

BOTTOM LINE

# Zardari's symbolic step



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON April 8, President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari travelled to India. This was the first visit by a Pakistani head of state in seven years, and given the prickly bilateral relations the visit assumed a high profile. Ordinarily, in Europe a visit by a head of state/government to a neighbouring country is a

routine matter but not so in South Asia. Officials from both sides said that the one-day visit of President Zardari was a "private" one and the president was the guest of the Indian prime minister. Zardari visited the shrine of Sufi Saint Moinudin Chishti in Ajmer, 350 kilometres southwest of Delhi. The shrine is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the region, receiving a constant flow of devotees. The president returned to Islamabad in the evening.

Prior to the visit to the shrine, President Zardari met privately India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh for 40 minutes and reportedly discussed a full range of issues including terrorism and the Kashmir before sitting down for lunch.

After the talks the Indian prime minister said to the media: "I am very satisfied with the outcome of the visit. President Zardari invited me to visit Pakistan and I would be very happy to visit at a mutually convenient time."

During lunch, the president's 23-year old son and political heir Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, met Rahul Gandhi, MP and a political heir of the Nehru family.

Relations between the two countries have been gradually improving since peace talks were derailed after the Mumbai attacks in 2008.

Zardari recently backed the lifting of trade restrictions on India, and Pakistan is also talking of dropping a restrictive list of what products it will buy from India. But tensions remain over more sensitive issues, such as the disputed region of Kashmir, and Pakistani militant activity against India.

Only this week, India again called for Pakistan to hand over Hafiz Saeed, the man it alleges planned the Mumbai attacks, after Washington announced a \$10m bounty for his arrest. Pakistan has again refused, ask-

ing to see proof for the allegations. Correspondents say few expected any headway with these issues during Zardari's visit. The BBC's Andrew North in Delhi says it used to be cricket that gave Indian and Pakistani leaders the cover they need to meet.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was in India early last year to watch a semi-final World Cup Cricket match between India and Pakistan. In 2005, the then Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf happened to be at the same cricket match as the Indian prime minister in Delhi.

It seems that earlier both India and Pakistan had employed "cricket diplomacy" to foster their relations as the US and China did with "ping-pong diplomacy" in the early '70s. (Bangladesh and India used "cultural

Analyst C. Raja Mohan believes Singh must make an official trip to Pakistan after his meeting with Zardari. "For his part," he wrote, "Mr. Singh should convey to Mr. Zardari his readiness to move as fast and as far as the Pakistan president is willing to go."

Others, like Jyoti Malhotra, actually find Zardari's visit to the shrine of a famous Sufi Muslim saint in Rajasthan loaded with symbolism in these troubled times. "Clearly, Mr. Zardari has stolen an imaginative moment from the bitter-sullen history of India-Pakistan, by asking to come to pay his respects to a cherished and much-beloved saint across the Indian subcontinent," she wrote.

Scholars like Kanti Bajpai suggest that India must remain patient even if faced with another Mumbai-style attack, continue to engage with Islamabad, help the civilian government in Pakistan politically, try to resolve a few outstanding disputes like Siachen and Sir Creek, build a relationship with the army and explore the possibility of cooperating with Islamabad on the future of Afghanistan.

Brahma Chellaney, an analyst at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, said of the visit: "This is a largely symbolic occasion and contentious subjects will be avoided. Chellaney said Zardari "wielded little real power in the country. You can't have substantive talks with someone who doesn't run anything," he told AFP.

The relations between two neighbours remain complex. A 2010 Pew survey found 53% of the respondents in Pakistan chose India as the greater threat to their country, and only 26% chose the Taliban and al-Qaeda. At the same time 72% said it was important to improve relations with India, and about 75% wanted more trade relations and talks with India.

Both countries have seriously weakened governments that make them unable to move toward any radical confidence building measures. In the current circumstances, President Zardari's visit can only be a

small bonus. The question now is: how soon the Indian prime minister can muster political capital in his country to carry through a visit in Pakistan, a trip that is considered as crucial to achieve any tangible result on political issues.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

*The question now is how soon the Indian prime minister can muster political capital in his country to carry through a visit in Pakistan, a trip that is considered as crucial to achieve any tangible result on political issues.*



diplomacy" by jointly observing the 150th Anniversary of Tagore to consolidate their relations).

Under Zardari's watch, India and Pakistan are considering a sweeping agenda for economic co-operation for the first time in decades. The prime minister had every reason to welcome Zardari warmly and consider the next steps in consolidating the unexpected movement in bilateral relations, the Indian Express wrote.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

# Insulting our intelligence



A. R. CHOWDHURY

A number of leaders in the two main political parties -- Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) -- have taken us for granted. What else would explain their arrogance and complete disregard for the democratic values and wishes of the people.

In their mind, they have a hard time admitting that we could think on our own. They seem to believe that people in this country will fall for whatever they throw at us. Insulting our intelligence has become their second nature.

There are numerous examples that could be used to make this point. But today I will just highlight two recent events. First, consider the railway minister's laughable attempt to exonerate himself from the bribery charges. The entire country knows what happened that night, so there is no need to repeat here. In any other country, the minister would have stepped down pending a neutral and objective investigation. What do we see here?

The minister is crying foul and pretending that he is the victim of a conspiracy to ruin his political image. In an interview with the BBC (quoted in *The Daily Star* on April 14), he said: "The Border Guard Bangladesh headquarters is a restricted area after 10 pm. How did the car enter that area? Who let them in? Why did they stay there the whole night? The answers to these questions are needed. Who gave the money, where was it given, where did it come from?" However, the minister conveniently forgot to ask the next logical question: Where was the money being taken? He should know the answer.

It has been clear from media reports that the money was part of a bigger pool which was raised from job seekers in Chittagong. Officials at different levels in the Railway Department kept their cut of the money. The assistant private secretary was in the process of delivering the boss's share. Corruption in Bangladesh by government ministers

and officials is nothing new. It doesn't surprise us anymore. Over the years, irrespective of party affiliation, very few ministers have succeeded in resisting the temptation of taking money from different projects, appointments, transfers, etc. Fortunately, there are few in the AL cabinet today who, by Bangladesh standard, could be considered reasonably honest. However, the railway minister hasn't demonstrated anything that would suggest that he is in that group.

The minister sees conspiracy where there is none. The embarrassment that he has caused the government is of his own making. The right thing for him to do is to step down. By continuing to cling on to power, he will only perpetuate the widespread view that he is part of the problem in the railway ministry. He is, in

*Some politicians have a hard time admitting that we could think on our own. They seem to believe that people in this country will fall for whatever they throw at us. Insulting our intelligence has become their second nature.*

his own words, the "black cat." When it comes to making fools out of themselves, our main opposition party stalwarts are not far behind. Just consider the summersault performed by the BNP's acting general secretary on the issue of the maritime litigation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Following the verdict given by ITLOS, the opposition party leader thanked the government on the verdict's small feat. Other leaders followed the party line and congratulated the government, although some said that the credit goes to the bureaucrats in the Foreign Office rather than the current government. What a joke!

Within a few days the opposition realised that they were giving too much credit to the government. So the BNP acting general secretary came up with his unprecedented theory that Bangladesh has actually lost the litigation. Are you serious?

An array of newspaper articles explained in details the different aspects of the verdict. To take an example, a fellow columnist M. Shah Alam wrote on this

page (*The Daily Star*, April 8) that Bangladesh's concave coast and socio-economic and historical reasons merited the application of the principle of equity as against equidistance propounded by India and Myanmar, which have convex coastlines. Bangladesh's argument was also supported by international case laws developed over the last several decades.

The verdict given by the ITLOS on the basis of the principle of equity extended our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to 200 nautical miles from along our more than 400 km coastline. This gave us 110,000 square kilometres undisputed sea area, both water and seabed, as well as legal entitlement to previously disputed sea areas. Now Bangladesh can identify and earmark its own blocks, which are presumably rich in mineral resources.

The BNP acting general secretary took back the credit that he had previously extended to the government. I could only draw two conclusions from his action. Either he didn't read and/or understand the verdict; or he is criticising just for the sake of criticism. Readers, take your pick.

While reading a recent news story from South Korea, I couldn't help but ask myself, when will our political leaders learn to hold themselves accountable for their action?

The South Korean police chief offered his resignation last week amid mounting public criticism over the police's slow response to an emergency call made by a murder victim. The police failed to respond promptly when an emergency call was made by the victim with a detailed description of where she was being held. The body of the victim was later found at the house of the murder suspect, hours after she called the police for help.

Cho Hyun-oh, Commissioner of the National Police Agency took responsibility as the national police chief and offered to step down. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is poised to accept the resignation.

I wonder when our political leaders will learn to admit their mistakes.

The writer is a Professor and Chair, Department of Economics, Marquette University. Email: abdur.chowdhury@marquette.edu

# Budget 2012-2013: Relevant issues

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

THE budget for the next financial year will be placed in the Parliament, as a matter of regular practice, on the 2nd Thursday of June (June 14) and will have to be passed by the 30th. Generally Parliament sessions are not held on Fridays and Saturdays. If this practice is followed this year the Parliament will be left with ten working days only. Ten days for budget discussion in the Parliament, as well as consideration of comments from experts, professionals and stakeholders outside of Parliament, before finalising the proposals for both revenue and expenditure, will be too short a timeframe for such a nationally important and vital matter affecting each and everybody of the country.

In case the budget is placed on the first Thursday, another six days will be added. That too should be considered inadequate for budget discussion. Perhaps no other legislature in the world allocates so little time for its budget session. Of course, as we have seen over the years, useful discussion on the budget very rarely takes place on the floor of the House. But that does not justify squeezing the time limit for the budget session. It is pertinent to mention here that a parliament's control over national budget and public purse is one of the major yardsticks for measuring how democratic a government is.

*The Daily Star*, in its April 9 edition, reported that foreign aid amounting to \$16 billion has been lying unused. The finance minister, while holding a pre-budget meeting with professionals (where the writer was present), himself admitted this. Now the question is, what are the reasons for such a staggering amount

*It is a matter of great shame that we cannot utilise foreign aid so vitally necessary for our development. The government should immediately publish a white paper on the issue after conducting inquiry and identifying the reasons for such a mess.*

of foreign aid remaining unutilised? Failure to utilise foreign aid may be due to strings attached with the aid which are difficult to comply with, shortage of matching fund, faulty project, prevalence of corruption in the implementing agency or simply lack of implementation capacity.

In any case, the cause should be identified for each and every project through investigation so that proper measures can be taken to bring an end to it. Bangladesh's economy has always faced resource constraints in general and dearth of foreign exchange in particular. A big percentage of our development budget comes from foreign assistance. There has never been any investigation or study conducted by the government to unearth why failure to utilise foreign aid has been recurring, nor have we seen that the government is seriously concerned for such a dismal situation created over time.

It has now become imperative on the part of the government to commission a high-powered enquiry committee to find out the causes responsible for such an alarming failure in utilising scarce foreign assistance. As citizens of the country we have a right to know. It is a matter of great shame that we cannot utilise foreign aid so vitally necessary for our development. The government should immediately publish a white paper on the issue after conducting inquiry and identifying the reasons for such a mess.

Every year, the size of the ADP is slashed at the end of the financial year but revenue expenditure is enhanced through supplementary budget grants, and has become a regular practice. The question is why do we fail to utilise the ADP allocation in full and we don't need to ask for additional fund for implementing the development projects? Suggestions were made every time at the pre-budget meetings to examine and locate the reasons for failure to utilise the budget allocations. But no initiative on the part of the government has so far been seen to find out the reasons for failure to implement ADP in full year after year.

Through the budget document as well the budget speech of the finance minister the nation is informed of the amount spent by the government during the year under review, but no study has ever been conducted to see whether the nation has got the value for money so spent. Spending money does not necessarily mean that value for money was received. For example, allocation for a project has duly been spent. But what the stakeholders or the nation have got out of this spending, how far the project has achieved the purpose or goal set out in the project document, whether the project has really yielded value for the money so spent, and whether the opportunity cost was taken into consideration are questions that have remained unanswered. For a resource-poor country such a study is essential so that money spent results in returns worth the expenditure.

A recently published report of TIB revealed that projects taken up under climate change hazards mitigation were seriously faulty and that there was rampant corruption in spending the money. While providing allocation for mitigating damages/disasters arising out of climate change this should be taken into consideration so that no unworthy project or projects under political consideration are selected and that no corruption takes place in utilising the money.

The writer is a former adviser to caretaker government.