

Awami League should join the committee



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE addressing a grand rally at Chittagong on March 1 organised by the AL-led 14-party combine, the Leader of the Opposition and the AL chief Sheikh Hasina dismissed the proposal made by the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in her winding up speech to the 20th session of Parliament on February 28 for the formation of a committee comprising members of the ruling BNP and the main opposition AL to discuss the AL's reform proposals and devise a fair procedure to ensure free and fair elections.

Sheikh Hasina said that there was no need to constitute such a committee as their reform proposals were quite clear. Earlier in her speech in Parliament on February 28, the Leader of the Opposition wanted to know whether the Prime Minister would carry out the opposition-proposed reforms in the caretaker government (CTG), Election Commission (EC) and electoral system for the sake of free and fair elections.

While making her proposal in the House for forming the bipartisan committee and inviting the AL to nominate their members to the committee, the Prime Minister indicated that, if necessary, others might also come and find out fair modalities of free and fair elections.

The Prime Minister's proposal in the House for forming a committee has generally been welcomed by the people, the media, and the development partners of Bangladesh.

Commenting on the Prime Minister's proposal in House for forming the committee, The Daily Star in its editorial on March 2 wrote: "The proposal made by the PM for both the ruling and opposition parties to form a committee to work

towards consensus on the opposition's reform agenda, coming as it did on the last day of the session, and somewhat vague in its particulars, is nevertheless a very positive step forward that is to be commended."

Another Dhaka daily (New Age) in its editorial on 2 March commented: "The Prime Minister's response to the proposals for caretaker and Election Commission reforms made by the Leader of the Opposition could surely have been

for reform of caretaker government and the Election Commission and said that a committee could be formed with representatives of both opposition and ruling parties. The fact that the Prime Minister has responded to the Opposition's demand may look like a positive development but such a conclusion would be premature."

One Dhaka daily has quoted BDNews, which says that the US, the UK, and the European Union missions in Bangladesh have

- Empowering the EC to conduct elections neutrally and expanding the organisational framework of an independent secretariat down to upazila level.
- Enjoying full financial independence by the EC.
- Enjoying full authority to appoint the returning officers and presiding officers and deploy the law enforcement agencies to ensure security during elections.
- Placing the persons involved in conducting elections under the

- Reforming the electoral rules and regulations for declaring assets of the candidates and their dependents.
- Monitoring electoral expenses of the candidates in every constituency and submitting statements of election expenses by the candidates within one month of the polls.
- Making the owners of black money, loan defaulters and anti-liberation war persons and war criminals ineligible for contesting

money and muscle power in elections. So, the opposition proposal for freeing the elections from the influence of black money and muscle power is in consonance with the ruling coalition government's stated objectives.

BNP was so long unwilling to discuss any proposal for reforming the CTG and electoral laws. But the Prime Minister's proposal in the House on February 28 to form a committee to reach a consensus on the main opposition's reform agenda on the CTG, EC, and electoral laws has come as a ray of hope to the people.

In order to move forward with this seemingly favourable atmosphere for arriving at an understanding, the AL should agree to the Prime Minister's proposal and nominate members to the committee. The AL has nothing to lose by joining the committee. If the AL nominated members fail to arrive at an understanding with the ruling party members in the committee, they have the option to boycott the committee and explain to the people the reasons for boycotting the proceedings of the committee.

But as a democratic party the AL cannot be oblivious of the fact that flexibility is a sine qua non for successfully negotiating such vital national issues. Here I am tempted to quote again from The Daily Star's editorial on March 2, which said: "We would have liked to see more details, especially a time frame, as time is now very much of the essence, but there is no denying that the PM has made a sagacious offer and that the ball is now very much in the opposition's court. We would hope that the opposition could take the PM at her word and see her proposal as a window of opportunity for the fruitful resolution of the issues that divide the two sides."

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BARE FACTS

From the speeches of the BNP leaders, it becomes amply clear that they are against the use of black money and muscle power in elections. So, the opposition proposal for freeing the elections from the influence of black money and muscle power is in consonance with the ruling coalition government's stated objectives. The Prime Minister's proposal in the House on February 28 to form a committee to reach a consensus on the main opposition's reform agenda on the CTG, EC, and electoral laws has come as a ray of hope.

a good deal more encouraging. Her suggestion that the proposals be discussed in a committee to be composed of treasury and opposition lawmakers cannot be described as failing to follow the patterns of constitutional politics. The Prime Minister has noted that the opposition has come in rather late in the day with its proposals for reform. That really ought to be hardly any problem, for two reasons. The first is that the head of the government has recognised, through the very statement, the seriousness of the proposals. The second is that the opposition, having presented the proposals in the House, will certainly want a clear agreement to be arrived at with the ruling coalition."

Commenting on the Prime Minister's proposal, yet another Dhaka daily (The Independent) in its editorial on March 2 wrote: "When the Leader of the Opposition offered to discuss the reforms in Parliament we, along with many other democratically disposed quarters, welcomed this changed strategy to bring back the issue on the floor of parliament, the right place for resolving political difference. Prime Minister and Leader of the House Begum Khaleda Zia in her closing speech expressed her readiness to discuss the Opposition's proposals

welcomed the proposal made by the Prime Minister in Parliament to form a committee to discuss the opposition's reform proposals.

For the sake of convenience of the readers, the reform proposals on the CTG, the EC and the electoral laws placed in the House on February 12 by the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina are summarised below:

CTG reforms

- Appointing acceptable and trusted persons as the chief adviser and advisers of the CTG by the president in consultation with all political parties.
- Acting by the president during the tenure of the CTG on all matters of state on the advice of the chief adviser.
- Running the defence ministry by the CTG.
- Confining jurisdiction of the CTG to conducting the day-to-day work and assisting the EC in holding the general elections.

EC reforms

- Appointing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other Election Commissioners in consultation with political parties and determining the number of Election Commissioners through consultation.

EC for a certain period before and after the polls and taking disciplinary action by the government against a defaulting official as recommended by the EC.

- Granting full independence to the EC to announce the election schedule and preparing election rules.
- Empowering the EC to postpone or cancel elections for violation of electoral laws and rules and giving judicial power to it to issue arrest orders and punish the violators.
- Preparing voter list maintaining complete transparency and issuing voter identity cards and introducing electronic voting.
- Preparing voter list of the permanent residents of the hill tracts as well as of the settlers and ensuring their voting right.
- Counting of votes in presence of all and giving signed copy of the results to every candidate or his nominee and announcing election results only by the EC.
- Disposing any case of election results within two months by the Election Tribunals and appeal by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court within three months

Reforms in electoral laws

- Giving the candidates the lists of presiding officers and polling officers and making the lists of polling centres public at least 15 days ahead of polls.

The BNP-led ruling alliance government has already acknowledged the need for reforming the EC in order to ensure holding of free and fair elections. The government should therefore have no objection to the proposed reform proposals on the EC. Acceptance of the proposals for reforming the EC by the BNP-dominated House will mean a victory for the nascent democracy of the country.

As for the reforms in electoral laws, the BNP may have some difficulty with the proposal of making the anti-liberation persons and war criminals ineligible for contesting elections in view of its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami. But BNP should not forget that its founder Ziaur Rahman was a liberation war hero who read out the proclamation of independence over the radio. So, BNP cannot sacrifice its liberation war spirit by making alliance with any anti-liberation force.

From the speeches of the BNP leaders, it becomes amply clear that they are against the use of black

Where do we go from here?

JOSEPH MICHAEL PEREIRA

THE chickens seem to be returning to roost without respite. Power outages, menacing mosquitoes, factory fires and collapsing buildings, which are becoming more frequent now, are merely symptoms of a misspent youth. Clearly, the sins of the past have begun to tell on the present and to threaten the future. As Bangladesh enters maturity, it is stronger but with rapidly weakening underpinnings.

Talk is cheap and we have plenty of it here. Very few listen and even fewer care, but that hardly seems to matter. If one has the inclination, at least one seminar or talk show on socio-economic matters is available to attend daily in Dhaka alone. The speakers' common refrain will be poor governance, lax law and order, rampant corruption, bureaucratic apathy, and little else. The reaction from the floor, in turn, will be the usual "we are aware of this but why is little being done about it." And there the matter will rest.

For the sake of balance, mention will be also be made of Bangladesh's success stories in garments, micro-credit and mobile telecommunications, and the five per cent per year real growth in GDP over a sustained period. The fact that this growth began from an extremely small base, which continues to remain quite small, is glossed over as are the terrible working conditions in the garment sector, the high cost and stringent requirements for micro-credit and the exorbitant charges for cellular calls.

Please do not misread or misconstrue me. There is plenty in Bangladesh to be proud of and bullish about. One cannot but applaud the contribution of the dynamic informal sector, the overseas worker and the hard-working, under-paid factory and farm workers. These are, and will continue to be, the principal contributors to growth and development. It speaks volumes of their spirit and dedication that they have done this with little fiscal social and moral support. Sadly, garments, micro-credit and telecommunications get all the plaudits and there is little time and attention for them.

Two examples are germane here. In Bangladesh for reasons not quite clear, petrol remains relatively cheap while biryani, the urban office worker's quick bite, stays costly. We need to learn from India and Pakistan here, which, by contrast, seem to have got the equation between these two items just about right. At the time of writing, the price of a litre of premium petrol was the equivalent of 64 cents in Bangladesh, 94 cents in Pakistan and 110 cents in India while a single

Experience says that lowering tax rates and tariffs generates business activity, improves compliance and reduces corruption. The government could consider this possibility to enlarge its revenue base. There is need also to reduce labour exploitation, remove fiscal distortions, and seek FDI and FII more effectively and sincerely and, finally, to place greater faith upon those many educated and empowered women to build a better Bangladesh.



TABLE I			
Bangladesh and Pakistan: Some Key Socio-economic Indicators, 2005			
Indicator	Bangladesh	Pakistan	
A. Bangladesh ahead			
a. Total fertility rate (children born per woman)	3	4	
b. Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	63	72	
c. Unemployment rate (per cent)	2.5	6.6	
d. Inflation rate, consumer prices (per cent)	6.7	9.2	
e. Investment (gross fixed) to GDP (per cent)	24.6	15.3	
f. Public debt to GDP (per cent)	46.1	54.3	
g. External debt to GDP (per cent)	32.3	43.5	
h. Secondary school enrollment as per cent of total School enrollment (2000-03)			
i. Female	49	19	
ii. Male	45	29	
i. Economically active, age 15+, per cent (1995-2002)			
i. Female	56	16	
ii. Male	87	83	
B. Little to choose			
a. Population growth rate (per cent)	2.09	2.03	
b. Birth rate (per 1000)	30	30	
c. Death rate (per 1000)	8.40	8.45	
d. Life expectancy at birth (years)	62	63	
C. Bangladesh behind			
a. Literacy (per cent) (2003)	43.1	48.7	
b. GDP per capita (US Dollar)	450	568	
c. GDP real growth rate (per cent)	5.2	8.4	
d. Budgetary revenues to GDP (per cent)	9.2	17.4	
e. Budgetary expenditures to GDP (per cent)	13.8	20.7	
f. Industrial production growth rate (per cent)	6.7	10.7	
g. Exports to GDP (per cent)	13.8	16.3	
h. Imports to GDP (per cent)	20.8	22.8	
i. Foreign exchange reserves to GDP (per cent)	4.6	13.0	
j. Population below \$2 per day (per cent)	83	66	

plate of biryani was priced at the equivalent of 75 cents in Bangladesh, 50 cents in Pakistan and 45 cents in India. In other words, in Bangladesh, biryani, the urban worker's lunch, is over-priced by about 55 per cent and premium petrol under-priced by around 35 per cent. Shouldn't this be the other way around?

The power sector is the other case in point. For some five years now, the government has been aware that a serious power shortfall was coming. Yet little or nothing was done to avert the situation. As a result, at the end of 2004, Bangladesh had a paltry installed capacity of 33 MW per million persons as against 120 MW for Pakistan, 105 MW for India, and 98

MW for South Asia in aggregate. Access to electricity was also poor with 35 per cent for Bangladesh as compared with 60 per cent each for Pakistan and India and 55 per cent for South Asia in aggregate. The position has, without doubt, got much worse since then as the many daily power outages will bear testimony.

Surely, there is immediate need to seriously address these two issues as well as the well-being of the garment sector and its some three million workers if Bangladesh is to maintain, if not improve upon, its historic GDP growth pattern and thereby move toward a better life for its 145 million people.

To pose the question where do we go from here is not to become

cynical. It has more to do with looking ahead and thinking dispassionately about issues and seeking solutions to them. Looking back, of course, is fine and necessary, in as much as it allows one to examine ones strengths and weaknesses and to move on from there. In the final analysis, it is looking ahead that matters and truly counts. However, at this point we need to look back for just long enough to create and analyse the accompanying Table I:

Table I is a broad-spectrum overview of the 2005 situation in Bangladesh and, for purposes of comparison, Pakistan as well. It is clear that in infant and maternal care, secondary school enrollment and women empowerment as measured by the number of eco-

nomically active women, Bangladesh streets ahead of Pakistan (and India in some cases). For me this is, without doubt, an outstanding and a lasting legacy of Bangladesh to its people, well ahead of garments and telecommunications, but behind micro-credit.

Unfortunately, there is always a flip side to these things. While in Pakistan severe gender inequalities are a serious drag on development and growth and a blot on its social fabric, the proportionately higher number of economically active women in Bangladesh results in a lower wage base and exploitation. One statistic will bear this out. In Bangladesh, an employed labour force of 65 million persons generated a GDP of \$65 billion in 2005. This is equivalent to \$1000 per working person. By contrast, in Pakistan, with an employed labour force of 44 million and a GDP of \$92 billion, the corresponding figure was \$2090 for the same year. If distribution in incomes is factored, the disparity becomes even more glaring. Apparently, the working person here is destined to pay more for biryani and get less for labour. This fiscal distortion needs to be addressed.

Where Bangladesh is significantly lagging behind is in budgetary revenue generation and foreign exchange reserves. Revenues were around 9 per cent of GDP in 2005 as against 15 per cent for India and 17 per cent for Pakistan. As India and Pakistan spend much more on their respective militaries, a more meaningful indicator is revenue to GDP after accounting for military expenditure. In this case, the ratios are 7.7 per cent for Bangladesh and 12.6 per cent each for India and Pakistan. The gap remains wide.

An inadequate revenue base and insufficient exchange reserves are the crux. Experience says that lowering tax rates and tariffs generates business activity, improves compliance and reduces corruption. The government could consider this possibility to enlarge its revenue base. There is need also to reduce labour exploitation, remove fiscal distortions, and seek FDI and FII more effectively and sincerely and, finally, to place greater faith upon those many educated and empowered women to build a better Bangladesh.

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A lesson and a clear message

The government is singing success. The opposition is sensing drama. They can do whatever they wish, but the people of Bangladesh have every reason to rejoice. Neither the government nor the opposition is the ultimate winner. It is the people of Bangladesh who have triumphed.

KAZI SM KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

IT has again been proved that Bangladesh is not going to stand such elements for long. Application of brute force has also been proved to be the worst mechanism to foist anything on the people of Bangladesh. The helpless surrender of the supreme militant kingpin and arrest of another kingpin within a span of a few days send a decisive and definite message to the conspirators that the people of Bangladesh are very much aware of their well-being, are very much familiar with their well-wishers, and can very well distinguish between friend and foe.

The government and the media merit appreciation as the captures were more than required to demonstrate to the world the true nature and spirit of people of Bangladesh. Thanks to them for projecting to the world that there is no room for fanaticism and militancy in Bangladesh and that the people of Bangladesh have no fascination for such a curious brand of Islam that puts innocent people to death. Rather, they are always ready jettisoning such rubbish ideas and the insane plotters that are harbouring the unrealistic schemes of turning the country into a land of mindless zombies so that they can capitalize and have a whale of a time at the cost of the faithfully liberal and appreciably tolerant masses.

Such people, perhaps, forgot the fact that people of Bangladesh had not bowed down to any uncivilized force in the past. People's understanding of Islam is very much on a right footing. It is next to impossible to coax them into believing distorted meanings of the holy book of Islam. Knowledge of Islam of the common people is also so mature that they hardly need to consult such foolish religious clerics who are more interested in misguiding, or rather, seducing them, rather than showing the sane and peaceful path of Islam.

Though many countries, including our powerful neighbours have long been strife-torn, often for religious reasons, it has hardly ever been a problem for us. Bangladesh has always been an example of religious harmony and coexistence. Even in many Muslim countries, Muslims are on a war footing against Muslims. To set fire to another sect's mosques is a common phenomenon there along with routine murder of clerics and people

TRIBUTE

Prof Shamsul Huq My mentor-philosopher

M ABDUL HAFIZ

HE died in his characteristic quietude as if he walked away the spotlight he shunned all his life spanning almost a century. Yet he left behind a sublimity matched by a few and his legacy in more than a field is bound to live on. With Professor Shamsul Huq (1910-2006) has departed one of the last few stalwarts holding their head high before worldly temptation and opted for a spartan saintly life. With his values and human qualities he was by himself an institution which will be different to be resurrected. He was a celebrity but there was no ceremony around his last rites: no lying in state, no big funeral, no fanfare of burial entitled to man of his stature. Whether or not he so wished, it went perfectly as per the philosophy of his life.

Had it not been for my stint in Bangladesh Institute of strategic studies I did not in any way qualify to come his across and to be in the coveted company of a person of his distinction. Prior to I only once met him in Quetta Staff College where he came as a guest speaker in 1970 while he was a central minister for education. Twelve years later I saw him as the Chairman, board of governors of the institute I was seconded to. That marked the beginning of a relationship -- one that develops between a sage and his disciple -- lasting till his death.

Even when our official link snapped subsequently I continued to be attracted by his enormous human qualities with which he always treated me. I had innumerable intimate sessions with him either in a familiar ambience of his Eskaton Garden House or his Nilkhet retreat of FREDP. We exchanged views on life, society and politics and every time I came back wiser. At times, he would refer to some of my views expressed in my column in The Daily Star. But he was always charitable in his com-



ments about his juniors and their works.

Last time when I met Prof Huq I requested him for his 'Foreword' for my book SOUTH ASIA IN PERSPECTIVE his face beamed up with a divine glow heightening it up as he struggled to dictate it from his sick bed. I perhaps would have seen another divine glow in his face. But alas! The book reached the Ekushey Book Fair the day he breathed his last.

In the present social and political milieu we will have to resurrect Prof Huq's legacy of wisdom, tolerance and conciliation again and again to bail this country out of the morass it is stuck in. Basically an educationist he made deep imprint in foreign policy making and his is the most authentic book on the subject. His 'Bangladesh in International Politics' is almost a text book for any foreign policy practitioner in this country.

In this ephemeral life Prof Huq had nothing more to desire. But his soul would rest in peace where his values would be upheld by future progeny.

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Gazipur blast (Nov 29, 2005) scene: We just don't want to see any repetition of these incidents.

of other sects. Attacking mosques of other sects was unthinkable in Bangladesh even a few years ago, but now the Ahmadiyya mosques in Bangladesh have come under attack. Nevertheless, the scale is very negligible compared to such incidents in other Muslim countries, and the common people of Bangladesh have little nexus with the ones that mastermind such attacks.

Bangladesh has also experienced some very painful incidents of bomb attacks on innocent people in various shrines of holy saints which are also a very novel and unwelcome event in our history. Such incidents shocked and outraged the people in no small measure. The people watched with shock and dismay how the shrines of the great saints who had been instrumental in bringing Islam to the subcontinent were being bombed.

Many blame the present government for the abrupt rise of the Islamic militants, though their heinous activities got started in the period of the previous regime who failed to pin them down. The present government, too, initially took it rather lightly and foolishly put the blame on the media. A section of the government was also alleged to have a soft corner for the militants. They perhaps wanted to experiment the impact of terrorizing people. Now, however, they must be kicking themselves and telling to themselves that it was too risky an endeavour which would have devoured even their existence had it been successful. They should not have forgotten the simple formula that Frankenstein is not to be reared

up. There is also serious allegation against the allies of BNP for nurturing the militants. I think they also have a lot to learn from the people's rejection of extremism, and the sooner they learn the better it will serve them. Those who are the masterminds behind the JMB should know that they have tried to adopt an approach that is too dangerous and the people of Bangladesh are capable enough to mow it down.

Militancy has almost disappeared. Many militants are behind bars. The rest are about to be hunted down. Many are being tried and justice is being meted out. Both the major kingpins are now being grilled and waiting to meet what they deserve. They might even be charged with treason, and rightly so. The government is singing success. The opposition is sensing drama. They can do whatever they wish, but the people of Bangladesh have every reason to rejoice. Neither the government nor the opposition is the ultimate winner. It is the people of Bangladesh who have triumphed. They had a point to prove and they have again proved to the world that they won't allow anybody to play with their distinct culture, religious liberalism, and rational as well as progressive attitude.

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