

Stimulating private sector growth

Govt. should heed business leaders' advice

THE critical role that private sector investment can play in facilitating the government's effort to achieve 7.3 per cent GDP growth in the next fiscal need not be overemphasised. But to make that happen, it is important that the government creates an investment-friendly climate for the private sector entrepreneurs.

Identifying high bank interest rate, corporate tax, corruption and political uncertainty, among others, as the main barriers, business leaders, bankers and experts on trade, finance and economy at a discussion meet in the city advised the government to address those to stimulate private investment growth. Also, they underscored the need for providing the prospective investors with adequate supply of gas and electricity.

Being in the thick of it, the business leaders know better the problems of private sector growth. So, the government, if it is serious about meeting its projected GDP growth target, should heed the well-meaning suggestions made by the business leaders.

Granted, last year's political turmoil was largely to blame for the government's failure to attain targeted GDP growth in previous fiscal. Since the government in office is also a major player in maintaining political stability, we hope, it would do its best in this respect to create an enabling environment for businesses so that they may contribute significantly towards the government achieving its development goals.

While encouraging investment, the government cannot also afford to be oblivious of some potential, but currently ignored sectors like jute. If the jute mills, some 40 in number, that have been shut down during the last three years could be rejuvenated, they would generate large-scale employment as well as contribute hugely to the economy.

Implementing RTI Act

Make the process simpler

THE Right to Information (RTI) Act introduced in 2009 was meant to empower people to obtain information meaningfully in the democratic process with a view to ensuring increasing transparency, accountability and answerability of governance at the citizens' level. However, instead of empowering people with the correct information rapidly, its complex and time-consuming process is discouraging many of them in seeking information.

Particularly two areas with regard to obtaining information must be addressed right away. First, the traditional mindset of government officials for being overtly secretive; and the second is to fix the benchmarks for considering the importance of demands for information.

If it takes a Narayanganj resident an unbelievable eight months to obtain information about a patient from an upazila health complex and if applications are turned down because of a spelling error in the name of a designated officer then the right to information is going unmet because of technicalities. Clearly the Information Commission has shortage of manpower, lacks efficiency and is not adequately responsive to furnishing required information.

Need of the hour is to equip information officers and training them to collect and disseminate information on demand.

With all its elements, the RTI Act could most efficiently serve as a catalyst to institutionalise democracy, promote good governance and combat corruption. Success of the RTI depends on two factors – efficiency of the information providers and making people aware about their rights to information so that they can generate useful demands for information.

Tarique believes in wrong history

SHAKHAWAT LITON

IT is not possible to become even a chairman of a union parishad, the lowest tier of the local government system, without people's vote in an election. This is the principle of democracy in the civilised world. But someone can become the country's president, head of state, and even head of government in the form of the presidential system of governance without people's mandate. General Ziaur Rahman had done the same. He grabbed state power and became the country's president in April 1977 by removing the then president Justice Sayem.

Gen. Zia was aware of his unlawful takeover. So, he had to move to legalise his takeover through election. He organised the presidential election in June 1978 in which he won and became the seventh president of Bangladesh. When he contested the election, he was still in the military service. He also had to indemnify all of his unlawful activities by amending the constitution in 1979 in parliament. These are historic facts and none can deny them.

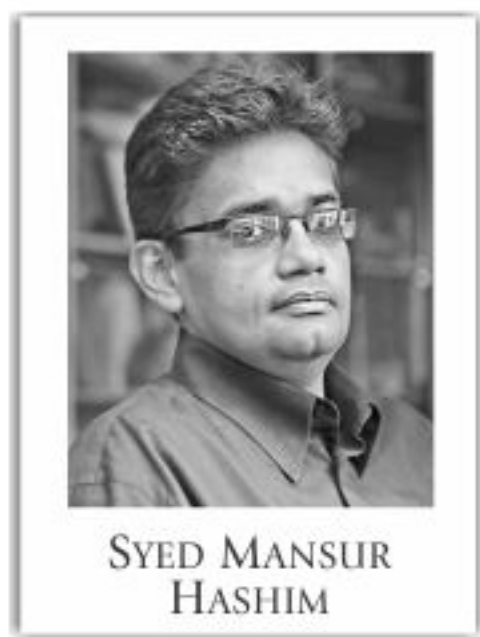
But his son Tarique Rahman, also senior vice-president of BNP, a party founded by Zia, has been desperately trying to establish his father as the first president of Bangladesh. He had first come up with the claim last March that it was Ziaur Rahman who was the first president of the country.

A book titled "Ziaur Rahman: First President of Bangladesh and Proclaimer of Independence" edited by Tarique was launched in the capital on Sunday. The book tries to glorify the mistake Zia made in 1971 to establish him as the first president. On March 27, 1971, Zia hurriedly proclaimed himself president and "declared" Bangladesh's independence through Biplobi Betar Kendra at Kalurghat in Chittagong. He however realised the truth and, within minutes, he made another announcement: "I, Major Zia, on behalf of our Great Leader, the Supreme Commander of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, do hereby proclaim the independence of Bangla Desh (sic) and that the government headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has already been formed."

Tarique Rahman intentionally ignored this truth in the book he edited. And those pro-BNP intellectuals who spoke at the launch programme blindly supported Tarique's claim. Do they really believe that it is possible to become country's president only by making an announcement? Or are they supporting Tarique only to make him happy, which is nothing but sycophancy?

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

China goes shopping



UNITED STATES. It is not only Brazil where China is making waves. As put by Gabriel Dabdoub, president of the chamber of commerce of the Santa Cruz region, which happens to Bolivia's economic engine: "Until recently Bolivia did not consider China a partner, it was very wary. But now there is more trade, and, in fact, we've just acquired a satellite." What makes China the logical choice for everything from satellites to major infrastructure projects for so many African, and now Latin American nations? Unlike the United States or the European Union, Chinese aid is not inherently tied to "conditions" revolving around good governance.

According to the Global Economic Governance Initiative at Boston University, China has pumped in a little over \$102 billion in loans to Latin American countries over an eight year period (2005 – 2013). That investment is now increasing exponentially. China is investing in both public and private entities. It is in the process of consolidating its commercial foothold in a continent, which until very recently had fallen squarely under the US sphere of influence. Now that dominance is being challenged. From Brazil to Bolivia, Argentina to Peru, from raw materials to manufacturing, China is on the march. Given its voracious appetite for raw materials, the country has been buying up rights on everything from mining in Peru to oil in Venezuela.

China's foreign direct investment (FDI) still trails behind the US, which recorded a little over \$41 billion in Latin America in 2012. That is hardly comforting news given that, according to a recent UN study, China's FDI in the continent had reached \$11.4 billion the same year. The largest economy in the region is Brazil and it is interesting to note that China is pouring money into this country. China's CNOOC Ltd. and National Petroleum Corp. are part of a consortium led by Brazil's Petrobras that is to invest \$500 million in Libra, estimated to hold "12 billion barrels of oil, which would be enough supply the world's demand for three months." China is backing even more ambitious projects. Funding has gone into Nicaragua to build a national dream. A canal that may rival the Panama Canal, which according to experts, may cost anywhere from \$40 - \$60 billion and is considered financially unviable. So, why is China going against the opinions of international experts? The contract for the project has already been signed at \$40 billion that allows for the Hong-Kong based company to design, build and manage the canal for 50 years. Work began this year.

It is hardly surprising to see China hedging its bets on Venezuela. China has invested an estimated \$50 billion into this country. Chinese state-owned Sinopec alone has signed a \$14 billion contract to develop an oil project in Orinoco in September, 2013. Indeed, going by what has been published in the international media, another \$14 billion was pumped in shortly making that deal worth \$28

billion. These are enormous financial undertakings. And there are huge risks entailed in such massive projects. Yet, the number of deals being signed and worked on is mindboggling. Venezuela has also been a major recipient of Chinese loans. And why wouldn't China agree to loan Venezuela nearly \$50 billion in loans, especially when these are guaranteed by oil sale contracts? This is barter at its best; Venezuela pays back loan payments in oil exports to China.

From the examples highlighted here, the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has made calculated moves into Latin America. Yes, there are risks involved. Cost overruns, unforeseen technical challenges are there. Opening up the Latin American continent for yet another reliable source of

Rival for the Panama Canal?

A Chinese company is studying whether to build a canal across Nicaragua; a final decision for the plan will come this year. How the proposed canal compares to the Panama Canal:

	Panama Canal	Nicaragua Canal
Length	51 mi. (82 km)	About 170 mi. (274 km)
Transit time	8 to 10 hours	Unknown
Watershed	47 percent is tropical rainforest	Lake Nicaragua, 16,250 sq. mi. (42,087 sq km)
Largest ship	Capacity: 14,500 20-ft. (6-m) containers, after canal expansion completed in 2015	Undetermined, but perhaps twice as large as Panama Canal's post-expansion



One cannot overlook the fact that the PRC is hankering after respect. Its economy is set to overtake that of the United States' this year or the next. It now wants recognition from the world's single superpower United States that PRC's time has arrived.

raw materials works in its favour. But is it only a question of raw materials or business prospects? One cannot overlook the fact that the PRC is hankering after respect. Its economy is set to overtake that of the United States' this year or the next. It now wants recognition from the world's single superpower United States that PRC's time has arrived. From that perspective, it makes perfect sense to invest in the Nicaraguan project, i.e. to build a canal which is independent of US control; a second trade route through which international shipping could change everything.

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Why the US must not arm Syria's opposition:

In disagreement with Robert Ford



main arguments of his article, "Why We Must Arm Syria's Opposition."

He believes America should arm the "moderate armed opposition" in Syria to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad for the sake of "stabilising the region," "America's security" and "core interests" in the region. He thinks America should protect Syrian civilians from Assad's troops and "jihadists." One may agree with Ford that America can play the most important role in stabilising Syria (and the entire region) provided it has a strategy to tackle both, Assad and his Islamist/ "jihadist" challengers who want to establish their versions of Islamic rule, including a transnational caliphate in and around Syria, after his removal from power.

Ford sounds very passionate, distressed and desperate at the same time. He believes time is running out and the US must do something to save Syria, before it is too late to do anything: "We don't have good choices on Syria anymore.... More hesitation and unwillingness to commit to enabling the moderate opposition to fight more effectively both the jihadists and the regime simply hasten the day when American forces will have to intervene against al-Qaeda in Syria."

His ambivalence is baffling. One fully agrees with him, there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. But one is not sure why he thinks America and its allies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, should arm and train the "moderates in the armed opposition" to tackle both Assad and Islamist radicals fighting to topple the Assad regime. Oddly, he does not mention the proactive role Saudi Arabia and Qatar played, with tacit support from Washington, in sponsoring radical Islamist militias, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to overthrow Assad. The ISIS is too powerful to be tackled by the so-called moderate fighters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The way ISIS fighters have overpowered the overwhelmingly numerous and better-armed Iraqi soldiers in northern Iraq should be an eye-opener to all.

It is unbelievable that a seasoned diplomat asks Washington to make overtures to Tehran, and then expects Iran to respond positively to join America "in pushing for serious negotiations" with Assad. We know nothing short of a total reversal of America's Iran policy (since the Islamic Revolution) can break the ice. America must restrain its

regional allies, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for example, to cease hostility towards Iran. As oil and gas producing Qatar does not want a pro-Iranian regime in Syria for allowing the proposed Iranian pipeline to go through Syria to link Europe via Turkey to sell Iranian oil and gas, Saudi Arabia and Israel have ideological/security issues with Iran.

Despite all these, it is time to leave Assad alone. He may be a dictator but does not pose any security threat to the region, let alone America. In Syria, America must not repeat the blunder it committed in Iraq vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein. In view of the ominous developments in Iraq after the ISIS occupation of Mosul, Tikrit, and parts of northern Iraq, it is time that Washington starts worrying about the future of Iraq and the entire region.

As Kofi Annan has observed: "Syria is not Libya, it will not implode; it will explode beyond its borders." One believes America has nothing to gain from the Syrian crisis. Irrespective of who wins, they would almost certainly form a government hostile to the US and Israel. A protracted civil war would turn Syria into a fractured country, or even worse, five different political entities run by five major sects/ethnic groups. It would not be a better place than post-Saddam Iraq. The departure of Assad -- who main-

Paying heed to not-so-responsible advice to arm groups to topple the Assad regime would be disastrous and counterproductive. America should not ignore Russia, Iran, and Iraq (among others) who have geo-politic and other interests in Syria. It is time to work for restoring order in both Syria and more so in Iraq, in collaboration with others, including Russia, China, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

tains the balance by restraining/controlling Hezbollah -- would be a headache for Israel.

For the sake of a durable peace in the Middle East and the adjoining regions, America must learn some lessons from what it did to Syria in the 1940s and 1950s. It must not arm anybody to overthrow the Assad regime, as it overthrew the democratically elected Syrian President Shure al-Quwatly through a CIA-sponsored coup d'état in 1949. Quwatly's successor, Colonel Husni al-Zaim -- aka "America's Boy" -- served American and Israeli interests for two months before he was overthrown and executed. And afterwards America staged five military coups in Syria to complete the de-democratisation process in the country.

Finally, paying heed to not-so-responsible advice to arm groups to topple the Assad regime would be disastrous and counterproductive. America should not ignore Russia, Iran, and Iraq (among others) who have geo-politic and other interests in Syria. It is time to work for restoring order in both Syria and more so in Iraq, in collaboration with others, including Russia, China, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Bring all kitchen markets under the drive

The recent drive to destroy adulterated fruits by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police is a praiseworthy initiative, even though it should have been taken earlier. It is our earnest request that these drives be conducted in every kitchen market of the city. Any trader involved in adulteration should be fined heavily and given exemplary punishment. The authorities concerned should not only test fruits, but also vegetables and dairy products before our bodies turn into dumping ground of chemicals.

Sabrina Samreen
Uttara, Dhaka

Little rain bad news for rice growers

'Rain, rain, go away, come again another day.' It was my rhyme in kindergarten. Now my prayer is: "Rain, rain, come again". This year has seen very little rain which is affecting our agriculture as cultivation of rice is being hampered. As a result, the price of rice will increase and ultimately, farmers will be the losers. This is the result of our imprudence, as we are continuously destroying our environment for personal gains, without considering the consequences. It's time we woke up and did the needful.

Shafkat Rahman
BIAM Laboratory School
New Eskaton, Dhaka

It's barbaric, outrageous!

What is happening in the country? Ours is a country where more than 80% people are Muslims and Shab-e-Barat is a very significant night to us. But after this holy night, 9 people of a family were burnt alive and another one was shot dead as houses of Kalshi Bihari camp at capital's Mirpur area were set on fire following an argument over firecrackers explosion. The clash took place between the locals and Bihari people after the Fazr prayer. The deceased were mostly children and women as the locals locked them inside their house and set it on fire.

I don't know what to say regarding this brutal act. What a trifle issue for killing 10 people! Human life is becoming so cheap in our country. Are we really going back to the age of medieval barbarism?

Mohammad Hasan
Banani, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Much ado about nothing," published on June 13, 2014

Monju Huq

With many gaps, loopholes and weaknesses still in the process, the anti-formalin drive undertaken by the police deserves our appreciation. We believe the action, even though not comprehensive, has already discouraged the mischief-mongers.

We hope the police will increase its capacity and outreach gradually, reaching every spot and source where the crimes of adding poison to fruits, foods, vegetables, drinks etc. are carried out. Our role will be to cooperate with the police in every possible way including feeding information to both the media and police.

Bangalee1971

So the government/administration wants to keep the residents of Dhaka city safe. How about the people outside of Dhaka city? Isn't it the responsibility of the government to keep everyone of the country safe? Isn't it discrimination?

MH Khan

This is just the opening of a source of income for some corrupt people in the police force.

"Generals rising, nations falling" (June 11, 2014)

Hafeejul Alam

A good write-up, albeit castigating the generals alone as usurpers of power may not be right. Dictatorial attitude of the civilian heads of governments in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world is no less responsible for falling of nations.

Syed Faruque

Even then Sisi is welcome. Welcome because Morsi not only failed to pursue an inclusive politics but also tried to usurp the power of the apex court of the country.

"Almost all litchis formalin-tainted" (June 12, 2014)

Fareed Wakil

Poisoning the whole nation, and yet this government sits idly by. You cannot even shame them.

Vikram Khan

So now what? The government will keep sleeping and we will be poisoned further...?