

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



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LIKE tsunami, rushing floodwater and fire take their own levels -- unstoppably -- so does money find its expression in one form or the other. Illegal money cannot be simply hidden, it's bound to surface today or tomorrow. Only that there is no omnipotent watchdog save the eyes from the heavens to see the unseeable.

The greed for money stems from a belief in the trick "not to live off the interest on one's capital, but off the interest on interest (Alan Clark)."

"Are we to believe, death is the most convenient time to tax rich people?" -- wondered no less a person than British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

Earnings not consistent with declared or known sources of income would surface one way or the other through apartments or real estate holdings and all the rest. Nobody who is somebody is ever held to account or made to face the force of law for illegal money and its physical manifestations.

We are not grudging genuine wealth creation; it is about toxic money the West has learnt at great pains to dread.

Black money far exceeding white money operates in an underworld economy parallel to the formal upfront economy. The holders of such money are not required to disclose sources of how they had amassed it as an incentive for disclosure. Nowhere in the financial world have black money holders been so rewarded as honest taxpayers gritted their teeth in exasperation.

To top all this up, graft buys security, immunity to prosecution and even acquittals from charges if made.

How can government officials having had decent upbringing and given their life-long savings, let alone their monthly salaries which did not allow for a cushy lifestyle, suddenly become owners of apartments or acquire real estate interests at home and abroad? So many may have explanations but most others don't. How many are rich from inherited wealth? Even petty employees these days make sensational rag to riches stories.

MPs, ministers, advisers and state ministers mostly come from a solvent background and spent in huge

White as lily, who?

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electoral costs, so they have an appetite to make it to a lifetime achievement in wealth acquisition. They don't care if it is a posthumous honorific. Their progeny either squander or utilise what is bequeathed to them.

Every government here has reneged on the standard practice followed in any elected democracy requiring holders of public office to declare their assets on assumption of a position and then keep doing this year after year until the end of the tenure. That is how the finances of public functionaries are accounted for in a democratic order. For this is key to transparency and accountability of governance.

A central bank governor wondered aloud: granted a massive flight of capital occurred centered on the SEC scam induced money. Taka had to be converted into pound sterling and dollar to be transferred into foreign accounts. But the question is, what happened to the original Taka counterpart which must have remained within the country?

Thus, most illegal transactions are traceable provided there is a will to go after the offenders. This is true about SEC scam as it is about Hall-Mark, Sonali Bank, Destiny 2000 related plunders of public money.

It's about time for a shrill cry to go out to the four corners of the world. Developing countries are

about to drink from the cup of hemlock, a metaphor for financial poisoning their economies are being prey to.

A report of the Washington-based Global Financial Integrity (GFI) reveals \$14.059 billion has been siphoned off from Bangladesh in ten years since 2001. The annual figure averaged at more than \$1 billion. Interestingly and eloquently too, the highest amount of more than \$2 billion had been coughed up -- out of the country, in 2006-'07. It is tell-tale that illegal money transfers tapered off in the following two years only to peak in 2010.

Mis-invoicing accounted for 80% of cumulative illegal outflows from the developing countries. Quite clearly over-invoicing of import and under-invoicing of export are rampant in Bangladesh. We are heavily dependent on import-export trade regimes and, therefore, vulnerable to such illegal transactions. It is an open secret that collusion between the buyers and the suppliers leads to stashing away of huge sums of money in foreign accounts.

The advanced world demands fair trading practices from others and smears the faces of developing countries with poor compliance records. But crucially it falls short of sharing vital information in good time that

would have been very helpful for timely preemptive action. Only recently, it has been revealed in a Wal-Mart reaction to the Tarzeen fire that the retail chain did not "play by the book."

In another instance, International Labour Rights Forum conducted factory audits but they did not bother to share their vital findings with apparel manufacturing companies in the exporting countries.

Obviously, a double standard is at play. Transnational companies, big brands and retail houses cry hoarse on our compliance status, pussyfooting about the indulgence they give to our traders. They are clearly accomplice in funneling what is people's money away into the safe tax havens like Switzerland, Singapore, Dubai, the Seychelles to name only the obvious few.

What are the so-called financial integrity institutions doing except to play the paper giant whistleblower? The wealth of Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Gaddafi, Equatorial Guinea's take-all President Mbasso and Marcos and Mobutu all came to be known only after their downfalls. In fact, extractive regimes have been supported by the world powers that be in exchange for arms deal, contracts and other favours, some political, others diplomatic.

The flight of capital benefits the advanced world while it drains out economies in the developing countries.

The GFIs revelation is based on "conservative estimation;" for we believe what has been disclosed is just a tip of the iceberg. We think, the research and advocacy group's responsibility does not end by making startling revelations. Unless it uses its influence on the advanced countries and effectively too, there is no way the developing countries can free themselves of the capital outflow menace.

The GFI, as we understand it, has a regulatory mechanism. Besides, it has a task force to secure prosecution against financial wrongdoing.

To add to its efforts, a global coalition of civil society organisations and governments has been working to address inequalities in the financial system that penalise billions of people. Are we in it?

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AL Council, RPO and citizen's expectations

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BANGLADESH Awami League (AL) will hold its 19th National Council (NC) on December 29. The last NC was held on July 24, 2009. Since the birth of AL on June 23, 1949, the party had regular councils till 1974. There were two gaps -- one was a 6-year gap between the NCs of 1957 and 1964 and again a 4-year gap between 1974 and 1978. Sheikh Hasina was made the party president in her absence in the 1981 NC. During 1981-2009, AL had eight NCs with 5-7 years gap between each NC, except in 2002. In 2002, AL had two councils -- one was a special council and one was a regular one.

After revision of the Representation of People Order (RPO) in 2008, registered parties have to hold their NCs at intervals mentioned in their constitutions. Article 90B(b)(i) of the RPO says that registered parties have "to elect the members of the committees at all levels, including members of the central committee." According to AL Constitution, the NC is responsible for electing the members of AL Executive Committee -- which includes president, general secretary, and 13 members of the Presidium -- departmental secretaries and treasurer. In line with the RPO, the party constitution guarantees that the office bearers of the party "shall be elected to their respective posts by the triennial council from among the councilors."

Although RPO does not have any definition of "election" in relation to election within political parties, it is understood as a "process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organisation or group by vote of its qualified members." Now, what happened in the last NC of AL? Was there any election according to this definition? The party formed an Election Commission (EC) consisting of two AL leaders -- Advocate Rahamat Ali and Sardar Amjad Hossain. The EC "was ready to hold election" and "translucent ballot boxes were ready for this," but as there was no candidate for the post of president and general secretary, no election was held (*The Daily Star*, July 25, 2009).

Moreover, the council bestowed the president and general secretary with the authority to choose leaders for 45 posts in the 73-member central working committee, although the party constitution empowers the president to choose remaining 26 members of the working committee. The council also empowered the president and general secretary to choose 13 members of the party Presidium, 31 departmental secretaries including three joint general secretaries and seven organising secretaries, and a treasurer.

Now the question is why is there no election in AL? Isn't there any competent leader except Sheikh Hasina in AL who can compete for the post of president? Is nobody fit for the post of general secretary, joint secretaries or other departmental secretaries and treasurer? We are sure there are many leaders in the

oldest and biggest party qualified for each position. Then why are these leaders not becoming candidates? Has AL conducted any study or survey to understand the reasons? We think the AL should find the answer of this question for the benefit of the country, for the benefit of the party and democracy.

Traditionally, before holding an NC, AL arranges councils at the grass-root levels and the district and metropolitan leaders are invited to the NC as councilors. But has the party held councils at all of its district and metropolitan levels? If not, then it is a clear violation of RPO condition.

I have some dreams about the next NC of AL. The first one is that AL forms a third party EC to hold elections in the NC. The EC declares election schedule for all the posts of the Executive Committee. Multiple nominations are submitted by the leaders against each of the posts. There are campaigns within the party. The EC arranges elections and councilors cast their votes through secret ballots. EC declares the results and the leaders are elected.

The second dream is that AL invites relevant CSOs and NGOs to observe its election. After the election, the observers publish their observation reports and people become aware about the democracy practiced within the party. My third dream is that AL invites Khaleda Zia, the leader of BNP, to the inaugural session of its NC as special guest, and Khaleda delivers a speech which inspires the AL councilors and leaders and the people of the country. My fourth dream is AL elects a general secretary who is not a minister, which was once a practice in AL.

Democracy is a matter of tradition, culture and practice of certain things. If there is no democracy within the parties, it is just impossible to ensure democracy and governance in state affairs. Whatever the RPO says, if parties do not follow the legal provisions can Bangladesh Election Commission do anything? During the last four years many parties violated the RPO conditions many times. Has Bangladesh Election Commission cancelled the registration of any party?

AL claims that it is a democratic party. Moreover, the present general secretary, during inauguration of membership collection programme in Sylhet, declared that "in future the central leadership of the party will be elected, not by the votes of the councilors, but by the votes of the grass-root leaders." He also said that the party started "membership collection programme in order to elect leadership through voting by the 2 crore leaders and activists of AL in the next council" (*Prothom Alo*, April 11, 2010). Can I expect, from the biggest and oldest party of the country, that my dreams will become reality? I think my expectation is not just my expectation, it is the expectation of the people of the country.

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Conflict transformation and peace building for emerging South Asian leaders

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IT was a great pleasure to participate in the programme titled "CONTACT South Asia Training and Peacebuilding Education for Saarc Emerging Leaders - 2012," arranged by School of International Training (SIT) Graduate Institute of the United States of America. The programme was held at Budhanilkantha in Nepal from December 5 to 16, 2012.

It was the fourth such programme arranged by the CONTACT South Asia authority, and was headed by Dr. Paula Green from the USA. Participants from more than 15 countries, including the US, New Zealand, Japan, Northern Ireland, India, Finland, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet (China), Myanmar, Maldives, Sierra Leone, took part.

The programme was set to achieve a cross-cultural but common understanding as well as to devise a strategy for ensuring sustainable peace in South Asia. To achieve the goal, the programme authority invited people not only from cross-cultural but also from cross-professional backgrounds, such as researchers, journalists, lawyers, university professors, NGO activities, governmental officials, students and the other practitioners from fields related to peacebuilding and conflict transformation activities.

As a researcher from Bangladesh, I got the full scholarship jointly from the American Cultural Center in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the US Department of State to participate in the programme.

The entire programme was designed to make the participants skilled on both the theoretical as well as practical aspects of conflict transformation and peacebuilding from South Asian perspective. The Leadership Programme was a combination of four workshops consisting of conceptual and theoretical understanding of the discourses of conflict transformation and peace building; conflict transformation and development; and the role of social media on conflict transformation and peace building in the South Asia region.

The workshops consisted of understanding the different models and theories of peacebuilding and conflict transformation; cross-cultural strategy making for problems in South Asia; presenting the problems and their solutions; making and presenting dramas on the issues, and so on. Apart from these, cultural presentations by the participants from the different countries and field trips to some historic and heritage sites of Nepal were also included in the schedule.

The first workshop started with the conceptual understanding of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Dr. Paula Green said that the term CONTACT stood for (1) existence of connection among the parties, either cooperative or conflicting, and (2) Conflict Transformation Across Cultures. Whatever meaning we choose, the goals remain same, which is bridging connections among different cultures to ensure peace.

Dr. Kevin Clements from New Zealand and Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath from India presented a number of models on understanding conflict and peacebuilding strategies, including the Iceberg Model, Structures of

Conflict Model, Basic Needs Model, and so on. Participants were also assigned in groups to identify the top five problems of their own countries as well as to explain those problems in the light of different theoretical tools. Along with these, practical case studies on the key problems in the region were discussed in detail.

Some of these case studies encompassed the militancy problem in Pakistan and Afghanistan border, Kashmir conflict, Northeast Indian conflict, caste system in India, water crisis in the South Asia region, insurgency in Sri Lanka, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Tibet independence movement, and so on. Cross cultural dialogues on different conflicting issues were arranged to grasp and understand the present scenario of the conflicts and their potential solutions. A number of documentaries were also presented on these case studies in the programme.

Dr. Tatsushi Arai from Japan and Brendan McAllister from Northern Ireland also trained the participants on the issues regarding conflict transformation, mediation and development. Through analysing a number of models and case studies, they attempted to make the participants well informed about a number of basic perspectives of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

These include: (1) understanding the conflicting parties and their interests in the conflict, (2) understanding the multilevel causes and assumptions regarding the conflict, (3) understanding the structural or root cause of the conflict, (4) coming up with alternative strategies to resolve the conflict with minimum resources, (5) understanding how to bring about a win-win situation between or among the parties to eliminate future reemergence of the conflict, (6) understanding the importance of non-violent strategies within the conflict transformation process and its implications, and (7) formulating effective strategies in the post-conflict situation to prevent any future possibilities of the rise of other conflicts.

Abraha Hassan, a journalist and documentary maker from Pakistan, also conducted a workshop on the role of social media in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in South Asia. He cited some practical examples from the Arab Spring and linked these with the application and careful use of social media within conflict transformation in the age of globalisation.

In the last part of the programme, participants from various countries presented dramas and took part in cross-cultural discussions on their approaches to apply the acquired knowledge in their own communities to resolve conflict and ensure peace.

Therefore, throughout the programme, not only did the different issues and problems emerge, but the participants also came up with solutions and their alternatives to resolve conflict issues in their own as well as other countries in the region. The programme has surely made an outstanding contribution towards make emerging South Asian leaders aware of regional conflict-transformation and peacebuilding issues.

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