

DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT IN MIDEAST

Homework for Bangladesh

M SHAFIULLAH

ZIINE El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were pushed out by people's power. Gaddafi is spilling blood of the Libyans to rule for life.

Decades of authoritarian rule made the people so desperate that they thought nothing more to lose but to come up to the despots on the street. The growth of peoples' power is the contribution of the authoritarian rule where the people cross threshold of fear psychosis over their tormentor! Bangladesh had under gone similar experience in 1990 when it consigned the decade old military dictator to history. It is, however another story to resurrect the fallen autocrat to meet political ambition of democratic leaders. An example of Realpolitik indeed!

The thirty years hurdle for North African and Middle Eastern (and for Gaddafi 42 years) rulers remind people that political party chiefs here are also crossing the three decade threshold at the helm of affairs of their respective political parties or twenty years either in government or in opposition by turn. No institutional mechanism is in place to pass on the baton to the next leaderships in a democratic and transparent manner. Peoples' power in North Africa and Middle East sends a resounding message that the days of Dynastic rule is soon going to be an object of museum especially in the Republican states. A people's power could even manifest in a democratic system when basic aspirations and concerns are trampled down by insensitivity. Kansat, Rupganj and Ariel Beel remind what to avoid or what to respect under the democratic system

Politicians are expected to be more sensitive to the hopes and aspiration of the voters who elected them to parliament. There is hardly any room for debate or a set of pre-conditions exit to participate in the proceedings of the parliament; once elected, pays, honorarium, and

perks are taken home and privileges are jealously guarded. It is an aberration to the sensitivity of the voters to abstain from parliament. Absence of opposition party just turn parliament a tool in the hand of party in power and the growth of Dysfunctional democracy which did not work anywhere. One of the primary causes of the current turmoil in countries in Africa and the Middle East emanate from the fact that the autocratic rulers introduced dysfunctional democracies with an eye to dynastic rule. Their system overthrew them. Neither would it work in Bangladesh. It invites only one-eleven with consequences known to all and sundry.

People's power is not unidirectional instrument against government only, it could be used against opposition party hierarchy who are insensitive to its own elected members who are not allowed to enter parliament to discharge their constitutional responsibility. Perhaps a time will come when the aggrieved MPs may cross the threshold of fear to convene a parliamentary party meeting to challenge party autocracy. They would find people behind them.

Fighting corruption was a common battle cry heard in the Freedom Squares against the fallen ruling families and their cronies or those autocrats like Gaddafi who are still fighting a losing battle. In Bangladesh the previous political government made us quadruple champion in global TI corruption perception index. This was consistently met with denial. It took one-eleven to open the lid of corruption in high places.

Corruption in our society is just like Dhaka traffic jam. You encounter it every day with no respite in sight. You even forfeit your right to pin point who are the most corrupt in public service providing system on pain of court case or other harassment. Latest TI, B report is a case in point. This nation should be grateful to the present Chief Justice of Bangladesh who in his grace took cognizance of the TIB Report on



Nobody knows for certain how long the current democratic movement would continue but one thing is beyond doubt that their economy would be badly hit with consequential fallout on the expatriate Bangladeshi community.

judiciary. He also directed to clean the system. It is unfortunate that the stake holders in other sectors of the same report went on hunting the TIB Trustees. The Home Minister became the 'defender of faith', Little knowing that the same people she endeavours to protect would prepare files on her once out of office.

Responsibility of unending and brazen corruption in the official organs ultimately comes on the shoulder of the government. People's power speaks during elections. It was witnessed in 2008 elections that a high profile corrupt government is booted out. Whereas an independent Anti Corruption Commission [ACC] enhances the

image of the party in power, helpful to re-election, protect it against corruption charges when out of office and keep the corrupt elements under pressure. Low corruption is a safeguard to democracy.

The other dimension of the movement against autocratic rulers in North Africa and parts of Middle East have a direct bearing on the Bangladesh economy. Out of estimated 70 lac overseas Bangladeshis, 40 lac are employed in the region. Sixty per cent of total \$11 billion remittance also flow from this source. Nobody knows for certain how long the current Democratic movement would continue and what are the countries to be affected but one thing is beyond

doubt that their economy would be badly hit with consequential fallout on the expatriate Bangladesh community. It may even be necessary to repatriate a large number of them to home at our expenses.

Current crisis exposes the lead Ministry that it has no contingency plan to reach out to the workers. The Ministry is just caught napping as it happened in August 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. I was instructed to reach Amman from Abu Dhabi in less than twenty four hours notice but 23 days after the invasion to repatriate the stranded Bangladeshis fleeing out of Iraq and Kuwait to Jordan. Eight thousand Bangladesh refugees had already reached Amman before my arrival.

The Jordanian Higher Committee for Repatriation headed by the then Crown Prince Hasan, the international and humanitarian agencies wanted to know how many would come so that makeshift camps arrangement could be made for them. I was caught on the wrong foot. Labour Ministry or the Foreign Office could not give me any reliable figure that I could provide to the Higher Committee. Ambassador M.R.Osmany in Baghdad and Ambassador Shehabuddin in Kuwait made me no wiser. At the end of three months Odyssey in the desert we repatriated by air 65000 souls through marshalling international assistance. It may not be possible today. Number is huge. International sympathy is dwindling.

In 1990 Bangladesh government had no logistics for such an undertaking. But what about now? Expatriate community remit \$11 billion. A catastrophic situation for Bangladeshi expatriates is evolving due to the fast moving development in the region. It may manifest in another form in other countries where they work. There is no waiting time but to build capacity to meet exigencies in times of such a crisis.

Establishing a secure communication between the Embassies and the Manpower Ministry should be the first priority followed by strengthening the Missions with Labour Attaches who are capable and professional. Provision should be there for quick transfer of fund from Expatriates' Bank to charter wide bodied plane through Red Cross / IOM. They have the network, efficiency and transparency. Shipping Ministry must have a passenger-cum-cargo ship which could be pressed in to repatriation service on emergency. Countrywide data base of expatriates must be the foundation of this exercise. I suggest the above from my experience of Gulf War repatriation.

The writer is a former Ambassador to Libya and Tunisia. E-mail: rshafullah@yahoo.com

Prospects of labour migration

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

BEING a country with huge labour surplus, Bangladesh has a strong potentiality to contribute to the supply side of world labour market. Successive governments have realised the importance of sending labour force abroad. There have been some reforms in the micro and macro levels, relaxation in banking regulations for the non-residents and so forth by the current government. But, the sufferings of the workers and the inhumane treatment they receive abroad have not decreased. And when they lose security of their life while working abroad, it creates a threat to the country in many ways.

Remittance is considered as one of the major weapons for fighting against poverty and hunger. According to the World Bank, remittance inflow has helped Bangladesh reduce poverty by 6%. Many see it as a more effective way than Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to alleviate poverty and promote economic growth. We can relive demographic pressure and earn foreign remittance by sending people abroad, though it creates some structural changes in the society.

On the other hand, FDI of course promotes employment and turns the wheels of the economy. But it needs infrastructure, occupies land and creates environmental pollution. So, though the role of these two major agents cannot be ignored, the importance and viability

of remittance are undisputable. We are trying to promote our migration sector but there remain some drawbacks in the system -- red tape, failure to explore new markets and sustaining the prevailing markets, inefficiency in negotiating, export of unskilled labour, illegal migration and so forth. For all these reasons this pivotal sector is

But, most importantly, our country is facing a dual problem: on one hand our country is losing the prospect for labour migration and, on the other, relatives of the migrant workers are becoming furious. They demand urgent steps by the government to rescue the workers because they feel that the government has not yet taken any sincere initiative

hostage. Again, a news agency reports that nearly 100,000 workers from the Philippines and Bangladesh remain stuck in Libya with their governments unable to provide assistance, and not nearly as quickly.

This situation has made the people afraid. And the inefficiency and contradictory statements of the

Bangladeshi migrant workers has decreased by 21% compared to last year. In 2009, Bangladeshi migrant workers sent about \$10.72 billion as remittance, and in 2010 it was over \$11 billion.

A study shows that the number of Bangladeshi workers, which was around 500,000, was reduced by 17.86% in 2009 because of the recession. While Bangladesh sent 2,73,201 workers to Malaysia in 2007, it was unbelievably only 1,000 in 2010. Experts blame the GoB, recruiting agencies and the Malaysian government for this.

Our labour market is now mainly confined to the Middle East. Of the total number of workers sent overseas this year, UAE took 52%, Oman 11% and Singapore 9%, a report shows. And mainly for lack of bilateral negotiations we cannot explore new markets in some other regions of the globe.

There are a lot of things our government can do to promote this sector. One of which is very crucial now; it is searching new markets in which there is a good socio-political environment and good wages. But for doing this certain things need to be done first, i.e. assessment of their demand, negotiations, and finally recruitment and training of people for meeting the demand.

This process will work in two ways: it will ensure bargaining power and secured working environment for worker. For an example, it can be said that there is a huge demand for trained nurses in the developed

world. Major labour exporting countries have provided various incentives to private sector educational institutions to produce trained nurses. But in Bangladesh it is still ignored. Many private institutions are ready to offer nursing courses, but they cannot because of politics.

Targeting a particular country or region for human resource export is never wise. The market can collapse any time and turn the whole sector upside down. Rather, the market should be fragmented, and more and more bilateral negotiations are needed to have a secured place in the world market.

The recruiting agencies have also to be taken under some rules and regulations and their activities need to be monitored so that no migration seeking people become victims of fraud. The government can make sufficient migration information accessible to the people so that they become aware of the potential market and can learn about the authentic process of migration.

Migrant workers are helping to build the nation, tolerating inhuman treatment from their employers and from the natives. They work and work, spend less and save more for sending to their motherland and to their families. So, they deserve at least that much respect and care from their countrymen and from their government, otherwise it will be very shameful for us as a nation.

The writer is a Development Researcher and an Assistant Director at D.Nnet. E-mail: mithunmids07@gmail.com



Migrant workers are helping to build the nation, tolerating inhuman treatment from their employers and from the natives. So, they deserve at least that much respect and care from their countrymen and from their government, otherwise it will be very shameful for us as a nation.

at stake. The situation has become more critical because of the turmoil in some labour receiving countries. It will indeed have a huge impact on our economy and society as well.

The turmoil is spreading like an epidemic, so it is uncertain when the situation will become normal.

to save the workers in Libya.

According to official statistics, some 95,194 Bangladeshis work in Libya. Bangladesh could not establish contact with 5,500 workers in Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city, where officials said the protesters have taken foreign labourers

government people have frustrated them. This may destroy the motivation of the people to migrate.

Contrary to popular belief, remittance, and not the ready made garment (RMG) sector, is the highest net foreign exchange earner. But, this year, the total number of