

Record high exports

Sustainability through positive politics key

THE country's export earnings soared by 23.22 per cent in December to chalk up US\$ 29.1 billion in 2013, the highest in the nation's history. What's especially noteworthy is that the export upswing was attained against stunning odds. Turbulent politics at home and dwindling image overseas of the principal export grosser, the garments sector regardless, exports notched up the record high. Garments sector remains a tower of strength; for, it alone grossed US\$ 23.5 billion compared to US\$ 25.1 billion in 2012.

It has shown resilience in the face of domestic odds compounded by image problems. The BGMEA and its constituents, financial institutions, Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) deserve our felicitations.

Two factors contributed to the improvement of our overseas market share: One, diversification of garment products; and two, catering to new markets like India, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, Malaysia, China and Australia. They are becoming strong new destinations.

There is a caveat though, sounded by BGMEA President Atiqul Islam, who explained that 2013 export figures represented supplying to orders that came before troubles on the domestic front set in. Besides, one has to take into account the high airfreight cost entailed in despatching Tk 5,000 crore worth of goods.

Continuing political unrest can only undercut our export competitiveness aside from risking shifting of orders away from Bangladesh. It is high time, therefore, that political parties accord utmost importance to the primacy of letting the wheels of economy turn uninterrupted. The sky would then be the limit of our achievements.

Students reeling in uncertainty

Roll back the incalculable loss

ELECTION has not come as a breather for the four crore primary and secondary students as they are still gripped by political uncertainty. Although the academic year has commenced, they do not know when the classes will begin and how. An overpowering sense of anxiety is engulfing the pupils, they do not know what lies in store for them. They have got the new books on time, the enthusiasm to study is taking hold of them and they wait with a bated breath to see the schools functioning.

The admission tests and formalities of getting admitted may be awaited in many schools; inordinate delay may cause sessions jam too.

In the present context of insecurity all around, parents and guardians are scared and teachers too are not in a position to insist on the students coming to schools. How can they guarantee security to the youngsters when the police themselves are busy handling the haywire law and order situation? There are petrol bomb being thrown, vehicles burning and cocktails blasting even though oborodh and hartal are petering out.

Like their parents and teachers, the students too are desperately praying for the political parties to come to an understanding on their disputes.

Meanwhile, the opposition should withdraw hartal and oborodh programmes for the sake of the future of the students.

The Statesman

Bangladesh votes

EDITORIAL

THERE was not another country in the world on Sunday that could have stood in so unsplendid an isolation as did Bangladesh. The world bore witness to an election that was boycotted by the opposition, to at least 100 polling stations going up in flames, and booths without voters. Well and truly has the political class, most particularly the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, crafted the obituary of democracy. It would be less than fair to aver that the UN failed in its mission to play the honest broker; nearer the truth is the reality that the delegation wasn't allowed to function, indeed to bring the two sides to the negotiating table. There was a blunt message in the refusal of the European Union, the Commonwealth and the USA to send observers; in real terms, the international entities refused to be part of the mortal exercise in self-deception.

In terms of electoral probity -- a quality that lies rather thin on the ground -- Sheikh Hasina's victory means little or nothing, just as an uncontested election is almost institutionalised nonsense. On the face of it, the prime minister for all seasons has had her way with her refusal to install a neutral caretaker government, on the terms set by Khaleda Zia. Thus was she able to score brownie points in the short term -- a spurious victory that is being greeted by violence, killings and strikes each day. That tragedy of the electoral system deepened on Sunday with the death of 21 people in course of a thoroughly meaningless election.

In her hour of contrived triumph, Hasina has inflicted a self-inflicted wound that shall not be easy to bandage. It isn't merely the brittle structure of governance that will be cause of international concern; as the scion of the family that brought the country freedom, her credibility as a political leader, as indeed that of the Awami League, is in tatters -- a cruel irony if ever there was one.

Sad to reflect that on its eastern flank, India will have to deal with a neighbour whose claim to power is based on a travesty of any country's tryst with democracy. A single-party election has made the deception complete. Yes, there will be enough MPs for parliament to swear in Sheikh Hasina as PM; but the pre-determined result is bound to lack legitimacy at home and abroad. A fresh election, chiefly to gain international credibility, is easier suggested than effected. The sad reality is that politics is much too dysfunctional in Bangladesh today.

Election and constitutionalism

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD
NURUL HUDA

Resorting to polls for political and constitutional continuity bypassing constitutionalism could be fatal. This is because politicians have to secure conformity with not only the letter but also the spirit of constitutional framework. There is no denying that achieving the objective of substantial conformity with the constitutional directive is a tough challenge. However, one has to admit that constitutionalism has to become a living reality to the extent that the directives curb arbitrariness of discretion and are in fact observed by the wielders of political power.

The constitution, in addition to establishing different forms of accountability also creates ground rules in the form of laws, codes of practice and conventions for ensuring fair play at every level. Equally significant characteristic of constitutionalism is a degree of self-imposed restraint which operates beyond the text of the constitution and its attendant rules, especially on the part of political actors and state officials.

It needs to be stressed that constitutionalism could be established in a true sense when political behaviour is actually contained within certain boundaries. The rules need to embody a defensible constitutional morality which accords with principles of good governance. The constitution should represent a sufficiently accepted political settlement. There must also be a general adherence at all levels to the constitutional rules and the wider body of law.

Do we witness patron-client relations in our political discourse? Do we get a sense from political transaction that the stability of our society would unfailingly rely on never questioning the authority of those further up the hierarchy? As far as public officials are concerned, is it the reality that once in post, rather than insisting on performing statutory obligations to investigate and prosecute high ups, the official in question is naturally inclined to defer to superior authority?

Do we see an unsavoury relationship that unites politics

and economics? Cynics say that political influence or power is ensuring access to wealth. The beneficiary or the client is providing the service that is contributing to the wealth of the powerful in which the client has often a proportional share. This is a symbiotic relationship in which each needs the other to derive the benefits they both receive. Such transaction, without doubt, is quite clearly contrary to traditional and formal ideas of constitutionalism. Are we, therefore, deprived of the opportunity to vote to secure the achievement of wider community goals and thus left restricted to ensure calculated individual gain at election time?

One has to agree that constitutionalism in Bangladesh stands seriously threatened from the convoluted use of religion by obscurantist elements. However, the common man who is deeply religious in his own way and wants an improvement in life, has always chosen the progressive, forward-looking, secular leaders and parties. He keeps religion and politics in separate boxes and believes that worldly affairs are too important to be left in the hands of the clergy. In fact, our problem is with the educated classes who are caught between the cross-currents of modernisation and obscurantism. Our thinking elite and the middle class have to appreciate the reality of nation-state, and must not be emotive and rhetorical about "Ummah."

The fundamental problem of constitutionalism in our situation has been that the key players have not accepted the rules of constitutionalism. In fact, the credibility of the entire structure has been called into question because the most influential actors who operate the levers of power have disturbingly breached the rules. There have been unsure attempts to engage the accountability mechanisms but in the process the authority of the constitution has been sadly dissipated.

A considered view is that attempts to achieve real progress in constitutionalism would be unlikely to succeed if we fail to address the mercenary nature of politics. Politics, for sure, cannot be a means of livelihood. We may perhaps be able to attain substantive progress when the peasantry and the working class organise political parties and stronger social movements to push for more social equality and justice both inside and the outside the present structures.

As of now, the major political parties have to be equally committed to shared principles of constitutionalism; and in that feature of constitutional democracy, an effective and legitimate opposition acting as a check on government must be a reality. In its absence popular street protests will precipitate one crisis after another. Political parties have to stop coalescing around powerful individuals and display genuine commitment to structural reform and wealth re-distribution in a society that remains very unequal.

Nightmare of “Arab Spring” in 2014

KAMAL GABALLA

IS it true that all the “Arab Spring” has done has been damage, death and destruction as well as the occasional violence and despair?

Is it right that the democracy, freedom and social justice that people across the Middle East called for about three years ago have turned into nightmares?

As usual, local, regional and international media have dedicated a generous amount of their time for evaluating the outcomes of the Arab Spring and its consequences in the past three years.

The two questions above were brought up by *Alkhaleej Newspaper*, based in the United Arab Emirates, which has claimed that the Arab Spring has only been negative.

Similarly, Britain's *The Economist* mentioned that there is an increasingly deepening disappointment in the Middle East because the Arab Spring only produced extremism, instability and violence after the happy scenes of the downfalls of tyrannies.

Also, prominent Arab author Jihad al-Khazen said in his column in the London-based *Al-Hayat* that the situation is very devastating in many Arab countries and expected conditions to worsen in 2014.

Khazen expected this: Ongoing tragedy in Syria, failed peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israel due to its extremist right-wing government, no democracy in Libya, civil war in Sudan leading to another division, Egypt under threat if it can't defeat terrorism and turn into a democratic state, and finally a crisis between Iran and other countries over nuclear power.

Meanwhile, a local newspaper has predicted the failure of the Islamist project, which Turkey's current regime follows and the Muslim Brotherhood was also founded on.

The Islamist agenda, including the Turkish-Brotherhood cooperation, rose at the beginning and occupied more seats than ever. However, by the winter of 2013 the tables had turned and political Islamism had lost a lot of its popularity in the region.

Egypt

The Muslim Brotherhood, which won in the five elections that were conducted after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, has now been declared a terrorist illegal organisation.

The Economist had quoted an Egyptian citizen, who lives in Cairo and works as a barber, saying that what happened was not an “Arab Spring” but a revolution against the people!

The magazine pointed out that 2014 will see the establishment of a new Egyptian system that looks democratic but will continue the same practices of an oppressive and corrupt regime -- economically and administratively.

Tunisia

The Islamist “Al-Nahda” (The Renaissance) movement is offering one concession after the other, fearing the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt -- this was seen through the resignation of the coalition government and the announcement of another government until new parliamentary and presidential elections are conducted this year.

Observers have noticed that Tunisia's celebrations of the third wave of its uprising on December 17 took place in the absence of President Moncef Marzouki in light of the rising disappointment and frustration facing the country.

On this occasion, in a speech to those celebrating, widow of activist Mohamed Brahmi, who was killed on July 25, called for the importance of freeing Tunisia from

the gangs of the Muslim Brotherhood and their oppressive tool embodied in the Salafi/Jihadist movement.

Meanwhile, Tunisian protesters gathered in front of the government's headquarters to call for the downfall of the Islamist state, carrying banners that read: We will not rest or give up so that Islam does not rule.

Libya

The rival militias in Libya are run by political Islam, which are fighting in the face of the coalition of national forces which won many seats in the first post-Qadaffi parliament and chose a liberal politician to head the government as prime minister.

The headquarter of the Justice and Development Party, the Muslim Brotherhood's arm in Libya, has been attacked and raided over the past year, which led Islamist leaders to warn against creating a similar situation to Egypt where the Brotherhood are excluded from political life -- which in their opinion may lead to catastrophic results.

Yemen

Devastating waves of violence, which has nothing to do with the Arab Spring, are taking place -- with the bloodiest of events being organised by the terrorist Al-Qaeda -- not to mention attacks organised by the deposed president Abdullah Saleh.

Generally, the more accurate description of the “Arab Spring” in the region in the past three years until date is: political, social and economic deterioration.

That's what has been confirmed by Arab and foreign experts in the field of social development in a meeting held in recent weeks in Lebanon's capital of Beirut.

The experts said that Arab countries, which witnessed uprisings, are now facing a very critical situation and stressed on the importance of writing new constitutions that implement social justice and equality, and guarantee popular participation and consensus on basic principles.

A study discussed at the meeting indicated that countries that witnessed uprisings have been hit hard by social and economic crises over the past three years.

The study was under the title: Promises of the Arab Spring - Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the Transitional Phases, and was organised by the social development committee of Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia of the United Nations (ESCWA).

It showed that regional production in the region had decreased from 4.2% (in 2010) to 2.2% (in 2011) while unemployment and poverty rose.

It also showed that more than 2,400 schools were destroyed in Syria by the end of 2012 and that the education of about 1.2 million children was delayed in Libya due to the political struggle, while in Yemen 90,000 children are deprived of education because 50,000 students cannot attend their schools in Aden.

The study recommended the drafting of new constitutions that include all the different factions of society, which implement social justice and encourage civic involvement during peaceful transitions.

It stressed on the important role played by civil society in these Arab uprising, especially in light of the dramatic rise in the number of initiatives concerns with civil rights, etc.

The study also included a large number of graffiti drawings, which had a great impact on these uprisings as young people depended on them to express their opinions freely and independently.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Dr. Zafar Iqbal on election

We were astonished to hear the comment of noted writer and thinker Dr. Jafar Iqbal about the one-sided election organised by AL government. He supported this ridiculous farcical election while 90% of the people were against it and all the noted personalities denounced this election and urged government to stop this. How could Dr. Iqbal, who is a very favourite personality of the young generation, extend his support to this voter-less election?

The nation never witnessed such a charade in the name of national election since independence, not even during Ershad's regime. We would like to thank TDS and its editor Mahfuz Anam for their right stand about this farcical election.

Md. Shahjahan Mia
Development Professional
Dhaka

Fresh water beneath seabed!

Water is the most essential element for humans and other living organisms. By mass, water contains 11.1% hydrogen and 88.9% oxygen. Although more than 70% of the earth's surface is covered with water, a very small fraction of it is available as fresh drinking water. Moreover, due to extensive extraction of groundwater, volume of fresh water is decreasing very fast. Now scientists all over the world are researching to find out new sources of fresh water. Australian researchers have made some remarkable progress in this respect. They found untapped freshwater reserves locked beneath the world's seabed. They claimed the volume of this water resource is a hundred times greater than the amount we've extracted from the Earth's sub-surface in the past century since 1900. Bangladesh is rich in water resources. Scientific research in exploring new sources of fresh water should be intensified in our country also.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Kejriwal's not-so-free water

This refers to the report, “Too much info, Kejriwal ill”. His free water announcement has come with a rider - but only for households with meter, and for slums that do not have meters. He should have made it clear about his strategy to provide 700 litres of free water per household, when he was canvassing for Delhi assembly elections. He did not do this. He has cleverly increased the water tariff by 10 per cent for all, which will lead to increase in household monthly budget. Those consuming more water than the free water quota of 700 litres per month, even by a litre will be required to pay the full bill amount. Voters have been clearly taken for a royal ride in Delhi, by the AAP. Where from the free water will come? He has already broken his promise, by taking the support of Congress, for forming the government. Communism seems to be on the revival in Delhi. Who will bear the subsidies? The tactics to woo voters are same, but the players are different. Kejriwal is no different, from any other politician.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Dhaka

Comments on news report, “Hindus under threat,” published on January 07, 2014

Azizul Rasel

I vehemently condemn the miscreants, allegedly Jamaat and BNP men (as DS reports), who attacked the Hindus. I also condemn the lack of action from the government. If the government cannot ensure security of these people, it should just step down. It is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh that the Hindu community would be attacked after polls. So why didn't the government take precautionary action?

M Khan

Disgraceful and unacceptable that religious minorities and political minorities are being victimised.

Khan

This is very sad that the Hindus are being killed for only voting for AL. I remember I was living in Paksey of Pabna district in 1971 and my relatives and friends were killed there though they were not AL voters. They were peaceful railway staff.

Jafar Iqbal

India sealed its border for the first time in history with an 'assumption of riots'. Very strange!

Mohammed Ismail

I condemn it and if we want to avoid such criminal activities, we should first establish true democracy in our country. Without real democracy such criminal activities will continue.

Sharukh Khan

Are we talking about Syria's Aleppo here? Is this an independent country? Or some unseen power has occupied Bangladesh? This young boy looks like Syrian refugee in Turkey!