

Example is better than promise



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

BARE FACTS

Our political parties, particularly the major parties, are in a race to make promises without considering the country's socio-politico-economic conditions and capabilities. Experience shows that successive political governments have failed to fulfill most of the pledges they made before the general elections. They should, therefore, go for a few pledges that are attainable. The sooner they realise it, the better it is for them and the country.

WHILE addressing a grand rally at Rajshahi Madrasa Maidan on March 29 organised by Rajshahi city unit of the ruling BNP, Begum Khaleda Zia, the prime minister and chairperson of the BNP pledged that if her party was voted to power again, "the next course of action of her government would be eradication of corruption."

Her son and BNP senior joint secretary Tarique Rahman and BNP ministers are repeating the prime minister's pledge at different meetings and rallies, conveniently forgetting that BNP in its manifesto for 2001 election had also committed to eradicate corruption.

While in opposition during the immediate past AL rule, the BNP blasted the AL government, the prime minister, ministers and AL party men for "unabated corruption" in the country. In its manifesto for 2001 election, the BNP made certain important commitments to help eradicate corruption and these included: (1) appointment of ombudsman; (2) setting up of an independent anti-corruption com-

mission (ACC); (3) disclosure of assets and properties of all elected people's representatives.

Now, let us see as to what extent the BNP during its four and a half years rule has fulfilled its commitments to eradicate unbridled corruption.

Ombudsman

Article 77 of our constitution provides for the establishment of the office of the ombudsman. According to the constitution, the ombudsman shall exercise such powers and perform such functions as parliament may, by law, determine, including the power to investigate any action taken by a ministry, a public officer or a statutory public authority. The ombudsman shall prepare an annual report concerning the discharge of his functions, and such report shall be laid before parliament.

In 1980, the then BNP government passed an act for installation of an ombudsman, and after 22 years, on January 6, 2002, the BNP-led coalition government brought the act into force through a gazette notification. However, on February

11, 2002, the law ministry proposed to the cabinet for amendments to some provisions of the act, which in turn formed a committee to scrutinise the bill. Since then nothing is known about the fate of the bill.

The inaction of the government led to the filing of a writ petition by three lawyers of the Supreme Court. The petitioners submitted, among others, that the constitution provided for an ombudsman as part of its built-in-system for transparency. But the successive governments since independence did not appoint such an ombudsman. The ombudsman, if appointed, would bring justice to the doorstep of the people.

Following the aforesaid writ petition, the High Court issued a rule on April 23, 2005 asking the government to explain within two weeks as to why it should not be directed to appoint the ombudsman in line with the constitution.

The present position of the case is not known. It is certain that the government, as usual, has been repeatedly asking for time extension to reply. Anyway, the appointment of the ombudsman is not in sight

during the remaining days of the BNP-led coalition government.

ACC

After three years of the BNP-led coalition rule, anti-corruption commission (ACC) came to be formed in a haphazard manner in November, 2004. During its existence for a year and half, the ACC has hardly been functional due to the hurdles created by the government.

First, the tussle between the commission and the government surfaced over the appointment of the secretary to the commission.

Second, through a government notification of December 2004, the commission was attached with the cabinet division which, in fact, became the controlling ministry/division of the commission. This struck at the root of the independence of the commission.

Third, while the tussle over the appointment of the secretary to the commission was going on, the cabinet division in a circular issued in January, 2005 announced the defunct BAC staff as government's reserve employees and asked them not to work for the commission until

rules and regulations were framed. They were threatened in yet another letter with disciplinary action if they worked.

Fourth, although 17 months have elapsed since the setting up of the commission, its organogram, rules etc have not as yet been approved by the government.

Fifth, the government has not as yet come up with an English version of the ACC law although the international community, in particular the development partners, has been interested in the establishment of the ACC and its effective functioning.

The ACC has been established to help eliminate corruption from the administration and the society at large. But the hurdles created by the government corroborate the people's perception that the government has created the ACC on the insistence of the development partners and it does not want the ACC to function effectively.

Disclosure of assets

There are three main actors in the high corruption drama of Bangladesh and they are politicians, public servants, and private corporate sector. A global survey of public perceptions released by the Transparency International (TI) on July 3, 2003 revealed that political corruption was the biggest scourge facing the world. Bangladesh is no exception to this.

In its manifesto for 2001 election, the BNP pledged that if voted to power, it would take legal steps for the disclosure of assets and properties of all elected people's represen-

tatives, including the prime minister, ministers and others with the rank and status of minister.

Though not properly followed up, there exist rules for taking account of the assets and properties of the government servants. Rule 13 of the Government Servants (Conduct) Rules, 1979 requires a government servant to make a declaration to the government of all his/her immovable and movable properties at the time of entering government service. A government servant is also under legal obligation to submit to the government an annual return of assets in the month of December showing any increase or decrease of property as shown in the earlier declaration. A government servant found to amass assets and properties disproportionate to his/her known sources of income is proceeded against under departmental rules or under anti-corruption law.

In some countries having multi-party democratic system, the MPs are under legal obligation to submit in a prescribed form the yearly statements of assets of their own, their spouses and dependents to the Election Commission (EC). The statements submitted by the MPs are published in the official gazette. These statements are scrutinised and if any statement is found to be false in material particulars, the MP concerned is proceeded against for committing the offence of corrupt practice.

But our political parties, whether in government or in opposition, disfavour enactment of such laws. This is primarily because of the fact

that money and muscle dominate our general elections. The MPs elected have to amass wealth by any means not only to recoup the incurred expenditure but also to meet the expenses of the next general elections.

Certain things are common in our political parties and these are: (i) abhorrence for transparency, whether in politics or in governance, and (ii) avoidance of accountability. That is why the ruling BNP failed to implement its commitment of 2001 for taking legal measures for the disclosure of assets and properties of the prime minister, ministers and MPs.

Now the question is whether the people will have their credence in the BNP's pledge for eradication of corruption if voted to power again, especially when Bangladesh was rated as the most corrupt country by the TI during all the past four years of the BNP-led coalition government. The answer will be overwhelmingly in the negative.

Example is better than promise. Some immediate measures by the ruling BNP towards fulfillment of the 2001 pledge for eradicating corruption may help regain the people's faith to some extent. These include:

-- Sacking those ministers, ministers of state and deputy ministers who have reputation for corruption.

-- Downsizing the big cabinet not only to get rid of the corrupt ministers but also to prove that a small cabinet composed of efficient and honest persons is more effective.

-- Enacting a law making it man-

datory for the MPs (MPs include prime minister, ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers appointed from amongst MPs) to submit in a prescribed form the annual statements of assets and properties, movable and immovable, in their own name or in the name of their family members from the date(s) of their taking oath as MPs, to the EC to be published in the official gazette and scrutinised by a committee for proceeding against those who make false statements.

-- Initiating steps to make the office of the ombudsman functional to protect the people from harassment of the public offices.

-- Extend all supports, including according approval to the organogram, rules, etc of the ACC to enable it to work independently and effectively.

To conclude, our political parties, particularly the major parties, are in a race to make promises without considering the country's socio-politico-economic conditions and capabilities. Experience shows that successive political governments have failed to fulfill most of the pledges they made before the general elections. They should, therefore, go for a few pledges that are attainable. The sooner they realise it, the better it is for them and the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

West Bengal polls: Leftists tipped for easy win



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

The polls are expected to see the ruling front return to power easily. The absence of any strong challenger stemming from fractious opposition and a sound record highlighted by largely incorruptible administration puts the leftists in a commanding position. However, it faces the task of ensuring a fully free and fair voting since opponents often accuse it of irregularities being in the government for long.

POLLING for the state assembly or "Vidhan Sabha" in the Indian state of West Bengal has begun on April 17 and the voting will be completed in five phases. Results are expected to be announced on May 11 for the new legislature. Till such time a deal of anxiety and eagerness will be in place to know the outcome of the elections of the state, unquestionably most talked about in the Indian context for a variety of reasons. Bangladesh also keenly watches the political developments in West Bengal for geographical, linguistic and other proximities. Obviously, the polls that have come after five years, are a matter of discussion, debate and interest in this country as well.

Politically, West Bengal is considered as one of the most advanced states in India for long. The famous comment of Gokhale during the British rule that what "Bengal thinks today, the rest of India tomorrow" still holds good. What distinguishes the state from almost all other states (provinces) of the country is the unique political stability witnessed for several decades. Most Indian states

including the population-wise largest Uttar Pradesh often experienced fluid political situation with no party or alliance having absolute command in the assembly resulting in weak or unstable governments. But West Bengal is largely different as the state has seen stable governments for most part of its history since the independence (1947).

Initially, it was Congress phase with such distinguished leaders like Dr. B.C. Ray, Prafulla Sen and S.S. Ray and then the current long phase of the leftists, who are at the helm for an uninterrupted 28 years. Veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu saw this long innings as chief minister till five years ago when he voluntarily retired from official position and his successor Buddhadev Bhattacharya is carrying Basu's mantle with remarkable ability. The ruling leftfront, a combine of several leftist organisations headed by the Communist Party (CPM) is once again facing the polls with Bhattacharya in the forefront to record another easy victory. 92-year-old Basu too is very much in the campaign despite his fragile health. He refused to be totally withdrawn as he says "a communist never retires from

public life".

Not that the state never saw political instability. There was a brief spell when no strong governments existed like one of the coalition of Bangla Congress and the leftists with Amal Kumar Mukherjee as the chief minister. Federal governments these days in India are invariably made up of alliance partners and this culture is also often reflected in the state governments. In West Bengal, the leftists are firmly entrenched without the help of others. Interestingly, this time the ruling leftfront is a supporter of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the centre -- albeit occasional differences in policy matters. But their ties are at dagger-drawn level in the state politics. Here Congress led by Sonia Gandhi is an adversary. Both the parties lost their two key leaders just before the polls -- first CPM's state secretary Anil Biswas died and then elderly and veteran Congress leader and MP A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury. The deaths came as big setback for their respective parties. However, the leftists' main rival in the state is the not the Congress, but the Trinamul Congress led by firebrand

Mamata Banerjee, who several years ago broke away from the main Congress and took West Bengal by storm by her meteoric rise mainly in capital Kolkata and other urban areas. Mamata is seen as a stormy petrel in the Indian politics as she is often a factor in the national context even though her organisation is confined only in the state. But in recent times, her popularity and political base weakened because of a variety of factors including alliance with the BJP, widely seen as communal. Mamata was the central minister twice during the previous NDA rule. She chose to quit federal ministry just before the last West Bengal polls with the hope of dislodging the leftists from power and become chief minister. To achieve this end, she had even allied with Congress, but their joint challenge did little to harm the ruling front, which had romped home easily. This time, Mamata is making another desperate bid to occupy the Eden Building, the seat of state power, with remote chance of any success. Alliance with the Congress did not come up this time as Mamata refused to part ways with the BJP as demanded by the Congress, which is a secu-

lar organisation. Mamata's credentials as secular suffered a setback because of her close links with the BJP, which is not at all a force to reckon with in West Bengal even though it has large following at national level. Probably, Mamata felt it unwise to distance with the BJP considering latter's strong base at the federal level.

Since the two main challengers of the government -- Trinamul and the main Congress -- failed to reach any electoral understanding this time, there is a feeling that both may cut sorry figure even more disappointing than the last time. The Trinamul has been badly shaken by a number of defections in recent times and as such Mamata wants a good showing in the polls in an attempt to refurbish the party. But it appears unlikely. The main Congress is the third force in the state and it may improve its position marginally. The leftists seem unassailable once again.

It will be height to folly to assume that over the long spell the ruling leftfront has succeeded in responding to the needs and requirements of West Bengal. The performance is tinged with both success and failure. But its main strength lies in the fact that it has an honest sense of purpose. It could convince the people that it is sparing no sincere efforts to address their problems. The progress in the rural areas is seen as quite spectacular in the Indian context and the government is now attaching importance also to industrialisation in addition to the agricultural development. It has also encouraging foreign investment in this regard. It seems new economic policies of the leftists are being well received by the people.

The polls are expected to see the ruling front return to power easily. The absence of any strong challenger stemming from fractious opposition and a sound record highlighted by largely incorruptible administration puts the leftists in a commanding position. However, it faces the task of ensuring a fully free and fair voting since opponents often accuse it of irregularities being in the government for long. In any case, such electoral malpractices, if true, are at a minor scale. So barring any stunning reversal, West Bengal is set to return the government in power to another five year term unhesitatingly.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Foreign Editor of BSS.

An expensive friendship

CLOSEUP JAPAN

We are definitely living at a time that can be easily termed as a strange and crazy period of history. A military power which has by now become the most hated in the world not only likes to see itself as a global police force, but also considers itself to be the protector of civilisation, and hence demanding that others pay them taxes so that they can continue perform that role.

MONZURUL HUQ

FRIENDSHIP between nations is never a matter that comes free of charge. There always have been careful considerations of losses and gains in any move taken by a particular country to forge a closer tie with another.

One of the most striking recent examples of friendship with a calculative eye is that of China and Pakistan. If China in 1960s was a rigid communist nation proclaiming her unconditional support to the poor and oppressed around the world, Pakistan under the military dictatorship was a country holding precisely the opposite viewpoint. Yet the two countries became close friends and strategic partners not because of their ideological standings, but more because China saw in Pakistan a conveniently ally in her bid to check India, a country against which Beijing fought a war in early 1960s, and hence was not hesitant to pay the price of betraying her own commitment of supporting the oppressed.

Similarly, why the United States is now adamant in continuing her presence in all over the world is also related more to such self interest calculations than the desire to help trusted allies in times of need.

There are now roughly forty-seven thousand US troops permanently stationed in Japan. For Washington, the military presence in Japan is more a convenient solution because a major burden of sharing the cost of keeping the military presence is being shouldered by the host nation. The people of Japan in general are less bothered about such economic burden as they might see it as a fait accompli for being at the losing end of the Pacific War.

But Japanese in times do lose their patience when they encounter unruly attitude of their unwelcome guests and there are no shortage of such incidents. Their nature might vary widely from indecent behaviour of drunken soldiers to noise pollution around US air bases.

Okinawa, being the main centre of concentration of US troops in Japan, always had to bear the worst of the burnt. Almost 70 percent of total US presence in Japan is in Okinawa, a relatively tiny island district compared to Japan's other 46 prefectures. Resentment of the people against the US presence, as a result, is also quite visible among the people of Okinawa. The government of Japan too, aware of this reality of imbalance, is for quite sometime trying to ease the burden

of Okinawa by requesting the United States to move some of its troops out of the prefecture. But since the US administration was unwilling to

decrease the number of their troops presence in Japan, Washington in return was asking Japan to provide an alternative for some of its bases in Okinawa. That placed the Japanese government into a position further difficulty as not a single of Japan's other prefectures are willing to accept the so-called important guests to their own territories. As a result, the issue of easing the burden of Okinawa was still in a limbo until the United States decided to rearrange her military presence in Asia Pacific region.

Among other US troops, almost 15,000 marines soldiers are now stationed Okinawa. According to the Pentagon proposal of military realignment, 8,000 of them are to be moved to Guam by 2012. Though the number of troops to be moved out of Okinawa is significantly lower than what the people of the locality would like to see, for both the Japanese government and the local authorities of Okinawa this was news of a great relief. They all welcomed the move without realizing what conditions might be attached with the relocation plan, which the US side revealed without much delay.

The US Defense Department estimates it will cost at least \$10 billion and insists that Japan should shoulder 75 percent of that expense, which comes up to \$7.5 billion. Many in Japan see the cost plainly exorbitant and the Japanese officials are now negotiating with the US authorities about the possibility of downsizing the proportion of Japanese share. But no progress has so far been made in such discussions.

Relocation cost for 8,000 marine soldiers would otherwise mean roughly a little less than \$1 million per soldier. This sounds not only exorbitant, but absurd too. To justify the demand US authorities provided further clarification, which indicates that in addition to move personnel and equipment, the money is also needed to construct new living quarters and improve facilities, roads and other infrastructures at the Guam base. The US also wants to upgrade the port facilities outside the base and in that cost too they want to see a due Japanese share. As a result, some forecasts in Japan as well as in the United States say the total costs might swell even further.

The US demand has placed the Japanese government in an uneasy position. No doubt, public opinion in Japan runs against providing anything closer to US demand. But the government knows that for Tokyo it would be virtually impossible to say no to what the trusted ally is demanding. As a result, the Japanese government is trying to reach a negotiated settlement,

which would see Tokyo's burden significantly decreased.

Over the years, Japanese taxpayers have been burdened with considerable amount of the huge costs to keep the American troops in Japan. The costs include expenditure for US military base facilities, salaries of base employees and some other related expenditure. In Japan the practice of sharing the burden of the US military presence is known as "sympathy budget" and it amounts to roughly 230 billion yen or around \$2 billion. Until now the budget covered only US bases that are located in Japan. But now Pentagon is demanding that Japan should pay for the base facilities in Guam as well. Many in Japan see the request disturbing, since there is a possibility that this might open the Pandora's Box as there is no guarantee that further request to provide financial assistance for military bases elsewhere in the US territory will not follow.

The official position of the Koizumi administration is to provide one third of the total cost for the relocation of marine troops to Guam. Japan is well aware that bowing to US pressure would mean the amount provided to the US State Department would by far surpass country's Official Development Assistance budget for fiscal 2006, which many other countries might not see as a rational move for a country seeking a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. Hence there are other options as well that Tokyo is trying to explore. One is to provide the amount to Washington in the form of loan. But Washington seems to be not impressed at all by any of the proposals that Japan has so far tabled. Pentagon is demanding that the troops in Guam will largely perform the role of protecting Japan from any possible outside attack.

We are definitely living at a time that can be easily termed as a strange and crazy period of history. A military power which has by now become the most hated in the world not only likes to see itself as a global police force, but also considers itself to be the protector of civilisation, and hence demanding that others pay them taxes so that they can continue perform that role. If this logic cannot be termed crazy, then we might have to invent a new word to define it.

Monzurul Huq is a columnist of The Daily Star.

