

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



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**A**FTER Begum Zia's announcement of a lull in hartal for whatever reasons, activism on BNP's part for realigning with political forces, large or small, takes on a feverish pitch. It is breathing some fresh air into politics gone surreal. One wouldn't be too wrong either to even look at it as a quieter prelude to an impending storm given; for, the seeds of discord have been sown deeper into the very heart of national polity which is the Constitution of the country.

Usually, aligning of political parties takes place in two sets of circumstances: The first has to do with waging a movement against a regime for all the right reasons; and the second relates to a run-up to national elections aimed at securing victory in the polls.

As for the first kind, one can cite the lining up of major political forces to spearhead a popular movement to overthrow the autocratic regime of former President H.M. Ershad back in late 1990. The second time that a pre-movement alignment took place was among disparate political parties like religion-based Jamaat-e-Islami, secular Awami League and Jatiya Party, the brainchild of once discredited Ershad. They made a common cause of introducing caretaker system in 1995-96 to oversee national elections.

The examples of pre-election understanding, even of seat sharing to field candidates according to agreed quotas to draw on combined vote banks, has been a standard strategic political maneuver practiced by political parties.

But now with the elections more than two years away, the parleys BNP is having with smaller political parties evidently fall in the first category -- oriented to launching a movement. They are designed to create a broader platform to wage a movement for retention of caretaker system (since defunct) for two consecutive terms in accord with a part of the Supreme Court verdict that went by default.

There are other elements like Articles 7(A) and 7(B) in the 15th amendment whereby several new provisions have been stipulated as "fundamental matters."

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The words "fundamental matters" have been equated with what is known as fundamental structure of the constitution, and, therefore, rendered unchangeable. Failure to abide by these would be construed "as seditious."

Some eminent jurists and civil society leaders have taken issue with these so-called immutable changes, basically viewing them as going against fundamental rights of the people and impinging on their rights to ownership of the constitution and the sovereign will of the people.

BNP's position on Islam as state religion and on treating all citizens as Bangalee, regardless of their

ethnic origins, may not fundamentally differ from the AL's position on them. But the CPB and the hardcore left are opposed to those provisions so they are reluctant to align either with the Awami League or the BNP, and they have affirmed as much. However, JSD (Inu) and Worker's Party led by Menon, which have three and two seats respectively in parliament and are part of the Mohajote, after an initial laid-back attitude got around to voting for the 15th amendment following persuasion by some AL leaders. As if they were submitting themselves to a party whip.

All this is to say that the BNP has the potential of building alliances on the basis of one-point programme, namely: return of the caretaker system for the next two general elections. Political parties across the board barring AL and JP, the intelligentsia in general, and the people at large are in favour of continuing with the caretaker system in preference to party government holding elections into the foreseeable future.

The BNP is dialoguing with Bikalpa Dhara led by Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury, LDP of Oli Ahmed and Krishak Sramik Janata League of Kader Siddiqui and with some other smaller political parties to build up a

common platform. Bikalpa Dhara and LDP, born out of discord with BNP have seen reason to unite on a common cause.

The Awami League is keenly active in holding together the Mohajote while simultaneously engaging Bikalpa Dhara, LDP and BSD, a JSD splinter, to wean them away from the BNP. These efforts are largely by way of damage control and not out of any principled stance to broaden the base of unity for achieving a cause. While the BNP has the advantage of upholding a principle and doing it with a clear-cut purpose, the Awami League's motivation is grounded in an instinct of self-preservation. This, in a context, where it must know it has alienated itself from a large segment of political opinion by going it alone on the constitutional issue.

The variant in this overall scenario seems to be the Jatiya Party and not Jamaat, which is in a beleaguered state. JP won 29 seats in 9th parliament, to signify its clout. Moudud's overture to his former benefactor H.M. Ershad urging him to join the BNP "for the sake of democracy" has been kicked in the long grass by the Jatiya Party president. He at once reminded the concerned of the long years he had been behind the bars, thanks to BNP rule. So much for the BNP's "professed democracy," he thought aloud.

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# Planned development for transport sector

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**B**ANGLADESH has developed a transport network that includes roads, railways, inland waterways, two maritime ports and civil airports catering to both domestic and international traffic. Road transport has traditionally been the centre of the government's attention in this sector.

It is the fastest growing mode, with an average annual growth of 8% for passenger and 9% for freight since 1990s. Roads account for around 80% of passenger and freight movement. The road network consists of four broad categories. National highways connect the national capital with divisional headquarters. Ports and international and regional highways form a five-way regional corridor (Dhaka-Chittagong; Dhaka-northwest; Dhaka-Khulna; Dhaka-Sylhet and Khulna-northwest), which represent 3 and 2% of all road length respectively.

Feeder roads connect Upazila headquarter and growth centres with arterial road system and represent 34% of the total road network. Rural roads represent the largest part of the Bangladesh road system, constituting 61% of the total road network. Roads & Highway under the Ministry of Communications looks after national, regional and some of feeder roads whereas major feeder roads and rural roads are looked after by LGED under the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives.

The government's transport strategy aims to support economic development by expanding linkages in the internal transport system and promote local market integration, specially in rural areas. There is sizable public investment (through development budget, ADP and revenue budget) in road construction (1.8% of GDP).

Bangladesh today has an extensive road network (2.4 lac kilometres) surpassing other South Asian countries in total road density. An extensive rural road network has contributed greatly to economic growth and poverty reduction. 80% of the rural road network is composed of narrow roads in poor condition because they are built with poor compaction and without proper structures.

Rural roads are mainly constructed under political pressure without proper planning, as a result the agricultural lands are reducing day by day. On the other, the regional highways and feeder roads are generally constructed under the direction of political leaders without any feasibility study, and don't follow the master plan of roads or five-year plan or long term plan. Rural, feeder and regional highways can be termed as political roads.

The great potential of Bangladesh's ports is not utilised well. While Bangladesh's ports generate small operation surpluses and receive negligible amounts of ADP expenditure, all the major ports suffer from overstaffing, excessive labour strikes (labour unions are politically motivated), cumbersome customs procedures and outdated and ineffi-

cient work rules and management practices. This represents a hefty tax on Bangladesh's economy and the costs of these inefficiencies are passed on to traders and customers.

Heavy siltation makes Mongla's approach channel difficult to maintain, resulting in low berth use because most cargo has to be lightened at anchorage. Turnaround time for feeder vessels in Chittagong is 6-8 days, compared with 1½-2 days in Bangkok and 1 day in Singapore. A meaningful port development policy should be formulated and implemented without political interference.

The inland waterway system, which carries large volumes of the nation's freight, is not used to its full potential due to silting waterways, lack of ghat berthing facilities and obstruction caused by low or narrow road bridges and irrigation channel sluice gates. Planned and meaningful dredging should be introduced for navigability of inland waterways. The

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government has given highest priority to dredging, but the money which has already been allocated/ to be allocated should be used properly.

Bangladesh Railway (BR) has a total of 2,885 route-km railway lines consisting of three different gauges. The Medium Gauge (MG) (1000 km) and Broad Gauge (BG) (1676 km) systems have been in use since the beginning, but Dual Gauge (DG) -- a mix of MG and BG --system was introduced in 2001. If rail is to survive as a viable mode, it must significantly improve service quality and operational efficiency. Moreover railway networks need multi-modal integration with road and inland water transport systems as well as improved infrastructure facilities to be able to carry more traffic efficiently.

Unplanned piece-meal and economically non-viable projects should not be implemented with inexperience project directors. The potential of the railway in Bangladesh needs to be unlocked through planned investment in track, signalling, rolling stock, maintenance and human resources. Donor and suppliers driven projects/programmes should not be considered.

Clear and appropriate assignment of responsibilities for the management of different types of roads, providing adequate funds, regulating traffic, managing street parking and enforcing road rules is a prerequisite for a sound road transport system. Yet the

relationship between ministries of finance, planning, local government, communications and various implementing agencies is unclear. In addition, a national policy for construction and maintenance of road should be formulated and implemented without any political interference.

Unplanned roads should not be constructed. Load capacity of national and regional roads should be 12 tons instead of 7 tons for regional connectivity. It may be mentioned that there are no formal mechanisms for allowing a constructive dialogue on overall sector policy and strategy, inclusive of all the major stakeholders within and outside the government. Corruption in road construction and inland water dredging should be looked into.

A master plan for railway should be formulated immediately for planned development. Railway has a shortage of skilled manpower; and without proper and efficient manpower it is impossible to implement the on-going and future projects. Instead of track improvement and expansion, Bangladesh Railway is interested in procuring locomotives, passenger carriages, wagons etc.

BR should introduce 110 pound rails immediately for implementing transit and Trans-Asian Railway. Railways and inland waterways were neglected in ADP allocations. Railways and inland waterways together account for only 12% of transport expenditure, which may be increased to 45% of total transport allocation.

The priority for the government in the transport sector is to embrace the role of regulator and standard setter. Road safety, improvement of railway service, pollution control and inland waterways are four major areas where needs are most pressing. The highest dividends in terms of growth and poverty reduction will be achieved if the government focuses on maintaining (not expanding) the core network as well as enhancing capacity on major highway corridors, expanding railway routes by introducing 110 pound rails and improving the service delivery of BR, bridging river gaps, dredging inland waterway for navigability, replacing ferries with bridges and introducing efficient port management.

The large network of rural roads also requires more maintenance not expansion. Combining rural and feeder roads maintenance with the Food-For-Works programme is a winning strategy, but more engineering supervision and local participation are required to improve the sustainability of these actions. Institutional changes are necessary to support these strategic choices. Involvement of political elites and representatives of the people in project selection should be stopped for the greater interest of the nation. For achieving economic development objectives as well as regional connectivity planned development of transport sector is need of the hour.

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# The fallacy of DFI

M. ASHRAF ALI

**T**HE government has been requesting foreign investors for Direct Foreign Investment (DFI) for quite some time, but has failed to win them over mainly because there is lack of suitable infrastructure as well as acceptable law and order situation prevailing in the country.

But why are we wooing them for DFI? This is a country of about 150 million people, and one of the largest markets in the world. The only thing we have to do is to create demand for durable and consumer goods. Take, for example, the question of shoes. How many people in the country wear shoes? If crores of people could form the habit of wear shoes, we would need crores of pairs of shoes. In that case, we would need thousands of factories employing thousands of employees. Having met the local demands, we could export thousands of pairs of shoes.

Millions of poor people in the rural areas cannot afford to wear a shirt. They mainly remain bare-bodied in this 21st century, which is a tragedy. If we could create a demand for shirts we would need many factories where thousands of local employees could work. Similarly, the rural women do not wear blouses only because they were not taught to wear them. We need to make them aware of the need for wearing them. In western countries, women use a lot of various cosmetics and beautification items produced locally. Our women in the villages do not use any at all. If we could make them conscious of using such items, business would boom in this country.

The only thing we need to do is to educate the nearly 100 million illiterates who are ultra-poor and who do not possess any extra money for cosmetics. Only thing we need to do is to help them earn enough money through suitable employment.

We need to establish many factories, leading to wide-spread employment, and to increase the purchasing power of poor people. It is said that man does not live by bread alone. He needs variety in his life, leading to a fuller life by using all the good things.

It is a heinous crime to keep the people uneducated and dumb so that they are unable to demand more from the government. It is easy to exploit them and push them into inhuman life for the sake of maximising the benefit of the ruling class.

So if we have our senses and use them wisely, we need not woo the unwilling foreigners for FDI. It is really shameful on our part to do so when we can take care of it ourselves.

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