

GROUND REALITIES

Of Ershad, of rainbow dreams

Remittance earnings give a boost

Now make good use of it

IT is welcome relief to know that the country's remittance earnings reached a record high of \$ 12.17 billion in 2011 with a 10 per cent increase over the level of the preceding year. It should provide a substantial boost to the economy helping the government, already saddled with fiscal deficit, to cushion its dwindling foreign exchange reserves. Now the challenge before the government is to put the earnings to best use to live down the strains on the balance of payment situation.

The year 2011 saw a reported surge in the outflow of migrant workers in many Middle Eastern countries. Severe political upheaval, however, put the economies in jeopardy in many host countries including Libya and Bahrain. That our migrant workers could gross this kind of earnings against such stunning odds makes the success all the more inspiring.

Given this background, we would like to emphasize that the government should cut back on its costly import of fuel for rental power plants since a freeze has been applied on this mode of power generation. There should be extensive belt tightening of government expenditure so as not to whittle down the foreign exchange reserves through unnecessary imports and foreign travels of government officials. Furthermore, imports of consumer and luxury products should also be brought under control for which we have to put a lead on hundi and induce our foreign wage earners to remit their money through authorized channels by a simplification of procedures.

In order to keep pace with the growing demand for trained workers, the government should step up its efforts to enhance skill levels of workers so that we have a larger share of manpower market. It is time we explored newer markets for our migrant workers.

Ministers should uphold rule of law

Not corrode it

OB AIDUL Quader and Shajahan Khan are in charge of communications and shipping ministries respectively. But the latter believes that on highway accidents he has the last word. No sooner had the communications minister emphasised maximum alert on the part of drivers to shun reckless driving and overloading and be compliant with traffic rules than his colleague in the shipping ministry reacted disapprovingly. At once he swung to a stout defense of the drivers blaring his pet slogan: 'drivers are not killers, rather they are service providers'.

Communications minister must have regretted sitting under the same canopy of an official programme on awareness-building among drivers with the shipping minister on Monday. But the presence of the shipping minister was because he is the executive president of the Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Sramik Federation, a co-organiser of the programme with the BRTA and Dhaka Metropolitan Police. Evidently, there is a conflict of interest issue here: a cabinet minister wearing the hat of a trade union federation. Setting aside that issue for a moment, whereas the minister should have used his clout as a trade union leader to motivate the transport operators to embrace the road safety agenda, he is being indiscriminately indulgent to them.

He is obviously playing to his constituency, more than his remit as a minister involving collective responsibility as member of the cabinet. Governance is based on rule of law. There are rules for licensing fitness of transport and competence of the drivers apart from the whole raft of traffic rules the vehicle operators have to adhere to. He must have minimum educational qualification, aptitude, skill training, road sense and knowledge of traffic rules to be on the driver's seat. No government worth its salt can compromise on these requirements.

As an integral part of both the normative and operational code of governance, even trade unionism is governed by a set of rules, a reform of which is long overdue. In any case, it can't run on the clout of sheer numbers. If that happens, the very core of governance will stand threatened. Therefore, we would urge a complete submission of an individual or a group to the rule of law and values of governance.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GOING by the harsh standards set by politics in postmodern times, Hussein Muhammad Ershad is a lucky man. He

is one of the few military dictators to have survived a big fall and live to fight another day. That should not have been the case. By any measure of political logic, he ought to have gone into retirement, silently reminiscing on the times that have been.

That is what Ayub Khan did in the five years left of his life after his departure from power in March 1969. In near similar fashion, Augusto Pinochet, having presided over a brutal dictatorship in Chile, stepped into uneasy superannuation and in the end died a humiliated man. There are the tales too of all the old strongmen in Latin America, all swept away by a rising crescendo of democracy around them. Not many of them were fortunate enough to return to office in a new, pluralistic ambience.

Given this historical record, General Ershad has had fortune smile on him at every political crossroads. Ageing has not had much effect on him. The old way of walking, military fashion, is as prominent as it was when he was president. Politeness has been part of his character, despite all the political games he has been fond of playing in all these years since he first began taking interest in politics in the early 1980s as army chief of staff. He is a good listener and gives off little sign of the arrogance typical of those who inhabit the political landscape. There is an intensity of the romantic spirit in him, in that broad literary sense of the meaning.

And yet there is a certain unpredictability about him when it comes to politics. He has been in alliance with Sheikh Hasina and then with Khaleda Zia, more than once. To a certain extent, he keeps the two women guessing about his next move with all his righteous indignation

about what he believes is their deliberate indifference to him and to his party. He makes sure, when he is aligned with the Awami League, that he is properly respectful toward Sheikh Hasina. In the past, when he was part of the Khaleda Zia-led movement against the Awami League, he went overboard, as some would say, in demonstrating his respect for the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

And then there is the irony: in these slightly over twenty one years

Ershad. He believes his Jatiya Party will win enough seats to form the next government. He quite leaves out the fact that for all their tragic flaws the Awami League and the BNP yet are rampant as the nation's pre-eminent political forces.

But, again, there is the incontrovertible truth that while politicians may get to be hyperbolic in their public expressions of sentiment, they feel differently in the silence of their privacy. That is as true of Ershad as it is of any other political being. The

he ensured a restoration of the nation's history in his days in power. He visited and offered prayers at Bangabandhu's grave and yet allowed the Freedom Party to operate freely. Ershad had a brilliant opportunity to correct some historical mistakes. He could have done away with the indemnity ordinance and brought the killers of August-November 1975 to trial. He could have stayed above politics and ensured that the old collaborators of the Pakistan army were pushed back into their caves.

In a land where politics keeps circling around Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia and Hussein Muhammad Ershad for years on end, rainbow dreams refuse to take form and substance across the firmament.



MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / DRIK NEWS

since they pushed him from power, both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have found it hard to alienate Ershad or keep him at arm's length. They may have condemned him for his flip-flops; they keep calling him an autocrat who undermined democracy through his coup d'etat of March 1982 (and they are right), but they know too that the former general cannot simply be wished away. They know they need him if they are to continue flailing away at each other. Ershad knows they need him, knows too that as long as they keep squabbling, he can expect another day in the sun.

And that is what he thinks will precisely happen at the next general election. Every politician has the right to dream of power, of attaining it or going back to it. So be it with

more important point here, though, is the sheer confidence which today defines the Ershad persona. Having been a kingmaker all these years, he now yearns to be king.

You tend to ask yourself a simple question: what if General Ershad, having seized power in 1982, decided to hand the country back to the politicians without himself getting involved in political games? What if he had never harboured any political ambitions post-May 1981 and had let President Sattar complete his term in office? What if he had waited till his retirement from the army to come into politics and thereby given the nation a good, credible third choice in the making of government?

There are other thoughts. General Ershad's place in history would be several notches higher than it is had

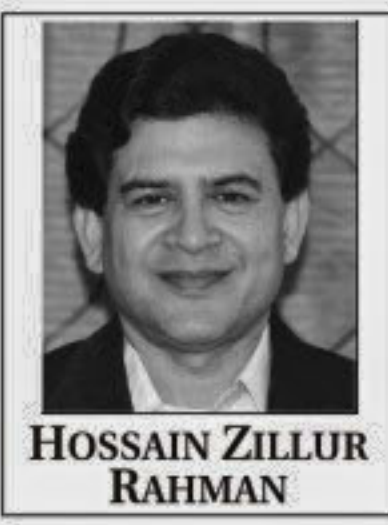
His politics, his ambitions came in the way. Because of what he did in March 1982, we remained burdened by the weight of a political class which refuses to free the nation of its grip. Largely because of his legacy, leadership has not grown in this country over the past thirty years. Politics has atrophied. Politicians have succumbed to hauteur.

In a society where the present is all and the future is yet beyond the distant mountains, hope dies slowly, agonisingly. In a land where politics keeps circling around Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia and Hussein Muhammad Ershad for years on end, rainbow dreams refuse to take form and substance across the firmament.

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HEADLINES BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Progressive economics, flawed politics



HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

FORTY Years. As the curtain has fallen on 2011, assessments and soul-searching have been galore. A nation born in blood and tears, written off at birth by a section of the international community yet rising like a Phoenix from every calamity inflicted by nature and man, united in the upward aspirations of its people but cruelly riven by the pettiness and greed of its leaders! Bangladesh, my Bangladesh, what awaits you in your next forty years? The accounting job has been done, the positives and negatives tallied. But the crystal ball refuses to surrender its message.

The first challenge was to demonstrate staying power. And how spectacular has been this success! In 1974, people died of hunger on the streets of Dhaka. In 1998, when a larger flood engulfed the country in August-September, doomsayers at home and abroad were proven comprehensively wrong before the year was out. In 1974, there were no VGF cards, no orsoline. Three odd decades later, Bangladesh was being held up as a disaster-management role model on the global stage. Yes. We won the resilience struggle. But meanwhile the people had moved the goal posts higher.

There have been turning points, known and less-known. 1973: The state embracing universal basic education as its own responsibility.

1979: Back-to-back LC and the birth of the RMG journey. Professor Yunus and the emergence of women as economic actors via microcredit. 1984: Drug Policy and the birth of the domestic pharmaceutical industry. Quamrul Islam Siddique and the first connectivity revolution through rural feeder roads of LGED. 1991: Begum Khaleda Zia and the road to gender parity in schools through conditional girl stipends. 1997: Sheikh Hasina and the impetus to social protection. The second connectivity revolution through mobile

interest only in partial and biased histories. A story of progressive economics and flawed politics. It had seemed the other way round in 1971. Then, the economics had seemed more forbidding and the politics the easier challenge. But the heroes showed their feet of clay while the man on the ground quietly soldiered on with the aspirational embers ignited by 1971. Inch by inch, the economic balance-sheet moved from red to black. But the political balance-sheet remained stuck in the red.

Progressive economics and flawed politics -- they have brought us this far but can they take us past our new and higher goal posts? Goal posts defined not only by the language of statistical growth rates but also by the larger egalitarian and progressive principles of 1971?

telephony and private media. The quiet but sustained reforms in banking and financial management over the '90s and beyond that produced two decades of macroeconomic stability. Forty years: The tripling of food production by farmers officially illiterate but savvy in embracing technology and enterprising in responding to opportunities, the remittance take-off by a youth driven by dreams of prosperity but unaided by policy. Yes, there have many drivers of change but the leaders and the partisan hearts have

Progressive economics and flawed politics -- they have brought us this far but can they take us past our new and higher goal posts? Goal posts defined not only by the language of statistical growth rates but also by the larger egalitarian and progressive principles of 1971? The game has changed. The economic challenges are qualitatively different. Access is no longer the driving concern. Quality is, be it education or health. Skills and not paper degrees are what matter in the market-place for the two million who are joining the labour force every

year. Urban dysfunction, infrastructural deficits and the energy crunch are the new brakes on the economic wheels.

As 2012 ushers in the next forty years, new realisations are afoot. Growth acceleration is needed. So is dignity. So is power tempered with humility. So is celebration of merit and competence. Perhaps the biggest realisation is that the first, i.e. growth acceleration, may not be wholly possible without the others. We can solve fifty percent of our problems by our own efforts. And this we must continue to do. Six percent GDP growth has come and will come from these diverse initiatives from across society. But for the other fifty percent of the problems, for raising the growth rate by another two to three percent more which alone can comprehensively see the back of poverty, the quality of politics and governance has to undergo a change. And change it must. Because the spirit of 1971 demands that it be so.

A nation was not born in tears and blood merely to be free from hunger. For the first forty years, we have made our entry onto the global stage and astonished the world with our resilience. For the next forty, we must aim higher, aim for centre-stage, of being an economic powerhouse and a quality society defined by humanity, excellence and competence. This is our vow today.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 4

- 1878** Sofia is emancipated from Ottoman rule.
- 1944** World War II: Operation Carpetbagger, involving the dropping of arms and supplies to resistance fighters in Europe, begins.
- 1951** Korean War: Chinese and North Korean forces capture Seoul.
- 1999** Gunmen open fire on Shiite Muslims worshiping in an Islamabad, Pakistan mosque, killing 16 people and injuring 25.
- 2004** Mikheil Saakashvili is elected President of Georgia following the November 2003 Rose Revolution.