

National Integrity Strategy

Feeling more of scepticism than hope

AT the outset, we welcome the government's initiative to formulate a National Integrity Strategy with the goal of curbing corruption and ensuring good governance in the country. However, despite talk of provisions to be incorporated in the strategy to deal with issues crucial in relation to transparency and accountability, we couldn't entertain high hopes as to what shape it would take and how much of it would be implemented. In regard to some provisions as publication of wealth statements of public officials and rules and policies for their appointment, we can hardly be blamed for lack of confidence in the government coupled with not inconsiderable scepticism.

In the three and a half years of its tenure, the government has done little to effectively combat corruption, one of its major election pledges. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which was formed after much struggle and pressure created by the civil society and media, has been crippled to the point of its chief himself declaring it to be 'toothless'. When the report on the share market scandal was filed, not only was it not publicised or the recommendations considered, but its author has been subjected to all sorts of unmerited criticism.

Unless concrete measures are in place, the government's move to combat corruption and malpractice through an integrity commission will remain an empty dream. For example, the publication of wealth statements of lawmakers, government officials and judges, a proposed mandatory provision of the strategy, must be effectively implemented and the wealth assessment tagged with tax return assessment in a continuing process of updating and public dissemination.

The appointment of an ombudsman, also an election pledge of the government, crucial for combating corruption and abuse of power remains an unfinished agenda. According to the strategy, a separate department to investigate corruption allegations is to be set up. We wonder if the ACC is allowed to act independently with the complement of its own investigating wing, any separate entity would be needed to investigate allegations of corruption.

However, our common experience has been that corruption charges and investigations into them have been directed against the opposition party members, unconcerned with the activities and allegations against those in power who have a free hand in committing corruption and abuse of power. The application of rules fairly to all, regardless of their political affiliation, is the guarantee for ensuring true transparency, accountability and good governance in a democratic system.

The curtain drawn on Olympics

We applaud the spirit with which it ended

AFTER 17 days of spectacular performances brimming with excitement, perseverance and the invincible human drive for scaling new heights, the 30th Olympiad came to an end through an absorbing and majestic closing ceremony in London. The closing ceremony befittingly celebrated the sporting feats of the highest achievers but what made it really special was the honour and admiration showered on all participants, irrespective of their winning or losing. It thus upheld the true Olympic spirit that emphasises participation and bringing together of all cultures coupled with recognition of competitive sporting prowess and skills at the highest level.

Evidently, the success of London Olympics owes as much to the cheery enthusiasm and selfless dedication of thousands of volunteers as to the organisers. Although to many the Beijing or the Sydney Olympic was more pronounced in terms of pomp and splendour, even super achievers such as Usain Bolt have admitted that the London Olympic was more impressive in many ways. In fact it was the unrelenting fervour of the British crowds who showed up at all major events that kept the Olympics torch truly alight.

Successfully managing such a big event almost impeccably, that too at a time when the economy of the Euro zone is beset with austerity cuts on the whole, has been undoubtedly a feat that the British Olympics Association and the people can be justly proud of.

Olympic is not only an occasion for universal sporting fraternity, it is also about patriotism and national identity. Some countries like Uganda have emblazoned their names in the Olympics by winning only one gold. All these naturally beg the question then why Bangladesh, a country of 160 millions, has yet to produce performers

Global food prices on the rise again



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE severe drought that hit the United States (US) this year has affected some 80 per cent of corn crop produc-

tion and 11 percent of soya bean crop. When we take into account the fact that the US alone contributes to 35 percent of the global supply of corn and soybean, the impact of such low yields due to adverse climate induced changes is already having a detrimental effect on the global supply chain. With an increase in world commodity prices, the effects will be felt by all maize and soya importing nations, including Bangladesh, leading to fears of yet another food crisis that triggered political and social unrest in 2008.

Although there are other large producers of grains like China, the world's largest producer of wheat, it also happens to be the largest consumer. But it is the US that is the largest exporter of these two crucial crops, which not only feed millions of people but are also used produce feed stock for animals. As stated by Council on Foreign Relations's Isobel Coleman, "Around the world you have rising middle-classes, a growing demand for meat and protein in the diet, and countries around the world are becoming increasingly dependent on relatively inexpensive food stocks from the United States. When you see a crop failure of the magnitude you have seen this summer, it flows through the whole food chain."

The sharp drop in rainfall has produced the worst drought to hit the US in half a century. The US Department of Agriculture is already predicting a price rise of food across the board to the tune of 3 to 4 percent next year and the drought is predicted to have affected two-thirds of the country. "This is a once- or twice-a-century drought, and it's more severe than anybody has been preparing for," says Robert Thompson, former director of agriculture and rural development at the World Bank. "It's huge with respect to the world market for maize and soybeans."



With so many nations depending on grain imports from the US to supplement their own harvests, and because intense drought and floods are damaging crops elsewhere (for e.g. Russia's wheat production plummeted 12.5 per cent), food supplies are expected to shrink and prices to rise across the planet.

The repercussions are already being felt worldwide. World Bank data points to a rise in global prices for corn and wheat to the tune of 45 and 50 percent since mid-June and soybean prices have shot up nearly 30 percent since June 1.

Yet it is not only US crops that have been affected by little rain. Climatic shifts in weather have affected most of the large wheat producing regions including Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan. This has led many nations to start stockpiling grains with Russia and Ukraine severely curtailing exports which put further strains on the global supply chain of wheat.

A constricting supply of essential crops such as soybean and wheat will inevitably have serious consequences on cereal stockpiles that aid agencies use to feed the millions of hungry across the globe. As put by Rene McGuffin, a spokesman for the UN World Food Program (WFP) recently, "High and volatile food prices affect WFP and our ability to

feed the world's hungriest poor in two ways. We have to spend more to purchase food for the hungry -- and we estimate that every 10 percent increase in the price of the food that we distribute means an additional \$200 million a year is required to buy that same amount of food. At the same time, the volatile food prices drive up the number of people needing food assistance."

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Bangladesh will have to face the same music as other nations in Asia due to changed circumstances. Given that the country is overly dependent for import of a number of cereals including soybean and that that global food markets will face volatility due to climatic shocks, a number

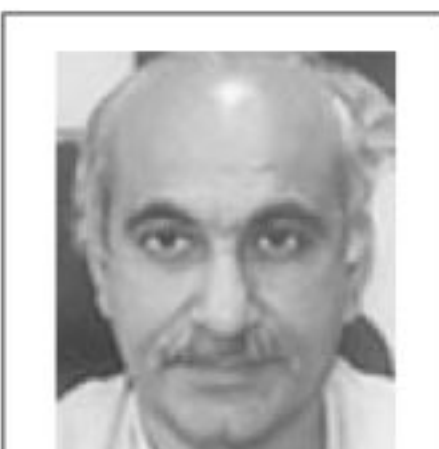
of instruments may be used to counter prices volatility associated with import bills, i.e. going with either futures and options contracts (financial instruments) or over the counter (OTC) contracts (physical instrument).

The main difference between them is that financial instruments can provide a country with a cash payout to enable them to offset higher food prices for physical imports, whereas physical instruments seek to manage price and supply risk and provide for the physical import of the food. Both types of instruments are offered by financial institutions and traders. But again, Bangladesh may not have the required reserves in foreign exchange to take advantage of such available instruments. Given its constraints, targeted assistance to those most in need, either using cash transfers or direct food assistance, may be the most effective and equitable way of reaching those affected by a food price crisis.

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BYLINE

When to throw away half a dictionary



M.J. AKBAR

JUST as a journalist cannot claim the power of a politician, a politician cannot presume the liberty of a journalist. Perhaps the

preeminent BJP leader L.K. Advani slipped from one world to the other because he was a journalist for many years, and it remains a fond memory; perhaps he still thirsts for that freedom of expression through a blog that is simply not permitted to a political leader.

The downside, as he should know better than anyone else, is that media, which needs a diet of at least one juicy story a day, will, given the slightest chance, take an inch and turn it into a mile. That is in the nature of this ravenous beast. Mr. Advani's blog on the post election scenario appeared on a lean news day. Media put some pickle around the story and had a feast.

His analysis was objective; which, of course, was the problem as far as his politics. Politicians are expected to shape analysis towards their partisan ends, or remain silent. It would be interesting, however, to treat what he wrote on its merits, and check whether it stands up to scrutiny.

He felt that since neither the BJP nor the Congress would have a majority on its own, it was plausible that a prime minister could emerge from outside their fold. He raised this as a possibility, not a certainty. Such an

eventuality has happened before, he added. He then quickly concluded (which was largely ignored by media) that such a government could not last. He also noted that the Congress numbers in the Lok Sabha could come down to double digits, so Congress support would be fragile. A stable PM would either need the BJP's support or would have to come from the BJP.

Such projections are par for the course in conversations this season in Delhi. If anyone else had written this,

consequences that are not necessarily beneficial. The Congress does not debate the accession of Rahul Gandhi, because it is not allowed to. The Samajwadi Party does not debate the succession of Akhilesh Yadav, because it is not permitted to. If there is some debate within the DMK it is only whether the heir should be elder brother or younger brother.

The party in all cases is paying the price of closed options. The argument that a political party will crumble

In a remarkable coincidence, the strongest regional leaders at present have no anointed heirs: Nitish Kumar, Mayawati, Mamata Banerjee, Navin Patnaik or Jayalalitha. A successor may or may not come from a family, as for instance Jagan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, but he will have to win his spurs with a personal display of commitment, as indeed Jagan Reddy has done.

any self-respecting eyebrow would not have bothered to flicker. The fact that such talk has become mundane is, if you think about it, the real story. It is indicative of a new mood. If the discourse has shifted to a non-UPA prime minister after the next general elections, it is only because the possibility has moved from possible to probable.

This debate is welcome, because it is a natural element of the democratic process. It is only in dynastic succession that there is no debate, with

without the glue of a single family is not tenable, as far as the voter is concerned. If a political organisation is so brittle as to need the same leadership generation after generation, then it will no longer pass the test of time. Families have every right to live within a party; a party cannot live within a family.

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may or may not come from a family, as for instance Jagan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, but he will have to win his spurs with a personal display of commitment, as indeed Jagan Reddy has done. Reddy has probably been saved by adversity. A soft landing into the CM's chair after his charismatic father's death could have pulped him; today he has more steel in his sinews.

The single most important criterion for leadership is not genes, but governance. Pedigree is supplementary, and not a very important one either. That is why Nitish Kumar and Narendra Modi are the names that bubble to the surface. Modi's advantage is that he belongs to a party that will get the largest number of MPs if Congress slips in the next elections; his disadvantage is that BJP's allies in the next coalition will not find him acceptable. Conversely, Nitish Kumar will be acceptable to allies, but does not belong to the party at the heart of the coalition.

This debate will eventually wind its way to a compromise. There will be twists and turns, as in the course of a political river; but do not expect a sudden flood in favour of any name. However, the relevant point is surely that the debate is considered legitimate rather than preposterous. What Mr. Advani wrote was correct, but for Advani the editor rather than Advani the leader. Political oratory opens the door to power, but only if you shut down half the dictionary.

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.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 14

1916 Romania declares war on Austro-Hungary, joining Antante in World War I

1921 Tannu Tuva, later Tuvan People's Republic is established as a completely independent country (which is supported by Soviet Russia).

1947 Pakistan gains Independence from the British Indian Empire and joins the Commonwealth of Nations.