

New window opens before Saarc countries

Coordination among members holds the key

WE are upbeat about the decision to open a liquidity-swap window for extending financial support to the Saarc member countries. The move made at the fifth Saarc Finance Ministers' Meeting in Dhaka is intended to enhance coordination in fiscal and monetary policies of the member countries and facilitate business and other transactions. We find this move very appropriate in light of the deepening global economic recession. It is a potential stepping stone towards offsetting the impacts of any global crisis. Now we want to see swift implementation of the project after having worked out its size, structure, resources and operational modalities.

The South Asian development fund has already been in operation for quite some time. It nonetheless has fallen short of shielding the member states from emerging economic crises. As indicated in the FMs' meeting, if the development fund is gradually transformed into a regional bank to cater to the needs of each country, we believe it will lay a foundation for an effective economic safety net that has been long overdue in the region.

The overall development of this region lies in financial, cultural and political cooperation among the concerned countries. Keeping this grand vision in mind, there have been a number of conventions and agreements including the SAPTA and Safta which aim at broadening intra-regional trade. Their slow implementation, however, has remained a matter of concern.

As Finance Minister AMA Muhith noted, lack of coordination among the member countries has been one of the key obstacles to removing the non-tariff and para-tariff barriers, which was among the major goals of Safta.

Overall, all Saarc countries should step up coordination in a robust way if we are to fulfil the dream of an economic union in the region.

MPs under PM scanner

Criteria for evaluation miss the point

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina informed the AL parliamentary party meeting on Sunday that she has collected 300 reports from as many parliamentary constituencies on the activities of MPs representing them.

The criteria for her evaluation of the report cards include strengthening the party, specifically their performance in 'drumming up support for AL', carrying out development work and their conduct with local people as well as party activists.

Clearly, two major parameters are left out. First, their financial records including declaration of assets and their status on corruptibility and abuse of power. To our knowledge, the AL has failed to enforce its commitments in the electoral manifesto to annualised declaration of assets by MPs and ministers. Since the MPs handle considerable sums of money in lump and development allocations they are liable for regular auditing. Honesty and integrity should have been the first element of the criteria.

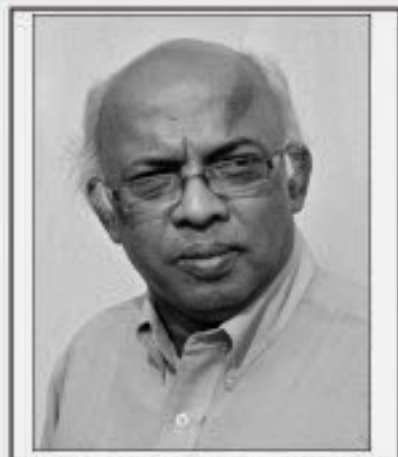
Secondly, their performance in the parliament as legislators, the quality of representation of their constituency and role in the parliamentary committees should be put under the prism.

Going by media reports MPs barring some exceptions have been indulging in corruption and abuse of power. The government does not investigate the allegations which shows how the PM is moving away from her prime electoral agenda for eradicating corruption.

At the local government levels the MPs have been given such decisive roles that this has on the one hand created tussle between two sets of elected representatives and on the other turned the MPs into virtual development agents. True, the MPs cannot be entirely divorced from a developmental role; yet, the more involved they are in the field development the more they veer away from their legitimate and primary functions.

The PM's emphasis on the MPs drumming up support for the party militates against their working for their constituencies comprising supporters and loyalists of other parties as well. They cannot be left unrepresented just because the winner MP is from AL. This is illustrative of the same blurring of line between the government and the

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

has always been exciting in this country, but of late the excitement has taken a dimension you do not and will not see replicated elsewhere around the world. A newly elected mayor -- and we speak of Comilla -- had his large vehicle block the path of a rickshaw the other day, the better for him to come out of it and land a few good punches on a lawyer riding that rickshaw. Of course, as is always the case, the mayor (and he has not yet been sworn in) denied that he had assaulted the lawyer. Why would such a good man do that?

So there we all are, caught between acts of desperation and a flurry of quick denial. Not that we are surprised. When you watch all those politicians on all those ubiquitous talk shows about to hurl themselves at one another, you know how much more enjoyable politics has got to be. Not many years ago, a lawmaker elected on the ticket of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party cheerfully wore a crown of gold gifted to him by his constituents. He was not at all ashamed to do so, even after reports on the scandal appeared in the media. That was one of the earliest of signs that in our putative democracy, politicians were fast turning into lesser men.

That truth only gets to be reinforced when you see a young parliamentarian from Rangpur descending with as many as five

hundred goons on a medical college because he is determined to have a quota of jobs for his supporters. He and his goons are then given a good thrashing by citizens. Images of the MP lying flat on the ground are not exactly edifying, but then again, he has brought it all on himself. We do not feel sorry for him. We are only sorry that such men of evil intent are in politics at all.

As if that were not enough, you have the ruling Awami League lawmaker from Mirpur happily and ferociously assaulting a woman journalist and then, with a straight face, denying that any such incident had at all taken place. He spends the fifteen minutes given to him by the Jatiyo Sangsad speaker to reflect on the president's address in a vitriolic attack on the media. That is interesting, for two reasons. First, you get a sense of how morality is today a missing factor among the political classes. Second, politicians are angry because the media are always catching them with their pants down. Which is not a bad thing after all, considering the damage politicians have been doing to the country of late.

And what exactly has been happening? For a start, in the aftermath of these reports of a failed coup attempt, the prime minister has been going around warning the opposition that it cannot ride to power on the back of the army. In her

response, the leader of the opposition, probably with images of Tahrir Square in mind, informs the government that it will be brought down not through a coup d'etat but by a mass upsurge.

Both women, without quite being aware of it, have been making light of the army. In a responsible democracy with two experienced, responsible politicians in charge, you do not expect the institutions of the state to be played around with as if they were trifles. But that is what is happening here. And no one is happy about it. In a land where nearly every

In a responsible democracy with two experienced, responsible politicians in charge, you do not expect the institutions of the state to be played around with as if they were trifles. But that is what is happening here.

organisation exists in two halves -- for the Awami League, for the BNP -- must we now have our politicians create a condition where the armed forces too will turn into factionalised images of themselves? Perish the thought. Else you will be in a bad

state of agitation. In a country where a minister informs you that the state is not concerned when it citizens are killed on the border, you wonder why this minister is there at all. If we had a proper, functioning democracy, he would be out of government by now. And yet he stays on, in the way that the former minister of communications stays on with a new portfolio when he should have been shown the door.

It is a beautiful word, democracy. Every day and in every way we are being initiated into newer

interpretations of it. The opposition wishes to march on the streets, but the police come in the way. You would think a state of emergency was upon us, or a martial law regime. And then comes that other new addition to democracy. If the opposition marches, the ruling party must not be far behind: it must schedule a rally on the same day and send the political temperature shooting as high as possible. That is ingenuity. And ingenuity is also what you spot when the police clamp Section 144 on us as a way of keeping both the groups away from the streets.

These are beautifully bizarre happenings. And when the American ambassador tells you that there will soon be a time when Bangladesh will rival China in asserting itself on the global stage, you are not quite sure if you should weep or laugh. You are not amused. Does Dan Mozena really mean what he says? What secrets does he have of Bangladesh's potential that we do not have?

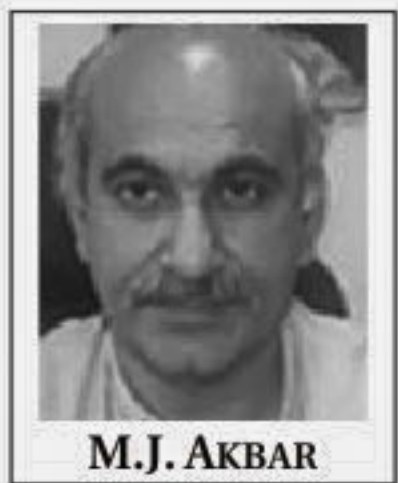
These are questions you ought not to seek answers to. Neither will you come by an appropriate government response to the threat held out by some irritants calling themselves political parties: they will put all "Indian agents" on trial in future if the trial of the war criminals is not put to a stop. These elements are guilty of more than nonsense. They are making a mockery of our independent statehood. The government looks away. And you and I can do nothing about it.

But, yes, life is terribly exciting. Even if there is mediocrity all around you.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

BYLINE

Salt of the earth



M.J. AKBAR

held together empires and colonies, the army. The metaphor for a soldier's loyalty was salt. If you were true to your salt, you remained loyal to whosoever's salt you had eaten. You were *namakhalal*. The opposite, *namakharam*, is still an accusation that stings, although contemporary values are determined by mercantile attitudes rather than ancient oaths. In today's job market, one is more loyal to the next salary than word given to the company you kept.

Proverbially, salt has also become symbol of civil behaviour in a potential confrontation. You are taught to take some load of rubbish with a pinch of salt, rather than remonstrate. The reader of the British Labour Party, the very wooden Ed Miliband, found an interesting variation last week when confronted with an opinion poll that put the ruling Conservatives far ahead despite a mood of gloom, if not quite doom, in Britain. Miliband said he had taken the news with a pinch of sugar. As Freudian slips go, this wasn't very sexy. But it was nevertheless revealing. He must have subconsciously remembered the bitter medicine that mummy must have forced down on young Ed, and possibly the jam that followed to

sweeten things up. When truth gets bitter, no one adds salt. A little sugar is the only consolation.

In the first week of March, when the results of the current round of Assembly elections come out, a lot of politicians who are comforting themselves with salt at the moment will be desperate for a lump of sugar. Salt today helps them digest the opinion polls they have commissioned. Firms who do the polling are telling them what they want to hear; that is the only explanation for the fact that both the Congress and Akalis expect to win in Punjab. Both can't be right. Does this amount to deceit by the firm commissioned to do opinion polls, and delusion by the parties? Not quite.

The electorate this year is in such a turbulent mood that the space for interpretation has widened considerably. Opinion polls are not simple arithmetic. Two and two are not always four. It is an algebra with lots of brackets in the equation. An important variable, to cite just one instance, is the demographic density of a party's support. If this support is spread too wide, you can pick up numbers but not winning numbers. That is one of the

problems that Mayawati faces in Uttar Pradesh. She has tremendous support among Dalits and other impoverished castes, but their presence is state-wide rather than consolidated in a particular cluster of districts. She could, therefore, end up second in over 200 constituencies and win only a hundred-plus. Conversely, the Muslim vote is an effective determinant of results because it is consolidated in a semi-circle of districts from west to east.

The multiplicity of sentiment, the gradations of anger, the constant interplay of conviction and pragmatism, the charm and limitations of charisma: an election in India is a political-cultural festival. It is the salt of the earth.

The dynamic of interpretation introduces the Piper Principle: he who pays the piper gets the tune. Number-crunchers are understandably reluctant to depress their clients, so all they have to do is interpret the data in one way rather than another. Political parties do not remember

after the results, in any case: winners are too exhilarated, and losers too depressed.

Smaller geographies make prediction easier. UP is difficult. Eight Punjabs, 20 Uttarakhands, 40 Goas and 80 Manipurs could fit into Uttar Pradesh. UP is a mini general election. It is unsurprising therefore that there has not been an election here in the last three decades that did not deliver a surprise. One opinion

poll suggested that both BJP and Congress could enter three figures, which would change the political environment radically; but there was a roughish touch to that poll which is why no one has made too much of it. We can predict with reasonable certainty that Mayawati's vote has eroded, but no one has any real idea about the extent of this erosion, and in how many directions it has travelled. The Brahmins who allied with her for tactical reasons in 2007 should go to BJP or Congress, but there are too many micro eddies in play that shift any pattern. The emerging Peace Party, with its bank of Muslim voters, is depending on such shifts. It has put up non-Muslim candidates in the hope that they will bring enough voters from their caste to nudge ahead. It is virtually impossible to find a formula that can absorb all the minute sub-plots that bristle through a narrative as complex as an election in Uttar Pradesh.

Uncertainty is the essence of democracy. If opinion polls were enough, we would not need polls, would we? The multiplicity of sentiment, the gradations of anger, the constant interplay of conviction and pragmatism, the charm and limitations of charisma: an election in India is a political-cultural festival. It is the salt of the earth.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 1

1713
The *Kalabalik* or *Tumult in Bendery* results from the Ottoman sultan's order that his unwelcome guest, King Charles XII of Sweden, be seized.

1924
The United Kingdom recognizes the USSR.

1979
The Ayatollah Khomeini is welcomed back to Tehran, Iran after nearly 15 years of exile.

2005
King Gyanendra of Nepal carries out a coup d'état to capture the democracy, becoming Chairman of the Councils of ministers.