

Loan from IMF

Will it bring desired relief?

IN an attempt to ease the imbalances being experienced in the balance of payments, Bangladesh has opted to avail nearly \$1billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under the institution's extended credit facility (ECF). The exchequer will receive \$141million upon signing of the contract and the rest in six equal instalments. Though the loan falls under IMF's concessional lending regime, there are tough conditions to be met for the government to avail the loan.

Conditions that require fulfilment include the raising of fuel prices at consumer level to match international fuel prices by December 2012 and withdrawal of lending caps for banks. Other conditions include the placement of new tax laws by June of this year in parliament for enactment, but this is already under process and in various stages of implementation by the government. Though the new loan is being touted as a saviour for the negative balance of payments, where "with steady but forceful action, the authorities' programme is expected to reduce imbalances and catalyse additional support from development partners, putting Bangladesh's balance of payments on a sustainable path over the medium term," doubts have been raised as to whether this particular loan was truly necessary.

Numerous tough conditions attached with each segment of the loan have to be met in a timely and satisfactory fashion to avail the fund. The quantitative conditions set forth in the new loan include setting benchmarks where certain reserves cannot go below or above limits, for instance, foreign reserve cannot be allowed to fall below \$6,000 million. Such conditions invariably lessen the policy flexibility of the government. In the final analysis of things, the foremost question that comes to mind is precisely why the country needs to avail \$1billion over the next three years from IMF in the first place, especially in light of the rigid conditions set forth at each segment of the loan whose fulfilment to the letter of the contract, will decide whether Bangladesh will ultimately avail the funds for which it has applied.

Dalit community is sizable

Discrimination a blot on majority's conscience

IT is appalling to note that as many as 5.5 million members of Dalit and Harijan communities barely exist on the peripheries of the mainstream society. They lead a subhuman life in the sense that they are clearly neglected, marginalised and excluded in the national scheme of things. A country emerging from the ashes of a hard-fought war to establish an egalitarian society can ill afford such discriminatory treatment to a particular community on the grounds of their origin. More so, when our Constitution proclaims equality of all citizens, irrespective of caste, creed and faith in the eye of the State.

To even think that Bangladesh is 'rich-friendly and anti-poor', as suggested by the Human Rights Commission chairman Mizanur Rahman, is a great shame. Any form of discrimination is an assault on human dignity and violation of human rights. It is the State's responsibility to protect rights, dignity and uniqueness of the Dalit communities in Bangladesh. For this, if any new law focused on elimination of 'racial discrimination' has to be formulated let's go ahead with it. Otherwise, we will be putting across a wrong signal about our respect for human rights. As a democratic country we cannot shut our eyes to the fundamental rights of any community whatsoever.

But you cannot legislate change in human attitudes or force compliance with standards of decency and civility given that habits die hard. First of all, the communities in question need to be organised themselves to protest maltreatment and demand their rightful place in society; secondly, a massive awareness campaign would have to be built to sensitise the victims about their rights, and how to go about securing them. They direly need access to education, job opportunities and legal aid.

In the ultimate analysis, however, the mainstream society should stand by them so that they feel cared for and

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- April 14
- 1294

Temür, grandson of Kublai, is elected Khagan of the Mongols and Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty with the reigning titles Oljeitu and Chengzong.
- 1865

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated in Ford's Theatre by John Wilkes Booth.
- 1909

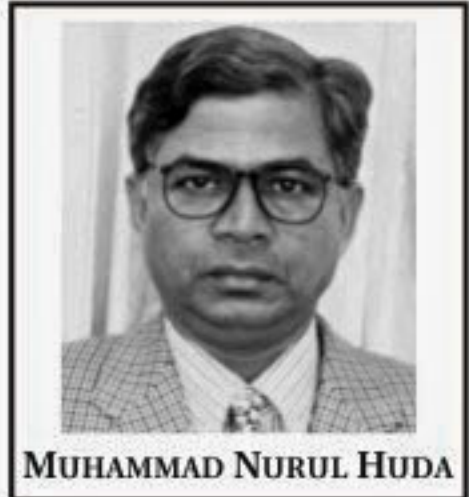
A massacre is organized by Ottoman Empire against Armenian population of Cilicia.
- 1912

The British passenger liner RMS Titanic hits an iceberg in the North Atlantic at 11:40pm. The ship sinks the following morning with the loss of 1,517 lives.
- 1986

In retaliation for the April 5 bombing in West Berlin that killed two U.S. servicemen, U.S. president Ronald Reagan orders major bombing raids against Libya, killing 60 people.
- 1988

In a United Nations ceremony in Geneva, Switzerland, the Soviet Union signs an agreement pledging to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.
- 2003

U.S. troops in Baghdad capture Abu Abbas, leader of the Palestinian group that killed an American on the hijacked cruise liner the MS Achille Lauro in 1985.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE seizure of Taka 70 lakh from the railway minister's assistant personal secretary's car and the subsequent handling of the matter by the minister have drawn adverse attention in the media. The neutrality of the probe committees formed by the minister has been questioned even before it commenced functioning. The Anti-Corruption Commission says that it will launch a probe into the minister's alleged involvement in the incident, as reported by a private TV channel.

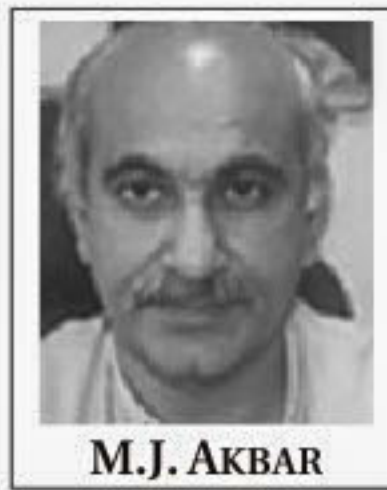
The high profile criminal cases of corruption lodged against a number of our political heavyweights in the recent past perhaps demonstrated that the minds of many public leaders have become impoverished on account of single-minded pursuit of money. It appears that such relentless pursuit has also desiccated their hearts. The malaise seems to be not only persistent but also prone to aggravation.

The question is, can mentally and ethically deficient people as above hold our trust that has to be reposed in public office? Alternately, should people with an unbridled lust for material accomplishments be allowed to occupy and disgrace high offices? In the fitness of things, such thoughts should engage the minds of all right-thinking people.

It is perhaps time to stop ruling out wise changes by politics as that would amount to a grave indictment of the functioning of the democratic process. The seizure of all levers of power by politicians and conniving bureaucrats in the recent past has been very frustrating to technocrats and professional managers.

Observers of the political scene are of the view that the personal and professional credentials of the politician are central to the subject under discussion. In this regard, the layman, in view of his experience, may wonder whether politics is a profession or a vocation or simply a social service.

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

WASHINGTON is famous for many things: fragrant cherry blossoms in springtime; a slender steeple monument in the middle of a park full of weekend kites; a cityscape planned by the secret society of Masons; and a White House that is, on closer inspection, perfectly white but not much of a house. But it is not famous for generosity in strategic policy.

The United States has not offered a bounty of \$10 million for "information leading to the capture of Hafiz Saeed" because Saeed is India's enemy. It did so because Saeed is America's enemy, and one ready to use terrorism in pursuit of his manic fantasies, as he did when orchestrating the attack on Mumbai in 2008. Washington is not in the business of borrowing headaches; it has enough of its own. This is further evidence of an emerging fact, that India and America are challenged by the same enemy on the battlefield of international terrorism. Wartime alliances are not defined by the presence of common friends, but by the existence of enemies in common.

The most important development this year in India-Pakistan relations is not President Asif Zardari's brief Sunday lunch with Dr. Manmohan Singh in Delhi followed by a short prayer at the shrine of Gharib Nawaz

One considered view is that although some political parties may have full-time cadre of workers who are on the party's payroll, in a democratic society, politics cannot be a full-time occupation.

It is felt that, while in power, holders of office shall be adequately compensated by the state, although the compensation may not prove to be satisfying for a capable professional. But then that is the price one has to pay for being in public service. The important issue here is that after one ceases to hold power one goes back to

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the parent profession or occupation. In other words, it is expected that politicians are in definite profession or occupation and have means to support themselves.

How close our political scene to the proposition described above is may be the subject matter of serious discussion. Do we see people in the political scene whose true sources of income cannot be ascertained? One has to bear in mind that parasitic leadership can neither inspire nor help in the creation of healthy political culture. These issues should be discussed seriously by the political parties themselves because, barring honourable exceptions, politicians with accountable income can command respect.

Politics has often been described as the art of wise people, and alternatively as the last refuge of scoundrels. There is, however, no doubt that efficient politicians are artful people who are driven by an admirable urge for public service. As such, their altruism has been appreciated and recognised in all societies and politics has been deemed to be an edifying activity.

It is, therefore, quite striking to note that in recent years, politicians, irre-

spective of their country of origin, have figured very low in the popularity ratings and therefore it is no wonder that governments administered and steered by politicians have been less than trustworthy in public eyes in different parts of the world. The increasingly strident voices of civil society and non-governmental organisations in such a scenario have further eroded the credibility of politicians.

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The question is, has politics become dirty because we see many of our politicians occupied solely in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice? Are our politicians served by deception and craftiness instead of vision and imagination? Has the near breakdown of politics been caused by the fragility of our institutions? Such worries should bother a concerned citizenry.

Politics brought to the fore a lot of dirt because our democratic experience did not depend upon habits of consent and compromise that are attributes of a mature political society. We did not seek to establish and sustain a lawful government under the rule of abiding law and with freedom of opposition and dissent.

It is time, therefore, to ensure that arbitrary power cannot once again wear the garb of constitutionalism. Elected representatives who betrayed the people's trust need to be kept away from public affairs. The question

is, how do we restore politics to its artful best and to the bonafide politicians?

In Bangladesh, politics, in its wider connotation, should really mean taking one's agenda in one's own hands. It should be about the process of change; how society is organised; what its power structure is; who the actors are; how they interact with each other and with the outside world. It is also about social responsibility, about participation, about inclusion. It is about ideas and new concepts and their implementation.

When we restrict politics to politicians and their antics, and intermittent interventions by the military, we exclude the above-mentioned subjects from purview. Politics in such a situation becomes a spectator sport. Quite naturally, in such a scenario, the people have neither role in selecting the players nor any part in the game itself. Therefore, the people also share the strengths and weaknesses of the players.

In our parlance, the best politician or a good bureaucrat should no longer be the person who never says no to his voters or friends. The distinction between public propriety and private gains has to be firmly established, and accountability restored. Doling our favours at public expense can no longer be tolerated. We have to get acclimatised to institutional reforms as against short-term gains.

Politics should touch our daily lives. For residents of urban centers, the issues of law and order, shortage of water and electricity, lack of a public transportation system, and unemployment should be the focal points of our politics. Issues which concern citizens' lives are political issues.

The colonial masters introduced the concepts of modern governance: a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary; and, of course, modern universities and colleges for social science, medicine and engineering. If we succeed in rejuvenating all those we will have excelled in the art of politics.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

Bounty on the mutiny

Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, but this decision made in Washington, for it offers Zardari a chance to choose his side in the war against terrorists. The triangulation is neat, almost perfect. It cuts through the fog of political compulsions. The official, if unspoken, excuse for Islamabad's inaction against Hafiz Saeed is that it is impossible for any government in Pakistan to hand a leader of the "jihad" against India to Delhi. India will be satisfied if Saeed is sent to a cell in America, because American courts will ensure justice. Zardari can join the India-US alliance against terrorism, or straddle

every policeman, could claim those ten million dollars [almost Rs.100 crores in Pak currency; not bad]. The correspondent of London's Financial Times could apply as well, for he met Saeed in January this year at Rawalpindi and quoted him as saying: "Pakistan is facing very severe threats from both sides -- India is one side, America and Nato forces are on the other, and the agenda of both is Pakistan."

The problem then is not information, but capture. Information requires a cooperative ear; capture needs guts. Does Zardari have them?

Why did Washington make this move now, adding sulphur to the fires raging across US-Pak bandwidth? Why was the signal sent from Delhi on the eve of Zardari's "private" trip to India? This is an electric prod to Zardari, to force him off the fence.

Prayer is a useful metaphor for India-Pakistan relations, and rather better than cricket, which used to be General Zia ul Haq's alibi for a sudden dash to India. The general, being ideologically closer to the puritan Jamaat e Islami, had no time for shrines or 13th century saints. Zardari is not going to Ajmer to pray for victory in the next Pakistani election. In any case, even divine intervention may be inadequate. Politics, not prayer, brings him to India. He has done his cost-benefit analysis. He is not spending a Sunday in India to win brownie points abroad and lose support at home. Nor is he there to make calibrated adjustments in the negative list for trade. The fly on the wall during closed door conversations between Zardari and Manmohan Singh will hear talk of war, not peace. But they will discuss a war beyond their boundaries, and wonder if there is a faint chance that they just might, given enormous luck and deadly circumstance, become distant allies. That chance depends on what Zardari does about Hafiz Saeed.

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Hafiz Saeed is not some inverted Robin Hood hidden in Nottingham forest, or even an Osama bin Laden lost in Karachi's urban jungle or a safe-house in Abbottabad. He lives quite publicly in Muridke, a suburb of Lahore, appears frequently on television, and delivers speeches at his own heavily secured mosque. The problem with America's reward for information might be one of plenty. Every journalist in Lahore, not to mention

Can Zardari touch a lesser target, Saeed's brother in law Abdul Rahman Makki, who may not make his captors as rich, but still offers a payout of two million American dollars? There is a fundamental question trailing Zardari: how much muscle does he carry in his baggage? So far, his government's only real response to America's bounty offer has been studied silence. The Hafiz Saeed establishment has been more vocal. It dismissed the threat contemptuously as an "April Fool's joke."