

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# A mission impossible?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**I**T feels like the legendary Scottish King Robert Bruce (1306-1329), who secured independence of Scotland from the English hands and became the hero of his country. Once fleeing a battle and demoralised, he spotted a cave where a spider was spinning a web to connect one corner of the roof to another. Every time the wafer-thin creature would slip down the slope of the inner wall it would glide up again to start spinning from where it had left off. Its perseverance eventually paid.

Robert Bruce awed at the spider's success drew a providential inspiration from it, shook off his low morale from several failed attempts, made his final stand, defeated the English, and ascended the throne. The message is inscribed on a boulder at the historic site -- never say give up.

When imploring politicians to pull back from a confrontational brink, journalists might feel they have run out of their repertoire of tricks for persuasion. To them it may sound like pursuing a mission impossible. But we shall never give up for our mentor is Robert Bruce, it has to be him, now.

At a House of Lords luncheon last Thursday hosted by British Parliament All Party Group of Bangladesh, opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia said: "Bangladesh has fallen 20 years behind owing to 1/11." Even though she stopped short of elaborating her observation, one couldn't paper over such a thought-provoking statement. One can perhaps read three implications into it and analyse them to try and fathom how her mind has been working lately.

In the first place, one wonders whether she believes that had 1/11 not taken place, the country's democracy would have taken a quantum leap! Or maybe, she thinks institutions of democracy would have been stronger and democratic and parliamentary processes taken deeper roots. Given the political dynamics of last 20 years, could one be even deluded into thinking that all that would have been possible?

Now, the pertinent question is, where were the things left off by the BNP-Jamaat alliance government on the eve of the takeover by the military-backed caretaker government? The then president Iajuddin sidestepping all five constitutional choices to appoint a chief adviser, himself assumed the role invoking the sixth option -- the remotest and most controversial on the list. As if that was not enough to scupper all notions of impartiality in an interim govern-

ment, Justice Aziz, as the chief election commissioner then produced a flawed electoral roll with ten million false votes. Nobody in a right frame of mind could have trusted such a president-chief adviser and chief election commissioner with the task of holding free, fair and impartial polls. The situation, needless to say, had reached a point of no-return

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between the ruling party and the opposition. Something needed to be done to defuse the mounting tension.

Whether a military-backed caretaker government was the only option to take is indeed debatable. Suffice it to say though, a civilian front of a technocratic government came to be tacitly supported by the people. And it was not until the caretaker government overstayed and overplayed its tenure and a self-arrogated agenda (without any constitutional mandate) that the people would get disenchanted with it. Fact remains

though, the authentic electoral roll that the military-backed caretaker government produced enabled holding of a free and fair election to pick up threads on a stalled democracy.

The third implication of Begum Zia's complaining of a throw-back by 20 years because of 1/11 literally takes us back to 1991. This was when BNP got elected to

power through free and fair election made possible by virtue of a mass movement against autocracy that restored the country to democracy. It is a glorious benchmark of AL, BNP and all other political forces making a common cause against autocracy drawing entirely on the strength of popular support. Indeed, nothing short of consensual politics and people's spontaneous movement could have sealed the fate of a nine-year-old entrenched authoritarian government. Not merely that, it was instrumental in effecting a switch over from presidential form

of government to Westminster type parliamentary democracy.

It was predicable and perhaps natural as well that once elections were held and a political party or its ally ascended to power, political parties will go their separate, adversarial ways. But that they would fall foul of each by the loser invariably refusing to concede defeat and the winner taking it all leaving little space to opposition couldn't be legislated against. Nor is it possible to legislate for such an eventuality. When would the instrument of power be solely harnessed in the service of the people rather than compromising on short-sighted party gains?

Democracy is a matter of practice and habit ingrained in traditions and culture of the highest and unswerving respect for public opinion as aired through the ballot. We have painfully learnt though that it is not merely a matter of elections.

Caretaker government issue had been reopened, thanks to the experience with the last caretaker government. It has now clearly emerged in bold relief following the Supreme Court's invalidation of the 13th amendment (with a proviso that two general elections could be held under the existing system). The just retired Chief Justice Khairul Haque presided over the full bench of the Appellate Division that delivered the judgment on the 13th amendment, thereby becoming controversial to

the opposition. When the next national election is held under the CTG, the last retired CJ is likely to be the chief adviser in 2013. The BNP's concerns pivot around a possibility of the caretaker government being done away with in compliance with Supreme Court verdict or the retired Chief Justice Khairul Haque becoming the caretaker government chief. In such a perceived context, BNP has voiced its reluctance to participate in the polls.

No well-wisher of democracy can entertain the notion of any one-sided election nor would the Awami League (AL), the oldest political party in the country, like it to happen. Mere elections have not produced the democracy people wanted to see. To top it off without mandate of the whole electorate would be a disaster. Just as the AL should try to allay the misgivings of the BNP so must the opposition feel drawn to a dialogue with the ruling party at convenient levels to begin with and then take the process forward. The sole object now should be to clear the deck for free and fair elections through a reformed caretaker government based on inputs from both sides. They must settle for this course to disprove "Politics is a strife of interests masquerading as contests of principles." Why make politics into a suicidal art of the impossible?

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## Potential of urban agriculture

SYED ANWARUL HAQUE

**T**HE leading development challenges of Bangladesh today include alleviation of poverty and environmental management in the context of rapidly growing population. Dhaka is the 8th largest city in the world, with a population of over 15 million. Population influx to Dhaka is very high. Frequent natural disasters -- flood, drought, cyclones, river-bank erosion -- destroy agricultural crops every year and force farmers go to the cities. People are pushed to the cities because of the absence of job opportunities in rural areas.

Most of the urban poor are concentrated in informal settlements, where there is no infrastructure or services to address environmental problems. They are mostly engaged in urban agriculture. One of the biggest policy challenges today is the inclusion of environmental policy into urban policy. Urban agricultural policy can be an integral part of a set of policies for sustainable urban environmental management. It can play an especially vital role in waste management by transforming waste into food and fuel.

A class of "new urban poor" seems to have developed in cities of many countries, mostly in Africa. According to the World Resources Institute (WRI), in 1988, about 25% of the absolute poor in the developing world lived in urban areas. In 2000, this figure rose to about 56%, (WRI, 1997). Urban as well as semi-urban agriculture has been doing well in some African and Asian countries.

The main objectives of urban agriculture, which include food security, poverty alleviation, public health and sustainable resource management, are strongly linked to the problems of urbanisation and management skills of the cities in solving them. The main driving forces for farmers in cities to become engaged in urban agri-

culture are food security and income generation. Apart from food security and poverty alleviation, urban agriculture is most important for public health and sustainable resource management. Urban waste can be converted into organic fertilizers to be



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used in urban agriculture. Furthermore, more appropriate waste management practices lead to a decrease in health risks. Urban agricultural projects in Dhaka will open up a new labour market in areas that have been negatively affected by industrial outsourcing of jobs.

Dhaka has been moving towards urban agriculture. Many facets of agriculture are taking quite strong shape in Dhaka in order to earn money by the hitherto unem-

ployed city dwellers. The demands of city agricultural products can be met through urban and semi-urban agricultural practices. These demands in fact led to development of small-scale urban vegetable, floriculture and horticulture gardening, poultry, fisher-

population of Dhaka, a vast quantity of fruits is needed. To meet the demand and earn money out of selling fruits, fruit plantations have developed in a small scale in the city as well as in the periphery in a scattered way. Demand for fresh vegetables is increasing in Dhaka, a part of which can be met by growing vegetables in the city itself. Demand for poultry, meat and eggs is growing in the city. It is a lucrative business and brings good money for the people engaged in the business. Ample scope is there to further widen the poultry business in the city.

A part of the fish and shrimp requirements of Dhaka city and its restaurants could be met through their culture in Dhaka itself. Hotels in cities like Bangkok, Beijing, Seoul, etc. have mini fish ponds in the restaurants themselves to cater to the needs of the clients.

Livestock is similarly an important sector because of the meat, milk, cheese, butter etc. Brac and Milk Vita, apart from NGOs, have been actively promoting supply of dairy products to the city dwellers. This sector has engaged quite a number of farmers and helps to maintain their livelihood.

In the near future, urban and semi-urban agriculture will be accepted and implemented as a major intervention in food security and social security programmes. It provides food, generates jobs, supports business and maintains the landscape. Already, there is a trend in developing urban agriculture in Dhaka city to maintain and improve the livelihood of the poor people and help the city dwellers with supply of much needed food products. The only need is to organise and develop the urban and semi-urban agriculture in the city in a more planned way.

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## Rising like the Phoenix

MARUFA HAQUE

**I** have visited the ashy remnants of the fire that destroyed their homes. Where the flames burnt everything they had, that was all that they could claim as their own. 14 houses in Ershadnagar slum on March 23, and 39 houses in Sattola slum on March 24 were burned down

Now they are homeless. They sleep on crowded floors, thanks to their neighbours' generosity; one poor man helping another. Such despair and devastation for those already deprived, already the poorest of the poor, the bottom of the pyramid, the dispossessed.

The strange thing was, I saw hope and resilience. Bamboo structures rose from the ashes like the Phoenix, within hours, for every house lost. To me this proved how strong the slums folks are, in constant battle, and yet

Tk.3,000 each for 5 families in Sattola and 2 families in Ershadnagar.

One woman I spoke to in Ershadnagar said she had lost everything. She could not salvage a single sari or the Tk.1000 cash she had hard earned and even harder, saved, under her pillow. She had to borrow money to buy a new mosquito net so she could pass the night on her relative's floor. She has 7 children.

I feel so lucky that I have a secure shelter, a roof, money for food, no worries. In the slum, I saw them cooking, with the fire very close to the fence. Babies were playing here and there. Where can they go? Fire everywhere. Anything could happen any time. Perhaps God will help them be strong.

Another woman I met said: "We have to suffer all this, because no one is here to help us, no one is



never defeated. Fire, shock, evictions, these don't stop life. Life must go on. I spoke with a few of the victims. They had lost everything. Other community members suffered too.

A national NGO, which works in the slums, came forward with household items and food worth

there to think further about us." I am a development worker. But still, I don't completely disagree with her. What are we doing for her? What are we doing that is sustainable? What are we doing that won't disappear in the next blaze?

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