

Why burn bridges?

Let good sense prevail

WE are taken aback by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's telling secretaries that the general election would be held within 90 days of present Jatiya Sangsad (JS)'s tenure keeping the JS and cabinet intact. With this announcement the PM has, in effect slammed shut all doors to a consensus with the opposition on a poll-time interim government.

It's worthwhile to note that recently she told the nation that parliament would be dissolved before the JS election.

One also wonders what has happened to her offer inviting the opposition BNP to place a proposal in the forthcoming JS session on an interim election-time government.

What has driven the PM, also the president of the Awami League, to take this unilateral and rigid stance on the next JS election?

To all appearances, the PM is being true to her recent public utterances on holding the next JS election the way it is done in advanced democracies. But she could not have failed to note that unlike here no ambience of mutual distrust exists in those democracies necessitating an interim, non-party poll-time government there.

In truth, has our democracy evolved into an advanced state with its institutional underpinnings as in those countries? So the need for a non-party caretaker government to oversee elections as has been in practice since 1991 could not have become redundant.

We think we echo the general sentiments about a negotiated mechanism to ensure a credible and broad based election in which all parties will participate.

We still hope good sense will prevail and the government won't burn all the bridges.

Labour unrest brewing

Reach consensus on RMG wages

THE Wage Board has failed to come to a decision on monthly salaries for garment workers during its panel meeting on September 2. Apparently, RMG owners' representatives are yet to submit their proposal to the Wage Board. In fact, the sector representatives have asked for a further two weeks to deliberate before submitting their proposal. The last meeting of the Wage Board saw workers' representatives recommending a minimum wage of Tk8,114 as monthly salary (excluding benefits).

The renewed delay in coming up with a proposal from garments manufacturers spawned fear of fresh labour unrest in the sector. Things have been anything but calm in the RMG arena since the Rana Plaza incident that killed more than 1,100 workers. According to Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Export Association (BGMEA), the body intends to hold two separate extra-ordinary general meetings to get opinion of companies based in Chittagong and Dhaka. Following this the body intends to sit on September 17 to come to a unified decision.

The fear of workers at this juncture is that BGMEA may be playing a delaying tactic with the hope of pushing the new salary scale beyond the next Eid festivity. With tempers running high after a series of high-profile disasters, another major labour unrest will not be to anyone's benefit. With the RMG sector earning an approximate US\$26billion in export earnings, employing three million people, any disruption will cost the economy heavily. It is more imperative than ever for the government to step in now to help close the deal sooner rather than later.

Falling rupee: Causes and perks

FAARIA TASIN

THE story of the free falling Indian rupee has surely caught our eye. Many on the other side of the border are concerned about the adverse effects this will have on the Indian economy, but should we be worried at all?

There are quite a few reasons for the depreciation of the rupee against the US dollar, a few of which will be discussed. According to the elementary law of economics, if the demand for US dollars in India exceeds its supply, then the dollar's worth will go up and that of the Indian rupee will come down in that respect.

The outlook of the US economy is better and is anticipating a good degree of growth, and the Federal Reserve has hinted that it may end its fiscal stimulus--implying that the dollar supply will decrease. In the short term this can lead to the dollar becoming stronger than other currencies, including the Indian rupee.

Crude oil is quoted and purchased in dollars. When the price of crude oil rises, more dollars are demanded which appreciates the dollar against the rupee, leading the rupee to lose its value.

The volatility of the equity market in India may urge many foreign institutional investors to take money, i.e. US dollars, out of the country, leading to a fall in dollar supply. This can again lead to a fall in the value of the Indian rupee against the US dollar.

Now, depreciation of a currency can also have its perks. Indian's exports can rise. However, this may not be possible in the face of inflation in the Indian economy. Inflation will increase the price of raw materials and diminish the competitive gains from depreciation.

Similarly, we can also think that 'Made in India' products can now flood the Bangladesh market since the cost of rupee in terms of taka has fallen. However, if inflation rises, we cannot really reap the benefits of the falling rupee. Bangladeshi exports to India can move either way; exports can decline as India may buy less of Bangladeshi products since importing is more expensive now. Inflation in both countries should also be taken into account. Bangladesh's exports to India can also rise; if inflation rate is high in India, then Bangladeshi products can be relatively cheaper and it can still pay off to import from Bangladesh. If inflation rate is close in both countries then Bangladesh is likely to take advantage of the falling rupee and import more from India, at least in the short-run.

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Sheikh Hasina's legacy

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

explosions of August 2004.

As prime minister, Sheikh Hasina lives through times that are a reminder of the troubles which assailed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the final year of his governance. In the end, Bangabandhu's enemies, ranged in the country as also outside it, felled him in a macabre moment in history. In the recent past, the severity of hate and criticism hurled at Sheikh Hasina are a sign of the kind of calamity that could yet befall her if her security goes lax or if she makes a terribly bad move in her exercise of power. There are evil portents in the wind. The air is thick with intimations of ugliness.

Why does Sheikh Hasina matter so much in Bangladesh? Yes, she has made mistakes. Yes, she has done and said things she should not have. Even so, her place in history will be determined by all the positivism which has emanated from her administration. Whether you like it or not, she will leave a powerful legacy behind, the essence of which is that it was she who restored the legal and moral fabric of the nation's politics. It is disturbing when you remember that between 1975 and 1996 and then between 2001 and 2006, the state simply lost its way -- because the ruling classes cheerfully ignored both law and morality in their pursuit of power.

When you reflect on such sordid truths, it becomes easier to understand better the Hasina legacy. Observe:

Sheikh Hasina was the first politician in the land to let the nation know that the notorious Indemnity Ordinance, issued by the Moshataque cabal and sanctified as part of the constitution by the Zia regime, would go. Her party did away with it in parliament. That was part of our shame being erased from our lives. And we were glad that Sheikh Hasina swept that darkness away.

Where it ought to have been the responsibility of the governments which held power after November 1975 to bring the killers of Bangabandhu and his family to justice, it remained for Sheikh Hasina to have the wheels of justice turn and for the judiciary in her time to pass judgment on Bangabandhu's assassins. It is our undying shame that we needed, in an emasculated country, a daughter to pursue her father's killers and have them walk the gallows. But where everyone else had failed, or was not bothered,

Sheikh Hasina lives in perpetual danger, in that literal sense of the meaning. There are too many wolves out there baying for her blood. While her supporters run into the millions, there is little question that her enemies are legion and are forever working away to dispatch her to kingdom come. She survived an attempt on her life in Chittagong in the times of General Ershad. In the era of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, she missed death when many around her fell in the grenade

It is the bigger picture, though, that matters. That picture is what will stamp Sheikh Hasina's legacy on the history of this Bengali republic. She will be remembered for letting shards of light into what had been a widening circle of darkness for the people of this land.

Hasina did it. It is that legacy of a restoration of the rule of law that assures her a place in history.

The task before Sheikh Hasina's governments, both in 1996 and 2009, was fundamentally to clear the country of the refuse and filth that had been strewn all over the place for years by those who benefited directly from Bangabandhu's assassination. The re-ordering of investigations into the November 1975 killings of four Mujibnagar government leaders is part of that clean-up programme. Where the nation's military rulers and their rightwing followers sought to undermine history through their long, vicious stranglehold on power, Sheikh Hasina went for sweeping action in tackling the forces of counter-revolution head-on.

One other area where the Hasina legacy promises to leave a lasting imprint is in her government's bold move to bring the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army to trial. No one believed that these collaborators could ever be tried in Bangladesh, just as no one had ever imagined that Bangabandhu's murderers would ever face justice. That Sheikh Hasina has now compelled the friends of Yahya Khan and Tikka Khan and, lately, of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, into experiencing their comeuppance lifts a burden from the conscience of the nation. Political classes in future will think twice before soliciting the support of the 1971 quislings, or of any other collaborators of any other sinister forces, in a furtherance of their political agenda.

Through initiating transparent legal proceedings in the matter of the ten-truck arms haul case and the August 2004 grenade explosions case, the Awami League government has let it be known that state-sponsored criminality is not on, that those who have indulged in such criminality have left constitutional politics grievously wounded, that they must pay for their crime. Such purposeful action toward a restoration of decency is part of the legacy Sheikh Hasina will leave behind on the nation's body-politic.

The government's tough action against the Hefajat-Islam has been proof of the determination of the state to handle unbridled nonsense with the firmness it calls for. In an environment where appeasement of religious fanaticism has become the norm, Sheikh Hasina and her government have done what a modern state would have done in a similar condition. They have let it be known that the state cannot be held hostage to obscurantism.

Sheikh Hasina has presided over a happy state of agriculture in the country. Education has been taking up increasingly wider spaces. Money siphoned off abroad by corrupt elements has been identified and brought back home. Bangladesh is no more a base for terrorists aiming to undermine other countries.

The country is certainly not a symbol of perfection. The government is surely not one that fulfills our everyday needs. It is the bigger picture, though, that matters. That picture is what will stamp Sheikh Hasina's legacy on the history of this Bengali republic. She will be remembered for letting shards of light into what had been a widening circle of darkness for the people of this land.

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Still caught between cliché and spasm

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

partial success.

Neither the Congress nor the BJP prescription is sustainable, but in the short run Congress gains from cynicism have been so spectacular that it has stopped thinking outside its established clichés. The BJP thinks in spasms, if it thinks at all.

Congress

squeezed into space created by the psychological bounce of a traumatic history. After dramatic initial resistance to British colonialism, Muslim elites bought into separatism with a vengeance, particularly when they realised that the tactics of division could perpetuate their privileges within a slice of geography. Battered by defeat in the battle for Pakistan, Congress capitulated intellectually and tweaked the slogan, after 1947, from division to isolation. It concluded that the quickest route to the Muslim vote was through accommodation with the extreme rather than dialogue with the broad Muslim centre. In the 1940s partition became the fashionable ideology of the landed gentry and middle class in north India. When they left for Pakistan the vacancy was filled by suddenly empowered clerics who, unsurprisingly, stressed faith over economics.

This kept both clerics and community poor, but the atmospherics were rich in tokenism. A normal relationship with Muslim voters would have kept the balance of debate along jobs and revival. This bargain with the extreme suited Congress perfectly. There were not too many jobs on offer in the first phase of our development. The upper castes got the chunk of the initial bite; the second surge went to 'Backward Castes' who had mobilised under different banners but displayed common economic purpose. The Muslims got false promises and high drama, hyped with high-voltage simulation of a "Hindu backlash." Such a backlash never came because it never existed. But fear was the electoral key: if Muslims could be driven into a polling booth on the basis of fear, why waste jobs on them?

THE Congress formula for Indian Muslims is rooted in colonial legacy: divide and rule. The BJP approach has been shaped by rage at partition: avoid and rule. All Muslims want from both claimants to national power is provide and rule; not because they are Muslims but because they are largely poor.

Poverty was the prevailing story when India became independent. It cut across other fault lines: there was a morbid equality of poverty. More than six decades of uneven growth later, we have the inequality of

In the absence of economic security, Muslims were fobbed off with security of faith. This was essentially meaningless, as it is the Constitution which guarantees religious freedom, not any political party. The narrative of violence was edited as required: Gujarat's riots continue their refrain, but Assam, where the violence drove hundreds of thousands of Muslims into near-permanent refugee camps, is excised from attention; and the horrors of Mumbai in 1993 erased from memory despite the fact that no action has been taken on the subsequent enquiry committee report.

BJP and Muslims lived on the same street, but walked on opposite pavements without a zebra crossing. They did not speak the same language. Attempts at conciliation, let alone reconciliation, were rare. The BJP had little to say, and Muslims did not want to hear that little. Even when the BJP's liberal icon Atal Behari Vajpayee tried to reach out when he contested from Lucknow, he was spurned. There is little point discussing whether Muslims will vote for the BJP if Narendra Modi is named its candidate for prime minister. Will they vote for BJP if he is not?

Every election registers some flicker of change on the barometer. In the Congress case, the chicken came before the egg and produced a harmful of votes. With the BJP, the egg must come before the chicken. This egg has to be fertilised in the mind. In this important therefore that the most significant statement of the campaign so far was Narendra Modi's remark that the only religion of a politician must be the Constitution of India. This may be only the opening line of a chapter yet to be written, but it is already a huge variant on conventional perception. The themes of that chapter must be employment, education and political equity, for they are the true antidote to any community's impoverishment.

Onions, like the Constitution of India, have no religion either. It is bizarre to believe that an impoverished people will continue to support, en masse, a catastrophic government that has taken food off their plate and looted the nation with a creativity that should win the highest awards. Over the last decade, particularly at the state level, Muslim voters have displayed sophisticated tactical finesse: note the Assembly results in UP, Bihar and Bengal. They want jobs, and a better life.

The most efficient form of economic growth comes when a country can maximise development across all its demographic segments. Everyone will not pull equally, but everyone must pull. Half of India is still underperforming. Raise its wealth and walk into high double digit growth. Economics is not complicated once the human being gets more attention than statistics.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
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Beating of war drums

As the UN arms experts investigate the alleged chemical weapon strike in Damascus, the US and its Western allies are seriously considering military intervention against the Syrian regime. Though the UN experts are yet to conclusively establish who used the chemical weapons, war drums in Washington are getting louder. One must remember that the US case of weapons of mass destruction against Iraq fell flat on its face. The regime change there, instead of bringing peace, has thrown the country into a vicious cycle of violence and turmoil that shows no signs of abating. Same is the case in Afghanistan, where the US, after years of conflict, is finding it hard to make a face-saving exit.

If the U.S. and allied forces go in on the ground to attack, the Russians are going to be very upset, and that could lead to a major war. The Russians and Chinese are especially upset at the U.S., but many other nations also consider the U.S. an arrogant big bully. Man's inhumanity to man shows again that mankind can't run its own affairs. Pray for the innocent who are suffering!

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Would she care as a sister?

Being the daughter of the father of the nation, PM Sheikh Hasina is the sister of the nation. We know that sisters are naturally very affectionate, caring and do not hesitate to make sacrifices for the welfare of their siblings.

Now the 16 crore people of the country who are her brothers and sisters are passing their days in fear, anxiety and hopelessness, not knowing what is awaiting them in the coming days. She can allay all the negative feelings and create a peaceful situation if she wants. We hope that she will use her power in a constructive way and save the country from being torn apart.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Bangladesh-India relations

Recently Mr. Mahfuz Anam's comment on bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh in a conference has drawn my attention. I think he echoed the fundamental rule of relationship among neighbouring countries. Since its inception in 1971, Bangladesh has not had any political intention to influence or intervene in other country's affairs. So any kind of development of Bangladesh will be helpful for restoring peace and stability in this region. I hope India will realise this.

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Senior Research Associate, BAU

Comments on news report, "Police won't be free of influence," published on September 2, 2013

Abul Kashem

Ruling party will not leave any loose pin or loophole to retain power.

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Is Bangladesh a democratic or an authoritarian state? It's so unfortunate to see how the politicians try to ensure that they act with impunity, keeping the police force by their side.

K Ashfaq

Please go ahead and make the police a more oppressive force.

Binodbangali

AL missed a momentous opportunity to modernise the police force of Bangladesh that is tainted with so many allegations.

Nazmul Haq

How can it be free? Every ruling entity requires these people to act at their will to punish the workers and activists of the opposition parties.

"Biman's remarkable recovery" (September 2, 2013)

Rick

Excellent! We need more professionals in these government-owned industries. Hopefully Biman will be a world-class carrier within a few years.

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

We mentioned time and again how Biman is being looted deliberately by a handful of greedy people, who are close to administration at all times. I am sure Kevin Steele must have felt the brunt of it and with his firmness he is overcoming it slowly. Biman introduced online ticketing, but I was always unsuccessful buying one. So, ghosts from the past are still there.

Dr. Syed Masud Husain

It is universally agreed that an able CEO can transform a dying enterprise into most vibrant organisation. Congratulations to Kevin Steele! Hope that he stays on.

Curry Cottage

This clearly shows how the country can move forward with a clear and planned vision without corruption.

Faisal

Such result under able hands of professional expert is not surprising. The rein of this country also needs to be given to experts.