

## When public property becomes political

*Public welfare is sidelined*

THE wholesale grabbing of government-owned land and turning those into so-called political establishments and business ventures is in full swing throughout the capital city. According to reports published in a national daily, the extent of land grabbing extends from one end of the city to the other. The erection of illegal structures on land adjacent to as many as 25 government institutions by some ruling-party affiliated wings gives some idea of the current trend.

Had these so called 'offices' purporting to belong to the various students and labour wings of the ruling party actually carried out some official function, then there would be no brows raised. Yet, as investigative journalism has revealed, the most preferred manner of grabbing government land has been to use the signboard of one or other such body. To add salt to injury, the areas which have witnessed the proliferation of these new offices and establishments have been accompanied by a rise in crime.

The concerned departments or ministries whose land is being acquired unlawfully remain silent spectators to this phenomenon. Even if steps are taken, the powers that be appear helpless in the face of stiff resistance put up by party cadres. One of the best examples of such a scenario is what we are witnessing with the case of LGED's directive to remove all illegal roadside establishments put up in the name of political organs of the ruling party and other and makeshift shops by mid-day, Tuesday. When authorities went to demolish such structures in the Mohakhali area, they ran into stiff resistance of party cadres of a particular ward and demolition could not take place in that Ward. Are we then to assume that a Minister, one who is said to head a particular youth wing is helpless in the face of opposition at street level? Needless to say, such a breakdown in the chain of command within the ruling party does not bode well for the country and order must be restored for the common good.

## Profit mongering

*Mere words will not work*

THE commerce minister deserves our thanks. At least he had the moral courage to admit that the prices of essential have spiraled up ahead of the forthcoming month of Ramadan, unlike his predecessor who was all the time convinced that the price was always under control. And there is no doubt, as the minister says, the rise is totally unjustified. Well there is the excuse of flood that will come in handy for those dealers who are constantly on the lookout for natural calamities or religious festivals to exploit the public and make a windfall out of those.

It is only in Bangladesh that prices of essentials are not governed by market laws but by the caprice and whims of a syndicate on whom so far, the governments have had no control. How does one explain the spurt in cost of essentials without any genuine reasons? And this has been happening before every Ramadan While nobody can take issue with the legitimate rise in prices, the problem with our market is that the rise has a ratchet effect; it never comes down.

Since the commerce ministry is sanguine that the rise is aberrant and has decided to deploy monitoring teams to detect the persons responsible for the machination, one would hope that the deviants would be detected and made examples of. Having said that we want to emphasise the fact that any measure, which is abnormal or distorts the system would be more likely to fail. Side by side monitoring, and that has not borne much fruit in the past because of laxity in penalizing the offenders, measures must be set afoot that address the deliberate distortion of prices.

As it is, the profit margin retained by the sellers at various levels is much too high, in some cases more than 100 percent the original cost. This is what the government must also tackle seriously. What must also be addressed are other allied factors that add to the cost at the consumer level like illegal tolls the carriers have to

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- July 4
- 1187

The Crusades: Battle of Hattin Saladin defeats Guy of Lusignan, King of Jerusalem.
- 1886

The people of France offer the Statue of Liberty to the people of the United States.
- 1887

The founder of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, joins Sindh-Madrassa-tul-Islam, Karachi.
- 1918

Ottoman sultan Mehmed VI ascends to the throne.
- 1918

Bolsheviks kill Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and his family (Julian calendar date).
- 1947

The "Indian Independence Bill" is presented before the British House of Commons, proposing the partition of the Provinces of British India into two sovereign countries India and Pakistan.
- 1976

Israeli commandos raid Entebbe airport in Uganda, rescuing all but four of the passengers and crew of an Air France jetliner seized by Palestinian terrorists.

## GROUND REALITIES

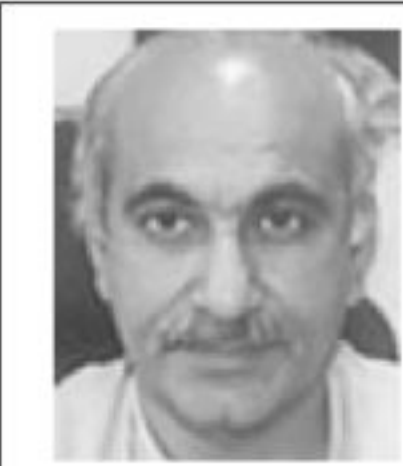


SYED BADRUL AHSAN

form when foreign governments and donor agencies step in to humiliate you publicly, for reasons that may or may not have to do with you. Tajuddin Ahmed was one of the very few men in Bangladesh's political domain who understood the need for even the poverty-stricken to have a right to self-esteem. The World Bank, he reasoned in early 1972, did not need to be here in Bangladesh. Having fought a war for freedom against overwhelming odds on their own, Bangladesh's people were eminently qualified to take the country towards a socialist transformation. In Delhi, even as Robert McNamara looked for a chance of a conversation with him, Tajuddin kept the World Bank president (and architect of the Vietnam War) at arm's length.

Today, the World Bank is not at arm's length. It is all over us, part of the reason being our own inability to handle ourselves better. The government should have asked Syed Abul Hossain to stand aside or the prime minister should have dropped him from the cabinet when allegations of corruption first surfaced against him and his family firm around the issue of an appointment of contractors for the proposed Padma Bridge. Every official at whom the finger of suspicion was pointed by the World Bank should have been sent on leave until such time as inquiries into the Bank's allegations were complete. The Padma Bridge was, and is, a matter concerning an entire nation. Why was it then not possible for the government to sacrifice a few individuals at the altar of enlightened national self-interest?

## BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

utives as much as to former finance ministers. The Vatican does not advertise the dilemma of past pontiffs, since the institution is sacred, and sometimes it takes few centuries before we get to know which Borgia had how many children, but the news is bad for editors and others who are less divine. As long as you occupy the chair you get the perquisites of God. The moment you are yanked off, the bile of frustration, revenge and ambition begins to flow through your reputation. There is nothing called an empty chair in real life. And no man is a hero to either his valet or his successor.

What is unusual, and different, in Pranab Mukherjee's case is that his former boss is his successor, since Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has taken charge of the finance ministry now that Mukherjee is headed towards a more spacious residence in Delhi. After more than six decades of democracy, India's political, economic and media elite still don't seem to get how government works. Policy is the prerogative of cabinet. The prime minister cannot claim that he does not share responsibility for policy, domestic or foreign. Pranab

These are worrisome days. And there are worrying things happening before us. Somehow you get the feeling that darker times are ahead, that mischief is afoot to create the precise conditions which could put all of us, and not just the government, in danger. The repeated violence in the readymade garments sector, the virulence with which factories are put to the torch, the explosions which occur on the basis of mere rumours of workers' deaths -- these are disturbing signs of things that could be even worse. You do not expect those employed, sincerely employed, in the garments sector to destroy the very institution which gives their lives an underpinning of survival. Then who are these elements who go so

swiftly and so angrily into turning the garments sector into a battlefield? There are an infinite number of instances from history to remind us of the tenuous nature of poor societies trying to create a democratic structure for themselves. Such societies find, at a point, that they must wage battle against forces more organised than they, that in the end they might not win. In 1953, for all the nationalistic support for his government, Prime Minister Mossadegh saw Iran slipping out of his grasp and the briefly exiled Shah restored to his throne by his friends in the West. And following the bloody coup which brought General Suharto to power in Indonesia in 1965 (tens of thousands of Indonesians were being hunted down by the soldiers on the suspicion that they were communists), western multinational companies came together in happy

conference to carve out territories of influence in the country. Capitalism took over and, with it came a military regime beholden to the West.

The violence you run into in Bangladesh these days, the organised chaos you experienced in 1974 in this same country, tend to pull you back, almost against your will, to the troubles which assailed Chile in the early 1970s. Wads of money were pumped in from abroad, to organise strikes against the democratically elected

government of Salvador

Allende, who eventually went down fighting in September 1973.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman received the news of the Chilean coup the day after.

Too depressed to work, he went home with the feeling that the shadows in the dark

would be coming after him next. And they did, less than two years later.

The danger to a country comes in varied ways, generally. It first rears its head when its government is either too inept or too corrupt or too weak structurally or too arrogant to read the writing on the wall. It then assumes a trenchant shape when powerful people abroad realise there is a chance for them to step in and turn matters to their advantage. Henry Kissinger warned Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that the latter would be made a horrible example of. Christopher Hitchens maintained to the very end that Kissinger had a role in August 1975-Bangladesh. And that, my friend, is the vulnerability weak, resource-constrained states go through.

The World Bank, through its public

announcement of the scrapping of the Padma Bridge deal, has demonstrated the patronising tone which often underscores the voices of the powerful around the world. And yet, much like the bureaucracy and the non-transparency which undermines governments like Bangladesh's, the World Bank remains hamstrung by some of the very ailments it spots in the world's impoverished states. Those ailments need to go. The bank has had Paul Wolfowitz, another cheerleader for undeclared and unjustified war, as its president. It has not opened its doors to leadership by non-Americans. Its record since the Bretton Woods conference has not been terribly bright. But neither has that of nations like ours, where bad governance and worse politics keep shooting holes in the armour of the state decade after decade.

Perhaps, as a former director of the World Bank has been quoted as saying in a journal, the Bank is a place where "the inmates are running the asylum." Perhaps we will have a bridge over the Padma someday, somehow. But this shame, for both the Bangladesh government and the World Bank, will be there for quite a while.

Tajuddin Ahmed relented after 1972, enough to see Robert McNamara in Washington in 1974. An eager McNamara was ready to offer Bangladesh goods of immaculate quality. Tajuddin, socialist of conviction that he was, had need only for bullocks, for the new nation's agrarian economy needed bullocks. He had a point.

Should we have heeded Tajuddin Ahmed in 1972? The answer to that question might come through a simple exercise: let the torch shine on every country into which the World Bank has gone. How many such states have risen to economic well-being through World Bank largesse, through the conditionalities the bank has imposed on the world's poorer societies?

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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*.

# A reason to remember Tajuddin

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that he could do little about the fiscal decisions taken by the Reserve Bank of India since its governor D. Subbarao refused to listen to him, and the governor was both appointed and backed by the prime minister.

What a minister is responsible for is implementation, and the argument can only be restricted to this. Dr.

Singh has asked the human beings in his finance ministry to go forth and find an "animal spirit." We will learn soon enough which animal is going to provide the inspiration, and to which degree this spirit will be distilled.

But the prime minister already has another and more difficult problem. Whether the animal spirit rears up or not, Mukherjee's departure seems to have inspired rather large quantities of the animal instinct amongst Cabinet ministers. There is a clutch of claimants for Mukherjee's old job, and as various ministers cast an eye on the quality of the queue, they immediately join it. Vituperative conflicts are raging on the side, as big business pushes forward its preferred candidates.

These gentlemen (there are no ladies in line) are, in my view, making

one big mistake. They are underestimating the prime minister. He has promised a cabinet reshuffle "soon," but "soon" has an elasticity that is equal to another four-letter word, "wait." Any dramatic shuffle is not possible before the votes for president are cast on July 19. After that comes the election for vice president, which takes us to August 10. By this time the monsoon session of Parliament will be underway. When this ends the climate will change, with the thermometer under the tongue of the crucial Gujarat elections. Come November, and all talk within government will turn to preparations for the next Budget, due in February. While politics is the antonym of certainty, it is a good bet that Prime Minister Singh will deliver his first budget after 1996.

The beauty of this exercise is that the prime minister merely has to let time and a calendar he cannot change shape the agenda. Never forget that Dr. Singh took a graduate course in politics from the Narasimha Rao University of Survival by Procrastination. Those who have seen Pranab Mukherjee after he filed his nomination for president of India remark that they have never seen him so relieved and happy. The relief is that he has left the Delhi culture of power behind. The happiness is easier to understand: nothing foreseeable can prevent him from becoming the 13th president of Rashtrapati Bhavan.

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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*.