

Caretaker conundrum

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THIS is understandably not the best of time for the world, and also for our country. Muammar has dourly stuck to his Bab-el-Azizia. Bashar, an ophthalmologist by education and a president by inheritance, has not been able to find a solution to the turmoil in his country because of his short-sighted policies. The America-led United Security Assistance Force (USAF) claims that it has the Taliban on the run. But after the night falls, the Taliban camp on the outskirts.

Afghanistan is a grisly scene of senseless manslaughter, lamented loss of innocent lives and abysmal decline of the quality of human life. Pakistan is paralysed by suicide bombings and defiant drone attacks. Its rulers are reluctant to find a political solution to the problem. At the heart of this crescent of misfortune the pathogens at work are arrogance of power and a stubborn attitude. It concerns us because it extends upto Bangladesh and the portents are not good.

Bangladesh is confronted with the rebirth of a crisis. The solution did not last even one and a half decades, because the politicians do not trust each other. A political solution, whether baptised in acrimony or in camaraderie, always has the genie in it. He who holds the lamp of power has the genie at his command. So, the caretaker government issue that bedeviled the country from 1994 to 1996 has again come to the forefront.

The Awami League, the party in power then, was the leading proponent of the issue while the BNP, the party in opposition then, was critical of the issue and opposed it as best as it could. But ultimately they capitulated. This time the roulette wheel has settled in favour of the Awami League. The last poll has given them a legion of law makers, and they are big enough to scare the wits out of the small rag-tag band of the BNP. Our judiciary has delivered its judgment, and that has further emboldened the AL in doggedly following the way that suits them better -- scrapping the caretaker system. And the BNP won't go to the election under the AL. Such is the freakish nature of our national politics.

The land we populate is the greatest gift from Heaven. We have a country in Bangladesh. Nothing



MUNIR WASSIF/DRIK NEWS

The ruling party has a greater share of the responsibility in giving because the people have placed the trust with them.

can be greater than this. The people of Palestine and Kashmir can tell us better what it means not to have a country of their own. I should compliment the sagacity of the highest branch of our judiciary that delivered its judgment on the caretaker system. It discreetly stated that the system might be kept for the next two polls for the "safety of the state and its people." It is a forewarning against brinkmanship.

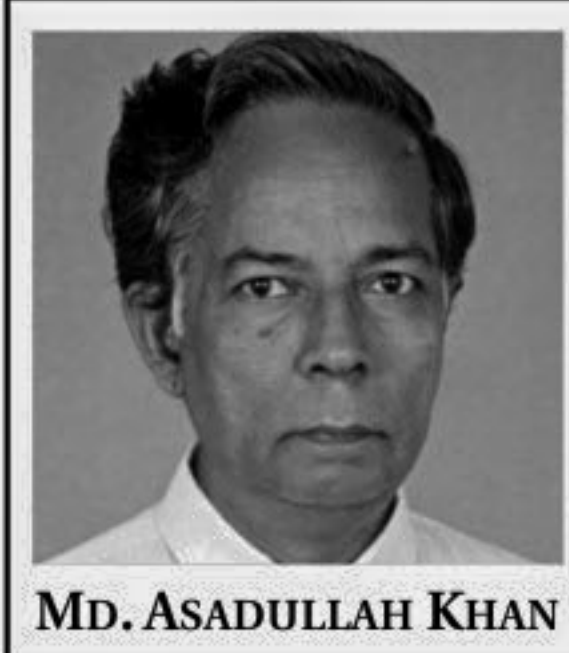
In a way the judgment has cautioned against taking the country to the precipice it was on prior to 1/11. There is ground for optimism in the observations of the leaders of two parties of the ruling 14-party alliance in favour of keeping the caretaker system for the next two national polls. They are Hasanul Huq Inu of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Rashed Khan Menon of Workers Party. These are the lone voices of reason.

The other major partner of the ruling alliance,

Jatiya Party, has for obvious reasons come out in favour of joining a poll sans the caretaker system. Perhaps the next poll is going to be the last poll for the general. He will not let the chance go by. It is certain that the BNP will not take part in a poll unless it is held under a caretaker system. Both the Begums in our national politics have uncompromising stance as their hallmark. If that is any indication about which side the camel sits then the ruling party will have no business with caretaker system. That clears the field for the general's party. If the Heavens can make him the president it can as well anoint his party as the official opposition or can grant the ultimate benediction of making it the ruling party. Who can deny that there is an undercurrent of exasperation with the ladies? The general is angling for the chance of his lifetime. That will be an irony for the national politics.

BITTER TRUTH

Create opportunity, not dismay



The death of 6 Bangladeshi workers, and 8 still unaccounted for, while evacuating from war-torn Libya last March, came as a shock for the country, where unemployed young men are

making a desperate bid to leave the country. People in the country learnt with shocked disbelief the horror story narrated by Suruj Mia, who went to Libya in 2010. Suruj Mia is now back home empty handed, and his dream of a better life for his loved ones has turned out to be a nightmare. Suruj said that he had paid Tk.2.75 lakh for a job in Libya that would fetch him Tk. 20,000 a month. But his employers never paid him, kept him confined and forced him to work.

Suruj was lucky to be back home alive. One returnee, while fleeing from Libya, died in a stampede in a food queue, and another one riding the same minivan carrying Suruj was shot dead by Gaddafi followers because he made some comments that angered them.

The stories of these unfortunate returnees are more or less the same. Up to March 15, at least 18,857 Bangladeshi workers had been repatriated from Libya. But they, burdened with debt, do not know what is in store for them in Bangladesh.

The tragic end of their lives reveals the sad plight of thousands of young men who have been looking for jobs and employment opportunities in a country that hardly holds any hope for them.

At a function organised by the expatriate welfare and overseas employment ministry, speakers expressed concern about the way workers fell victim to harassment and deceit by manpower agents. Alongside the hardship of the workers, pathetic living conditions, deprivation and torture by employers have come to public attention.

In the years following 1975, the country's ailing economy grew worse with sharp division between two opposing blocks. In the wake of this bickering that often exploded into violence and even killing, sluggish growth and rising unemployment have hit the country hard.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina serves a citizenry profoundly weary of economic hard times. In a situation when just living is at stake, people are less interested in the different ideological biases or the country's global commitments.

Let there be no dispute or debate about the fact that if we can't get bread on people's tables, there would be chaos everywhere. The paramount task is creating jobs in the rural areas; we have to stop the trek to cities and a surging desire to flee the country courting disaster, hazard and deceit from the moment they board the aircraft.

The privatisation of sick industries that started long ago didn't succeed mainly because of political warfare. Entrepreneurs, either from home or abroad, did not show enough interest in a country seething with troubles on one hand and frequent power breakdowns on the other.

Much to the chagrin of all interested in the development of the country, the government incurred a loss of Tk.6,935 crore in the current fiscal year in the state owned enterprise (SOE) sector, while it made Tk. 2,776 crore and Tk. 3,282 crore as profit in the last two fiscal years. According to Economic Review 2011 placed in the current session of the Parliament, PDB and BPC incurred the highest loss in the current fiscal year.

As revealed by DCCI and FBCCI, SOEs have

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been kept alive by infusion of heavy subsidy, amounting to Tk. 21,000 crore in the first 21 years after liberation of the country. And the subsidy continues to mount. These SOEs are responsible for the present liquidity crisis in the banks because a major share of the total bad debts is caused by them.

The reason cited for such huge losses is attributable to system loss in public utility services, lack of accountability, pilferage, over-staffing and investment in the unproductive sectors. Delay in privatisation or finding a suitable buyer or entrepreneur run either jute or textile mills have only amplified the weakness of the administration.

If things continue like this, the country will soon attain the status of economic pariah. The ministers for planning and finance said at a press briefing after announcement of the budget that the country's economic crisis had been compounded by bureaucratic paralysis. Unless the bureaucratic machinery can be set in motion, no progress can be achieved and poverty elimination programmes would just become a slogan. In the context of the turmoil in most of

the host countries in the Arab world, growing unemployment in the country and hard attitude of the host countries in recruiting labour from Bangladesh, the government should encourage banks and non-banking financial institutions to issue loans to small and medium enterprises (SME).

The vast number of unemployed youth in the countryside can be rehabilitated by a steady infusion of loans by the government agencies and NGOs. This is specially true in a situation when about 33 lakh unemployed young men landed in total distress after losing their seed money in the stock market scam in December. Reports revealed that several thousand crore taka were siphoned off from the stock market, causing a severe crash.

The Ibrahim Khaled report highlighted how politics and big businesses are united in a silent conspiracy to loot the common masses. These unemployed young men took up a living without brandishing weapons on the street and resorting to any form of violence, and were not a liability for the government in any way.

It will be unfortunate if the government does not find out what went wrong in the capital market. With sincere initiative, it would not be difficult to recover the fund from the looters and compensate the losers in a bid to gain credibility and success in the next polls. The judiciary must step in because the executive seems to have failed and the roar that is echoing through the country is the voice of the people, not of a political party.

To create infrastructure and avenues for employment, the government must set up skill development training centre at every district and train up people in various trades, and only successful trainees should be sent abroad as per requirement of the host countries.

With so many obstacles, a comfortable climate for investment seems to be difficult to achieve. Many foreign investors are continuously assessing and evaluating the political situation, availability of power and administrative efficiency and skill of the government machinery before committing funds for setting up plants. Economists believe that until a solution to the lingering political infighting is found and power situation eased, most investors will look elsewhere for less risky options. Let our efforts be directed in such a way that we don't have to hear about deaths of expatriate workers.

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Anyone know a hitman?



OPS. THIS IS EMBARRASSING. A reader asked me to put him in touch with a contract killer. But there's not a single one in my contacts book. Having said that, there IS one tax inspector, two chief nursing ward sisters and a school matron, which some people would say are pretty much the same thing.

The reader had written to me for help in committing suicide. "Is there any way to find a professional contract killer to do it? Tks! said the email from a gentleman whose initials are HL.

I wrote back advising against using hit men (they mess up the wallpaper) and suggested he instead take his problems to counselors, who are cheap, clean, and often rather cute.

Why ask a columnist for help hiring a murderer? Probably because I wrote a column in September in which a reader named Dancer who lives near me remarked that out-of-work contract killers approached her husband in a park to offer a discount murder for the equivalent of US\$38.

Mr Dancer politely declined, being unable to think of a single person he wanted killed.

I was shocked. "Not even one?" I said. Wow, now THERE'S a nice guy. (I wrote a list in case he gets the same offer again.) Meanwhile, one gang of killers-for-hire in Asia last week tried to raise their market value by using modern marketing methods, a reader from India told me.

They posed for photographs, listed the guns they knew how to handle and documented previous hits they had made.

Inspector Chandra Dhar told the Times of India that the villains did this corporate brand-building so they could charge more per killing. Officers who busted the gang are confident of getting a conviction. Imagine the trial.

Judge: "Are you contract killers?"
Gangster: "No, my lord."
Judge: "Then why are your faces on this brochure which says Contract Killers R Us?"

These villains are surely due for a MAJOR oops moment. From the US a reader sent the story of Scott Wellington of New Hampshire, who told his bosses his wife was sick. They gave him sympathy.

He said she was dying. They passed a hat around and gave him US\$7,000 for medical expenses.

He said she'd died. His boss sent a condolence card to his house which Mrs Wellington opened. She apologized for her husband's stupidity and offered to return the money last week.

The twist in the tale is that the boss told her she could keep the money for all she had to suffer in being married to a guy like that. Now that's a wise and generous human being.

I did meet a real killer once, on a jungle trek through Sarawak in Malaysia. An old, skinny man living in an Iban longhouse told us that he used to be the district's main headhunter, and still had the shrunken heads of his victims to prove it.

I told him that people in the outside world no longer used the word headhunter. "We prefer to say executive search consultant," I told him. "It's better for marketing." He nodded politely although I'm sure he thought I was an idiot.

ON OTHER MATTERS... Apologies for not being able to reach you guys for a while. I hung out with a real-life revolutionary (Jose Ramos-Horta) and commenter Angela. Will report more when I get the pictures downloaded.

In the meantime, I looked up Liftie's allegation about the doctor who did poo transplants, and it's all true. A woman was dying so he opened her up and put her husband's poo inside her, saving her life.

Chamin, I looked up Newater this is Singapore sewage which is treated and then reused as fresh water. Eww. Chamin, I wish you had told me about this BEFORE I spent four days in Singapore...

Thanks also for the animal vids, fascinating.

For more on hitman, log on to <http://mrjam.typepad.com>