

What a farce!

MAHMUDUR RAHMAN MANNA

It was repeatedly told that Khaleda Zia had not been confined and that she could go anywhere she wanted. But the fact that she could not was made abundantly clear yesterday. Such misuse of power is not acceptable.

From the beginning, we have equally criticised both the parties, and have sought to create a third party instead. However, in no way can we blame both the parties for what happened on January 5. The Awami League came to power by conducting the elections almost forcefully. And a year later, they want to make this a day of festivity for everyone, and celebrate 'Democracy Revival Day'. In the name of democracy, they have confined the opposition. It doesn't matter if the person in question is Begum Zia or Shokhina Begum; you just cannot restrict the mobility of someone without showing constitutional or legal reasons. You cannot stop someone from speaking. Not in a democracy.

Why would they not give BNP permission for rallies? For the deterioration of the political climate, I blame the AL. Meanwhile, the BNP chairperson had given a seven-point proposal a week ago where she had suggested a dialogue. In a democracy, there has to be space for dialogues and difference of opinion. Now if you say there will be no dialogue till 2019, what does it signal? If you refuse to talk, but then disallow rallies or movement of leaders, what sort of a democracy is it?

On one hand, the government is asking the opposition to be peaceful, but on the other, they are obstructing them every time there is an attempt to hold a programme. What sort of a farce is this? The way they used pepper sprays on the protestors, even on Begum Zia, whose asthma was aggravated, holding people hostage, placing a thousand police in front of the office and 9/10 sand trucks... what is the meaning of all these? A minister even went so far as to say that the sand had been commissioned by Khaleda Zia for building purposes. Is this the kind of comment we should expect from a minister in a democratic country? There is no

doubt that we want peace, but it is hypocritical of the ruling party to demand peace from BNP when it is acting in such a fascist manner.

The AL would like us to believe that there is no support for BNP. The reality is that there are people who are taking to the streets, but many of them are being mercilessly beaten. You cannot stop them through violence forever, so there will come a time when, I am sad to say, people will flood the streets under BNP's leadership. Why am I saying this? Just look at the amount of people there was in the rallies in Comilla or Habiganj in which Begum Zia spoke. It was much more than what the ruling party can mobilise. Why did not they not allow a rally in Gazipur? Were they afraid that twice as many people would go to the BNP rally?

There is a growing trend among the ruling party politicians to boast about development as a counterpoise to democracy. There are some countries where development has taken place without democracy. But there was commitment and patriotism of the leaders behind the development initiative. In our country what is going on is not development. It is just plundering. The ruling party members have plundered banks; the government has rescheduled loans of the party members grossly violating banking rules. In the Padma Bridge construction project, the government estimated 10 thousand crore taka for the construction of the full bridge and associated facilities. But now they are talking about 6000 crore taka only for constructing the approaching road. Is there any accountability? The real credit goes to our hardworking migrant workers, garment workers and farmers for keeping the economy buoyant.

If BNP wants to maintain its existence, it has no choice but to declare programmes. Whether or not BNP has the capacity to do so and to reach its goal is a different issue. But if BNP fails to create a movement, there is no doubt that the democratic space will shrink. And if it wins, it is not as if BNP-Jamaat will do anything better when they come

to power; but for the sake of democracy, I am appealing to the government to think wisely, sit in dialogue with all relevant stakeholders including the opposition and hold an acceptable election. I am not talking about an election for the sake of putting BNP in power, but one where democratic principles are established. For that we need constitutional amendment and updates, we need to make the judiciary more independent, we have to end partisanship in administration etc. We need qualitative changes and democratic reforms.



We need national unity against the evil forces corrupting this country. I personally feel that if there is a free and fair election, where not only Awami League and BNP will participate but also a third force, perhaps a party like Aam Janata Party in India can emerge here. Maybe the third force would not be able to hold power immediately, but it can appear as a legitimate alternative.

The commentator is the Convenor of Nagorik Oikko.

No tolerance no democracy

DR. AL MASUD HASANUZZAMAN

We have observed the violent nature of confrontational politics before the January 5 general election. As there was no political understanding between the two parties at that time, a confrontational relation developed between the two parties. In order to uphold the constitution, the holding of the January 5 election had been imperative. After that, the political violence stopped and people heaved a sigh of relief. At that time, the government said it was an interim election and that it would hold the 11th national election later at a suitable time. But since then, the government has moved away from its previous stance and has been trying to consolidate its position. It seems it will not consider holding an interim election unless there is pressure from the people; the opposition alone won't be able to pressurise the government to do so. In the last one year, the government has been formulating policies and implementing those based on its election manifesto. It wants to gain peoples' acceptance by implementing projects of public interest.

On the other hand, because of structural

weaknesses, the opposition party has failed to organise any political movement against the ruling party and so far has failed to engage people in its programmes. Even the party stalwarts are not involved in the programmes, let alone general people. But the opposition members are firm in their demand for a caretaker government. A few days ago, the opposition leader proposed a seven-point demand, of which holding of a national election under a caretaker government was reiterated again. But the government cannot take any risk to allow possible anarchical situation right now that might hamper its consolidation process and is seemingly inflexible to resort to coercive policy measures. As a student of political science, I think the government needs to let the opposition hold peaceful programmes for the sake of democracy. Although it is always risky, as peaceful programmes can turn into violent protests any time, if the Jamaat-e-Islami, BNP's key ally and the Chhatra Shibir get involved.

What is important is to establish electoral democracy in Bangladesh, which is not possible without political tolerance. The BNP should present a detailed proposal for holding dialogue. All should come forward including the allies of the two parties, the civil society organisations etc., to create an environment for holding dialogue.

What BNP needs to do is to solve the factional clashes inside the party and overcome the party's structural weaknesses, if it wants to advance in the changed circumstances. In order to be successful the party leaders have to come forward physically, approach and involve the masses and take the lead in the political rallies, meetings etc. that are being held. Only conveying their message through the media will not do.

The government has been trying to mobilise public opinion in its favour; if it can do so by ensuring good governance, people may not consider BNP as an alternative.

In a democracy, the role of the opposition is extremely important, without an opposition party, democracy is meaningless. The government and the opposition have to act within the constitutional limit and practice a tolerant political culture.

The commentator is Professor of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University.

Some predictions for the world economy, 2015

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The world economy will navigate through some choppy waters in the first few months of 2015. The reasons for my cautious optimism are threefold: the weakness of Eurozone economies, the behaviour of the oil market, and political uncertainties in Ukraine, Greece, and the Middle East. Barring

any cataclysmic developments in the three areas I just identified, it would have been easy to forecast 2-3% growth in most G8 and developing countries, steady job creation and economic prosperity shared by all, and relative stability in the financial, housing, and foreign exchange markets. In other words, if we assume "Business As Usual" in all markets and geographical areas, it is not

too difficult to relax and expect that 2015 would be as good, if not better, than the year we just passed.

Unfortunately, there are some pockets of conflict and political uncertainty now, and lurking in the near horizon. To start with the minor ones, there is expected to be some tremors in the Eurozone countries as Greece heads for parliamentary elections on January 25th, and the leftist coalition assumes power in the Hellenic Parliament. The left has repeatedly voiced its intention to reverse some of the austerity measures that are in place as it attempts to recover from the disastrous economic crisis which shook the European Community only a few years ago. Next, the rest of European countries experienced a mild recession last year and the European Bank is expected to counter widespread fears of economic recession and deflation by undertaking a programme of quantitative easing along the lines of the US Federal Reserve. However, the German Constitutional Court ruled against this policy recently and the fate of this much-needed programme still hangs in the balance pending the appeal in the European Court.

The more serious problems that await the world economy as it tries to recover are the road bumps in the form of uncertainty in the BRICS countries (notably Brazil and Russia), the recession in Japan, and the prospects of trade recovery in European countries as the Euro starts its slide against the US Dollar. Many of EU's exports were hurt in the aftermath of sanctions adopted by the West against Russia following its interference in Ukraine. Agricultural exports were severely curtailed and this along with lack of growth in domestic demand has been a serious blow to most EU countries except Germany and UK.

Let me now turn to some of the areas of strength as we move forward in the coming year. First of all, the lower price of oil is being heralded as a godsend during the winter months and has been providing economic stimulus for the last six months. The benefits of lower price of gas, heating oil, and energy for power plants is a boon for most countries except the oil exporters. Undoubtedly the external shock of this drop in oil price is adversely affecting the economies of Russia, Nigeria, Venezuela, and the Middle-East, and might have a destabilising impact on some of them. However, as fellow economists like to phrase it, the benefits of lower oil price have so far outweighed the costs.

The other strength is the robust growth of the US economy which is the world's largest. For the last two quarters, the US GDP growth has exceeded predictions and grew 5.0% at an annual rate in the third quarter of 2014—the strongest single quarter since 2003. While many economists see this growth as a blip and offer many warning signs regarding the weakness of this growth particularly in the lack of income growth, structural unemployment and income inequality, it cannot be denied that these require strong political will and it is not clear whether the new Congress or the US political establishment have the will or the vision to undertake any reforms in this area. The US economy is expected to grow at a robust rate of 3% this year and while job growth is very lopsided, it will bring the unemployment rate down even further. Inflation is in check, and while the Fed is expected to raise the borrowing rate in the coming months, it might have minimal impact on borrowing and the stock market.

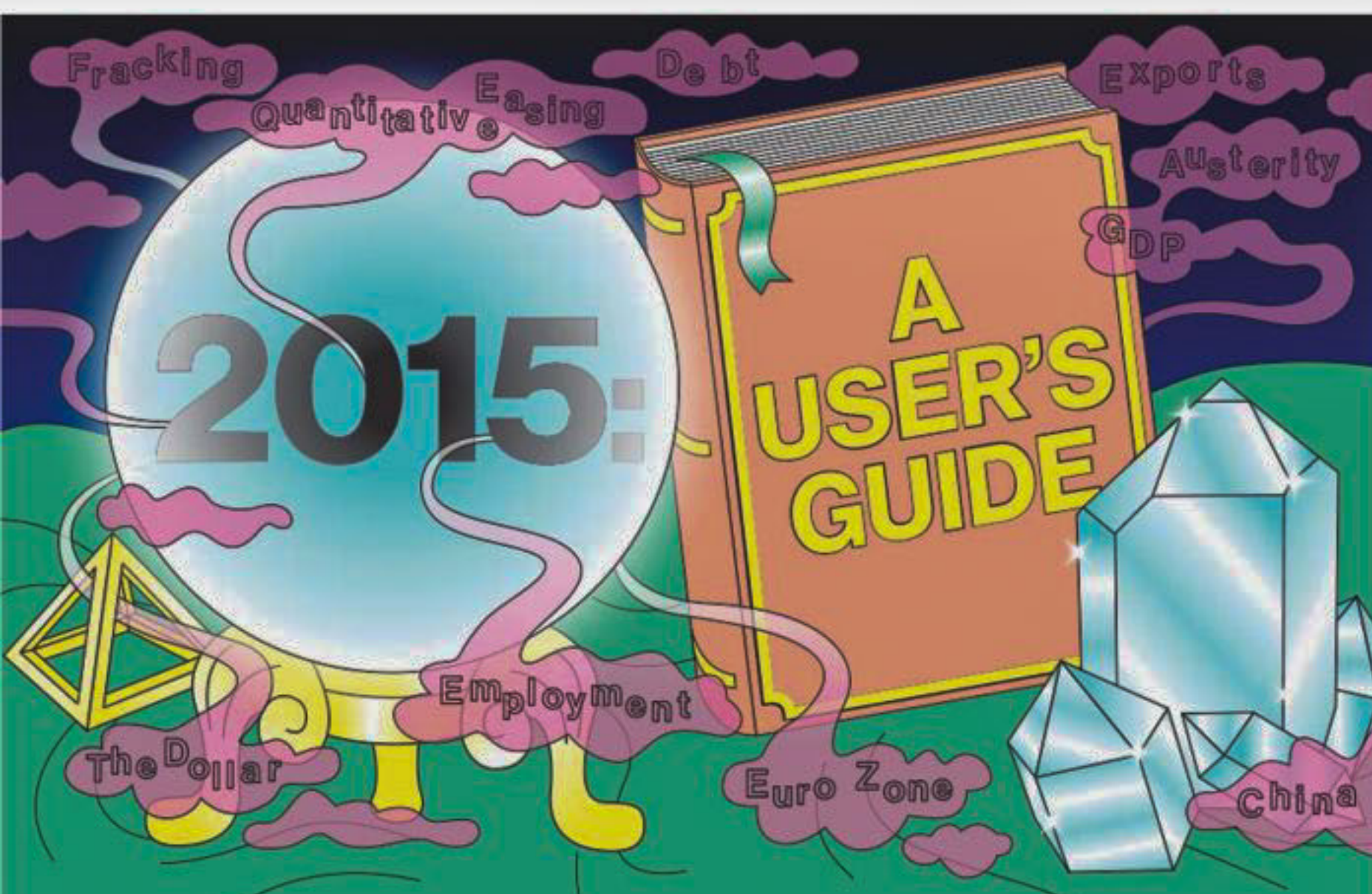
Another sign that the world economy is off on a good footing is the growing optimism that

Japan and China will reclaim their growth rates. Both countries have taken initiatives to slow down their economic downside and have seen some initial results. Japan's yen is declining and this is expected to boost exports growth and thus compensate for the weakness in domestic demand. The government has postponed an increase in sales tax from October 2015 to April 2017, and Bank of Japan, the central bank, announced on October 30th that it will strengthen QE by \$730 bn. This will mean that demand for bonds will go up which, given the inverse relationship between bond prices and returns, will bring down interest rates further. The Japanese yen has been falling against the dollar, and dropped a whopping 46% since the start of 2012, and this makes Japan's exports cheaper, giving it a boost.

China has similarly taken strong measures to boost its growth rate to 7% although it is not clear that the higher rate it was used to in the last decade will be claimed in light of problems that it is still grappling with notably, deflationary pressures, housing glut, and poor industrial planning. Consumer price and PPI grew at its slowest rate in five years in November thereby increasing the cost of borrowing. But the central bank has lowered the interest rate and the regional governments have taken measures to boost its environmental sector.

Finally, the European economies are expected to grow faster and the rate will increase from .8% to 1.4% led by Germany, UK and the effect of the stimulus provided by quantitative easing by ECB. Economists also see a positive development in the downward movement in public and private debt levels in all major G8 countries.

The writer is an economist, lives and works in Boston, USA.



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The writer is an economist, lives and works in Boston, USA.

QUOTABLE Quote

Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.

John F. Kennedy

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Farm towers
- Temple leader
- Peer
- Director Woody
- Hourly noisemaker
- Idiosyncrasy
- Uno plus due
- Photographer Goldin
- Stiffly phrased
- Twosome
- Snaky fish
- Top-rated
- Handed over
- Lawyer's jobs
- Pro votes
- Stir-fry pan
- It's south of S.D.
- Bitter brew
- Discoverer's cry
- Disencumber
- Young one
- Timer on a chain
- New York's -Island
- Similar
- Canary chow
- Kitchen gadget

DOWN

- Religious groups
- Poor sport's cry
- TV's Susan
- Sturdy tree
- Like some spoons
- Entered Indy
- Maximum amount
- They "have more fun"
- For the reason that
- Tangled
- Pitcher Hershiser
- Noted Virginia family
- Make cookies
- Party snacks
- Apartment door feature
- Fiasco
- US-USSR tension
- Be patient
- Printer's need
- Top story
- Philosopher John
- Old anesthetic
- Yound one
- Boxing great

Yesterday's answer

CRYPTOQUOTE

M OXBMU'C BNUL NC JZPMUPQ FSMU M BMU'C: CSP JSMURPC NF BXQP XVFPUI.

—XZNIPQ SPQVXQL

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: YOU DON'T CHOOSE YOUR FAMILY. THEY ARE GOD'S GIFT TO YOU, AS YOU ARE TO THEM.

—Desmond Tutu

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte

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