

Election agenda for seeking people's mandate

We all love our country and in our time we served the nation with our humble capacity. Now circumstances have driven us to different places for different reasons. We know Bangladeshis are a proud people, having an enviable history. We do not want to be branded as a failed nation for the misdeeds of only a few criminals. May I appeal to sensible political leadership to declare their election pledges, indicating how they are going to address major national issues like the way leaders from other nations do.

SALEQUE SUFI

Sensible citizens, as well as well-wishers of Bangladesh, are now talking about a free and fair election under a neutral (hopefully) caretaker government as mandated by the country's constitution. Well, fairness and neutrality are matters of judgment, but terrorism infected, corruption plagued Bangladesh needs one term of good governance by a responsible patriotic government to turn around and get set for accelerated growth.

The great people of Bangladesh have a proven tradition of turning the tide and knocking down oppressors when their frustrations become unbearable. The ruling alliance government and the opposition alliance are now locked in an impasse over reforms of the electoral process.

Donors and development partners have also extended their helping hands to help resolve the deadlock and break the ice. Hopefully good sense will prevail, and our dear motherland will eventually thrive following the ideals of the liberation war.

Bangladesh is really not a failed country, neither are the Bangladeshis a failed nation. A few individuals, or self-styled politicians, encouraged corruption by snatching power through the backdoor. The country got a bad reputation because these autocrats institutionalised corruption and hooliganism in different spheres of life.

But the majority of the green, beautiful Bangladesh are still hard working, peace loving, and honest citizens. As proud Bangladeshis, it hurts us to accept the realistic criticism by the Western world about our dear motherland because we know that our motherland has immense potential to emerge as a

vibrant and dynamic economic force.

The intent and focus of this article is not to elaborate on the contentious agenda but to give some idea about how the incumbent government may plan the future course of actions.

As the country has earned a bad reputation due to widespread corruption, mismanagement, and organised vandalism, it now requires a specific election agenda, with the consensus of patriotic democratic forces, for assisting people to judge their future leaders.

We have a serious law and order situation, human rights violations, energy crisis. Political alliances must publish their planned course of action on how they will address and mitigate those. Let me tell you how one of the major political parties has declared its policy in a civilised country like Australia.

The election in the state of Queensland is due this month. The policy to deliver a raft of initiatives for the first 100 days of the new term has been declared by one of the contending parties. We may get some clue, though our priorities and lines of action will be different:

- Outline a blueprint that will see the emergence of Mount Isa, Townsville, and Bowen as a major triangle of industrial development and mineral processing over the course of the next half century.
- Bangladesh may do the same for the western side of the Jamuna River, with Sirajgonj, Ishwardi, Bheramara, Jessore and Mongla as an industrial triangle.
- Announce preferred developer status for development of the Arukun bauxite deposit.
- Can we think of something like this for our coal deposit exploitation

in the most cost effective and eco friendly way?

• Establish a clean coal technology board, and initiate action to test new technologies in the generation of clean power from fossil fuels. We have just entered the coal era.

• We should have an appropriate coal policy in place and we should diversify our energy sources to prevent non economic use of natural gas. The CNG network must be extended all over Bangladesh. Only small off-grid gas-fired power plants, and a few barge-mounted plants can be built along the national gas grid to manage any crisis.

• Amend state development and public works acts, and related legislation, to provide the Coordinator-General with powers to take over approval processes where agencies have not made decisions within 20 working days.

• In our country the city mayor's office can be technically strengthened to assume such responsibilities.

• Identify private sector partners, and prioritise areas for implementation of the mineral exploration and collaborative drilling program.

• We will require revision of the national energy policy. A gas act and coal policy can be integrated in the NEP. We must have a very transparent exploration strategy for offshore drilling. Bapex can have a joint venture partner of proven capability. The energy regulatory commission act can be amended to give more authority. Attractive pay and benefits must be given to attract and retain competent professionals.

• Initiate works on major road projects including release of environmental impact statement on Airport Link, awarding of construc-

tion for Ipswich Logan Motorway interchange and final investment decision on Northern Bus way.

• Well, in our case Padma Multipurpose Bridge and Dhaka-Chittagong express highway should be top priority initiatives. Can Dhaka cantonment be moved away from the city to Rajendrapoor, retaining the domestic areas intact? Free passage through cantonment area will ease much of the present traffic congestion.

• Accelerate major rail projects by awarding tender for the mitchellton to Ke perra second track, complete track works on Ormeau to Coomera duplication and commencing construction of Salisbury to Kuraby third track.

In our case, we can have a comprehensive plan for a Dhaka city circular road, rail, gas main and go for phased implementation. Major city-link rail communication have plenty of room to improve. Dhaka city can have city metro or elevated express Rail link.

Well just to draw analogy, some of the election pledges of a certain political party are discussed here. They mean it and vow to the people to implement it within a given timeframe. If they fail without valid reasons they are voted out. Election process is very open and transparent, press is free and independent. Police is people-friendly and judiciary is unbiased and neutral.

We all love our country and in our time we served the nation with our humble capacity. Now circumstances have driven us to different places for different reasons. We know Bangladeshis are a proud people, having an enviable history. We do not want to be branded as a failed nation for the misdeeds of only a few criminals.

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Malpractice in recruitment: A malignant move

For the sake of the greater interest of the nation, there should be a commission to review the existing recruitment rules, and they should come up with suggestions to establish fair policies. All recruitments must be based on brilliance, eligibility, and fair competition with transparency and accountability at all steps. The recruitment should be done on the basis of merit and conditions of relevant rules as prescribed in the Constitution, without interference from any other source. Good governance is possible only with honest, efficient, and dedicated human resources.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

A spree of hurried recruitments is taking place in different ministries, departments, and directorates. This trend, and the process adopted to complete the recruitments, have generated suspicions of massive nepotism, political influence, and above all, large-scale bribery in the whole process.

In fact, favouritism and political interventions are not uncommon in this part of the world, although such attempts are criticized as being unjust, corrupt, and unvigorized. These practices deprive an eligible candidate of his/her right to be rewarded for his/her outstanding career and capability. It is very unfortunate and undesirable when recruitment is done in exchange for illegal benefits. Of late it has almost become common knowledge that a candidate must pay in cash if he/she wishes to be employed in the service of the Republic.

The appointment in exchange for illegal benefits relates to leaking of question papers, exchange of answer scripts, acceptance of false certificates and age, change of scored numbers, briefing before viva-voce exams or handing over false appointment letters. Every one of these corrupt practices is a criminal act and deserves punishment under the law of the land.

Such dubious appointments are, in fact, a direct disowning of merit, negation of morality and religious dictum and, above all, they are driving the nation towards an undesired destination. More often than not, people appointed in this manner are more likely to adopt unfair means as a way of doing business. These people are not only guilty of malpractice, but they also vitiate the environment they work in. These people can be likened to a poison-

ous tree implanted to aggravate the norms of the society, and eradicate the sense of integrity from the bureaucracy.

Every year, at least 20 lakh young people enter the employment market. The government can hardly provide employment opportunities for even 5 percent of them. The others are being employed in different private or non-government organizations, while many of them try to test their destiny with self employment. Many of them remain unemployed, underemployed and employed in disguise in agriculture, fisheries, livestock or forestry.

Even those who are employed elsewhere prefer to be absorbed in government service to avail the opportunity of job security, career building, social status, better training at home and abroad, and above all, pension benefits for husband or wife, whoever the recipient may be. It indicates that after serving in the government for 33 years, a person might get benefits of another 30 years from the government exchequer. This is the reason for stiff competition for employment in government service and, thus, there is a strong demand for justice and fair play in the process of recruitment.

The Bangladesh Constitution, Chapter IX (clauses 133-136), addresses issues dealing with appointment under the Republic. The Government Servants' Conduct Rules Act, 1979, states how a public servant is expected to behave. The Services (Reorganization and Conditions) Act, 1975, also indicates the system of recruitment. There are primary recruitment rules for almost all the posts under the Republic.

Unfortunately, it has been observed that rules of recruitment

and qualification for promotion, are being twisted at the whims of the political parties in power. The movement of senior officials in the political arena, politicization of members of the lower subordinate services and acceptance of bribes at the time of recruitment are reminders of the deplorable degeneration of our bureaucracy.

To make the bureaucracy an organized institution, bestowed with neutrality and people and development-oriented views, at least 44 administrative reorganization committees have been constituted since 1947. The Public Administration Reorganization Committee, the latest one being set up in 1997, formulated 107 long and short-term recommendations but failed to implement any one of them.

There is, in fact, scope for misunderstanding in different recruitment rules and instructions. The Surplus Public Servants Absorption Ordinance, 1985; the Mujibnagar Employees (Conditions of Services) Rules, 1980; Instructions of 1972 and the notification of July 28, 1985, modifying the quota system in the recruitment of government service, autonomous bodies and other offices, transfer of employees from the development to revenue budget, employment on contract service, the Government Servants (Special Provisions) Ordinance, 1979; the Public Servant (Dismissal on Conviction) Ordinance, 1985 demand a serious review, and even modifications, immediately to adjust with the changed scenario in the country.

It is, perhaps, high time to annul the rules relating to the appointment of Mujibnagar employees, absorption of surplus employees, redefine the procedure relating to the

employment of wards of freedom fighters, and a total modification of the quota system.

There is provision in Article 137 of the Constitution of Bangladesh to establish more than one public service commission, therefore, a separate commission for the employment of 3rd or 4th-class employees needs to be established urgently. Direct appointment by the different offices or departments generates corruption in different forms with the strong influence of trade unions prevailing in those offices. It was observed in 2001 that the new government, immediately after taking over power, cancelled all recent appointments, thus, a huge number of people missed their chance to appear at the next competitive examination.

For the sake of the greater interest of the nation, there should be a commission to review the existing recruitment rules, and they should come up with suggestions to establish fair policies. None should undermine the role of an MLSS in the government offices where secrecy of the documents is concerned. Once a bad element is absorbed, it will act as a malignant disease for the same office. Since dismissal from public service is difficult, any move to recruit an undesirable element is tantamount to inviting the disease and letting it fester.

All recruitments must be based on brilliance, eligibility, and fair competition with transparency and accountability at all steps. The recruitment should be done on the basis of merit and conditions of relevant rules as prescribed in the Constitution, without interference from any other source. Good governance is possible only with honest, efficient, and dedicated human resources.

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Disasters and development

Linking disaster to development shows some hope for both, sustainable disaster management and development in the country. However, to make the development much more sustainable and development that bears fruits to all actors, the disaster management activities must be integrated. A clear road map on how disaster will be linked to development should be sketched before hand to guide the actors and the community. So, limited resources will be utilized for maximum benefit and the plan will be successful.

KHAN FERDOUSOUR RAHMAN

In today's fast changing global environment, the detrimental consequences of disasters on society, economy, natural environment, and even politics, cannot be overemphasized, it is more so in developing countries. The impact of disasters inevitably goes beyond their immediate devastation, as the continuing toll of human lives, property and resources exacerbates poverty and sets back economic development. Natural disasters can occur in any part of the world irrespective of whether it is a developed, or developing, country, a rich society or slum.

Since long there has been a constant evolution in the common understanding of disaster management. Various measures were taken to plan for emergency relief and management of a disastrous event. Despite all the efforts aimed at reducing the impact of hazards on mankind, very little progress was

made. Loss of life, property, infrastructure and economic livelihoods are on the increase without any indication of improvement. Development activities could, in most instances, be blamed for the high level of disaster risk present in communities.

At the same time, very little progress has been made in the international arena to ensure a development focus on disaster risk. Despite the international, as well as national, focus on the prevention and mitigation of disasters, the continuous impact and increase in losses were a clear indication that something more than just pure disaster management should be undertaken.

Hazards can be natural, human induced or technological in nature, i.e. cyclone, flood, famine, earthquake. Hazards are not disasters, but are the potential causes for them. A disaster is a serious and sudden event on such a scale that the stricken community needs extraordinary efforts to cope

with it, often with outside help or international aid. It is a severe situation usually associated with severe damage to infrastructure and utilities, death, injuries, and homelessness.

A disaster can be best described as a possible outcome of hazards striking a vulnerable community element. Vulnerability means that elements are exposed to specific hazards and have a low level of resilience to cope with the impacts of that hazard (i.e. storm surge, tsunami, flood, earthquake, etc).

Risk describes the likelihood of harmful consequences arising from the interaction of hazards, vulnerable elements and the environment. Mitigation is the process of implementing measures that eliminate or significantly reduce the risks associated with the impact of potential hazards. Disaster management is the organization and management of resources and responsibilities for dealing with all aspects of emergencies, particularly in preparedness, response and rehabilitation.

Every year, one or more types of natural disasters occur in Bangladesh, causing heavy loss of life, property and infrastructure. Past experience shows that disaster relief activities and the few disaster-related plans were prepared at the highest level without having comprehensive information about the disaster on the ground, i.e., at the local level.

Therefore, in many cases, the post-disaster relief and rehabilitation activities that were designed reflected neither the physical reality nor the needs expressed by the victims. At the same time, with limited trained human and financial resources, implemented activities were grossly inadequate and ineffective. Disasters cause economic damage to the tune of several billion dollars every year in Bangladesh.

In a developing country like Bangladesh, many development plans are poorly prepared at the central level without consulting the local communities and representing the needs of the target communities. Such development plans are not only unsustainable, but are also expensive and create a negative perception in the local communities towards development activities. Such flawed development initiatives in many areas of Bangladesh have created disasters or hazards such as the breach of irrigation channels, building constructed in vulnerable areas, poor housing plans, etc.

Due to flawed disaster management, the ratio of people killed to

affected population in Bangladesh is not negligible. The challenge of coping with disasters, and the need to integrate disaster reduction into sustainable development planning, must number among the major concerns. Natural disasters result in loss of lives, serious economic damage and severe impacts on the social conditions. However, natural disasters have received very little consideration in development policies, especially policies towards alleviating poverty.

All our efforts for disaster management in Bangladesh are run on an ad-hoc basis without thinking about their sustainability and long term impact to the local community. Moreover, such efforts were mostly concentrated on post disaster activities such as relief and rescue. Such post disaster activities were also done in isolation without consulting the target communities and authorities at the disaster sites.

There is a great possibility for linking disasters to development initiatives, and a variety of development activities can be implemented through a disaster mitigation initiative. It is an irony that, despite the knowledge of this reality, all the development actors (government, NGOs and development partners) have been dealing with disasters in isolation. Therefore, many development activities have been seriously disrupted or rendered non-functional by different natural disasters in the country.

In recent years the development community has been making the links between disasters and development. Disasters can impede the effectiveness of development resource allocation. Disasters have a particularly destructive economic impact in areas in which there are few replacements for assets that are destroyed, or in areas in which the resources are already at critical levels. Development processes can both increase or decrease the vulnerability of a society to hazards. There are clearly established linkages between poverty, marginalization, over-population, and vulnerability. To a large extent, vulnerability derives from poverty. The poor are more likely to live in vulnerable areas, have difficulty accessing education and information, have fewer assets to invest in resources to reduce vulnerability, and are more prone to becoming malnourished and have chronic illnesses that predispose them to injury and death.

Development may be associated with the production of new hazards accepted by a society because the perceived benefits of the development project far exceed the relative risk associated with the project. It is now widely recognized that the most likely solution to disaster problems is the implementation of successful development projects towards vulnerability, risk reduction, environmental management and sustainable livelihoods.

Partnership is another area which has been largely ignored in disaster management in many countries. Partnership in disaster management is much more needed than anything else. Many disaster experts know that a single institution cannot make a significant change or improvement during any disaster.

Despite this reality, none of the development activities implemented by either governmental or any non-governmental, or any development initiatives in Bangladesh, tried to link disaster to development. Therefore, many development activities have been suffering from natural disasters in Bangladesh adding additional financial burden to the ailing economy of the country. This clearly indicates that there is a great potentiality for linking disaster to development in a disaster prone developing country like Bangladesh.

Training and education are of critical importance in preventing increased vulnerability as a result of development strategies. Development also can progress in a manner that will result in mitigation of the impacts of an event on a given society. Such mitigation measures can be either structural or nonstructural.

There exists a wide range of options for incorporating mitigation measures in development projects. Proper coordination is always a challenge within the government

and in many cases, between government and NGOs. The sustainable disaster management activities in a disaster prone country like Bangladesh should be integrated or holistic in nature, and disasters should not be dealt with in isolation.

Linking disaster to development shows some hope for both, sustainable disaster management and development in the country. However, to make the development much more sustainable and development that bears fruits to all actors, the disaster management activities must be integrated. A clear road map on how disaster will be linked to development should be sketched before hand to guide the actors and the community. So, limited resources will be utilized for maximum benefit and the plan will be successful.

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Debating over Asian and Western democracy

Thailand's democracy will move on, with ups and downs that reflect its distinctive home-grown situation. At the end of the day, Thailand will remain an open society that tolerates dissenting views from the opposition, civil society organizations, and media.

KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN, *The Nation*

WHERE is the best place to discuss the Asian brand of democracy in the wake of the Thai coup last month? It is Singapore, of course.

The island republic is an ideal place, despite its tiny size (though you cannot see it clearly from the sky these days because of the smog from Indonesia). The country is not totally open, but it is opening up. But with a level of stability that is unmatched by any place in the world, and the uninterrupted continuity of social and economic development over the past four decades, foreign investors and expatriates love Singapore.

Its leaders are intelligent, self-centred, and unshakable. There are

no coups. The People's Action Party has reigned supreme and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Tolerance of opposition parties is low because the ruling party here is so "damned good"—to borrow a descriptive phrase from a Singaporean journalist. There are few irritants in Singapore at the moment. After all, Dr Chee Soon Juan has been declared bankrupt and is bleeding. James Gomez has been repeatedly branded a liar and is living overseas. The Far Eastern Economic Review is no longer on sale on the island.

So, when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong minced no words in commenting on the Thai coup last Friday to a group of editors from Europe and Asia gathered at Sentosa Island, it was a real eye-opener. He said the coup was a

setback for Thailand and that Singapore would have to accept it. He went on to say that former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra had won two general elections with landslide majorities, but there was implacable opposition from the Bangkok establishment, which subsequently led the military to intervene.

"General elections were scheduled for November as a way to break the impasse. But the military decided to remove Thaksin through a coup instead of waiting for the verdict of voters," he said. He also dissected the development of democracy in Indonesia since the fall of Suharto, saying that although political reform there had produced more checks and balances, it also made it harder for the country to push

other critical reforms, such as fixing up its labour laws.

It was hard to disagree with his analysis of the Asian political system when he said that every country in Asia must take its own route and strike its own balance. Importing institutions from other countries and grafting them onto the local political system can end up doing more harm than good. In more ways than one, Singapore has found its own political niche, which it has guarded tooth and nail. One could detect the pride that Lee seems to feel over Singapore's model. It is just the right mix.

Unfortunately, Lee's comments were not taken very well in Bangkok, not to mention "shock and deep concern" expressed by Foreign Minister George Yeo in New York. Over the weekend, the foreign ministry had made its position known to the Singaporean Embassy. It is not that the Thais are not used to harsh comments on our political system. The issue is where they come from. The United States—particularly certain American Congressmen—was the first to

condemn the Thai coup and was the only country to suspend all bilateral assistance. Bangkok could not have cared less. After all, US Ambassador Ralph Boyce was the first foreign diplomat to congratulate the new prime minister, General Surayud Chulanont, at Government House last Monday. Singapore was also among the three countries along with Laos and China to send a letter of congratulations to Surayud.

Some Thai officials bluntly rejected Lee's comments, saying they displayed a high level of political arrogance and indifference to the Thai political situation. They expected Singapore, as a strategic partner, to have more of a moderate view. As they saw it, Singapore's strong words about the coup and Thailand's democracy seemed closely linked to the island state's blind support of Thaksin over the past five years and the perceived loss of opportunities and benefits involving the mega Shin-Temasek deal.

The deposed Thai leader was seen as a student of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's political philosophy. The

senior Lee saw in Thaksin a leader with great potential and awarded the Thai with a fellowship under his name in 1996, the first foreign politician to receive such an honour. Thaksin was hooked.

He even declared at one time that he would make the Thai provinces into several Singapores. One of Thaksin's long-held plans was to implant the Singapore press model on the Thai press.

That explains why Thaksin was considered a buddy of the island state's leaders. In the past five years, they saw eye-to-eye on how the region could develop and compete with others. He and former prime minister Goh Chok Tong jointly called for an acceleration of Asean economic integration and several other schemes. Singapore's confidence in Thailand's economic performance shot up under Thaksin and served as a key factor in luring investors, including those belonging to the government, to pour money into this country. Now Singapore's level of investment rivals that of Japan and Taiwan.

The "win-win" mentality ignored the political risk associated with Thaksin's leadership and abuse of power, which reached its peak right after he won his second election in 2005. Indeed, Temasek was not the only organisation that had placed all its chips on Thaksin. Many Western corporate leaders in the US and Europe were supporters and were equally impressed with his economic vision. Fortunately they had their views vetted by independent experts before making any decisions.

Last week, the Supreme Administrative Court accepted to consider a petition to revoke the licences of Shin Corp because of its deals with Temasek Holdings. However the case is resolved, the ramifications for the future investment climate and the state of Thai-Singapore relations will be serious. It is therefore imperative for the two countries to hold talks and establish a new rapport so they can move past the dramatic changes that have taken place. Both sides have to make sure that it will not directly affect the fledgling defence cooperation.

In the end, the coup was a big—rather a mammoth—setback for Singapore's interest in Thailand. It also exposed Temasek's way of doing business and the nature of its corporate governance. Obviously, the island republic does not worry about democratic development here.

Thailand's democracy will move on, with ups and downs that reflect its distinctive home-grown situation. At the end of the day, Thailand will remain an open society that tolerates dissenting views from the opposition, civil society organizations, and media.

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