

Padma bridge project

We want renegotiations with WB

THOUGH we are shocked and saddened by the fact that our dream of a bridge over Padma stands temporarily threatened by the WB's decision, yet we are glad to note that prospect of revival of the project still exists. At least that is what came out of the Finance Minister's press briefing on Sunday. It is very clear that the government is not closing the Padma Bridge chapter with the World Bank (WB) and wants the Bank to review its decision.

The government should also be commended for making public all its correspondences with the WB on this matter and the actions it has taken in response. However, it is one sided. We feel that it would have made the public privy to the WB correspondences.

Since there is the issue of 'credible evidence' asserted by the WB, which is 'not acceptable' to the government, it would have helped the public to know what the putative evidence the Bank had offered. This we feel would have helped validate the action of the government so far. That the "strict confidentiality" or the letter are WB property is not acceptable argument to us.

The ACC has also come public but again not entirely. That we are afraid begs the question as does its admission of lacunae in its laws that limit its operational capability.

The entire episode, predicated much by the definition of 'corruption' and 'credibility' has brought about a situation that has hurt the integrity of the government, blemished the image of the state and, above all, jeopardized our national interest. It appears that the government has been overzealous to protect a group of persons, especially one at the expense of the country's interest

We wonder whether the person at the center of the squabble should not have relinquished his position on his own or made to do so. That is where the government made a cardinal error. Nothing should have stood on the way to serve national interest. But something stood, and we are having to pay a heavy price for that.

The importance of the project cannot be overemphasized. We support the position that it should be revived. But before that happens, the government must address the concerns of the WB by removing those tainted by the allegations and have on board the project people with proven integrity and honesty. It must also hold a transparent and credible investigation. For its part, the WB should show more flexibility and understanding and help us start anew.

No 'surprise' from Quader, please

He contradicts the FM's position to review the deal with WB

WHEN the whole nation is reeling from the World Bank's cancellation of the Padma Bridge loan, we are perplexed by Communications Minister Obaidul Quader's promise to spring a 'surprise' on the Padma bridge project. While the finance minister expresses his hope that the WB should see fit to review its decision, Quader claims that alternative funding the cost of which would be cheaper than WB rates is being negotiated.

Quader's comment is clearly at variance with the finance minister's attempt to revive the deal with the WB. We find this lack of coordination disturbing. Therefore, we think a minister with such an important portfolio as communications should speak with circumspection and responsibility especially when he is passing comments about issues of extreme national importance.

As for the dramatic 'surprise' up his sleeves, we would like to say that we are clearly suffering from big surprises and have no stomach for any more. If he has specific data about the cost-benefit analysis of alternative funding with Malaysia or with any other country or organization, he should make that information public when something tangible has been firmed up or worked out. That would give us enough data to compare with the WB's pledge and judge which is better for us.

Let's reiterate that the Padma Bridge project is an integral part of the country's infrastructural development and is a matter far too serious to be dealt with in a cavalier fashion. Nor is any degree of non-coordination between the communications and finance ministers

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- July 3
- 987

Hugh Capet is crowned King of France, the first of the Capetian dynasty that would rule France till the French Revolution in 1792.
- 1767

Norway's oldest newspaper still in print, Adresseavisen, is founded and the first edition is published.
- 1775

American Revolutionary War: George Washington takes command of the Continental Army at Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1884

Dow Jones and Company publishes its first stock average.
- 1886

Karl Benz officially unveils the Benz Patent Motorwagen the first purpose-built automobile.
- 1886

The New York Tribune becomes the first newspaper to use a linotype machine, eliminating typesetting by hand.
- 1944

World War II: Minsk is liberated from Nazi control by Soviet troops during Operation Bagration.
- 1962

The Algerian War of Independence against the French ends.
- 1979

U.S. President Jimmy Carter signs the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

Overhauling the education system



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE road to promulgation for a generally acceptable education policy has been a long one. Attempts have been made to do so in different decades, none of which made it to enactment: the Hamoodur Commission Report in the '60s, Qudrat-i-Khuda report in the early '70s, education policy in the early '80s during H.M. Ershad's regime all failed for one reason or another. The present government promulgated the Education Policy in 2010. This in itself is a major milestone for the government.

There have been some notable successes. In an effort to break the old system of recruitment of teachers in schools, where money power and influence helped secure lucrative positions, the ministry has established "Teachers' pool" at district level. Interested candidates must qualify as 'pool' teachers - if they can pass the examination. So when the schooling system recruits, these 'pool' teachers will be called upon. The introduction of Primary school certificate (P.S.C.) up to Class V: may not have helped urban school going children who are going to good schools. However, the government is funding 'on paper' hundreds of thousands of primary schools across the country. Thanks to P.S.C., now schools have to come up with real results to protect registration. This will help the government to take stock of the real situation in primary education P.S.C. can serve as a yardstick for evaluation. The overhauling in syllabus, i.e. new text books and changing the way examinations are held. The fact that there will be no question bank to speak of in itself is a major improvement. With more emphasis placed on creativity and analytical ability, it will change the way students are educated in

schools. Although the new system has received positive feedback from the bulk of students, even here, there is resistance. Those parents who are wholly committed to attaining the best grades for their children are bound to be unhappy. Teachers too are challenged by the new system that takes away their comfort zone. Teachers' retraining will be a major challenge for the government, but these are being implemented.



UNICEF

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However, besides success with the education policy, the ministry of education finds itself in the soup on a number of other fronts. Of late, a number of directives issued by the ministry are being ignored at all levels. Examples can be found ten-a-penny. For instance the ministry's ban on corporal punishment in schools issued in August, 2010 has not been enforced till date. In September of

various schools have not done so. Indeed the list of irregularities does not stop there. The more blatant disregard for rules and regulations comes to light when one is faced with the fact that some of the most reputed primary and secondary schools in the city have not bothered to take permission of the ministry to open one or several branches of their institutions. This is in direct violation of 'The

Conundrum in Cairo

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week in Cairo, a historic ceremony took place. Mr. Mohammed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party of Egypt (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood), was sworn in as the new Egyptian president. With this swearing-in, Egypt has pole-vaulted into a new political age.

Never before in history had the people of that country had the pleasure of choosing their president. From the Pharaohs to the last dictator Hosni Mubarak, it has been their fate to be ruled by people who had either inherited power or had usurped power. The people of this "cradle of civilization" had never been enfranchised and had the ability to bestow state power. Yet there are many Egyptians who are sceptical and think this event is not any way seminal. They know that the collapse of the last authoritarian regime in Egypt does not mean the ushering in of a golden age of democracy

Why are they apprehensive? This is because the real power still remains in the hands of the military. Only three months back, at a cost of 3 billion Egyptian pounds, 30 million voters went to the polls to elect a free parliament. The Muslim Brotherhood secured a majority of seats there. But the military disbanded the parliament soon after the elections. They decided that a constituent assembly should first be elected to draft a new Constitution for Egypt.

So even if the last dictator has been sent to oblivion, the body and soul of the deposed dictator remain. The military also dominates the economy. "It controls between 10% or maybe even 30 % of the economy. No one knows because it is all a secret." Thus mere election of a president does not wish away the machinery that dictates everything in Egypt. Yet there is a silver lining. With the president being freely elected, there is now hope that this corrupt political system will slowly be replaced by a representative civilian rule.

Egypt has always been considered as the centre of the Arab world. Democracy, if it succeeds there, will capture the heart and soul of the Arabs everywhere. Recall the songs, the music, the TV shows that Egypt has produced and enchanted the Arabs all over with. This is more so in the realm of ideas.

Major political movements in the past century in the Middle East had begun in Egypt. It was this country that had given the idea of Pan Arabism. All Arabs, it said, should unify politically. Again, it was

Egypt that spawned the idea of Islamic fundamentalism. It inspired impressionable young men and women to join in order to relive the great ideals of Islam.

The West was not humoured. In fact it was alarmed. They encouraged the Egyptian dictators to stymie the fundamentalist movement. But the movement spread under their shadows. The election of Morsi, who belonged to this movement, as president validates this fact. But the movement in many respects has also morphed over time. Today, it is more in the business of creating jobs, dishing out welfare and supporting social inclusiveness than in changing the way people live and pray. But what matters now to its followers are how they are governed and the quality of governance.

President Morsi's first task would be to curb the powers of the military. His relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf) are at best courteous. The Scaf, realising that its days are numbered had, just before the presidential elec-

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tions, issued a supplementary constitutional declaration that sliced off some of the powers of any future president. As it stands today, the president of Egypt cannot even declare war without the clearance of the armed forces. Morsi needs to change all that and restore presidential supremacy.

Morsi has three other equally important challenges before him. There is the matter of national reconciliation. Egypt, after his election, is a divided country. Just over 51% of the electorate voted for him. His opponent Shafiq, who represented in many ways the interests of the old Egyptian order received over 48% of the votes. Thus, Morsi's challenge would be to bring 12 million Egyptians who voted for his opponent round to his way of thinking. He has to build bridges and embrace the liberals, the Coptic Christians and other minorities that had opposed him in the election. Morsi has to be "a president for all Egyptians."

The other challenge before Morsi is that of internal security. Since the agitations in Cairo's

Tahrir Square there has been a dramatic rise in killings, abductions, car thefts and illegal possessions of arms. The police are a compromised force there. They had served the last dictator Mubarak and are suspected by the people. Morsi has to reform the police force and install an honest and professional one.

A major challenge before Morsi is the domestic economy. About 40% of Egyptians now live under the poverty line. There is very little foreign investment. The IMF and the World Bank have withheld \$3 billion as they want to be sure that the political situation stabilises before releasing the funds. Foreign reserves have dwindled because of huge imports. Factories are closing and strikes are frequent. Morsi will have to revive the economy before the people get disillusioned.

In foreign relations, Morsi also faces indomitable challenges. Egypt's relations with the Gulf countries are strained. The sheikhdoms suspect that the influence of Muslim Brotherhood would spread in their region. Morsi has to quickly allay their fears as Egypt has thousands of well paid Egyptians working there and sending much needed remittance.

Another area of concern for President Morsi is Egypt's future relations with the US and Israel. He is already under pressure from within his country to rescind the peace treaty with Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood is on record in criticising President Mobarak who supported the treaty and was subservient to the interest of the US and Israel in the region. Morsi has to maintain good relations with both Israel and the US without hurting his own people.

But Morsi possesses a great advantage. He enjoys widespread support of the international community. From Iran to the US all governments have welcomed his election. The only country that has not done so is Israel. It is waiting and watching. It will not accept cancellation of the peace treaty and will not be happy if Egypt embraces Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip. Morsi now needs to leverage on this international goodwill to get on with the rebuilding of Egypt. He has little time and a short political fuse. He has to engineer the future of this ancient land.

For Egypt the future has already arrived. But it is just not evenly distributed.

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