

Coming together of the two

There is need to articulate alternative policy options

DR. Kamal Hossain and Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury have joined voices in calling for national unity in addressing the issues that are exerting harmful consequences on the nation's politics, economy and social fabric. Their motivation is well understood, given the political wilderness the nation finds itself in at this particular point in time.

While some might ask whether it is a precursor of an alternative political platform, some may well write the two off as being able to produce nothing more than the collective value of two tried politicians.

People are disappointed because of the pathetic performances of the two parties. Both the AL and the BNP have been driven more by partisan interests than the state's, and that too for the self-aggrandizement of only a few individuals in the party. At no other time has the need for an alternative democratic platform been more felt than now. Regrettably, their efforts in the past had been unsuccessful in spite of their good intentions.

We in this newspaper are convinced that neither the country nor democracy can thrive in the present political culture that has made the country captive to caprices, whims and mutual hatred of the two parties. Our experience shows that none of the successive governments did anything to change the culture of conflictive politics that has inevitably led to misgovernance, corruption and worsening of the rule of law.

Given their expressed intention to right the wrongs in politics, the best thing for Dr. Hossain and Dr. Chowdhury will be to articulate a common vision so that the people may judge as to what is in offer and make their choice.

Considering the political uncertainty the country is faced with, and the people left with no viable alternatives, commitment and concrete actions on the part of the two, coupled with quality alternative policy options on issues that the two parties have failed to deliver, may help add positive value to their efforts of providing suitable alternative to the voters. They would also need to demonstrate their commitment by declaring their willingness to go the whole hog despite the encumbrances that they are likely to encounter.

Good economic growth, but can be better

Domestic investment constraints must be mitigated

TRAFFIC congestion and the poor condition of roads are taking a toll not only on the people but also on the economy. According to a recently released World Bank report, although Bangladesh's economic growth is healthy in the context of unfavourable global conditions at a projected 6 percent -- the government forecast is a more ambitious 7.2 percent -- the country is performing below its potential.

The key reasons behind this have been identified as weak external demand and, more within the country's control, domestic investment constraints. Hindrances to investment include the deteriorating condition of roads and ports which cause major delays in export-import business and shortage of gas in manufacturing industries. While power generation has increased in the last two years, the demand-supply gap remains high and, according to the WB, while rental power plants have a short-term positive impact on growth, they are expensive and longer-term solutions are required. In addition, the poor situation of governance at state-owned commercial banks and underutilisation of development projects have also been identified as factors hindering investment and, in turn, growth.

Despite Bangladesh's political instability over the years, not to mention the global recession which has hit hard economies around the world, the country has demonstrated a steady growth rate thanks to remittance, declining inflation and international commodity prices and a tight monetary policy. And, as statistics have shown, it can do even better, with major infrastructural and some policy reforms going a long way.

We would encourage the government to consider these latest reports on the country's economic growth and take appropriate measures. While all the solutions are long-term and will be costly, the benefits reaped, too, will be for the long run, and contribute to the strengthening of Bangladesh as a competitor in the global market

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- October 23

1707

The first Parliament of Great Britain meets.

1917

Lenin calls for the October Revolution.

1946

The United Nations General Assembly convenes for the first time, at an auditorium in Flushing, Queens, New York City.

1973

A United Nations sanctioned cease-fire officially ends the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Syria.

1998

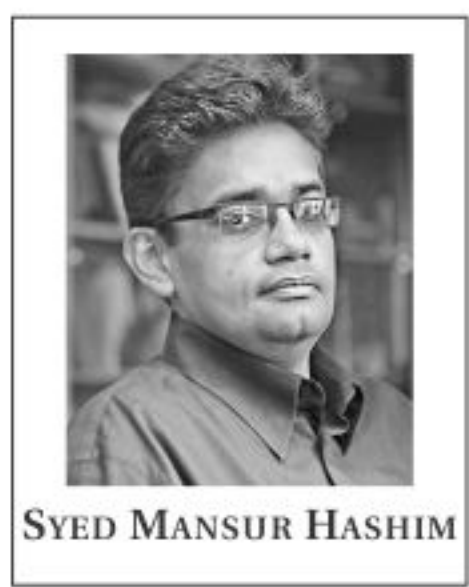
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat reach a "land for peace" agreement.

2002

Moscow Theatre Siege begins: Chechen terrorists seize the House of Culture theater in Moscow and take approximately 700 theatergoers hostage.

COMBATING FOOD ADULTERATION

Address regulatory and infrastructure issues



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

NOT intending to sound too dramatic, but judging from what the Saudi authorities have told their counterparts here in Bangladesh, it appears that our agro-exports to that country could be facing a ban in the near future. From what has been reported in the press, the Saudi authorities have found evidence of banned chemicals in Bangladeshi agro products. The King Faisal Specialists Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh conducted tests on a shipment of betel leaves and found evidence of "Iprodione at the level of 5,986" that is considered to be too high for human consumption.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the main destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers. With an estimated population of some 2 million Bangladeshis living in the country, there exists a substantial market for Bangladeshi fruits, vegetable, fish and other edibles. But due to recurrent instances of finding substances that are harmful to human health in our products, Saudi authorities have incrementally been cutting off import of foodstuffs from the country. Today, the annual export market stands at an estimated \$136 million annually. Indeed, according to Export Promotion Bureau statistics of JulySeptember 2012, Bangladesh exported items worth \$42.7 million to KSA. What is interesting to note here is that the shipment that tested positive of containing an unacceptable level of banned substance had all requisite

clearance from Bangladesh side. It was cleared for shipment by the Department of Agriculture Extension.

This incident brings us to the question of precisely what the government regulatory body responsible for adhering to international food standards is doing. Should the KSA decide to slap a ban on Bangladeshi agro products, other important destinations like the UAE, USA and UK could follow suit. Given that all these countries are serious about what quality of food ends up on their food shelves and the fact that we are looking at hundreds of millions of dollars of earnings per annum, something needs to be done at our end.

No amount of sensitisation is going to work with farmers who need to preserve their crop from point of production to ultimate sale. For a safe and healthy food chain to prevail problems associated with storage and transportation must be resolved.

Inefficiency and ignorance coupled with corruption make a dangerous recipe for disaster.

However, this isn't merely an issue of the regulator failing to discharge its duties responsibly. The issue of adulteration has become systemic in nature. Without having sufficient knowledge on what chemical is food grade and which is not, the application of harmful substances make their way into the food chain resulting in multifarious health complications affecting different age groups. As stated in a recent article in the *Financial Express*: "It is widely

believed that more and more people are becoming victims of many little known and incurable diseases because of the extensive and uncontrolled use of chemical fertilisers, harmful pesticides and preservatives. Farmers of developed countries also use chemical agents to increase farm production and contain plant diseases." Farmers apply whatever chemicals, at times industrial grade, in the hope of getting two things: a better yield; and second, in post-production stage, keeping produce fresh enough to make it to the markets.

Overcoming infrastructure woes is one that entails direct government intervention. Yet there is little evidence

of any government drive to address the lack of infrastructure, i.e. proper storage facilities to mitigate this problem. Inadequate storage facilities coupled with poor transportation automatically translates into fresh products with limited shelf life for agro-products. This means fruits; vegetables, meat and fish go to waste in hot climates due to a lack of transportation, proper storage, adequate cooling and timely access to markets. The government has the financial resources to come up with necessary investments to improve transportation scenario. Only then can we expect private sector stepping to make

available requisite storage facilities.

Addressing existing infrastructure bottlenecks, such as poor road access is a mid to long-term affair. There is however, another piece of infrastructure that is already in place and which has the potential to move goods, particularly perishable ones faster than by road. This of course is railway. Unfortunately, this service has remained neglected over the decades. Ironically, successive governments deliberately chose to let the railway network fall into disrepair opting instead for movement of bulk goods by road -- a move that has not paid dividends for end users. The facts speak for themselves. Tk.42.47 billion in subsidies over a ten-year period from 2001 2010 has not borne dividends and merely resulted in a service that is notorious for failing to keep time on any given day of the week. And although the present government undertook steps -- 31 railway projects approved, more than half of which are yet to takeoff as of September end, we are looking at the lost opportunity to move bulk amount of goods over great distances, in the shortest possible timeframes. There are no tailbacks on a railway track.

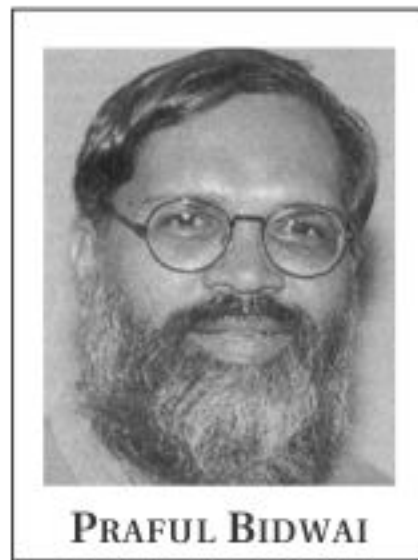
Blaming producers for breaking the law is not going to cut ice anymore. No amount of sensitisation is going to work with farmers who need to preserve their crop from point of production to ultimate sale. For a safe and healthy food chain to prevail problems associated with storage and transportation must be resolved. Otherwise, we can safely look forward to a toxic domestic food chain and end up losing our foreign markets for agro-products.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

NATIONAL INVESTMENT BOARD PROPOSAL

Subverting environmental regulation



PRAFUL BIDWAI

throttling development by putting obstacles against industrial, mining and infrastructure projects. The campaign, backed by Big Business, accuses the MoEF of imposing a new "licence-permit raj" and throwing a "green noose" around industry's neck.

This feeds into the efforts by the Prime Minister's Office and the finance ministry to create an all-powerful National Investment Board, a one-stop fast-track clearance window for projects worth Rs.1,000 crores-plus -- regardless of their impact on land, air, water, forests, and vulnerable tribal communities.

Such mindless approvals will gravely threaten South Asia's irreplaceable and invaluable environmental resources. India has already lost half its prime forests and much biodiversity, besides suffering extensive air and water pollution, which has devastated urban life, turned rivers into sewers, and poisoned groundwater.

The NIB will accelerate this. It will use its extraordinary authority to supersede individual ministries and bypass environmental impact procedures and ensure that projects conform to the Environment Protection Act, Forest Conservation Act, Wildlife Protection Act and Forest Rights Act.

The NIB will thus undermine basic tenets of democratic governance: transparency, rule of law, public participation, equity and justice. It'll place private profit above environmental protection to boost "investor confidence."

The NIB's origins lie in pressure from the corporate sector which stridently complains of regulatory delays. As we see, the complaints lack substance; if anything, the MoEF has been clearing too many projects with-

out scrutiny.

The NIB doesn't even contemplate giving a hearing to citizens who may be aggrieved by projects. As MoEF Minister Jayanthi Natarajan writes in her unusually forthright letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the NIB will "be used for the benefit only of large investors ... This concept is unacceptable. The NIB has no constitutional authority to decide on the failure of any minister...[or] assume

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his/her authority." Nor will it have "the competence to do so."

Tribal affairs Minister Kishore Chandra Deo also opposes the NIB, and says no environment clearance should be given to any project without total compliance with the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA).

Under the FRA, passed in 2006, but greatly delayed in implementation, *gram sabhas* (village councils) must approve diversion of forest land to other uses. PESA provides for tribal self-rule and control over land.

The NIB is only the latest of recent measures to dilute and bypass environmental regulations. Take three other examples. First, the government is loath to create an independent regulatory/judicial forum. In 2010, it set up the National Green Tribunal to hear environmental cases.

The NGT has passed good judgments, as in the POSCO case, wrongly cleared by the MoEF. It has also criticised official decision-making. The government is trying has tried to disable the NGT deviously -- by not appointing judges and by denying them offices and accommodation. In disgust, six judges have resigned, weakening the Tribunal's effectiveness.

Second, the government has altered

the composition of three statutory bodies, the Forest Advisory Committee, the Environmental Advisory Committee and the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL). For instance, non-official members of the FAC-- Mahesh Rangarajan, Amita Baviskar and Ullas Karanth, all distinguished scholars -- were replaced by blatantly pro-industry persons, including a mining business representative.

Similarly, several well-known NBWL

2011, the MoEF cleared all but 19 of the 1,689 projects submitted -- an approval rate of 98.9%!

The MoEF website proudly displays 1,800 rejections of forest clearance applications since 1981. But most of these took place before Jairam Ramesh became environment minister. Only 8% happened post-2009.

Over the past three years, the government has loosened Coastal Regulatory Zone rules to permit all kinds of high-impact projects, including power stations, roads on stilts and housing estates, destroying mangroves and marine ecosystems which protect against cyclones.

EIA norms have been relaxed; mandatory public hearings have been made discretionary. EIA reports aren't written by independent experts, but consultants hired by project promoters. These are typically incomplete and full of contradictions. A consultants' industry has mushroomed, which often recycles reports by changing the project name.

Although multiple projects, say dams, are planned on the same river, they are approved individually; the cumulative impact is never considered. Most are approved without field visits, with pious faith in the promoter's neutrality, rather than realistically seeing him as an interested party.

As Mr Ramesh confessed, in the past decade: "We must have approved about 7,000 projects...., each [with] conditions and safeguards.... But unfortunately, we do not have a system of monitoring compliance...." through periodic inspections.

FAC non-official members pointed out 10 different flaws in its working, lack of diligent first-stage scrutiny, absence of on-site impact studies, opacity in disclosure of meeting agendas, and lack of penalties for false reporting. No action was taken on these.

We need to breathe fresh life into the MoEF through public accountability and effectiveness. The NIB will kill it altogether.

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