

## Political instability hampers growth

GDP growth takes hit

THE World Bank through a recent study has taken stock of reasons why our GDP growth rate has lost a full one per cent in the last fiscal. The violent political agitation campaign waged last year has been identified as one of the key reasons for this downturn. The economic blockade and 85 days of hartal over a six-month period helped cause a US\$1.4 billion loss for the national economy. These shutdowns caused not only immense human suffering but resulted in severe downturn for most productive sectors including garments, transportation and tourism. This is perhaps the reason why the projected GDP growth rate has been revised downwards from earlier 6.2 per cent to 5.4 per cent.

With factories locked down, entrepreneurs and businesses are in doldrums as to how to pay back bank loans. Our political parties have, for decades, chosen to enforce crippling blockades and hartals to force the government in power to come to the negotiating table. Last year's agitation programmes were a departure from earlier times in that we witnessed the use of firearms and bombs in an attempt to cower an entire nation into submission. The capital city was effectively marooned from the rest of the country. Export-laden transportation vehicles were burnt at will and every sector took a hit. We have been fortunate that strong export demand and a return to normalcy after the general elections have helped avert catastrophe. Attaining a 6.5 per cent GDP growth rate in the next fiscal can only happen if the present calm over an ever shifting political landscape prevails.

## Question paper leak

Identify and punish the culprits

ONCE again a public exam question paper has been leaked, this time question of HSC English second paper of Dhaka Board, which had compelled the postponement of the exam.

Leakage of question papers has assumed an endemic scale in our country involving even the primary terminal examinations. This is highly disconcerting. And given the repetitive nature of the incident, the onus for the failure to stop the leaks must fall not only on the respective education boards but also on all those associated with setting, selecting, printing and, finally, dispatching the same to the exam centers. And one of the reasons why such incidents have been occurring frequently is the failure to take stringent actions against the culprits.

The Education Minister has moved fast and has taken some urgent measures. But he has to put an end to the leaks by having a foolproof system in place. We are happy to note that not one but two committees have been formed to investigate the matter and the education minister has assured strict measures against the culprits. However, we would hope that the two committees will be able to identify the culprits and those linked with the syndicate.

And we would hope too that the findings of these two committees would be implemented unlike in the past, where reportedly, there have been reluctance to address the recommendations of the committees, at least of those that had been able to make some headway in the investigations. Had that not been so, such obnoxious acts, that affect severely the morale of the students, would not have happened so regularly.

## New gold rush!

ABDUL MATIN

A new gold rush has begun! No, it is not like the one of the 19th century when people rushed to Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, South Africa and the United States in hundreds of thousands in search of riches. Mining of gold is a tough job. Yet, huge migration took place at that time and many people made fortunes.

The new gold rush in the 21st century has a different style. Nobody now bothers about tiny pieces of gold a miner used to collect after a hard day's labour, digging through tons of ores and straining the huge sludge in water. As a matter of fact, there is no need to dig mines any more as refined and pure gold is rushing in the form of bars to our international airports! Carriers bring them as personal baggage and disappear in no time if the smuggled gold is detected. Nobody knows the people behind the trade even though one or two carriers are caught occasionally.

We see the gold rush almost every day at the airports: 2.5 kg at Chittagong on April 7, 7.23 kg at Dhaka on April 1, 6.3 kg at Chittagong on March 27, 107 kg at Chittagong on March 25 and so on. Interestingly, detectives detained four people including three policemen recently for misappropriating smuggled gold, and recovered 149 gold bars. Apparently, a source reported the incident to the police because of a dispute over the division of the booty. Unfortunately, disputes do not always occur. Around 520 kg of gold was seized last year, whereas the amount was only 25 kg in 2012. Surprisingly, 220 kg was seized during January to March in 2014. We know how much gold is seized but we have no knowledge how much passes through the airports unnoticed.

Metal is supposed to be detected by x-ray machines. Nobody knows how the bars pass through the screening machines undetected at the airports of both origin and destination. It is reported that gold smuggling has increased because of recent rise in import duties on gold in India. The World Gold Council estimates that 150-200 tonnes of gold are smuggled to India each year. According to sources in the BSF and Indian customs, around 5% of the gold smuggled to India passes through Bangladesh, and this comes to 7.5 to 10 tonnes worth Tk. 3,450 to Tk. 4,600 crore every year! With this money, we could build one Padma bridge every six years.

This is indeed a big gold rush, but who are the beneficiaries? Are they beyond the reach of justice?

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

# Gold - related delinquency

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

that the abominably scandalous acts have made Bangladeshis hang their heads in shame.

The arrogance and damning attitude of the mischief-makers can be gauged from the report that the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) found only around 2.36 grams of gold in place of the specified 11.64 grams and only an alloy of base metals instead of the supposed 350 grams of silver in each of the crests. The arrogance and the manifest callousness of the perpetrators of the crime can be seen from their total lack of thought of demeaning the auspicious occasion and robbing the symbolic value of the awards.

The moral depravity of the delinquents should awaken all concerned to take serious note of criminal negligence in high places and to ensure the severest of punishments at a very early date. The culprits behind the national shame must not be able to escape the arm of law. Manifest punishment for mind-boggling misdeeds is the demand of the day.

The other shameful and image-shattering acts involving gold relates to the allegation of collaboration in and misappropriation of gold bars by members of law enforcement agencies in Dhaka city. This has come at a time when there is a worrisome increase in gold smuggling in Dhaka and Chittagong. Concern has been expressed as to whether suspicion of involvement of higher levels of police hierarchy in gold smuggling could be indicative of the vulnerability of national security.

Whether or not the above incident is an isolated one and whether an assistant commissioner has been willfully let off the culpable list are matters that deserve

attention of the top leadership of police for setting their house in order and establishing the organisation's credibility as an impartial law enforcement outfit. The black sheep in the house need to be reined in and, therefore, early punishment of all those involved in the smuggling of gold bars should be a priority with the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

Since gold smuggling is not an ordinary crime it should be accorded the due significance taking into view the national security aspects in the wake of increased smuggling transactions. The gun runners and



drug barons are credibly suspected to be involved with gold smuggling. The intensity of gold smuggling, therefore, should alert us to the need of invigorating the checkpoints and listening posts and gearing up the intelligence complement. Needless to mention, the presence of shady personnel in sensitive regulatory places would be sadly self-defeating.

The police are and shall continue to remain the basic outfit for providing security. The slackening of control and supervision therein cannot be accepted and official highhandedness must not be able to escape swift punishment.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

## Gurus and governors

SHASHI THAROOR SERIES



SHASHI THAROOR

THE ongoing general election in India has brought to prominence not only the usual cast of political aspirants, campaign managers, publicists, and vote-brokers, but also an array of astrologers, numerologists, and pundits. Candidates have been flocking to such soothsayers in large numbers, seeking advice on everything from the precise minute to file their nomination forms to the appropriate alignment of the doors of their campaign offices.

Indians, after all, manage to live in that rare combination of modernity and superstition that defines them as a breed apart. Where else in the world is so much made of an individual's astrological chart, that mysterious celestial database that determines one's life opportunities, marital prospects, and willingness to take on certain risks? I once wrote that an Indian without a horoscope is like an American without a credit card. That observation shows no sign of losing its validity in the twenty-first century.

It is a truth that seems particularly entrenched in Indian politics. As a believing Hindu, I make no claims to pure rationalism myself. But I am bemused when a minister's swearing-in ceremony is delayed because an astrologer told him that the time was not auspicious to take the oath, or when a candidate's election papers are filed at the last possible minute to avoid the malign influences of the stars at other times of the day. Both are frequent occurrences in Indian political life.

It is not just a question of taking the oath of office at a time determined by an astrologer; the stars also decide when a minister moves into his office and begins his work. Many ministers do not report to work for days after being sworn in; files pend while the planets realign themselves more favourably. Superstition can also influence the selection of the minister's office, housing, and furniture, guided (if not actually directed) by gurus and pundits on the basis of time-honoured, if scientifically unproven, principles.

My favourite story of this type involves a chief minister who refused to move into his official residence because a pandit claimed that it was not built according to the correct spiritual principles of vaastu (India's version of feng shui), and that he would not fare well in it. The bungalow was reconstructed accordingly, at great public expense, with new doorways and windows realigned to satisfy the pundit. At last, the chief minister moved in, only to lose his job -- and his new home -- the next day in an unexpected political crisis.

Why do otherwise intelligent, educated people put themselves in thrall to superstition? I am all in favour of the innate human desire to propitiate the heavens. I am even prepared to entertain the notion that the cosmos might be sending us signals in every planetary alignment. But what makes us so credulous as to believe that soothsayers understand the code?

Not long ago, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu state, the former actress Jayalalitha, decided to add an extra "a" to the end of her name because a numerologist told her that the new spelling would be beneficial to her turbulent political career. She promptly went on to win an election in her state, lost the next one, and now is back in power again.

I suppose it is entirely possible that "Jayalalithaa" has attained political successes that might have eluded a mere "Jayalalitha." But on what possible basis can it be argued that the addition of a superfluous vowel made all the difference? One can scarcely believe that the heavens dispense their favours according to the number of vowels in mortals' names.

But many Indians are firm believers, as the increas-

ingly eccentric spellings of film titles and movie stars' names confirm. One of India's finest actors, Irfan Khan, suddenly re-baptised himself Irrfan, a change that many swear prefigured the transformation of his career.

New Delhi's political circles are rife with gossip about a former prime minister who was guided daily by a godman, and a former finance minister whose decisions were influenced by astrology (though tempered, it seems, by a former cabinet secretary who passed himself off as an amateur astrologer). The leader of Bihar state's Rashtriya Janata Dal party, Laloo Prasad Yadav, reportedly filled his swimming pool with mud and garbage because a pundit told him it would stop the "leak" of defecting members.

Most Indian politicians wear rings with stones tailored to specific planetary conjunctions that are providential for them, or designed to ward off malefic influences from planets unfavourably situated on their birth charts. Many swear it works for them; others take the agnostic view that one has nothing to lose by indulging such beliefs, except the price of the ring -- a sort of Hindu version of Pascal's famous wager.

It turns out, however, that Indian politicians are not the only ones vulnerable to seduction by the Indian



"miracle mafia." Former Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh reveals in a recent memoir that no less a personage than Margaret Thatcher was fascinated by an Indian godman, Chandraswami, whom she received in her office shortly after becoming Conservative Party leader.

The godman impressed Thatcher enough with his mind-reading skills that she visited him again -- wearing, on his instructions, a red dress and sporting a religious talisman he had given her. At this second encounter, Chandraswami accurately prophesied that she would become prime minister within four years and serve for nine, 11, or 13 years (she served for 11).

There was one crucial difference from her Indian counterparts, though. When Singh, meeting Thatcher soon after she had become prime minister, whispered: "Our man was proved right," her reaction surprised him. "For a moment, she seemed flustered," he recalled. "Then, she took me aside and said: 'High Commissioner, we don't talk about these matters.'" Indians do: We may be superstitious, but we are not hypocritical.

The writer is India's Minister of State for Human Resource Development. His most recent book is *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2014. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Ridiculous claim

Tarique Zia and Khaleda Zia declared Ziaur Rahman as the 1st President of Bangladesh recently. As a listener to Major Zia's declaration of independence on 27th March 1971 (he rectified it and declared on behalf of Bangabandhu), I heard him mentioning himself as the supreme commander of Revolutionary Council. History never recorded who the council members were.

On 10th April, the first Bangladesh government was formed in exile, proclamation of which was officially made on 17th April with Bangabandhu as president in absentia and Tajuddin Ahmed as PM and Col MAG Osmany as C-in-C. And Major Zia became one of the sector commanders of that government. After 43 years of Independence, his son and wife came up with a ludicrous claim. But truth will prevail and they will carry the stigma of living a lie.

A. H. Dewan  
 South Kafrul, Dhaka

### Why not LEDs on bats, gloves!

Despite umpires standing just a few feet away from the on-strike batsman wearing an earphone to listen to whether the ball nicked the bat at the edge, despite the whole world seeing the ball take the edge, the umpire denies the wicket. How frustrating!!

During the 2014 T20 WC, I believe putting LEDs on the stumps was a very innovative idea. The umpires can now very easily and effectively judge close run-outs and stumping. Is it possible to put LEDs on bats as well which would make the bats light up at the very slightest nick of the ball? I also believe putting LEDs on gloves as well as pads is a solution for our 'blind' umpires!!

Aminur Rahim  
 New DOHS, Mohakhali  
 Dhaka

### Why this farce of elections?

Fair, free and credible election is prerequisite for establishing democracy. It also depends greatly on the effectiveness of the election commission. But recent election-related reports give us the picture that in this country we have made a mockery of democracy. We have seen massive vote rigging, stuffing of ballot boxes and capturing of polling centres in the last few days. The entire nation is disappointed at the farcical and controversial activities of the election commission. If muscle power is everything to go to power, then why is this drama of elections? It only costs this poor country a huge sum of money.

Nilufar Yeasmin Lima  
 Dept. of Business Administration  
 Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

### Comments on news report, "Security eats up half the budget," published on April 8, 2014

#### Deep Purple Blue

The huge amount of taka (185 crore) spent for law enforcing agencies must be audited. There is reportedly no accounting for this fund. My request to the media in particular is to probe into this and inform the readers of it. I'd like to join my voice to the fact that the electorate certainly did not get service worth 185 crore taka.

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### "Kidnappers mostly known faces" (April 7, 2014)

#### Md Razzak

Thanks for such a valuable report. It will increase social awareness.

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### "Govt starts probe into award scam" (April 7, 2014)

#### Deep Purple Blue

Nothing will happen to anyone for this massive fraud. The perpetrators, who connived and took share of the loot and those who are now investigating, are all united under the present government.

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### "Police focus now on Shibir" (April 7, 2014)

#### Hardreality

It is beyond doubt that police are looking for scapegoats. Despite all the eyewitnesses, if the real culprits get away, then what kind of message is it sending to the BCL activists in particular and the nation in general?

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### "Not taking the long view" (April 7, 2014)

#### Nds

Yes, the concluding sentence says it all. Considering the long chequered and proud history of AL, the largest and the oldest political party of this country, and the exemplary sacrifice that many of its sincere adherents have made in the past, I feel a real sense of pity and shame that the present leadership have chosen to drag it to such a filthy rotten state only for their shameless self aggrandizement. It's really an irredeemable pain to many of us.