

The PM's baffling observations

These can only erode her credibility

We are aghast at the PM's sweeping and unsubstantiated allegations that the opposition BNP resorted to killing and kidnapping 'to fulfil its political mission' of foiling the war crimes trial. This is not for the first time she has said so; but the intensity of her tirade doesn't fit in with the current political vibe.

A relative calm seemed to pervade an otherwise torrid political scenario, thanks to the opposition deciding to sit in talks with the President. When we have just suggested that the onus is more on the ruling party to take things forward on the presidential talks, to be careful with words, here comes the Prime Minister with tongue-lashing at the BNP.

If the Prime Minister has specific information about the BNP's direct or indirect hand in the incidents of disappearances and 'secret killings', why doesn't she share it with the public and arrest the 'culprits'? Obviously, she doesn't have any hard information, otherwise why is she talking of a probe? And how good a probe it is going to be when she as the PM is being judgmental about its outcome?

Let's make it clear though, when Begum Khaleda Zia and Moudud Ahmed has asked for stopping the war crimes trial we condemned them in the strongest of terms. But to shift the blame of a law and order failure in curbing disappearances and secret killings (only on Saturday four persons disappeared) on to a 'plot' hatched by BNP to foil war crimes trial without furnishing any proof is disingenuous at best and misleading at worst.

This is trivialising the most dreaded form of criminality that enforced disappearance and secret killings are. This is also denigrating the minimal respect for human rights of those who have been abducted without a trace and occasionally surface as dead bodies. It is the state's responsibility to protect its citizens and not to empty the laps of mothers or households of their only earning members or leave a wife widowed. If the state fails to do it then it takes on the label of terrorising the citizens just because some gangsters have a field day with impunity.

Textbook festival an auspicious beginning

Divest education of commercialisation

At the start of a new year which also marks the completion of our 40 years of independence, we applaud the education ministry's initiative to celebrate the occasion by distributing free text books across the country among students of primary, secondary and technical education schools, and Ebtedayee and Dakhil madrasas. What could be a better way to celebrate the first day of the year than provide our tender-aged children with fresh new books?

While we reflect on the last year in retrospect or ponder carving out ways to move ahead, we often leave our children out of the purview forgetting that today's children are the future nation builders. The education ministry, however, has made a difference by prioritising children's education and by ensuring that all children regardless of their class and creed have an access to education.

Having said that, we would also like to put stress on what our children at primary and secondary levels are learning because it is through education that a nation instills in its young minds a sense of patriotism and a vision for building a prosperous country. For that to happen, the preparatory level of education has to incorporate an initiation to all the historical epochs that altogether constitute our national identity.

Above all, effective classroom teaching must be addressed which largely depends on teachers' efficiency. It is with dismay that we have noticed in recent times a commodification of education leading to the rise of coaching centres and private tuition. Timely and free distribution of books is the foundation on which we build further improvements to impart learning at the primary and secondary levels. With our collective vision of ushering in a prosperous era, we urge all concerned bodies to divest education of its commercial tilt and make it a tool

BANGLADESH AT 40: LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

Secularism

Rehman Sobhan

[PART III of a Four-Part series]

THE constitutional commitment to secularism was grounded in our long struggle to rescue Bangladesh from the abuse of religion for political gain. Throughout the phase of Pakistani rule, greedy, corrupt and immoral political elites quite cynically attempted to use religious slogans to mask their anti-democratic rule. The abuse of religion reached its most degenerate form in 1971 when genocide was committed on large numbers of innocent Bengalis, in the name of religion, by a leader and his forces who were totally irreligious in their personal character and motivations. The founding fathers of Bangladesh were, thus, determined that in an independent Bangladesh no scope should be provided to similarly abuse religion for purposes of political gain. Secularism, as it was interpreted in our constitution, was thus never designed to interfere with the practice of religion by any individual or community or to discourage religious education. Nor did we go so far as to discourage any reference to religion in our public educational institutions or public sphere as is the case in some countries such as France with a strong commitment to secularism.

This attempt to discourage the abuse of religion for political gain did not prevent the post-liberation government from being slandered for discouraging religion, putting

locks on the mosques or banning religious education. Even in the election campaigns of the last decade we have heard the slogan that the sound of the azaan will be replaced throughout Bangladesh with the sound of the conch shell.

This deliberate misinterpretation of the approach to secularism as incorporated in our constitution, led to the legal excision of this provision from the constitution by the post-1975 regime and its replacement by the constitutional proclamation under the 8th amendment, emphasising the supremacy of the religion of the majority community. These constitutional assertions of supremacy of one religion may not have derogated from the secular foundations of our constitution or legally arrogated a particular religion into a guiding principle of our jurisprudence but it served to encourage politicians and parties seeking political power and private material gain to abuse religion to promote their political fortunes and slander their opponents. This same abuse of religion had culminated in the genocide of 1971. Whilst this tendency has not yet led to another genocide in Bangladesh the recent emergence of terrorism has demonstrated that violence in the name of religion has the potential to escalate into a threat to the functioning of a democratic society. Pakistan's experience should have taught us that when ambitious politicians and

generals deliberately manipulate religious beliefs to both capture power and perpetuate their anti-democratic rule, sooner or later ideologically motivated fundamentalists will use these same slogans for imposing their beliefs on the people by terror rather than the ballot box.

The recently enacted 15th amendment to the Bangladesh constitution which once again restored secularism as a founding principle of the state, is a positive development even though some of the cosmetic interventions elevating a particular religion remain intact. Perhaps more significant than the amendment to the constitution is the decision of this government to push ahead with the trial for war crimes committed by certain political elements who explicitly collaborated with the Pakistan army in the genocide they inflicted on the people of Bangladesh in 1971. It was an affront to both the rule of law as well as the commitment to the construction of a more secular polity that those political elements who collaborated in genocide at a defining moment in Bangladesh's history, remained unanswerable for their role in 1971. However, if justice is to be done after all these years it had best be done through due legal process so that those who are being made answerable for unspeakable acts against their own people cannot claim political victimisation. It

was this willingness by the current Prime Minister, during her first tenure in office, to ensure due process of law in the trial and sentencing of the assassins of Bangabandhu, his family and his close colleagues, which gave credibility to the outcomes of the judicial process and left it above legal or political challenge.

In the final analysis we cannot expect to construct a secular society out of a few amendments to the constitution. The substance of a secular society demands that we not only tolerate the practice of all faiths but do not discriminate against minorities in the distribution of political and economic opportunities. If Bangladesh is to avoid Pakistan's exposure to ideologically inspired terror the mainstream political parties will collectively need to decide that religion should not be exploited for partisan gain. Whilst all people should be free to pursue their religious beliefs religion cannot be manipulated to divide the country into political categories of believers and unbelievers. Once we introduce such variables into political life then those who are obsessed with the conviction that they are the truest believers will feel encouraged to assert their right to annihilate not just minorities but, as we are witnessing in Pakistan today, even those of common faith who they feel do not share their interpretation of the religion.

Rising value of US dollar

MONAEM SARKER

AS 2011 comes to a close, the economic state of affairs in the United States is frightening. The economy has slowed considerably, many people have lost their jobs. Companies are cutting back in the face of declining consumer demand. Consumers are spending less because they are losing their jobs or fear losing them. It's a vicious circle.

There has been a government bailout of banks. Some are wondering who will be next. While all this has been going on at home, on the world stage the US dollar has been riding high. It has been gaining strength against most other major currencies, such as, euro, pound, etc. Why would the dollar be strong if things are so bad in the US?

It would be nice to think the rising dollar is a sign that the world thinks Washington is doing a better job than other governments at managing the economic crisis. Maybe it is. But there are other reasons for the strengthening US currency.

When people get scared, as they are at the moment, they tend to run for the dollar. Like gold, the US dollar has long been a safe haven for investors looking to put their assets in a place where they won't be confiscated or decline sharply in value.

When the supply exceeds the demand, the price goes down; when the demand exceeds the supply, the price goes up. The more money there is chasing a limited supply of a commodity, the price of that commodity will go up. Countries wanting to hold US dollars must buy them on the world currency markets.

As more countries want to buy dollars, the price goes up. So the US dollars gains in strength. In time it will come down again as other considerations come into play. For the time being, though, the US dollar is strong despite the economic weakness.

While the strong dollar is a sign that international investors still have faith in the weak US economy and its deflated financial markets, it is clearly having a negative impact

on American businesses that can't compete with products readily available to consumers at discounted exchange rates.

It's not just apples and oranges that are being affected by the almighty dollar. On the manufacturing side, auto supplies, textiles, wood and lumber, and plastics are just a few industries struggling under the dollar's hefty gain. And on the consumer side, visits from international tourists are down significantly this year, while Americans are choosing in ever-rising numbers to travel abroad with their strong currency.

In the 1990s, the US Treasury Department developed a "strong dollar" policy -- an unwritten rule

ofomics start having difficulty, these other countries want to hold more of their reserves in the most secure, sizeable, and most stable currency -- the US dollar.

It may not be as safe as it was and I think many people have their worries about the size of the US debt and whether the dollar will always be safe, but certainly it's the safest thing around at the moment. Plus, there's no practical alternative to the dollar in this situation. No other country has a large enough money supply to accommodate the international demand for a safe-haven currency, nor is there enough gold in the world to take the dollar's place right now.

But is the popularity of the US

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that having a balanced budget, stable interest rates, low inflation and a humming economy were the best way to spark investor interest in US dollar-denominated investments. That was accepted by almost everyone when the US economy was doing well. Now, with the weak economy and with no one certain about whether growth will rebound or not, it's not so fine.

Overseas, the economies of other countries are suffering the same plight as the US -- economic decline. The US is the largest economy in the world. It is the world's economic engine. When the engine slows down, the whole vehicle slows down.

The US is relatively stable, politically. All countries have currency reserves -- they hold their reserves mostly in US dollars -- because of that stability. When their own econ-

dollar good for the US economy? In some ways, though, it isn't. When the Japanese yen declines against the dollar, Toyotas get cheaper compared with US autos, and that's not good for Detroit. Generally, the stronger the US dollar, the bigger the US trade deficit.

There is another perspective here, however. Between bank bailouts and the massive spending stimulus, the Obama administration is projecting a budget deficit this year of \$1.75 trillion. The US needs to borrow a lot of money. The strength of the US dollar ensures that foreigners are ready to buy US Treasury Securities and Bonds, thereby finance US spending. By comparison, other countries that need a stimulus programme will have a harder time borrowing the money they need. It also reflects the continuing view in Asia, and especially China, that the

financial stability and the financial recovery of the US is crucial to their own economic and financial futures.

At some point, investor concerns about the US's growing debt or its trade deficit are likely to mean the US dollar will lose some of its luster. But it probably won't happen as long as the investors are worried about the world economy.

A repatriation of capital out of emerging economies will see the US dollar and Japanese yen strong in the next couple of months. Even though emerging economies should grow stronger than their developed counterparts in the coming months, investors will likely continue to push into safer assets. That repatriation of funds back into local economies will see the US dollar and Japanese yen benefit most in the short term.

However, although the US economy may be vulnerable, the chances of a dollar collapse happening imminently look slim. That's because the other big buyer of US Treasuries, the Japanese, are in trouble.

The value of the dollar has increased by more than 10% against the taka in the last six months in Bangladesh. And the increasing trend continues. What has contributed to this sudden rise? The government's policy to give licenses to new banks has a lot to do with it. Bangladesh Bank has imposed a number of conditions for establishing a new bank. One of the condition deals with having a capital of Tk.400 crores raised from legal sources. This has led to a huge purchase of US dollar using local taka. This dollar is being repatriated to the country through legal channels in order to be regarded as white money. As a result of this demand for dollar, its value has increased at a fast rate.

This trend will continue in the coming months. And there is no reason to expect the dollar to return to its 2010 or 2011 value very soon.

The writer is Director General, Bangladesh Foundation for Development Research.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 2

366

The Alamanni cross the frozen Rhine River in large numbers, invading the Roman Empire.

1791

Big Bottom massacre in the Ohio Country, marking the beginning of the Northwest Indian War.

1860

The discovery of the planet Vulcan is announced at a meeting of the Académie des Sciences in Paris.

1871

Amadeus I becomes King of Spain.

1900

John Hay announces the Open Door Policy to promote trade with China.

1905

Russo-Japanese War: The Russian garrison surrenders at Port Arthur, China.

2001

Silvia Calderón becomes the first female Governor of Puerto Rico.