

Failure to protect minorities

Errant agencies be held to account

HINDU families under attack and fleeing their homes in different districts before and after the January 5 election are in a state of panic. It is shocking that the outrage had taken place despite a substantial deployment of security forces in areas identified as potential flashpoints.

Who's largely to blame for this disastrous situation, if it's not the Election Commission (EC)? Being in charge, along with the proper conduct of the election, its overall responsibility was also to ensure security, especially, in the vulnerable areas.

We were told that the EC had identified different areas as vulnerable for special reasons and that it was adequately prepared to face any eventuality. But the attacks on Hindu families in some parts of the country do not in any way speak well for EC's preparedness, nor for its capacity to tackle emergency situations efficiently. And that makes the failure more poignant as we have a sad history of targeting minorities before and after elections.

Surprisingly, the local administration, too, failed badly as the law-enforcers made inordinate delay in responding to the victims' appeals for help. How will it explain this callousness?

The government also cannot shirk its responsibility for not moving quickly to restore confidence among the minorities. The incidents demand an immediate enquiry to identify both the culprits involved and why the agencies failed to respond promptly.

It is just not enough to institute cases against unknown persons. The culprits must also be ferreted out. We want action and immediately at that.

Cash crunch hurting business and consumers

Improvement difficult given present circumstances

THE banking sector as a whole is suffering from a severe cash crunch. This has become systemic with the deterioration in law and order over the last three months. Consumers have had to face the full brunt of being unable to avail cash through the thousands of automated teller machines (ATM) that almost all banks now operate in the city. With the advent of the "petrol bomb" phenomenon that has become synonymous with blockades and hartals, most of these ATMs remained empty of cash as banks fear for the safety of their cash-carrying vehicles.

Looking beyond the inability to draw cash for customers and small businesses, the seemingly endless hartals have effectively ground entire sectors. The highways have been blocked in many parts of the country with the police struggling to provide security for goods-laden trucks to ply with relative safety; the supply chain of various goods has broken down. No delivery equals to no sales, which in turn translates into no cash for producers, distributors and retailers. Is it any wonder that clients are defaulting on loan payments to banks? And it is not only the private sector that is taking a hit from this prolonged political stalemate.

The countrywide unrest has slowed down implementation of the government's annual development plan. With visuals of violent street clashes between protesters and the police flashing across the globe, foreign investors are slowly turning away from Bangladesh, which unfortunately is being branded as a country not worth doing business in.

What does blockade mean?

ABDUL MATIN

LOCKADES were imposed by the opposition last November. Having completed five rounds of blockades for a total of twenty days, a non-stop blockade was enforced on January 1 to derail the election of January 5. On January 4, a harta was superimposed on the blockade. The blockade and the harta have been continuing even after the election.

We are familiar with the term harta, but what does blockade mean? I looked into an online dictionary. It defines it as "an act or means of sealing off a place to prevent goods or people from entering or leaving." As a matter of fact, blockade, a military term, is used by one country against another during a war.

It may be recalled that during the War of Independence in 1971, Indian navy blockaded all Pakistani ships carrying supplies and reinforcements for the Pakistan army stationed in Bangladesh. The Indian air force similarly enforced an air blockade to stop Pakistani supplies by air. Without getting any supply or reinforcement, the Pakistan army was crippled and forced to surrender on December 16, 1971.

In 1982, Argentina occupied the Falkland Islands, a British territory in the South Atlantic, claiming sovereignty over the islands. The British navy and air force engaged the Argentine forces and blockaded all enemy ships entering the islands. The trapped Argentine forces were thus forced to surrender. In history, there are numerous examples of similar blockades by warring countries, but is there any example of a blockade imposed by a political party against fellow civilian countrymen?

The blockades have essentially disrupted the chain of supply of essential commodities, including food, to the people of Bangladesh, restricted their movements and disrupted their normal lives. Countless innocent lives were lost. The economy of the country has been badly affected. According to an economist, the losses to the economy so far amount to Taka one trillion (one lac crore). The education system has been ruined. The country has been bleeding.

This looks like a virtual war. The people are wondering who has declared the war, against whom and for what purpose? Who will be the victor or the vanquished in this war?

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
psc (Retd)

election by the BNP, the lead role being taken by Jamat-Shibir combine.

Targeting the minorities is disgusting but one wonders who deserves more contempt, the perpetrators or the administration and the law enforcing agencies who failed to respond adequately and in time and to the call of the victims. This abject failure admits of no excuse.

The election had many firsts worth reminding the good readers. Apart from 154 seats passing unelected and more than half the registered voters disenfranchised, a good number of them first time voters, this is perhaps the first time that the main opposition leader was virtually under house arrest since well before the January 5 election. It is difficult to accept the inane explanations on the status of Khaleda Zia by public figures forgetting that the people are not quite the fools that the politicians often take them to be. And it is for the first time that unwilling persons were made to contest as candidates and some of them even won.

As for the election, particularly the voter turnout, even the military dictator must be feeling ashamed seeing the way his mechanisms in political manipulations during the nine years of his regime and election distortions during the 1980 and 1988 polls have been replicated with even more unabashed abandon. Given the empty goalpost and barren field was it at all necessary to indulge in vote rigging, booth capture and stuffing of ballot boxes?

The EC has managed, after nearly 72 hours, to come out with a percentage which would need one to stretch one's imagination to the limit even to accept half the figure as true. But was the percentage a factor at all? What did it matter if the AL had notched up 70% of the votes? That would have given the AL a greater cause for self-satisfaction, which was plenty in evidence in the demeanour of the PM during her press briefing on Monday. But AL would still lack the approbation of the public and international community, if for nothing else than the fact that the election has done nothing to lay the ground for a quick and peaceful resolution of the very fundamental issue, i.e. a participatory and democratic election.

So much for the election which the Boat won but regrettably, for a party with a long political heritage and enviable pedigree, it is AL that has lost in public estimate.

So where do we go from here, or rather, where do the two parties take us from here? Let us consider the options open to the two.

The ball is in the AL's court and it is in the driving seat. The first round of battle has been won with the BNP in disarray. The master strategy of the AL, with a single-minded objective, to keep the BNP out of the election, has worked. And, to my mind, everything was done to ensure the BNP did not participate, including lumping together the political issue with the war crimes trial. War strategy suggests that the pursuit must be relentless till the enemy dissipates into nothingness as an entity if the war has to be won. But will the AL apply the coups de grâce?

Any green political leader overcome by smugness would surely go for the jugular. But what does political strategy counsel? It cannot be lost upon the AL strategists that in politics there are no last battles. And any attempt to end the BNP as a political party would create a void that might be filled up by forces whose character, capacity and capability one cannot guess enough. The cautionary note stems from the PM's allusion, during her press briefing, to the status of BNP after the new government is formed, that it would no longer be considered as the opposition.

Opposition or not, the AL cannot afford to keep the BNP out of its equation. And neither can the AL subdue a political party through coercive policies for any length of time. That will engender more violence whose character can take various forms. And since the AL cannot continue very long with a government that is the upshot of a questionable election, the best option for it is to engage the BNP without any preconditions. The BNP leaders, including Khaleda Zia, should be set free immediately. Here is a chance for Sheikh Hasina to graduate from a mere political leader to a statesman.

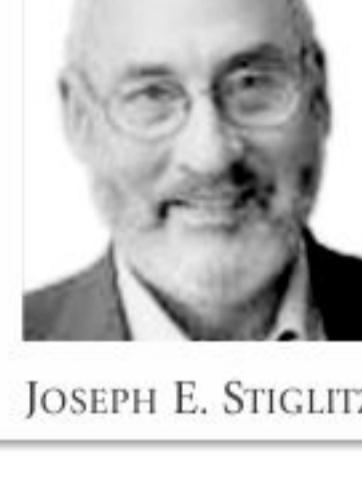
As for the BNP, it must admit that it has lost the first round. It has walked into the AL plan hook line and sinker. However, BNP must reconsider two very serious issues before the party can reset its strategy to combat AL. That its use of violence has been counterproductive and the party has lost lot of ground because of this. The victims have been the common man, and surely no political party that claims to represent the people can make them the deliberate targets of its violence, in which the Jamaat-Shibir has taken the lead. And that takes us to the moot question: Can the BNP be on the same boat with the Jamaat, rowing in different directions? And if it cannot jettison the Jamaat can BNP allow the destructive politics of Jamaat, which has no stake in the election, to continue. Jamaat has deliberately targeted the minorities with ulterior motives. BNP must make it clear whether it approves Jamaat tactic.

For BNP it must reformulate its strategy which must abjure violence, and distance itself from Jamaat, since both have proved to be deadweights for the party.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

Advanced malaise

BUSINESS & FINANCE



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

There are a few exceptions: After more than two decades,

Japan's economy appears to be turning a corner under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government; but, with a legacy of deflation stretching back to the 1990's, it will be a long road back. And Germany's real per capita GDP was higher in 2012 than it was in 2007 -- though an increase of 3.9% in five years is not much to boast about.

Elsewhere, though, things really are dismal: unemployment in the eurozone remains stubbornly high and the long-term unemployment rate in the US still far exceeds its pre-recession levels.

In Europe, growth appears set to return this year, though at a truly anemic rate, with the International Monetary Fund projecting a 1% annual increase in output. In fact, the IMF's forecasts have repeatedly proved overly optimistic: the Fund predicted 0.2% growth for the eurozone in 2013, compared to what is likely to be a 0.4% contraction; and it predicted US growth to reach 2.1%, whereas it now appears to have been closer to 1.6%.

With European leaders wedded to austerity and moving at a glacial pace to address the structural problems stemming from the eurozone's flawed institutional design, it is no wonder that the continent's prospects appear so bleak.

But, on the other side of the Atlantic, there is cause for muted optimism. Revised data for the US indicate that real GDP grew at an annual pace of 4.1% in the third quarter of 2013, while the unemployment rate finally reached 7% in November -- the lowest level in five years. A half-decade of low construction has largely worked off the excess building that occurred during the housing bubble. The development of vast reserves of shale energy has moved America toward its long-sought goal of energy independence and reduced gas prices to record lows, contributing to the first glimmer of a manufacturing revival. And a booming high-tech sector has become the envy of the rest of the world.

Most important, a modicum of sanity has been restored to the US political process. Automatic budget cuts -- which reduced 2013 growth by as much as 1.75 percentage points from what it otherwise would have been -- continue, but in a much milder form. Moreover, the cost curve for health care -- a main driver of long-term fiscal deficits -- has bent down. Already, the Congressional Budget Office projects that spending in 2020 for Medicare and Medicaid (the government health-care programmes for the elderly and the poor, respectively) will be roughly 15% below the level projected in 2010.

It is possible, even likely, that US growth in 2014 will be rapid enough to create more jobs than required for new entrants into the labour force. At the very least, the huge number (roughly 22 million) of those who want a full-time job and have been unable to find one should fall.

But we should curb our euphoria. A disproportionate share of the jobs now being created are low-paying -- so much so that median incomes (those in the middle) continue to decline. For most Americans, there is no recovery, with 95% of the gains going to the top 1%.

Even before the recession, American-style capitalism was not working for a large share of the population. The recession only made its rough edges more apparent. Median income (adjusted for inflation) is still lower than it was in 1989, almost a quarter-century ago; and median income for males is lower than it was four decades ago.

America's new problem is long-term unemployment, which affects nearly 40% of those without jobs, compounded by one of the poorest unemployment-insurance systems among advanced countries, with benefits normally expiring after 26 weeks. During downturns, the US Congress extends these benefits, recognizing that individuals are unemployed not because they are not looking for work, but because there are no jobs. But now congressional Republicans are refusing to adapt the unemployment system to this reality; as Congress went into recess for the holidays, it gave the long-term unemployed the equivalent of a pink slip: as 2014 begins, the roughly 1.3 million Americans who lost their unemployment benefits at the end of December have been left to their own devices. Happy New Year.

Meanwhile, a major reason that the US unemployment rate is currently as low as it is, is that so many people have dropped out of the labour force. Labour-force participation is at levels not seen in more than three decades. Some say that this largely reflects demographics: an increasing share of the working-age population is over 50, and labour-force participation has always been lower among this group than among younger cohorts.

But this simply recasts the problem: the US economy has never been good at retraining workers. American workers are treated like disposable commodities, tossed aside if and when they cannot keep up with changes in technology and the marketplace. The difference now is that these workers are no longer a small fraction of the population.

None of this is inevitable. It is the result of bad economic policy and even worse social policy, which waste the country's most valuable resource -- its human talent -- and cause immense suffering for affected individuals and their families. They want to work, but the US economic system is failing them.

So, with Europe's Great Malaise continuing in 2014 and the US recovery excluding all but those at the top, count me dismal. On both sides of the Atlantic, market economies are failing to deliver for most citizens. How long can this continue?

The writer, a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book is *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Poor standards of high GPA scorers

I had the opportunity to listen to the remark of the education minister Nurul Islam Nahid on the occasion of publishing the result of PSC public examination. When asked by journalists about the quality of education, he said the quality of education has not deteriorated.

One of my relatives, who has been working as an English teacher at a renowned school in Dhaka for a long time, said that many students who failed in four or five subjects in the pre-test exams, taken by the school, have got GPA-5 in the PSC examination.

One of my friends is working as a supervisor in an NGO and has to work with a good number of primary schools. Before the PSC examination, she said many students from various schools performed badly in Mathematics but all of them would pass in the PSC examination as they would be allowed to see each others' exam scripts in the examination hall.

Merina Hossain

Dhaka

What about looters inside the govt.?

Our honourable PM had always been vocal against the BNP-led 4-party alliance rule during 2001 to 2006 blaming their lawmakers for amassing wealth. But I have never heard her saying a word against her own pillaging lawmakers. All past wealth amassing records have been devastatingly broken by her party and her government.

This is why she is taking all legal or illegal measures to retain her government. So many common innocent general people are being killed on the streets, so many people are being injured, and so many arrests are being made.

I thank your esteemed daily for making all these information public. They should be brought to justice.

Iqbal Ali Khan

Dhaka

'Jonogon' the scapegoat

I find it difficult to understand the claim by many politicians that they talk on behalf of 'Jonogon'.

I would like to be educated as to who, on behalf of the 'Jonogon', gave them the mandate.

Mahbubur Rashid

On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Strongest majority vs weakest opposition," published on January 7, 2014

Abul Kashem

This is just continuation of 1975 era when one-party rule was imposed. More surprise may be on the card. Wait and see what's next!

Shahin Huq

These poodles have become MPs with Sheikh Hasina's approval, not with people's votes. Bangladesh is now run according to Sheikh Hasina's wishes, not according to people's wishes and aspirations.

Aasfisarwar

The strongest majority, the weakest opposition and the biggest insult to democracy are the hallmark of this election/selection caricature. The opposition must find some innovative program to associate mass people in their democracy restoration movement. As a start-up:

1)They can urge people to boycott Indian goods.

2)Increase diplomatic contacts with friendly countries.

4)Find all legal opportunity to challenge this election.

5)Start free Bangladesh campaign in different world capitals on regular basis.

6)Call the oath-taking ceremony day as democracy killing day.

Akhtar Shah

This is called democracy BD style! It's all about sums (majority) and they add up, who cares! We have lift off! We rule with an iron fist.

Ramur

Sitting outside Bangladesh it is very confusing. What was the great difficulty in holding election under the supervision of an Election Commission, like in India? It is hard to sympathize with the BNP because they are with the murderer Jamaat gangs. They killed Bangladeshi during civil war and they kill indiscriminately even now. I think next election should be held after all the Jamaat murderers are hanged.

Zman7

Strongest majority and weakest opposition is nothing but the "blessings and curses of democracy". Democracy or "democratic spirit" curses or punishes and politically "pauperizes" those weakest opposition who betray, bully and boycott democratic institutions (such as parliament and polls).

Jafar Iqbal

Sheikh Hasina made the