

Charges against BNP leaders lack credibility

Belies govt claim to democratic practices

ARREST of 63 BNP workers including the president of Jubo Dal betrays the unwarranted treatment of the AL of its political opponent. Not only have the BNP workers been charged under the Special Powers Act, six of them have also been taken on remand.

The reason given by the police for the arrest is unacceptable. To say the least, suspicion of 'planning to instigate' is very tenuous, if not ludicrous, and does not stand up to legal scrutiny. And whoever has heard of people planning subversive activities in broad daylight with such a large number of people in one place?

It seems that the threshold of the government to countenance dissent or any other form of demonstrative political action against its policies is getting lower and lower by the day. The aggressiveness with which BNP is being dealt with and the recent arrests must bring to question the legality of the action as also the judiciousness of AL's policy, and making all its claims of adhering to democratic practices less and less credible.

We protest the tactic of the government to stifle opposition political activities. When meetings inside the four walls of one's house are being prevented by the police, who seem to have been given a free rein, can there be any doubt about the declining state of democracy in the country? Does it really bear out the much flaunted declaration of the PM about the march of democracy in Bangladesh? We hope the ruling party is not unaware of the fact that stifling open and legal political activity may spawn clandestine and illegal movements.

UPs inactive standing committees

Service denied at the grassroots

APPROXIMATELY 90 percent of the Union Parishads (UP) do not have functional standing committees. These committees are crucially important for the discharge of mandatory responsibilities of elected UPs.

In the first place, 13 committees that are to be part and parcel of each UP and devoted to different concerns -- education, health, family planning, social welfare, disaster management, agriculture, fisheries and livestock -- are non-functional. In the second, their importance lies in the fact that they comprise of elected representatives from the parishads, civil society members, socially respected persons and the women representatives of the localities. They are to assist the UP for ensuring better services and resolving local problems.

The basic reason for the non-functioning committees is lack of awareness of and interest in the functions and jurisdictions of the UP as a whole. With such structural inadequacies and operational disconnect the overall work of the UP, as the cornerstone of local government system, is badly impaired.

In the light of above, we urge the government to ensure that the UPs have properly constituted standing committees and that they function in their respective assigned areas.

Saarc summitry

EDITORIAL: DAWN (PAKISTAN)

THE leaders of Saarc are scheduled to meet in Nepal at a time when civilian deaths resulting from skirmishes between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control and the Working Boundary have cast a dark shadow over South Asia.

The guns may perhaps fall silent when the summit conference is held, but that is more likely to mean respite rather than a long-term solution to the problems that obstruct a more vibrant and cooperation-oriented relationship among the member countries.

Accepting the Nepalese prime minister's invitation to attend the conference in his country on November 26-27, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reiterated his desire for greater economic cooperation among the "major countries" of the South Asian forum. Earlier, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, had pleaded for greater cooperation among Saarc nations to alleviate poverty.

This is the same Mr. Modi who has upped the ante in Kashmir by giving carte blanche to his troops for a higher force level to 'retaliate' against Pakistan.

Founded 29 years ago, Saarc should have been a going concern by now; instead it has not even managed to hold annual summit conferences regularly.

In contrast, we have the enviable examples of such regional blocs as Asean, the African Union and the Organisation of American States, not to speak of the miracle that is the European Union. All that Saarc has done all these decades is to come up with a plethora of pious resolutions which have remained confined to paper.

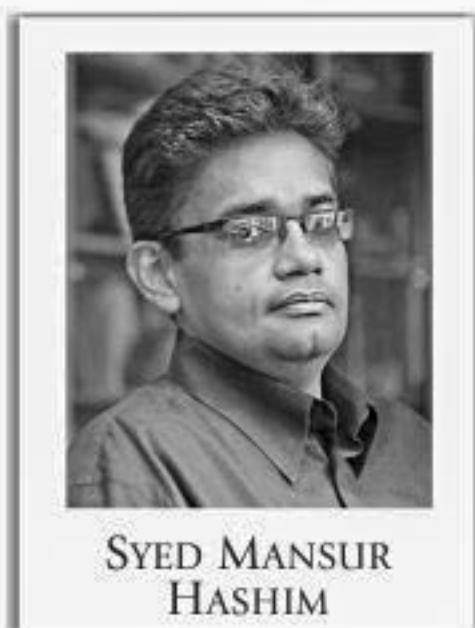
The 1990 conference in the Maldives launched two major projects for "organised tourism" and "special travel documents" providing for visa liberalisation for certain categories of visitors, but nothing practical was done.

Last week, Saarc energy ministers met in New Delhi and finalised the framework for cooperation to share technology in renewable energy and pricing mechanisms. But it remains to be seen whether there will be progress on this vital sector.

Given the fact that the Saarc bloc comprises 23% of the world's population, the scope for trade and economic growth is enormous. But the basic issue is the mistrust between its two major powers, Pakistan and India, and the latter's dominating attitude.

A regional grouping can work in an atmosphere free from duress and coercion. But, sadly, this is lacking in South Asia. Social dividends from trade can provide the impetus for cooperation, but Saarc's political leadership has shown a lack of will to turn the regional grouping into a dynamic entity.

A new option in international finance



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

CHINA has been toying with the idea of an international bank that would cater to addressing regional infrastructure needs and not focused on poverty reduction or alleviation. In that the Beijing-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has found response in countries like Bangladesh that have dire need for finance without the added burden of answering to issues of governance and where members will have a more equitable say in the running of the institution. Needless to say, AIIB's launching drew a lot of flak from existing institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) on "the ambiguous nature of the AIIB proposal as it currently stands."

The two principal points of contention with AIIB is that China will use the institution to counter the ADB and WB. That possibility cannot be ruled out given that China commands less than 6% voting power at ADB against a combined voting prowess to the tune of the 26% between the United States and Japan. It will certainly give China more regional influence. The other point being that AIIB will provide it with a legitimate means to expand economically into the region supplanting western interests. Whatever may be the arguments against AIIB, there is no contending with the fact that the ADB falls far short of financial capacity to meet Asia's "need for infrastructure funding, and AIIB is not entirely in the same business as the poverty-reduction-oriented ADB."

All said and done, according to a WB report titled 'Reducing Poverty by Closing South Asia's Infrastructure Gap,' Bangladesh will have to spend anywhere between \$7 billion to \$10 billion a year until 2020 to upgrade its infrastructure, including power, water and road connectivity, to cater to its expanding population. The massive gap in infrastructure must be a priority policy issue for the government to propel the country's economic growth. According to the study, the country has 0.1 kilometer of road per 1,000 people, which is the lowest in the region. Only 10% of roads in the country are paved, which, again, is the lowest in the region.

Asia has experienced unprecedented urbanisation. With the region's urban population "projected to rise by 650 million between 2010 and 2030," experts estimate that Asia will need to invest up to \$11 trillion in urban infrastructure to accommodate this demographic shift. Yet the capital infusion needed for such infrastructure development has not been forthcoming given the global financial meltdown of 2007-2008. With Chinese institutions having lent an estimated \$670 billion in loans,

guarantees and insurance over the last eight years, it is easy to see why ADB and other multilateral agencies are jittery with the rise of AIIB. Not only that, China's own infrastructure boom over the last two decades, i.e. building and servicing projects, has given it the capacity and expertise to "export" that skill to other Asian economies through such an institution. AIIB will start operating commercially at the end of 2015. It will concentrate on rail, road, power and other projects across the region.

It is no secret that very substantial foreign currency loans will be required to get infrastructure projects under the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) region. Some potentially beneficial projects have been identified from a regional perspective. These include, for instance, an oil pipeline stretching from Shilliguri (West Bengal, India) to Parbatipur (Bangladesh) that will allow Bangladesh to import diesel directly from Indian refineries in Assam. When we talk about the Sarc power grid, we are essentially talking about investments in electricity grid substations across borders, gas trading from areas such as Tripura (India) through transmission lines to Bangladesh, and construction of a power grid that will enable the country to import excess electricity from gas-rich neighbours to electricity-starved nations like Bangladesh. All such plans can become feasible if finance can be made readily available, and it is here that AIIB can play a constructive role alongside multilateral agencies such as ADB.

As pointed out by *The Economist* in a recent article, "for other Asian countries, the attraction of the scheme is all too obvious: money. The ADB has estimated that Asia needs to invest 'about \$8 trillion in national infrastructure and \$290 billion in regional infrastructure between 2010 and 2020 to sustain its growth trajectory.' One of the central themes of the APEC meetings this year is improving 'connectivity' in the Asia-Pacific, including physical connectivity, i.e., infrastructure."

For Bangladesh, prospect of getting a loan to build crucial infrastructure like the proposed Padma bridge has become an issue of prestige as much as economic need. However, given the present predicament of the fallout experienced with both WB and ADB, it may be perceived that AIIB will be a viable alternative. While a loan coming out of the new bank may not be any cheaper than what the WB or ADB had to offer, the issue of "no-strings-attached" loan-sanctioning may be of particular import to the government. With China's accumulated \$4 trillion of accumulated foreign reserves, it is safe to assume the country is well poised to increase the authorised capital of AIIB in the coming years as its portfolio of projects increase. The emergence of AIIB in the near future also opens up the possibility of countries like Bangladesh to "negotiate" on interest rates for large loans, which hitherto had not been possible.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

An emerging new social coalition?



PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged as the largest party in the Maharashtra and Haryana Assemblies, reconfirming its status as the main point of reference in Indian politics. Behind its latest success lie factors which will influence politics for some time.

An even more assertive, masculine BJP is now likely to evolve under an absolutist leadership which isn't bound by any constraints in pursuing trademark Hindutva agendas, including a Ram temple at Ayodhya (which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has re-invoked), as well as "love jihad," which has yielded dividends.

The BJP won a majority in Haryana despite most Jats voting against it and ally Akali Dal deserting it. But even more significant is its 122/288-seat victory in Maharashtra, India's most-industrialised and second most-populous state.

The BJP risked going solo despite the assured victory of its 25-year-old alliance with the Shiv Sena, which led in 244/288 Assembly segments in the Lok Sabha. The risk paid off.

Three factors explain the BJP's performance, each more important than so-called "Modi magic." These are: unpopularity of incumbent governments; creation of the elements of a new coalition across different caste-community layers; and the BJP's surcharged election campaign which overwhelmed its opponents' lifeless canvassing.

According to a survey, Maharashtra's Congress-National Congress Party coalition was widely seen as ineffective and corrupt. More than five times more people thought it "very corrupt" than those who thought it "not-all-that-corrupt." In Haryana, 75% thought the government was suppressing the land controversy involving Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law Robert Vadra.

In both, the BJP built a "coalition of the extremes": the upper castes, on the one hand, and Other Backward Classes (OBC), and to an extent, Dalits and Adivasis, on the other.

In Maharashtra, 52% of the upper castes voted for the BJP. The BJP also won 38% of OBC and one-third of Adivasi votes. But it got only 13% of Muslim votes (Congress, 53%).

The BJP got more votes from the rich (35%) than from other income-groups. It thus built a less inclusive variant of the Congress coalition of the 1950s-1960s, comprising the upper castes-Muslims-Dalits-Adivasis. The new bloc, with Hindutva consolidation through communal violence, won the BJP the Lok Sabha elections in the North.

In Haryana too, upper-caste groups favoured the BJP. Dalits and OBCs backed it under the influence of the Dera Sacha Sauda and khap panchayats.

Another factor was social conservatism. A recent poll says 80 percent-plus of Haryana's respondents oppose marriage within the same clan/village; only 22% oppose khap panchayats, and 70% object to women wearing

jeans. The BJP gains from this reactionary conservatism.

The BJP will probably turn such coalition-building, combined with reaction, into a national election strategy, especially if it can attract OBC-Dalit youth by promising Gujarat-style "development."

Gujarat isn't about development, but GDP growth, which doesn't lead to modernisation, or human capacity enhancement through healthcare, education, etc. For aspirational unemployed subaltern groups which have invested all their family savings in low-quality education, it means some kind of employment.

Regrettably, no party has policies to generate jobs or gainful self-employment for these restive subaltern layers. The BJP will let them down. Its policies can deliver sweetheart deals and super-profits to corporations, not jobs or a living wage.

Not to be underrated is the Modi-Amit Shah leadership's high-powered election campaign, financed by Big Business and run by RSS foot-soldiers. Under its spell, an astounding 40 percent-plus of voters chose the BJP close to election day.

The Maharashtra-Haryana results will further feed Hindutva hubris, and increase insecurity among the minorities. Hyderabad-based Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen has debuted in Maharashtra: it won two seats and was runner-up in three others. This reaction to Hindu-communalism spells further Muslim ghettoisation.

The BJP's victory run has aggravated the Congress's paralysis. The Congress must accept that the Sonia-Rahul leadership -- which temporarily stemmed its post-1984 decline -- has failed. But it lacks the courage to do so -- and its leadership the decency to make way for others.

The Congress cannot recover unless it reinvents itself through an imaginative, frankly Left-of-Centre programme, without ifs and buts, which reconnects it to the masses.

A strong presence of the Left parties, which could have helped shift India's political centre of gravity in a pro-people direction, will be sorely missed. Alas, they're in a grave crisis, which they can't diagnose, leave alone resolve.

What does the BJP's dominance mean for the regional parties? Will they go the Shiv Sena way? The Sena was vulnerable. Its long-term decline was partially masked by its alliance with the BJP, but got accelerated after Bal Thackeray's death.

However, this doesn't quite hold true of regional parties embedded in two-party systems, like Telugu Desam/Telangana Rashtra Samiti, AIDMK-DMK or Biju Janata Dal. But the Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal (United), Rashtriya Janata Dal, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, and especially Bahujan Samaj Party, will face a tough BJP challenge.

Despite its deviousness and corruption, the BJP isn't becoming another Congress. Whether a "BJP system" of politics evolves, which rivals the once-famously-described "Congress system", remains an open question. What's beyond doubt is more social turmoil and political trouble.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Two sides of the same coin

Recently PM Sheikh Hasina commented against BNP: "Akta manusher gaye hat diye dekhuk..." (just touch a single man...). We appreciate our PM's concern for our people. But the memories of 'logi-boitha' rampage led by her are still fresh in people's mind. It seems to us that both Hasina and Khaleda have the same motto; one is trying to hold on to power by any means and the other is doing the same to be in power.

Mawduda Hasnin
Rajshahi

Skills training for deprived women

This is in reference to the encouraging front page report of TDS dated October 14, 2014. With little help, a group of underprivileged women have learnt to overcome odds and are now making a



PHOTO: STAR

living in Bogra, as the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in collaboration with UCEP is providing technical training such as basic computer skills, driving, auto-mechanics etc. to them. This training will give its participants, many of whom are survivors of domestic violence, a chance to stand on their own feet.

Hasna Begum
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

Law should be equal for all

On 8th October 2014, after spending the Eid and Puja vacation, my family and I were waiting at the Jessore rail station for a Khulna-bound train. Suddenly I saw a small crowd and being curious I went there. A mobile court was fining three youths Tk. 300 each as a punishment for smoking publicly. Those three youths, probably students of some university or college, hung their heads in shame. People surrounding them were hurling abuse at them. Two of them were able to pay the fine but the third couldn't, so he remained under police custody. At that time, our train arrived and we got on board.

No doubt, it is commendable to punish someone for smoking in public. But I am quite sure that many of the people who ridiculed the youths also smoke publicly. I can't resist mentioning the incident of our Social Welfare Minister Syed Mohsin Ali's smoking in public during a programme in Sylhet. Although he apologised after it provoked an outcry, yet he didn't face any punishment. Moreover, we see different people including government high-ups, members of law enforcing agencies, and influential people smoking publicly. It seems laws are always slack for them.

Santosh Das
Khulna

Comments on news report, "No country endorsed this govt: Khaleda," published on October 24, 2014

Touchstone

No country endorsed this government, yet the PM is being invited internationally and given state honours everywhere.

"No world leaders questioned: PM" (Oct. 24, 2014)

Gulshan Dhaka

Sooner or later, fairness will come and then definitely, AL will just evaporate. AL knows this and hence is afraid of holding a fair election.

Mortuza Huq

AL is afraid of election held in a free and fair manner.

"He got off easy" (Oct. 25, 2014)

Molla A. Latif

Agreed, he got off easy here but would not escape the trial of the Judge of the judges.

Dev Saha

This man could have stopped the genocide but rather chose the Nazi way to eliminate people from this beautiful land.

"Thanks to lax law enforcement" (Oct. 22, 2014)

Robiul Hasan

Drivers of buses and trucks are very arrogant. They cannot stand any vehicles in front of them.