction of 12% for seed, feed and wastage, the net amount available for human consumption stood at 291.80 lakh tonnes. At 489 gram per capita per day food grain requirement, the annual food grain requirement for 149 million people comes to 266 lakh tonnes,

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production for seed, feed and wastage to determine the actual quantity available for human consumption has not been correctly worked out; (3) the determination of per capita per day requirement of food grain at 489 gram is not based on reality; and (4) government figure of the country's population may not be correct because a UN agency recently put our

farmers are hoarding their produce in anticipation of higher price between mid-February and mid-April, when the country generally faces food grain shortage.

Informed sources say that rice-millers and traders are very active in the market to purchase huge quantities of rice for hoarding, anticipating windfall profit in March-April when the price of rice generally remains higher than that of the harvesting period. Though the Bangladesh Bank is known to have issued instructions for shortening the period of repayment of loan by the rice-millers and traders, this is not likely to deter them from carrying on their food grain hoarding business as usual.

The National Food Policy 2006 has directed that government food security stock should be maintained at 10 lakh tonnes at all times. The present stock, which is reportedly much below 10 lakh tonnes, has sent a wrong signal to the market.

A visit to the MOFDM website shows that in the fortnight ending on December 15, Thai rice prices continued their slow decline from the previous fortnight with a 0.18% drop, bringing them down to \$556 per tonne. The Dhaka price stood at \$467 a tonne on December 17. The latest available price in Kolkata is \$355 a tonne on December 8, which was \$359 a tonne on November 12. This is quoted only to show that international rice price has not influenced the continued rice price hike in the country.

Remedial measures include, inter alia, increasing per hectare productivity of rice, which is low compared to rice producing countries of South-Asia and South-East Asia, through adoption of appropriate technology and other measures -- like reflecting actual domestic production of food grains in our national statistics; determining per capita per day requirement of food grain based on reality; developing appropriate mechanism to reduce wastage of all varieties of food; ascertaining actual population of the country; maintaining, as per directive of National Food Policy 2006, 10 lakh tonnes of food grains at the government warehouses at all times to discourage hoarders and traders from stockpiling food grains; and reactivating the anti-hoarding law on food grains and other essentials and updating it to meet the need of the changed circumstances.

**M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary. E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com**



which means a surplus of 25.8 lakh tonnes.

The website of the MOFDM shows that last year 1,723.5 thousand tonnes of wheat and 3.6 thousand tonnes of rice were imported by the private sector and the public sector respectively. Addition of this quantity to the domestic production further increased total supply of food grains. The government claims that this season's aman production target of 130 lakh tonnes or so will be achieved.

This reasonably leads to conclusions that (1) the published domestic food grain production figure might not have reflected the actual production; (2) the deduction of 12% from the domestic

population at 164.4 million, which is 15 million more than the government estimated population.

Since the price of rice is spiralling in spite of "satisfactory" harvest, the cause for price hike may be found elsewhere.

A report published in Janakantha on December 22 showed that farmers in the northern region, which is commonly known as the country's granary, were gradually shifting towards cultivation of fine quality rice because of significant difference between the prices of coarse rice and fine quality rice. A demand-supply gap for coarse rice exists, which is ultimately contributing to price hike of coarse rice. Further, rich and middle-class