

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

## Bangladesh on economic freedom index

*We can do better*

**B**ANGLADESH has been given the 130th place among the 184 countries rated as the freest to carry out business in.

According to the rating done by the premier Washington-based think tank Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, Bangladesh has moved slightly upward on the score card by 0.2 point, though its ranking remained static compared to that of the last year.

So far as South Asian nations are concerned, Bangladesh with its score point at 53.2 is trailing behind Sri Lanka (58.3), Bhutan (56.6), Pakistan (54.7), and India (54.6).

The measurement of Economic Freedom Index is based on ten specific categories of freedom in the areas of labour, business, trade, fiscal policy, government spending, monetary policy, finance, investment, property rights and corruption. Obviously, Bangladesh could not perform equally well in all these categories of economic freedom.

The slightly better score relates to improvements in the areas of business and labour freedom. However, the rating in trade freedom has shown a downtrend compared to that in the last year.

Other positive trends include improvements in the regulatory efficiency demonstrated through a more simplified processing of business with attendant reduction in start-up time by about 19 days.

However, the full extent of the better functioning labour market remains largely underexploited, while the increased labour productivity is yet to be matched by a raise in wage structure. The government adopted some measures to contain higher inflationary pressure preventing it from impacting negatively on economic growth.

The report adds that administrative corruption and "inefficient judicial system" are still a barrier to better economic performance. The reform regime, too, has largely remained asymmetric and deficient. The governance is weak, while structural deficiencies continue to dog development efforts. The government's continued interference in the economy as well as the over-politicised regulatory regimes has rendered the foundation of economic freedom fragile.

Despite the drawbacks, the rating by the Heritage Foundation and Wall Street Journal still puts Bangladesh in a better light than generally perceived by experts at home. Moreover, given the economy's ever-expanding links to and increasing dependence on external factors like exports, foreign remittances as well as narrowing down of foreign aid inflow, it is no mean achievement.

## Dredging for life

*Parliamentary committee suggestion needs careful consideration*

**T**HE expression 'better late than ever' becomes a euphemism when we are talking about saving our dying rivers. Our rivers are our land's lifeblood and over the last few decades they have been fighting a losing battle against all kinds of man-made degradation. The primary enemy has been the indiscriminate dumping of toxic waste from industries and households, virtually killing the aquatic flora and fauna, leaving the river to be nothing more than a dead stretch of dirty water.

Illegal filling of the river by unscrupulous land grabbers, often with the tacit go ahead of authorities, has grossly shrunk the rivers, canals and other water bodies.

The suggestion of a parliamentary committee to dredge rivers all year long to keep them navigable is a case of too little too late. Already around 30,000 km of waterways have been reduced to a pathetic 3,500 km.

Now the committee is saying immediate steps have to be taken to stop the dumping and funneling of wastes into the river Buriganga, the lifeline of the capital. All this should have been suggested and implemented years ago when the media (The Daily Star especially) kept shouting and screaming about the need to save our rivers.

In any case the solution of dredging the river may sound the best one so far particularly if it is to improve navigability. At the same time the process of dredging needs to be examined carefully with expert advice to make sure we are not faced with unexpected side effects. In other countries dredging has been criticised for disturbing the habitat for certain species and cracking the underground water supply. We must be certain that these concerns are kept in mind when designing the dredging process if it is at all implemented.

Whatever it decides, the government really has no time to lose.

# Diploma diplomacy



Brig Gen SHAHEEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

**W**E had Hilsha diploma and the Jamdani diplomacy. And now we have what some call "diploma diplomacy."

This follows the conferring of a Doctor of Literature honoris causa by the Tripura University to our prime minister.

For the government of Tripura the visit of our PM to Agartala had several "firsts." It was the first visit of a Bangladesh head of government to that state. Sheikh Hasina's flight was also the first international flight to land at Agartala airport, which was upgraded to international airport for the visit. And it was the first visit by an Awami League party chief, after Bangabandhu's visit to Agartala in 1963. According to Sheikh Hasina, "Whenever I think of Tripura, I recall my father's first visit here in 1963 to explore the possibility of Indian help to the people of my country in their struggle against the repressive Pakistani military junta." And Sheikh Hasina was the first foreigner to be conferred a degree by the University of Tripura.

It is not always that the head of government of a sovereign country accept the hospitality of a constituent state of another sovereign country exclusively; and there perhaps is more than merely the D.Litt that was in the minds of the government of Tripura or the government of India which said that the visit would further strengthen people-to-people links and

enhance trade and economic relations between India and Bangladesh.

Leaving aside speculations let us see if there has been any tangible gains for us in the very short visit with a fairly large retinue; reportedly, an entourage of 106, including a large number of businessmen, had accompanied the PM. Come as the visit did, quite soon after the visit of the Indian PM's visit to Dhaka, it has become the cause of a few conjectures.

There is a historical link with Agartala to Bangladesh, apart from the fact that it is the closest Indian state capital from our borders. It was the "conspiracy case" that

from the rest of India. If Bangladesh is India-locked, by the same token the Indian Northeast is Bangladesh-locked. This strategic reality cannot be lost on India, whether that is so with our policy makers one cannot say for certain.

Some critics suggest that the conferral of the degree was partly to assuage the frayed nerves of the Bangladeshi PM after the Teesta disappointment. But perhaps more importantly, it is an acknowledgement of the truth by the Indian policy makers that without the participation of Bangladesh the development of the Northeast would remain a difficult objective to achieve. And the

more liberal in outlook says everything. That was echoed by the Tripura Chief Minister, who urged the Indian government to take a "sincere initiative with liberal eyesight" in dealing with Bangladesh. And one cannot but be heartened by the attitude of Mr. Sarkar when he spontaneously agreed to share a part of the state's allotment of power from Palatana with Bangladesh. That has however been questioned by the opposition on the grounds that the CM has no authority to make such a commitment. Authority or not, Mr. Sarkar deserves our thanks for displaying the positive frame of mind that one finds missing in other Indian leaders.

One feels that Bangladesh must make use of the prospect of the vast market that the Northeast hold for us and the starting point may be a joint venture in power development which the Tripura CM has readily welcomed. One would hope that Bangladeshi businessmen and investors would not have to come up against informal blocks that they continue to face despite India's commitment.

But one feels that the Bangladesh PM has been very modest when she reportedly, quoting Tagore while addressing the mammoth gathering at the Assam Rifles Ground, said that she had very little except love to give to the people of India. One has only to look at the list of things that Bangladesh has already given to India in the last three years, and many of them may have been prompted by love. And one expects, in bilateral dealings, national interest to play a significant role, just as much as love.

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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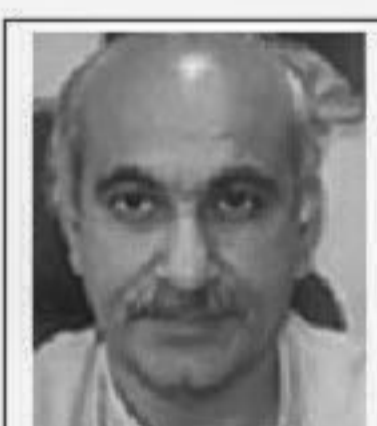
brought into focus the capital of the state in 1968, and it was from Pakistani brutality unleashed on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1971 that our refugees found succor in Tripura, their figures far outnumbered the population of the entire state. Their spontaneous warmhearted help had nothing to do with any regional or global geopolitics, and we have lot to be grateful to the people of Tripura in particular for the support during the tumultuous period of the Liberation War.

The other side of the equation is that Bangladesh is indeed the easier gateway to the Indian Northeast

Tripura government especially has to thank Bangladesh for not making the Teesta deal a precondition for according India transit, although there was every justifiable reason to do so. But for the out of turn favour to India by allowing the ODCs to pass through Bangladesh, that has cost Bangladesh a great deal in many ways, the Palatana project would be struggling to be completed as per schedule.

Sheikh Hasina made Bangladesh's position clear by restating our position regarding India's attitude in dealing with Bangladesh. Her call for India to be

## BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

**P**AKISTAN'S first coup was led by a civilian. When the bureaucrat-turned-Governor General Ghulam Mohammad arbitrarily dismissed Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin on April 17, 1953, he was a little apprehensive about intervention by Queen Elizabeth II of Britain. He had reasons to be worried, because Pakistan was still a Dominion State, and the Queen was legal monarch of the Dominion. Pakistan became fully independent when it adopted a democratic Constitution on March 2, 1956, but it never got the chance to become a democracy because General Ayub Khan stepped in through a military coup before an election could be held. What is curious is that 56 years later its civilian rulers still look abroad for help in a crisis.

The difference between President Asif Zardari's appeal to the United States, via an infamous memo sent by his ambassador in Washington Hussain Haqqani to Admiral Mike Mullen some weeks ago, and Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani's desperate phone call this week to British Prime Minister David Cameron, for help against a potential coup by Pakistan's army, is only a question of degree. If the first has been dubbed rather unimaginatively "memogate," the second could equally be known as "phonogate." The president and the prime minister have, rather pathetically, exposed their

impotence. Their constitutional authority permits them to remove army chief Ashfaq Kayani as easily as they dismissed defence secretary Naeem Khalid Lodi. Their political judgement tells them that the army will pack them off to jail rather than obey any such order.

We do not know if Zardari has made a similar appeal to Islamabad's big brother Saudi Arabia; in all likelihood the answer is affirmative. Certainly, most aspirants for power tend to check with Riyadh about their chances.

The latest to do so is former dictator Pervez Musharraf, who after being kicked out by an inspiring popular movement, formed the All Pakistan Muslim League (as opposed, one presumes, to Some-bit-of Pakistan Muslim League), as the vehicle for his return. Why do despots reinvent themselves, in their imagination, as saviours? It is one of the more inexplicable excesses of the human imagination.

Zardari's domestic political philosophy is clearly inspired by the world-famous proverb: he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. Sometimes his alter ego Gilani retreats verbally, praising generals who would destroy him to try and stave off doomsday. At other

times, he seems to retreat physically, to his "home" in Dubai. He is the first Pakistani president with an office in Islamabad and a home in Dubai. Some weeks ago he disappeared to Dubai because of a heart attack, which turned out, at best, to be a minor prod rather than an attack. Last Thursday, in the midst of yet another crisis moment, he disappeared for a wedding to which no one else seems to have been invited; and it was not his own. This Dubai dash is always mysterious, and cloaked in

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obfuscation, as if the truth might be seriously injurious to his survival. One wonders what the protocol for such travel is. Does Zardari need a visa? Does he go by private transport or official jet?

These anxious pleas for foreign

assistance, however, quite miss the point. The army has, very intelligently, opted for action, so far, not through its officers and infantry, but through the Supreme Court. This is a triangular crisis, with a thick overlay of corruption, since the government refuses to investigate Zardari's well-known foreign bank accounts. What is beyond dispute is that the Zardari government's credibility is below freezing point. Morality is not something one should readily

introduce into the debates of our subcontinent, or no government would survive; but there are degrees. The Zardari government's moral authority is in negative zone.

There is a perfectly legitimate way to prevent a coup that no one, probably not even the ranks in the army, wants. The government should call for a fresh election. Let the people decide, and from that injection of serum the poison that has entered the system, and is killing it in rapid stages, will be cleansed. Even a faint trace of patriotism, which, in essence, is nothing more and nothing less than putting the nation before one's personal interests, would persuade the ruling class that Pakistan has no other option anymore. The army would not dare attempt a coup to pre-empt an election, since that would amount to a coup against the electorate.

A recent Pew poll showed that 80% of Pakistanis believe that their army is a positive force; no army chief would dare to dent the people's faith in an institution under his temporary care. Surely, this must have occurred to politicians. If Zardari and Gilani are resisting the idea it can only be because they fear that the people's wrath might be greater than the army's anger.

Khwaja Nazimuddin did not have the option of going to the people. Given a chance, he would have. He belonged to the generation that created Pakistan, not to an ilk that has milked the nation dry.

The writer is an eminent Indian Columnist.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 19

**1840** American explorer Charles Wilkes completes the voyage that confirms Antarctica is a continent.

**1915** German Zeppelins begin the first ever strategy bombing campaign, hitting Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn.

**1942** Japan invades Burma, igniting the longest World War Two campaign fought by British troops.