



## Rethink and reform politics

### *The compelling message from BDF*

**T**HIS year's BDF meeting stood out from the previous ones. There has been a marked stridency in the development partners' positioning on issues. Pleasantries were in short supply and even the customary scale of praise and brickbats was heavily tipped towards the unsavoury.

What comes through the donor-Bangladesh government interface can be summed up as follows. First, by past standards, government's credibility with donors has touched a new low. Secondly, the donor community's observations have not been just acerbic, these even came with a hint of partial withdrawal or disengagement from programmes. Third, the discourse was dominated by non-economic issues like never before. Fourth, a clear message rang out that non-economic factors like corruption, high cost of doing business and deepening insecurity reduced the annual growth rate by at least three percent. Fifth, the development partners stressed the paramount need for providing security to ordinary citizens who basically are the engine of national development.

To address the whole gamut of issues, the development partners have come out strongly with a commonsensical recipe, oft-suggested by our independent media and civil society as well, for the government's tolerance of dissent and allowing of space to the opposition. Given the stalemate, the fundamental responsibility is the government's to engage the opposition rather than distance itself from the latter, far less be exclusionary or dismissive about it. Hopefully, the ruling party has learned, perhaps the hard way, that it doesn't pay to go it alone in matters of presenting the country's case to the outside world. Furthermore, the idiom a government uses for domestic consumption to get around their follies can fall flat on expert foreign audience who have their own judgmental criteria. That is perhaps another lesson to draw.

The message is equally targeted to the opposition. They need to respond as a responsible opposition to a government offer for talks that will have travelled an extra mile. There is no discord between the government and the opposition on basic reform issues. Only growing political confrontation raises newer questions and causes hardening of positions. Thereby the potential for building a working relationship is wasted. Such a relationship would have paid equal dividends to both sides regardless of who were in power.

Setting aside the donor language or expressions which, in some instances, were abrasive verging on being grated, we are in broad agreement with the thrust the BDF laid on priority concerns and issues before the nation. But the point we would like to highlight is that none of the issues will be properly addressed unless the opposition is given the space it deserves because of the public support it commands and no less because the Constitution of the country and the supreme national interest demand it.