

## KALEIDOSCOPE

## Invest in youths

*They are our present and our future*

PERHAPS there could not be many better things for the government and the society to invest in than the development of its youths. And that was the main thrust of the call of the President while inaugurating the two-day convention titled, "Lead 2012: Youth in Rising South Asia: Promises and Dreams."

We fully echo the President's sentiments because, given that the region has 25 percent of the world's population and also the largest portion of the young between the ages of 15 and 24, not doing so would be at the peril of the regional countries. Indeed, it is our youths that hold the promise of fulfillment of our dreams.

For Bangladesh the situation has been made brighter by the fact that presently around 73 percent of the population in our country is below the age of 40. And if we were to leave out of the equation those below productive age, we would still have a very substantive portion of people between 20 and 40 years of age, a situation that is quite the reverse in many countries of the West, and which puts us in a much better position than many of the regional countries.

And the youths are one of the very important vehicles of the country's transformation which the government should focus on. Because, going by the global trend, leadership in many important sectors of national and human growth is being provided by the youths successfully. Therefore, they are not the leaders of the future but rather leaders of the present too. Not only are they far better in absorbing technology, they are better also in applying it in their respective fields provided they have opportunity to access the appropriate technology. And with the growing expansion of the ICT world, and Bangladesh becoming an active member of it, there is a vast potential of an export oriented ICT sector in Bangladesh.

However, an important aspect that all must be aware of is the fact that just as much as the youths can deliver given the opportunities, it is just as well possible for them to be frustrated and despondent, and as a consequence counterproductive, due to lack of it.

## Deteriorating state of law and order

*Odhikar report reveals disturbing facts*

RIGHTS group Odhikar in its annual report brings to light certain disturbing facts that are reflective of the overall human rights condition in the country. It lays bare the alarmingly rising trend of enforced disappearances allegedly by the law enforcing agencies, not to mention custodial torture often leading to death. The report says last year 30 persons fell victim to enforced disappearances and 17 to custodial deaths.

While extra-judicial killings had dropped to 84 from the preceding year's 127, enforced disappearances and custodial deaths saw a rise. These facts, along with other incidents of mob and gender violence, bring out a grim picture which obviously invalidates the oft-repeated government claim that the state of law and order has rather improved.

Coming on the heels of another report by the rights body Ain O Salish Kendra, Odhikar's report reconfirms how badly the state-run agencies have failed to protect the people. What is worse, these agencies, who are constitutionally obligated to provide security, have themselves become a threat to people's security.

In view of the present situation, the government should go into the allegations that enforced disappearance is but a newly adopted government strategy to replace the much criticized shoot-outs that have seriously tarnished its image.

Also the law enforcing agencies must pay proper attention to the aforementioned report while the government should act instantly to bring the agencies to act in a manner so that they can regain people's confidence as their protector.

In this regard we would also like to add that the burgeoning crimes related to gender violence owe much to our societal ailments which is why people at large should also stand guard against all forms of social crimes including stalking, rape, fatwa, abduction, domestic and mob

# Break political stalemate



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

WHEN Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was giving her government's account of successes in the last three years, the

people of Comilla city were thinking otherwise. The Awami League (AL)-backed mayoral candidate for Comilla City Corporation Afzal Khan lost to his opponent by a huge margin. If election is any yardstick to measure a government's popularity, then the mayoral polls for Comilla city are definitely the ones to gauge people's perception of the incumbent government's performance.

The defeat of the AL-backed candidate says a lot about how the voters of Comilla city evaluate the ruling party's three years in office. But the AL leaders would rather like to explain the polls-result away as having little political ramifications. And they are using the same arguments as they did in the past when they faced similar defeats in the of Chittagong City mayoral elections and recently in Narayanganj. The pet logic is the election result of Comilla city has nothing to reflect their party's, or for that matter, the government's diminishing popularity. That is to say that the Comilla polls or even the previous ones in Chittagong and Narayanganj were purely local phenomena and had nothing to do with the national political image of the party in power. Claiming that ruling AL had many successes in the last three years, AL's presidium member and former minister Tofail Ahmed negated the view that the outcomes of those three mayoral polls were a tell-tale sign of

the ruling party's eroding popularity. Taking a swipe at the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), he further said that the opposition BNP has no reason to revel in those results either, since none of those candidates belonged to their camp.

In the circumstances, would it not be wiser for the AL leadership to have an honest soul-searching as to why the voters have been doing an about-face at the polling booths three years into its office? Even though local issues dominated the voters' choice,

*The government should not waste anymore time in engaging the opposition in a constructive dialogue and reach a consensus on under what system the next general election will be conducted.*

does it not mean that the local AL leadership failed to gain the local electorates' confidence?

The ruling party should be ready to face facts, particularly after it has spent the better part of its tenure in power. Whether those winning mayoral candidates were from the opposition camp or not, the fact remains that the electorate gave a massive verdict against the ruling party-supported candidate in each case. And that says a lot about the incumbent government's performance in the last three years.

Regrettably, from the ruling party workers' and leaders' behaviour and utterances in the post-poll atmospherics show that they have not taken any lesson from those polls results.

There are even signs of disillusionment in the AL-led grand alliance. It has become clear that the alliance partners are getting increasingly res-

notive and not willing to share AL's burden of failures in governance.

Notwithstanding all these signals, the ruling AL seems to be quite unperturbed. As it had happened with its precursor BNP, it is still hoodwinking itself into believing that the time has remained static since its late December 2008 parliamentary election's thumping victory against the present opposition-led alliance.

Not only that, it is getting increasingly intolerant of any criticism from

any quarter, even from the well-meaning and the friendly ones. The intellectuals who have traditionally been sympathetic to AL for historical reasons have been forced to go into the defensive mode, if only because of the party's wrath against the leading newspaper columnists like Syed Abul Maksud who organised a sit-in programme on Eid day at the Central Shahid Minar pressing for a seven-point charter of demands to ensure road safety including resignation of the then communications minister Syed Abul Hossain.

The government not only condemned those intellectuals for that sit-in, it went so far as to mount police watch against them. That kind of a knee-jerk reaction from the government against the well-meaning members of the intelligentsia, the civil society and cultural workers only alienated the ruling AL from the sec-

tion of the people who had supported the party and its government through thick and thin. The ruling party is not only insensitive to any criticism, but it has also become narcissistic.

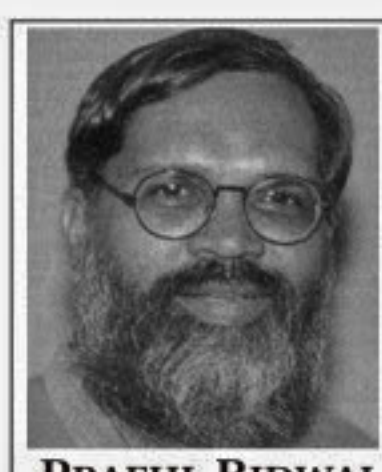
The leaders of AL has on more than one occasion expressed their annoyance with the media, as it has been making objective reports on the various issues of governance failure. And to the government, any report that deals with corruption in the communication ministry or in any other department of the administration, violence in society, death of people in police custody or in consequence of police encounter or so-called "cross-fire," or forced disappearance of people, excesses committed by the police against protest demonstrators, high price hike and so on are instances of negative reporting.

On the political front, there is still no sign of light at the end of the tunnel. The government is stubbornly holding its ground about the manner of conducting next general elections. In a bipartisan dispensation, one party (the ruling party, in the present case) alone cannot and should not take the entire responsibility of saying the last word. All the political parties including the main opposition should be engaged in taking the decision on whether the caretaker system or any other form of interim government should be the arrangement under which the next general election will be held.

With two years left in office, the AL leadership can still bring a real change in politics by taking the lead in initiating the dialogue. Will the PM end the era of demagoguery and show her statesmanship by taking the lead?

The writer is Editor, Science&Life, The Daily Star.

## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE fiasco over India's Lokpal Bill showed the ruling United Progressive Alliance and the Bharatiya Janata Party in poor light,

and exposed the hypocrisy of and falling public support for Anna Hazare and India Against Corruption (IAC).

The episode highlights Indian politicians' reluctance to fight corruption by establishing a Lokpal or ombudsman with independent investigating powers. Two critical issues still remain unresolved: the procedure for the Lokpal's appointment, and its authority over the Central Bureau of Investigation or another probe agency.

The Lokpal is no panacea against corruption, especially of the kind experienced by the poor who have to bribe officials to get even what they are entitled to. That needs a different law. But a Lokpal is indispensable to fighting corruption among high functionaries.

I shed no tears over the acute embarrassment that Anna Hazare and IAC suffered when they failed to attract big crowds to Hazare's three-day fast, which was to be followed by mass arrests.

Hazare & Co didn't see the moral absurdity of a three-day, as distinct from indefinite, fast. Nor did they understand that support for them in August was based on unresolved tensions with the government which hadn't then clarified its Lokpal stand. However, once the issue went to parliamentary forums, the public didn't see coercive interference with the process as legitimate.

Hazare got a boost in August because of the UPA's mishandling of his protest, hyped by a fawning media. That didn't happen last week.

Meanwhile, important members of the Team got exposed for their dubious practices, vaulting ambition and venality. Hazare stooped to petty

politics when he said he'd campaign against the Congress in the coming state Assembly elections.

Team Anna's links with the sangh parivar, which lent IAC crucial logistical support, brought it no credit. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leadership openly identified itself with Hazare, admitting that many swayamsevaks were active in IAC. That damaged Anna.

However, the UPA/Congress didn't cover itself with glory either. It first drafted a Lokpal Bill which kept the CBI under the Centre's control but allowed the Lokpal another independ-

ent investigation agency. But it switched to a new draft under which the Lokpal would have no autonomous investigating agency.

There's a good case for keeping the CBI out of the Lokpal's complete control. That, as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh argued, would effectively make the Bureau unaccountable to Parliament.

But there's an even more compelling case for freeing the CBI of the government's control so the Lokpal can order it to probe corruption. Dr. Singh disingenuously ducked this issue.

Freeing the CBI must start with repealing the "directive" of the 1980s which bars even a preliminary enquiry against senior civil servants or ministers without the government's permission. And no government, whether Congress- or BJP-led, has granted permission.

The final Bill, then, proposes a toothless -- not effective and credible

*Team Anna revealed its close connections with the BJP by concentrating all its attacks on Congress leaders, including Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi, while saying nothing against the BJP for its countless vacillations on the Bill, and eventually for scuttling it.*

ervations for the religious minorities, which it didn't.

The BJP played sordid politics with the Bill, arguing contradictorily in the Upper House that by mandating the appointment of Lokayuktas (ombudsmen) in the states, it violates federalism. But it had supported the same clause in the Lower House!

The BJP was keen to exploit the Congress's differences with the volatile Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress, and add to the confusion caused by the 187 amendments moved to the Bill.

Ultimately, the UPA didn't press for a vote on the Bill, which it would have lost. The grounds it cited -- namely, the convention that the Rajya Sabha cannot sit beyond midnight of its session's last day, and its new session must begin with the president's address -- was specious.

There is no such convention. In 2003-04, the House was adjourned on December 23 and reconvened on

January 29. The Supreme Court ruled that this was only a resumption of its earlier sitting. The world over, conferences extend their sittings if they haven't completed their business.

The BJP has emerged most discredited and mauled from the Lokpal affair. It played a double game right from the beginning by using Anna as a semi-respectable mascot for the sangh parivar's age-old agenda of trying to seize power by devious non-electoral means.

The BJP has no real commitment to the Lokpal/Lokayukta. In Gujarat, the post has been lying vacant for almost 10 years. Chief Minister Narendra Modi wants veto power over the nominee recommended by the state High Court's Chief Justice.

The BJP opposed the Lokpal Bill because it wanted to deny the Congress any credit for the legislation. That would have strengthened the Anna campaign, which in turn might have helped the BJP in the coming elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh. This marks low political cynicism.

Ultimately, Team Anna revealed its close connections with the BJP by concentrating all its attacks on Congress leaders, including Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi, while saying nothing against the BJP for its countless vacillations on the Bill, and eventually for scuttling it.

Significantly, Team Anna didn't once criticise the Trinamul Congress for moving the "federalist" amendment to keep the Lokayuktas out of the Bill, or the BJP for backing the amendment -- although the Lokayuktas' inclusion was one of Hazare's "non-negotiable" demands.

Anna Hazare uniquely combines personal honesty and austerity, with authoritarianism, rusticity, ignorance, messianic arrogance, mulish obstinacy, and low cunning. His discrediting, and the exposure of his links with the parivar, is the sole gain from this drama. It must not be lost.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 9

1960

President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser opens construction on the Aswan Dam by detonating ten tons of dynamite to demolish twenty tons of granite on the east bank of the Nile.

1991

Representatives from the United States and Iraq meet at the Geneva Peace Conference to try and find a peaceful resolution to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

1992

The Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina proclaims the creation of Republika Srpska, a new state within Yugoslavia.

1996

First Chechen War: Chechen separatists launch a raid against the helicopter airfield and later a civilian hospital in the city of Kizlyar in the neighboring Dagestan, which turns into a massive hostage crisis involving thousands of civilians.

2005

Mahmoud Abbas wins the election to replace Yasser Arafat as President of the Palestinian National Authority. He replaces interim president Rawhi Fattouh.