

Playing foul with the report?

Stop machinations, act on it

WE cannot but express our serious concern about the controversy over the share market scam probe report, whose fate, going by the reports in several newspapers including this one, has become very uncertain. It seems there are very well orchestrated moves afoot to not only divert attention from the report but also to damn the report as well as the head of the probe committee by deliberately discrediting him and questioning the veracity of the findings.

There is every reason to feel concerned about the fate of the enquiry that has dealt with an important public interest matter and which has to do with the hard earned assets of hundreds and thousands of small investors. A concerted effort is afoot to both discredit the report and its principal author. Petty flaws are being exaggerated to look like big mistakes. Twisting a simple remark about how legal system works in democracy and giving it a completely opposite meaning, the chair of the enquiry body is being dragged into a controversy, with the aim of diluting the importance of the report. We strongly condemn these efforts which are being orchestrated by people likely to be exposed if the report is followed by government investigation.

Admittedly, the report names a large many influential persons and corporations against whom the findings have established *prima facie* evidence, and once the report is published the government would be obliged to investigate further and nail the culprits. One hopes that the government will not modulate its action on this factor. If that is the case the public cannot be faulted for thinking that there is lot at stake for the government in not publishing the report.

Soft pedaling on the matter or indeed putting the wraps on it will only discredit the government. It should publish the report immediately and proceed against the identified culprits as per law.

Middle East ferment

Change is in the air

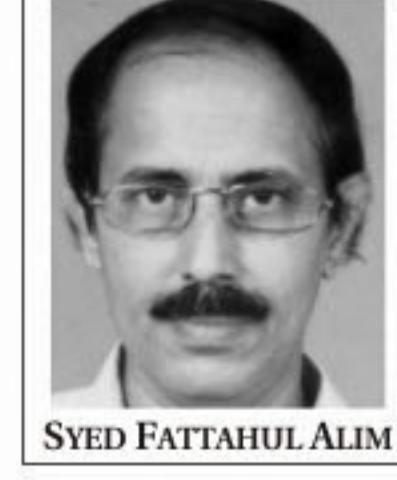
LARGE swathes of the Middle East remain in ferment. The newest sign of that reality comes from Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad has assured Syrians that the emergency laws in place for nearly half a century will be lifted within a week. The gesture is not spontaneous but is a reaction to the gathering restiveness in the country. In Egypt, the move by the present rulers to detain and question deposed president Hosni Mubarak demonstrates the willingness of the authorities to heed popular demands for substantive progress to democracy. Egypt remains a work in progress.

But what will likely happen in Damascus and is happening in Cairo is quite different from how things have been turning out in Tripoli. A defiant Muammar Gaddafi fights on, despite some recent large profile defections from his camp. The feeling at this point is of a stalemate holding Libya in its grip, though in the end Gaddafi may not be able to withstand the forces, the West as well as the rebels, arrayed against him. In Bahrain, with assistance from the Saudis, the ruling classes have for now put the lid back on the boiling pot. But that may not be a good way of dealing with demands for a democratic opening. The Bahrainis' resort to force to quell popular demands is something the Algerians appear unwilling to emulate. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has just announced sweeping political reforms as a way of staving off a crisis threatening to bring his regime down. Speaking of reforms, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's offers of a compromise solution (minus his immediate resignation) have not impressed his detractors. It is a bizarre situation where the president and his people are engaged in a see-saw struggle for power.

Clearly, change is in the Middle Eastern air. The good news is that many of the long-entrenched authoritarian regimes appear to be acknowledging the need for change. It is only men like Gaddafi and Saleh who refuse to see reality for what it is. A pity.

KALEIDOSCOPE

Pahela Baishakh in our urban context



SYED FAITAHUL ALIM

THE first day of the Bengali New Year, Pahela Baishakh, drew a sea of people on to the streets of Dhaka. It was people, men and women of all age groups -- youths, parents with children, middle-aged men and women -- walking all around wearing traditional dresses. Women were clad in white sarees with red border, while men wore punjabi, pyjamas and chappal (sandals) or nagra shoes. But they were loitering as if aimlessly under a mostly gloomy sky. The sky overcast with cloud was a blessing in disguise, because on previous other Pahela Baishakhhs the scorching sun would beat down mercilessly on the celebrants.

The traditional Pahela Baishakh of the past has been reinvented by the urban middle class and transformed into a carnival these days. But in the past it was mostly the rural people who would observe the day after the closure of the old year and with the daybreak of the new year, when the peasants would have filled their barns with fresh harvests. It was the time of the year when the *zemindars* would collect taxes from the subjects and the business people would open a new *halkhata* (book of accounts) after closing the older one.

Customers who had arrears to pay back to the *mahajans* (money lenders or merchants, who sold their goods on credit to customers) would clear their dues on the day. To mark the day, *mahajans* would treat their debtors with sweets, while an '*aarong*', a kind of rural fair would sit usually on the bank of a river. Handloom-woven colourful cloths, garments made from such cloths for young, old and children alike would be sold in the *aarong*.

Earthenware for household use,

including animal-shaped earthen toys, some with orifice at one end through which children would blow air with their mouth to produce shrill sound, would flood the fair. Bamboo-made toys as well as useful household articles, for example winnowing fans, hand-held fans made from palm leaves and their stems, sweetmeats of different varieties having shapes of different animals to attract children would also be sold in an *aarong mela* (*aarong* fair).

There would also be spots where

Year) in its present form was introduced during the reign of the greatest of the Mughal emperors, Akbar. Older system of collecting taxes from the subjects was done according to the Islamic Hijri calendar. Since that date did not coincide with the harvesting time of the year, the subjects would be hard-pressed to pay their annual tax.

To overcome this difficulty, Akbar introduced the *fasli san* (agricultural year), which would begin from March 10/11 according to Gregorian calen-

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children and the elders alike could entertain themselves by riding a merry-go-round, while at others there would be *pala gaan* (where rural lyricists and singers would sing folk songs narrating a story in groups led by their team leaders), *kobi gaan* (debate competition between groups of rural versifiers or poets on a theme).

The villagers would organise boat races in the local river, arrange wrestling competitions, bullfights, cock-fights and so on. After the harvest was over, the villagers had the free time to indulge themselves in such pastimes as they would have the surplus agricultural products and money in their hand.

Though this kind of new year's celebration dates back to the Vedic period in the Indian subcontinent, the Bangla Nabobarsho (Bengali New

dar. Later it was calculated from the date of this ascension to throne.

However, the observance of Pahela Baishakh that started in protest against the then Pakistani government's attempt to suppress Bengali culture through banning songs and poems of Rabindranath Tagore, was through singing of Tagore songs by the Chhayanaut cultural group welcoming the month of Boishakh at the foot of the banyan (in actuality, peepul) tree in the Ramna Garden of the city. Since then the number of the Bangla Nabobarsho celebrants has literally exploded over the years.

But the carnival form it has taken in Dhaka and other cities has little resemblance with that of the rural festivities of old. In the present time, the villages have lost their own integrity and characteristics. The all-engulfing pull of consumerism has

also swept rural life. Their traditions are vanishing as the lives of the rural people are being irreversibly transformed in the model of urban consumerism. But questions remain to be answered by us, the urbanites, all the same.

We often talk big about preserving our Bengali culture and traditions. Celebration of the Pahela Baishakh is such an instance of our love for the age-old cultural traditions that the majority of our population would like to proudly claim. But who make this majority? Are the participants of the Pahela Baishakh in the capital city or at other urban centres representing that majority? Does their style of celebration really reflect the cultural life of our vast millions of peasants, boatmen, carpenters, clay potters, blacksmiths, weavers, fisher folks and so on? Are they not excluded from this kind of carnival in the city?

Take the example of eating *panta bhat* (boiled rice soaked in water) and *hilsha* fish at the makeshift hotels at the Ramna garden. The price at which a plate of *panta bhat* sells would have the head of a peasant turned. On the contrary, the poor farmers' cheapest way of preserving last night's leftover rice is to soak it in water and then consume the same with salt, pepper and, if affordable, a pod of onion. So, does not the way we take *panta* makes a mockery of the *panta* the poor, hardworking villagers have to eat, as they cannot afford to have anything better?

The reality should make us go for a soul-searching and rediscover the essence of Bengali New Year's Day in a fresh light and celebrate it by showing respect to the traditions of the majority who built their culture over the eons colouring it with their joys, sorrows and struggles.

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Corruption: The deadly bug

HUSAIN IMAM

CORRUPTION is a death-trap for any nation. It does the same thing to a nation as does a bug to timber. It eats the vitals from within and makes it a hollow shell ready to crumble into dust any moment. Bangladesh has surely been in the death grip of that vicious bug for long and now seems to have reached a stage where from it might seem almost impossible for any government to save it from total collapse.

At this moment, when I am writing this article, I have one vernacular national daily in front of me. It has two front page lead news on corruption. One is about corruption in Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC). There is no trace of Tk.600 million deposited as car registration and other fees by the public. The other is about the share market scam.

Thanks to Khandaker Khaled Ibrahim and his team members of the enquiry committee. They have done a job which can only be performed by men of high integrity and courage. They have, without any fear or favour, unearthed some shocking incidents of financial irregularities in our stock market, which might prove to be the biggest scam in the recent financial history of our country.

The dishonest traders, in deep collusion with the regulators and the market players, have swindled some Tk.20,000 crore (Tk.5,000 crore going to private pockets alone) from the share market through market manipulation, making thousands of small and ordinary investors paupers.

According to the probe report, there has been gross manipulation in both the primary and the secondary markets and private placement of shares played a major role in the manipulation. There were many influential figures, including politicians, businessmen and government servants, among some hundred persons who received shares in crores in private placement.

Every party cried hoarse against corruption and promised that when they would be in power anybody who indulged in corruption would not be spared, Alas! Every time it went the other way. Corruption did not spare anybody.

Although the probe committee has held the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) mainly responsible for the incident and recommended complete restructuring of the Commission, including removal of its top bosses, we believe the ministry of finance also cannot absolve itself from its failure to take preemptive action before things went that far.

Corruption is not a new phenomenon. It is an age old disease. It is probably as old as the modern civilisation itself. Many countries have been able to contain it, if not totally eradicate it, while many other countries have allowed it grow unchecked for the benefit of those who were in power or in the corridors of power. No denying that our

country falls in the second category.

When Bangladesh became independent in 1971 through a nine-month long war of liberation, it was expected that for the economic emancipation of the people, fight against corruption would be the top agenda of the incumbent governments. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Every party cried hoarse

the historians have to nominate a golden era of corruption, it should be that era of hers.

The immediate past military-backed caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed made an attempt to fight against corruption and had some initial success also. But it did not last long. Soon, the deadly bug of corruption took over and spared not even those who had initiated or took active part in the process.

Before coming to power, one of the chief election pledges of the present government was to launch an all-out war against corruption. It has been more than two years since the present government came to power with a landslide victory in the general election.

During this period, it has embarked upon a large number of projects for the overall development of the country, especially for the welfare of the common people and she might as well claim credit for formidable success in some sectors. But if we talk of corruption we have not yet seen any sort of initiative, let alone war against corruption, worth mentioning.

There is an agency to do the job, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and a gentleman bureaucrat as its head. Very few people know what he does or what he does not. Rarely does he open his mouth. So people do not know for sure whether he has teeth or not. So the corruption bug continues to grow from fat to fatter by eating the vitals from within without any fear or favour.

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