

It's not only the economy, Sir

AZIZ RAHMAN

DURING Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992, his strategic slogan was "It's the economy, stupid." President Bush looked unbeatable because of foreign policy gains in the Cold War and Persian Gulf War. The phrase meant that Clinton was a better choice because Bush did not address the economy wisely. During 1991 Iraq invasion, 90% Americans supported Bush. Next year, 64% disliked his governance style.

"America is a rich Bangladesh and Bangladesh is a poor America," observed a Bangladeshi student on return from the USA. People in both countries behave identically. In affluence or bankruptcy, they crave for consumer's haven. There is a rural saying, "Bangalira rin korey ghee khay," meaning Bangladeshis borrow money to buy rich food. The similarity is not, however, entirely true. Unaware of their entitlement under democratic governance, common people in Bangladesh are content with very little. They never heard of "Right to Development."

Some Bangla-American traits are remarkably present in particular sections -- consumer society in America and nouveau riche in Bangladesh. One common phenomenon has emerged recently -- the dire state of the economy. News media speak of the abysmal situation in which the economies of both countries have landed. Hence, the advent of occupy movement in USA and social unrest in Bangladesh. Here, the mal-

ady is much more pervasive. If I had met Clinton during this winter of discontent, I would say: "it's not only the economy, Sir!" It is misgovernance which is destabilising this resource-constrained but legendarily resilient country.

Our economy is at a critical juncture, as evident from the PERC report, followed by a frank admission by the finance minister in MCCI meeting on December 19, 2012: "I am not sure if budget deficit will remain within Tk.450 billion." Foreign aid inflow has sharply declined, making the availability of Tk.170 billion budget support impossible. Government has borrowed heavily from banks, with a negative impact on private investment. Development budget is being reduced by one-third, due to donors' aid fatigue combined with World Bank corruption charges in Padma Bridge project and inefficiency in utilisation of development funds. \$13 billion commitment in pipeline resulted in "very poor disbursement." Dwindling foreign aid is not, however, the only reason for this winter's discontents. We cannot afford to ignore huge deficit in balance of payment and other economic distortions.

The runaway inflation, going into double digits, along with skyward price-hike, is a major challenge for the economy. No efforts to control unnecessary and wasteful expenditure, observe austerity, reverse inflationary tendencies or arrest flight of capital are visible.

Despite overall adversity, it is heartening

to note a few positive trends. Three mainstay components of the economy -- agricultural output, remittance by expatriate Bangladeshis and growth of export despite global economic slow-down -- have shown remarkable buoyancy and virtually kept the economy still on its feet. For rejuvenation of the economy, it is essential to address all the endemic and ongoing but reversible economic malaises by taking effective measures through a dependable mechanism.

It is recognised worldwide that rights-based democratic governance is essential for

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balanced pro-people development. World Bank defines governance as the "manner in which power is exercised in management of a country's economic and social resources for development." Determinants of good governance are: policy framework and stra-

tegic direction; rule of law under equitable legal system; transparency and accountability; responsibility and responsiveness; control of corruption and denial of impunity; social harmony and national consensus; decentralisation and participation; long-term perspective planning; and efficient resource management under enlightened, ethical and visionary leadership. This holistic approach to governance is remarkably absent in Bangladesh.

Economic management is only one aspect, a very significant one, of good governance. The current economic situation, though not yet catastrophic, has resulted from lack of governance for which the government and the opposition, civil society, private sector, and intelligentsia are all more or less responsible. We have the habit of overlooking the most vital stakes and fighting on insignificant issues. We turn a blind eye to the fact that average annual economic growth is steady, but attaining desired 7-8% is still a far cry -- whereas successful anti-corruption regime alone could raise GDP growth by 2-3%; population sector is callously unattended while demographic explosion is imminent; 31% people live below poverty line; unemployment/underemployment is as high as 40%; top 5% people enjoy 35% national wealth, bottom 5% get only 0.60%; national debt payment gobbles up an alarming 21% of revenue and rich-poor gap is ever-widening, with economy and politics being controlled by grabbers and plunderers.

Bangladesh stood 25th among 35 countries at "Alert" stage in a 2010 survey of failed/failing states. Our standing in other international rankings is not anything to be happy about. The Economist IU democracy survey 2010 placed 53 countries in flawed category. Bangladesh is in middle category in 83rd position. It has to cross two thresholds to graduate to flawless democracy. At what cost and after how many years, nobody can guess. Meantime, people are becoming apprehensive about efficacy of democracy, the best possible mode of governance. Our leaders, and watchdogs are in deep slumber! But not all of them.

"Over the same period our development strategies have recreated a highly inequitable, deeply unjust society, graduated from the two economies which characterised Pakistan, into two societies which characterise contemporary Bangladesh," said Prof. Rehman Sobhan, with great anguish. "Bangladesh's two societies are characterised by the emergence of an elite which is becoming increasingly differentiated from the mass of society." A comment by former advisor to the caretaker government, Muhammad Habibur Rahman, about the "chairtakers" is significant: "Two banyan trees are not allowing other trees to grow under them." Obviously, we have still to go a long way. But we must start coming out of the abyss now.

The writer, a former civil servant, is Executive Director, Centre for Governance Studies and Faculty Member, Northern University. E-mail: cgs.bd.ed@gmail.com

In Syria, we need to bargain with the devil

NICHOLAS NOE

ALMOST one year after anti-government protests began in Syria, a disaster of enormous moral and strategic proportions is fast approaching. Full-scale civil war is now likely. And a multifront, conventional and possibly unconventional war ignited by events in the Levant is also increasingly plausible.

However, many in the West, in some Arab governments and even in the Syrian opposition still think a "controlled collapse" of Bashar al-Assad's government is possible.

According to this view, increasing pressure from all around will, at some point, fracture the government and its supporters both at home and abroad. Any resulting death and destruction, as well as regional blowback, will be within acceptable limits.

Unfortunately, there are at least three problems that make a controlled collapse unlikely.

First, the Assad government, which still enjoys substantial support from the army, the elite and other segments of the population, may be able to prolong its bloody denouement, with help from outsiders. Russia, which sees Syria as an indispensable strategic asset, joined China on Saturday in vetoing a United Nations resolution against the Assad government.

Iran has staked its own vital interests on Assad's regime, which is a crucial conduit for Tehran's support for the militant Shiite Muslim group Hezbollah in their common struggle against Israel.

Second, the violence from any drawn-out collapse will most likely exceed the limits of moral or strategic acceptability for the West and its allies -- not to mention the Syrian people. Sectarian conflicts that divide the Shiite and other minority communities from the majority Sunni population will accelerate, compounding tensions in neighbouring Lebanon, where Sunni fighters are now staging attacks into Syria, and also in Iraq, where sectarian violence has sharply increased in recent weeks.

Third, the resulting movement of refugees will add yet another destabilising element to a humanitarian crisis. After all, Syria already hosts millions of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees who are likely to experience further anguish and loss.

Far from controlled collapse, a likelier scenario is a bloody last-ditch effort by Assad, Iran and Hezbollah to save the Syrian government, which they have the means to do.

These "axis of resistance" forces would most likely project their formidable military power -- which includes chemical weapons in the case of Syria -- against their enemies in a fight for their collective existence. Conveniently for all three of them, there are multiple ways Israel could be goaded into a major conflict without it seeming as if Assad or Hezbollah were responsible, in the eyes of their supporters. Indeed, a lone rocket attack from southern Lebanon that kills a large number of Israeli civilians is a distinct possibility.

To counter this dangerous situation responsibly, the United States and its allies would have to be willing to plan for and then swiftly implement a wide pre-emptive military strike. In even the best-case scenario, this would mean holding large chunks of Lebanese and Syrian territory with ground forces.

Adequate pre-emptive planning and action, though, seems extremely unlikely given the political and financial constraints faced by Western countries at the moment, not to mention the repercussions a major war in the Middle East would have for Western interests.

It is not enough, then, to blame Russian and Chinese vetoes at the Security Council or even the murderous Assad regime for the danger that is gripping the region right now -- even if they deserve much of the blame.

Instead, Washington should adopt a realistic, albeit distasteful, strategy that seeks to steadily defuse the conflict rather than watch it explode in everyone's face. And that means dealing with Assad.

Assad is a brutally repressive and dangerous leader who is responsible for most of the death and destruction that has plagued Syria in recent months, but the consequences of pushing Iran, Syria and Hezbollah beyond their red lines will most likely be far worse.

America must therefore dispense with the inconsistent maxim that bargaining is morally prohibited when a leader is deemed to have

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gone beyond the pale -- especially when bargaining could actually mitigate future fallout, while eventually securing one's interests and values.

The main reason for making a deal with Assad right now -- even one where he is initially offered more carrots than sticks -- is precisely that a Western-led process that steadily undermines his ability and desire to use violence would stabilise a quickly deteriorating regional situation, gradually opening up Syria's political system and reducing repression over time.

Thankfully, America and its allies are far more powerful than Syria, which means they possess the tools and flexibility to see such a strategy of pre-emptive concessions through to a successful conclusion.

The broad coalition currently facing Assad would first have to publicly lay out a grand bargain that retreats from the position of demanding that he step down immediately.

In exchange, a robust and competent contingent of Arab and United Nations monitors should promptly fan out across the country in order to verify the army's pullback of heavy weaponry and the steady release of political prisoners. They would provide a permanent presence, and citizens could approach them to register complaints about violence committed by any side.

A national reconciliation conference outside of Syria should then be convened under Arab League and United Nations auspices. This would lay the groundwork for writing a new constitu-

tion and holding multiparty, supervised parliamentary elections later this year -- as Assad himself recently proposed -- and presidential elections in 2013. The reconciliation conference should also begin an investigation into the violence of the past year.

Three incentives could make the deal extremely difficult for Assad to reject.

First, America and its allies should call on the Free Syrian Army and other insurgents to suspend their operations. This would entail working with neighbouring countries like Turkey and Jordan to create internationally supervised, weapons-free safe zones for the fighters, their families and others who feared retribution.

Second, the United States and the European Union would relax sanctions based on the government's adherence to the deal and would set up an international conference of donors to support the material needs of the Syrian people.

Finally, so that it is not tarred as a Western plot, any deal would have to include a serious American-led effort to broker the return to Syria of the Golan Heights, which Israel has controlled since 1967.

Although there appears to be little political will for such an approach in Israel at the moment -- the government sees no need to make concessions to Assad's weak, teetering government -- expending American political capital on a more promising peace process makes sense. Unlike the now defunct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, talks with Syria could actually succeed (they broke down over a few hundred meters of land in 2000). Achieving an Israeli-Syrian deal could truly isolate the intransigent Iran-Hezbollah axis at a critical moment in the standoff over Tehran's nuclear programme.

This benefit, together with the prospect of normalised ties between Israel and Syria, might prove attractive to members of Israel's security establishment who have long viewed a deal with Syria as both politically doable and strategically vital.

For its part, the badly shaken government in Damascus might find this a propitious moment to accept a deal as a way back from the abyss, even if this would most likely mean Mr. Assad's eventual exit in the future. And if Mr. Assad rejects it, such a patently unreasonable move might actually offer the best hope yet of splitting his government and controlling the resulting collapse.

Admittedly, the prospects of successfully orchestrating such a deal now are far less promising than they were early last year.


But the realisation that die-hard elements in Damascus, Beirut and Tehran could unleash great regional destruction should prompt a long overdue discussion about putting forward a credible and comprehensive bargain.

Negotiation now, rather than war later, could lead to a far better outcome for all parties -- even if that means Syrians' aspirations for freedom might be met much later than anyone would like.

The writer is a contributing writer for Bloomberg View and the editor of Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.

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The legend of the iPod



HAPPY Birthday little box. The iPod has just celebrated its 10th anniversary.

I can barely believe it was a whole decade ago my trendy friend Todd Wong turned up one weekend clutching an off-white box, the size and shape of a cigarette packet. When we saw it was an Apple product, we lost interest. Apple stuff was for geeks, not cool people.

Todd then confirmed his geekiness by spending the following weekend duplicating his entire CD collection onto little box. What a waste of time! Two weeks later, he showed me how he could transmit music from his little box to any music player, even the one in his car.

The music system in my car rarely worked, so the only sound which livened our journeys was the horrible tinny buzz of pocket video game music from my son's Gameboy. In contrast, the glorious strains of Vivaldi flowed from Todd's car windows. "Name any song," he said. "I've probably got it." I named a Black-Eyed Peas song. He had it. Okay. I was impressed.

Then came the day I was out jogging and was passed by my Scottish neighbour Iain Carmichael. The iPod strapped to his arm urged him on in Tiger Woods' voice, using all sorts of Tiger Wood-ish phrases, such as: "Go for it!" and "This is your fastest time ever!" and "Wow, I bet I could bed that cute waitress without Erin finding out!" As Iain approached the end of the run, the iPod burst into applause. I was amazed.

The apps got cooler and cooler. Top four VITAL apps:

- 1) Bulletflight turns the gadget into a sniper's gunsight, so you can pretend to shoot your boss's head off. Irresistible.
- 2) iDrunktxt provides ready-typed messages so you can text people even when you're drunk. To make it realistic, there's a random button so you can send the wrong messages to the wrong people.
- 3) Honey It's Me sends you fake messages from a fake girlfriend. (Men are pathetic enough to enjoy this.)
- 2) If you are a geek who is lucky enough to have a real woman, My Girl's Day calculates her "time of the month" so you know when to expect moodiness and tread carefully.

Today, everything is different. Apple is cool. The little box in my pocket is my timepiece, my phone, my music collection, my bookshelf, my newspaper, my coach, my calendar, my camera, my map book, my barometer, etc.

And there's still a ways to go. Top three new apps I'd like to see:

- 1) Jet Pack App. You download this app, tape your iPod to the back of your jacket, and you can fly.
- 2) Scarlett Johansson App. You click this icon, and whoever you see through the machine looks like Scarlett Johansson.
- 3) User Clone App. Double click this one and the thing projects a holographic clone of the user, which can be sent to work in your place, while you busy yourself with more important things, such as watching Scarlett Johansson ironing your shirts.

But you have to be careful who you lend the thing to. Last month my children got hold of it. They downloaded Angry Birds and lots of other games. Now every weekend we drive along the streets listening to the horrible tinny buzz of pocket video game music. Sigh.

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