

President's talk with political parties

Positive development on EC formation

WE welcome the news that the Hon'able President will be holding dialogues with the political parties on the formation of a new election commission on his return from Singapore. The PM had also alluded to it recently during a press conference. In this regard we recall a similar exercise by late President Zillur Rahman that unfortunately did not produce any result.

The point that must be emphasised here is that although it is for the President to appoint the EC, he can only do so on the advice of the PM. The President can go only as far as the Prime Minister would want him to. It would therefore be our expectation that the PM would allow a wide mandate to the President that would enable him to broker a deal and reach a modus vivendi in appointing an EC that would be acceptable to all.

It would not be out of place to mention that for a greater part of its existence of nearly seven decades, the AL had been in the opposition, struggling on behalf of the people for democratic and political rights. Therefore, we feel, there cannot be any party in a better position than the AL to understand the travails of the opposition.

In this regard too we would like to put our faith and confidence in the lifelong experience of the Hon'able President, much of which was spent also on the opposition bench. And, given the sagacity he displayed during his tenure as the Speaker of the Parliament, we feel he is eminently endowed to give the country an equitable solution.

It should not be lost upon anybody that the nub of the problem is to have an EC that would be acceptable to all.

Full verdict in Rid Pharmaceuticals case out

Will the guilty now be brought to justice?

THE full judgment of the said case is now out. A Dhaka court on November 28 had found two officials of the Drug Administration guilty of negligence in the Rid Pharmaceutical case which supplied toxic paracetamol syrup that killed at least 28 children in 2009. The two accused were drug superintendents at the time and were found to have dealt with the case against the accused company with incompetence and inefficiency, which ultimately led to the acquittal of all the five accused. The manner in which the case was handled left much to be desired. From the very beginning, it smacked of a deliberate half-hearted approach by the officials that eventually led to a weak prosecution and the accused going free as the case built up against them was flawed.

This sort of negligence and half-hearted effort by the drug watchdog body is totally unacceptable. That it has taken seven years for the victims' families to wait for justice is painful enough.

We had been assured by the minister of health that action would be taken after the full judgment was published. Now that it has been, we expect legal actions would follow immediately. It is time to rectify the wrongs of the past and let the parents of those unfortunate children have some solace. They have had to wait too many years to bring this sad chapter in their lives to a close. The officials who have been named in the court report must face the full brunt of the law and an example must be set that playing with people's health will not go unpunished.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Traumatising crime TV shows

Nowadays crime TV shows broadcast by almost all TV channels in our country are very popular. But have we ever thought that these TV serialisations of murders and physical torture can traumatise the viewers, particularly the children?

A recent study by Purdue University shows that viewers of crime shows can suffer from 'mean world syndrome', the belief that the world is more dangerous than it actually is. Media scholar George Gerbner associates this syndrome with paranoia about victimisation. So I request the authority of our TV channels to present these sensitive programs with more caution. News is important only when it serves public interest.

Ashek Sarker
Comilla

26 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY

Why I am not celebrating

MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

IN a recent commentary piece, Mr. Mahfuz Anam shed light on the Democracy Restoration Day and outlined the demands that the then tripartite alliance between the Awami League-led 15-party coalition, the BNP-led 7-party coalition and a group of left-leaning parties, made to the nation. In summary, December 6, 1990, represents the fall of the military-autocrat General HM Ershad from presidency, a victory for democratic principles and the fulfilment of the prerequisite for our two leaders to lead the nation. Yet sadly, Mr. Anam's commentary and other media reports are the sole mainstream sources of material pertaining to this significant event. And for someone who was not even born during the anti-Ershad struggle, such is all the information we get and have. That, my countrymen, is a massive insult to all those who had fought on the streets to restore multi-party democracy in Bangladesh. It is an insult to the Noor Hossains and the Dr. Milons, and to an extent, to the freedom fighters who had so ardently fought to establish people's rule in Bangladesh. We cannot let our country fall to such a pit.

I cannot, nor should I, speak for a different generational era, when it comes to politics. I am sure for Mr. Anam and his colleagues, the Ershad-era of the 80s and the subsequent election of Khaleda Zia in 1991 to the Prime Minister's office, must have been a riveting period of journalistic excitement. Nevertheless, for those born after 1990, Democracy Restoration Day is sadly not a regular instalment in the annual celebratory calendar. Why? Well, partly because my generation, and especially those in the middle-class or above, have disenfranchised themselves from politics. Parents do not want their children to aspire to be a politician, neither do most teenagers feel it necessary to pursue an academic career which may allow for a route to politics. This is not to say we have no interest in government or governance. We surely do. But that remains in the vicinity of conversations at the dinner table and social media arguments. We are surely at fault for being ignorant and unenthusiastic in some cases. However, there remains another strong reason, and that very reason is why I am writing this op-ed.



Noor Hossain at the November 10, 1987 protest for democracy in Dhaka.

Whereas December 6 should be the day when the people of Bangladesh come out in the streets and celebrate the culmination of a game changing united movement to oust a dictator, whilst wholeheartedly observing the instillation of parliamentary democracy, it is a day where we contemplate the future of this country's politics. For the youth of the country, politics is all about Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. We observe them, we criticise them, we compliment them. We have not seen Bangabandhu or Ziaur Rahman, neither have we been part of the Ershad era. But neither of our two leaders, publicly or tangibly, showcase their reverence for democratic values to the extent where people deem it suitable and sufficient. Yet, without their combined democratic efforts to oust Ershad, neither our current Prime Minister nor Khaleda Zia would have reached the position and reputation they have today. December 6 should have

been a celebration of two strong women, differed by political ideologies but united by a desire to build democracy. Yet, we see quite the opposite. I do not see the Awami League celebrating this day wholeheartedly as they do when the Prime Minister returns from a successful foreign trip. I do not see BNP workers lining the streets passionately as they do when Khaleda Zia visits her husband's grave on the foundation anniversary of the party. Without December 6, 1990, Bangladesh would never be able to proudly boast its unique female leadership at the top of the political establishment. Yes, we read a statement here and there, and yes, we observe a few rallies, yet Democracy Restoration Day and the values which it represents, surely do not get an ounce of attention that they deserve from our political parties.

Ershad's rehabilitation into the political scene and his subsequent association with both the AL and BNP

might explain why we do not make a fuss about the restoration of democracy. To his credit, the General has survived valiantly. And to the credit of both leading parties, they have utilised him well. It is basic politics. The politics of survival. But at the same time, it is ugly politics. It is the brand of politics which deters the youth from showing interest. It is that ugliness which prevents parents from thinking about motivating their children to be the next Maulana Bhashani or AK Fazlul Haq. One questions why we fought so ardently to restore democracy, only to be back to a system where the opposition is treated as merely a fringe actor in the political process.

Nevertheless, as Bangladeshis, it is in our genes to remain hopeful. We demand that the principles based upon which Ershad was brought down and the unity shown by Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia during that period, reverberate onto our current day actions and are practiced across the political aisle. The leadership is still the same, yet egotism and personal issues seem to have gotten in the way of practicing cooperative democracy. We can build the democracy that we foresaw in 1990. We can celebrate our system proudly one day. We can ensure increased youth participation. All we need is for our political leadership to respond to the wills and wishes of our people. The youth and the whole of Bangladesh so desperately want a positive sign from its politicians. They want to see participatory democracy. They yearn to be motivated into tangibly and philosophically participating in our political story.

We want to rejoice Bangladesh's democracy. We want to make politics a supporting hand to our extensive development, and not an unstable deterrence. If we do not do that, then as Mr. Anam rightly points out, democracy will continue to be for the winners only and we will continue seeing the educated youth distance themselves.

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Photo: Dinu Alam on Facebook/Dinu Alam on English Wikipedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rally_of_Nov_10_1987_-_1.jpg), "Rally of Nov 10, 1987 - 1", <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's demonetisation disaster



SHASHI THAROOR

ON November 8, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that, at the stroke of midnight, some 14 trillion rupees worth of 500 and 1,000 rupee notes – 86 percent of all the currency in circulation – would no longer be legal tender. With that, India's economy was plunged into chaos.

Modi's stated goal was to make good on his campaign pledge to fight "black money": the illicit proceeds – often held as cash – of tax evasion, crime, and corruption. He also hoped to render worthless the counterfeit notes reportedly printed by Pakistan to fuel terrorism against India. Nearly a month later, however, all the demonetisation drive has achieved is severe economic disruption. Far from being a masterstroke, Modi's decision seems to have been a miscalculation of epic proportions.

The announcement immediately triggered a mad scramble to unload the expiring banknotes. Though people have until the end of the year to deposit the notes in bank accounts, doing so in large quantities could expose them to high taxes and fines. So they rushed to gas pumps, to jewellery shops, and to creditors to repay loans. Long queues snaked in, out, and around banks, foreign-exchange counters, and ATMs – anywhere where people might exchange the soon-to-be-defunct notes.

But, upon getting to the front of the line, people were often met with strict withdrawal limits, because, in a display of shocking ineptitude, not enough new currency was printed prior to the announcement. Worse, the new notes' design prevents them from fitting into existing ATMs, and their denomination – 2,000 rupees – is too high to be useful for most people, especially given that the government's failure to print enough smaller-denomination notes means that few can make change.

India's previously booming economy has now ground to a halt. All indicators – sales, traders' incomes, production, and employment – are down. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh estimates that India's GDP will shrink by 1-2 percent in the current fiscal year.

But, as is so often the case, the impact is not being felt equally by all. India's wealthy, who are less reliant on cash and are more likely to hold credit cards, are relatively unaffected. The poor and the lower middle classes, however, rely on cash for their daily activities, and thus are the main victims of this supposedly "pro-poor" policy.

Small producers, lacking capital to stay afloat, are already shutting down. India's huge number of daily wage workers can't find employers with the cash to pay them. Local industries have suspended work for lack of money. The informal financial sector – which conducts 40 percent of India's total lending, largely in rural areas – has all but collapsed.

India's fishing industry, which depends on cash sales of freshly caught fish, is wrecked. Traders are losing perishable stocks. Farmers have been unloading produce below cost, because no one has the money to purchase it, and the winter crop could not be sown in time, because no one had cash for seeds.

Despite all of this, ordinary Indians have reacted with stoicism, seemingly willing to heed Modi's call to be patient for 50 days, even though it could be much longer – anywhere between four months and a year – before the normal money supply is restored. The government's assiduous public relations – which portray people's difficulties as a small sacrifice needed for the good of the country – seem to have done its job. "If our soldiers can stand for hours every day guarding our borders," one popular social media meme asks, "why can't we stand for a few hours in bank queues?"

But the sacrifice extends far beyond queues. Hospitals are turning away patients who have only old banknotes; families cannot buy food; and middle-class workers are unable to buy needed medicine. As many as 82 people have reportedly died in cash queues or related events. Furthermore, it seems likely that many of the short-term

be long before old habits – under-invoicing, fake purchase orders and bills, reporting of non-existent transactions, and blatant bribery – generates a new store of black money.

Many Modi supporters claim that the demonetisation policy's problems are a result of inept implementation. But the truth is that its design was fundamentally flawed. There was no "policy skeleton," no cost-benefit analysis, and no evidence that alternative policy options were considered. Judging by the blizzard of policy tweaks since the announcement, it seems clear that no impact study was carried out.

Yet, rather than recognise the mounting risks of the non-transparent policy environment he has created, Modi has been discussing going even further, moving India to an entirely "cashless society." Does he not know that more than 90 percent of financial transactions in India are conducted in cash, or that over 90 percent of retail



Famous cartoonist RK Laxman on demonetisation of higher denomination of Indian currency in 1978.

effects of the demonetisation could persist – and intensify – in the longer term, with closed businesses unable to reopen. It could also cause lasting damage to India's financial institutions, especially the Reserve Bank of India, whose reputation has already suffered.

Perhaps the worst part is that these sacrifices are not likely to achieve the government's stated goal. Not all black money is in cash, and not all cash is black money. Those who held large quantities of black money seem to have found creative ways to launder it, rather than destroying it to avoid attracting the taxman's attention, as the government expected. As a result, most of the black money believed to have been in circulation has now flooded into banks, depriving the government of its expected dividend.

On top of all of this, the government's plan does nothing to control the source of black money. It will not

outlets lack so much as a card reader? Is he unaware that over 85 percent of workers are paid in cash, and that more than half of the population is unbanked?

Modi came to power in 2014 promising to boost growth, create jobs for India's youthful population, and encourage investment. His poorly conceived demonetisation has made a mockery of these objectives, while bruising his reputation as an efficient and competent manager. How long it will take for India to recover is anyone's guess.

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