

EC's dialogue with stakeholders

The ball is in its court

We accept the premise that it is not the sole responsibility of the Election Commission to hold free and fair elections, but on its rests the primary responsibility of doing so. And a series of dialogues that the EC organised over the last several months with the stakeholders was indeed an acknowledgement of this reality. What was noticeable was the eagerness and sincerity of all the interlocutors to hold an election that fits the description of a 'good election'.

Political parties have given their views and suggestions which merits the EC's serious consideration for fulfilling its most important mandate. It is now for the EC to come out with its own views and suggestions for making the next parliamentary elections participatory and acceptable to all the stakeholders. It should also make public any difficulty it might face and the way out of it.

And it's the criticality of the role of the EC in the democratic setup that we want to flag. If election is a crucial process for a functioning democracy, fundamental to the formation of a representative government, then the EC's role, among all the democratic institutions, happens to be the most central.

We are constrained to say that the previous EC did not quite redeem itself during its entire tenure; and the manner of its conduct of the election in January of 2014 has sullied the reputation and dented the credibility of a very important democratic institution of the country. It is for the Commission to assure everyone that it would ensure a level playing field for all, and that an election that can be participated by all in a free manner would be its main endeavor. And neither is beyond the capacity of the EC to realize.

Discrimination against women in RMG

Law and policy must be sensitive to their needs

A recent study report by Karmojibi Nari and CARE Bangladesh pointed out a serious issue of discrimination that women in the readymade garments sector have to face: having to do more overtime duty, while at the same time, having fewer career prospects when it comes to promotion. The findings also pointed out a range of discriminatory practices and harassment that women are subjected to in the sector.

In terms of the first, it sounds too ridiculous to be true that the very workers who are putting in more time are the ones who have narrower career prospects. The studies revealed how there is a disparity in the numbers of men and women promoted to supervisory positions. This goes beyond to the trade unions, where the number of women representatives is far less compared to men. At the same time, while these women have no choice but to take on the extra work through overtime to earn a decent income at the cost of their health, they are the ones who have fewer facilities and amenities such as maternity leaves, provisions for women's special needs, the number of toilets for them etc. This is on top of the pervasive sexual harassment they have to encounter on a daily basis.

Women constitute a big portion of our RMG industry workers, and it is their hard work that is bringing our country foreign earnings. Yet, the number of gaps that exist in our labour laws, policies and practices is stunning. Not only do we need to revisit our labour laws to address these gaps and ensure their implementation, but also, as this findings show, especial attention needs to be given to solving the issues faced by women in the industry. It is they, after all, who are contributing the most to the industry, but being discriminated against the most.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Explore new labour markets

The Middle East, home to the majority of Bangladeshi expatriate workers, has been hit hard by a sharp fall in oil prices. This has led to various problems for Middle Eastern economies, which in turn has caused significant reductions in the salaries of Bangladeshi expatriate workers.

Consequently, Bangladesh, being massively dependent on remittance from the Middle East, has also experienced major reduction in remittance inflow during the current fiscal year. Therefore, exploring new labour markets can be a timely solution to addressing the brewing challenges that Bangladesh is going to face in the near future.

European countries should receive first priority in this regard. However, we should also focus on Far Eastern countries like Japan and Korea, as we currently have a relatively low number of expatriate workers working there, compared to what we could have.

Md Sadequr Rahman, Maniknagar



PHOTO: AFP

ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

Is Bangladesh falling for Myanmar's ploy?

AMIR KHASRU

WHILE for Bangladesh the Rohingya problem started back in 1978, for the Rohingyas, it started as early as the 17th and 18th centuries and became worse after 1940. For decades Myanmar have kept this problem alive, and Bangladesh, being geographically closest to Myanmar and Rohingya people, is constantly facing the aftermath. Yet it has never had a proper strategy to handle this issue. And the lack of speed and precise decision has become more evident with every passing day. Myanmar, on the other hand, has been very consistent in moving its agenda, a scheme that is gaining momentum along the way, and they have an action plan for their final goal.

In 1978, two hundred and fifty thousand Rohingyas were forced to take shelter in Bangladesh due to government-backed dispersion and eviction from their homeland. Bangladeshi authorities at the time initially sought to solve the problem by taking bilateral diplomatic initiatives, but Myanmar did not heed any diplomatic call. However, after China's mediation and a "special counter-measure" by Bangladesh government, they could not but negotiate.

An agreement was signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the July 9, 1978, for the repatriation of Rohingyas. One of the key points in this agreement was that the Myanmar government had referred to the Rohingya as a legally valid citizen. Under this agreement, Myanmar government was forced to take back almost all Rohingyas.

Soon after this, with this in mind, Myanmar changed the citizenship law for Rohingyas (especially Muslims) in Rakhine State in 1982, introducing a strange law which identified Rohingyas as foreign citizens, i.e. Bengali people. All the relevant documents and identity cards from before 1982, were seized from the Rakhine Rohingyas. Then three types of citizenship were introduced represented by pink, blue and green ID cards. Only people who had lived in Rakhine for at least five generations received full citizenship. The year 1823 was set as the benchmark, which favoured the Rakhine Buddhists. People who started living in the region after 1823, received associate citizenship. And those who did not receive full or associate citizenship before 1948 were dubbed as naturalised citizens. This last group of people are Rohingya Muslims who have been facing discrimination for generations. The new citizenship law was an obvious scheme by the Myanmar government to push out all the Rohingyas from their homeland where they have been living for several centuries.

In 1991-92 another round of violence and torture were inflicted on Rohingyas and this time two hundred thousand of them fled to Bangladesh. Following the exodus, Bangladesh again called for diplomatic action and Myanmar's foreign minister at that time reluctantly participated in a bilateral meeting organised by Dhaka in April, 1992. A joint statement was signed at that meeting which was later considered as an agreement. This agreement had several differences with the 1978 agreement. Firstly, Myanmar added two key words in this agreement, one was "Myanmar's lawful citizens" and other was "Myanmar's society members". Today it is very evident why these two terms were used.

The second key difference was that, in the 1992 joint statement Myanmar clearly stated that they would not take back anyone without proper documents. Third, those who were not willing couldn't be forced to return to Myanmar. With these three key differences lie the shortcomings in our farsighted planning. Policy makers at



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PHOTO: STAR

that time failed to realise the reason why Myanmar changed their citizenship law in 1982 and introduced new terms and conditions in the 1992 joint statement. All these are relevant to today's problem.

Myanmar is still referencing to the 1992 agreement. Bangladesh must realise why they keep impressing on 1992 and what the significance of 1982 citizenship law in the matter is. Without grasping the full extension of Myanmar's ploy of only taking "legitimate citizens" back, Bangladesh will always keep struggling with any sort of decision on Rohingya issue.

Since the latest influx of Rohingya from August 25 of this year, the 1992 Agreement keep coming back and at one-point Bangladesh even stated that Myanmar must take back Rohingyas according to the 1992 agreement. One has to wonder whether our policy makers comprehended exactly the implications of what they were saying. They ultimately did, but it is now too late.

Recently, one of the union minister of Myanmar State Councillor's Office completed a three-day visit to Dhaka. After a joint meeting with the Myanmar representative, the Bangladesh foreign minister said that they were ready to oblige to the 1992 treaty for Rohingya repatriation. On the very next day (October 4), the office of the Myanmar State Councillor said that according to the joint statement of 1992, legitimate citizens can return to Myanmar and they will gladly rehabilitate them.

Here is the catch, if this process starts, only 14 to 18 thousand Rohingyas out of 9 lakh can be repatriated. Finally realising the mistake, Bangladesh arranged a briefing with foreign diplomats on October 9. Even with the realisation one can still doubt whether Bangladeshi policy makers are able to see through Myanmar's intention or their 1982 citizenship law.

In the October 9 briefing, Bangladesh foreign minister stated that repatriation based on valid citizenship credentials will not work and it is Myanmar's trick of not taking back Rohingyas and not implementing the Kofi Annan Commission's resolution. This realisation should have come much earlier.

It is important to mention two things here. First, when

the problem arrived barging at the doors, Bangladesh was caught unaware. Secondly, Dhaka was hoping for leverage on Myanmar from common friends forgetting the basic rule of foreign policy—every nation prioritises themselves first.

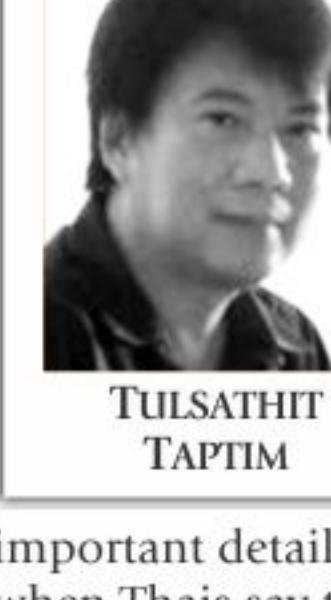
Another important thing to note is that the joint working group (JWG) which Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed upon might be completely powerless as no one knows how they will work, when will they work and what will they work for. Moreover, many believe, JWG itself is a Myanmar tactic to buy time ultimately aiming at befoiling the international community. The Bangladesh home minister visited Myanmar with a draft outline, hoping to sign a suitable agreement. However, both sides agreed to form a joint working group within November 30. The Myanmar Times on October 25 in a report said, "It's too early to accept [Bengalis] back from Bangladesh," Colonel Aung Htay Myint head of the Transnational Crime Division, told reporters at a news conference after the ministerial meeting. Myanmar officials have also said they will accept the terms and conditions of the agreement that was signed by Myanmar and Bangladesh in 1992. Aung San Suu Kyi and her office have been repeatedly saying that the joint statement of 1992 will be the basis of all negotiations.

Interestingly, right after the announcement of the formation of the joint working group, the State Councillor's Office of Myanmar made it public that the arrangement would be based on 1992 joint statement but no one from Bangladesh has opposed that. Not to mention, UN wasn't made aware of the joint working group nor will they have an observer status. Myanmar also has a long history of ignoring UN and its other organisations. So many are speculating that the joint working group is nothing but smoke and mirrors to waste time.

What happens now is the question. Should we accept that we are trapped by Myanmar's long-winded scheme. Will the Rohingyas end up being stateless forever? One can only hope that this is not the case.

Amir Khasru is a senior journalist.

King Bhumibol sowed the seeds of a new economic doctrine



TULSATHIT TAPTIM

His Majesty the King Rama IX of Thailand has been a huge jigsaw.

If one looks too close, one can miss the big, overall picture. Too far out and important details can go unnoticed. Even when Thais say their last goodbye to the late beloved monarch, overwhelmingly and wholeheartedly, it is not easy for foreign observers to really comprehend the whole thing.

The world is seeing massive oceans of black-wearing Thais gathering for a grand funeral ceremony, the scale of which has been unseen in modern Thai history and rare by global standards. The parades are culturally exquisite and the pavilion reflects all the traditional Thai grandeur.

All of these, however, are not even half the story.

Now, the world knows that here was a very hard-working, multi-talented King, who devoted himself to helping Thais get a better life, who rebuilt a monarchy that was facing a formidable test of time, and did so with maps, cameras, pens and pointers, not with a sword.

His integrity was unquestionable, and the much-scrutinised laws that guarded him could be summed up by the words of a government official, who could have sounded belligerent or rude to reporters a couple of years ago: "Others don't have what we have, so it's up to us, not to them, when it comes to protecting it."

It's his key philosophy, the Sufficient Economy, that may still have puzzled many including a lot of Thais.

He preached it, gently and subtly, but the idea was set against a glaring backdrop of a conventional economy that has been in place for a long time and firmly supported and cocooned by superpower nations.

His Sufficiency Economy idea is, in fact, simple. It advocates getting back to basics and not biting off more than one

can chew.

In elementary school terms, the existing mainstream economy in its most complex but widespread form goes like this: Village A bets on how many fish Village B will catch three years from now. In many cases, money is borrowed from Village C to place the bets. Village D insures the debts, some of which are to be bought by Village E if they go bad. When the bad debts get worse, Village F becomes a rescuer by buying all.

King Rama XI's idea has you catch your own fish just enough to put some on the table and sell the rest in the

digital numbers whirling on computer screens at financial institutions across the globe than genuine human abilities to create food, shelters or medicine.

Again, if one looks "too close", one will claim an "irony".

King Rama XI didn't really have to catch fish for a living, some argue. This, however, is more or less the same as criticising the "humiliation" of pledging to "serve under Your Majesty's feet in every life" while the crucial fact that it was always him who did the serving is ignored, or bemoaning the obligatory standing up in the movie theatres while



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PHOTO: AFP

nearest market so you can buy additional healthy food. Simple?

Yes, but it's hard to do nonetheless.

One may say he was a dreamer, but the six-village complexity a few years ago triggered the world's biggest economic meltdown in recent memory, which came at a time when human beings were better equipped than at any point in history to put food in every mouth on the planet.

In other words, the near-collapse of the world economy has more to do with

waiting in a Starbucks queue may take a lot longer.

If one looks from afar, important details could be missed. Television footages in honour of the late monarch can be bland if one does not think along. Every one of them features the green of veggies and crops, the dark brown of soil, the translucence of water and the limited number of farm animals. One will claim that the "bland" footages are nothing about an obligatory routine.

Nobility is in the details, in this case.

The monarch's idea is that if you can make good use of the soil, keep the veggies and the crops green, maintain the flow of the water and raise an appropriate number of farm animals, you will really need little else. You will be happy, fulfilled and dignified.

Nobody ever heard His Majesty the King Rama XI criticise any economic system that he might have disagreed with. The "obligatory" TV footages carry absolutely no political message, with interviewees, in a matter-of-fact manner, only thanking him and talking about how to get enough water and keep the soil rich. They never went out of their way to ask others to do the same. They only look genuinely happy and sincerely grateful.

The economic status quo is very omnipresent and deep-rooted, and King Rama XI was certainly well aware of that. He also appreciated the fact that the Thai people are an unavoidable part of it, particularly because this is an era of "globalisation". His Majesty passed away in October last year, certainly realising that his Sufficiency Economy idea will take time to grow.

One of the biggest funerals the world has ever seen has passed.

Again, if one concentrates too much on the "scale", some very important things that King Rama XI has done or conceived could be overlooked.

To measure the monarch and how Thais feel toward him, October 26 is a key barometer, but it is just one of many.

He must have wanted his Sufficiency Economy philosophy to be up for the judgement, though. As an outgrowth of a system called "absolute", challenged by something called "democracy", His Majesty the King Rama XI espoused an idea that sought to create genuine dignity and equality.

He has sown the seeds, which can wait patiently underground, for as long as it takes.

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