

The way it is

All our values that came with our thousands of years of heritage, culture, and history are being drowned in the degradation of our society which has been overcome with greed for power and money, nepotism, intolerance, perversions, intellectual bankruptcy, socio-political degradation, and so on and so forth. I know I am drawing a very negative picture, but look deep down into our society and you can see where we have ended up. We have reached the bottom of the pit, and burnt the ladder to get out. This is all our own doing, and we cannot point the finger at anyone else.

AKKU CHOWDHURY

CRAWLING out of the tunnel of darkness has been a never-ending process since our independence. Every time we see a light at the end, and hope rises, the exit is blocked out by falling rocks.

The country, today, is economically in a good position, and business is taking off. We overcame the crisis in the garments industry, that almost choked our export earnings, but now we are at a chaotic crossroads again.

Politically, we have been locked in immoderate debates over trifling matters for years, but which could have been overcome with mature thinking. But then, that is the process by which democracy takes shape. Unfortunately, the politicians were becoming impatient, and civil society, cultural activists, and business leaders also jumped onto the bandwagon for "reform" of the election process which (the caretaker system) is still in a transition period.

Too many forces began to play their own games, and all dreams of peaceful transfer of power from an elected government to a caretaker government were shattered, and what we saw in the streets of Dhaka and the rest of country is a shame for all of us.

Just a fortnight back we were all brimming with pride when our illustrious Professor Yunus won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Today, our

heads are bowed with shame at the cruelty and atrocity shown by some demonstrators during the transition period of power hand-over.

Destruction of property and looting are bad enough, but the naked aggression on defenseless people, and mercilessly beating them to death, are under no circumstances acceptable. There can be no justification for this, and all the political parties who organized such demonstrations are to be blamed, and their leaders condemned for such a crime.

It is hard to understand how the minds of political leaders work, but it is unbelievable that they can sleep in peace knowing very well that their rhetoric caused the hatred and violence that was displayed in the streets of Bangladesh most recently. The violence and killings have not stopped, and I am not sure when they will. But one thing is for sure, that what has begun, as a means for political gain, will not ever end.

We can only become true patriots by immersing ourselves in our work, and trying to be the best in whatever we do, which will ultimately contribute to nation building. If we can be focused about our country, and be passionate in our responsibility to our country, this nation of ours can surely move forward.

In the true spirit of our freedom struggle, we can dedicate ourselves to nation building with our services and professional ethics.

To do this we don't have to sacrifice our entire material world. All we need to do is try to practice, in our daily lives, the basic moral values that make us human beings.

Our culture, heritage, and religion teach us to be disciplined, to value and respect others, to be content with very little, to be resilient and to overcome all kinds of misery very quickly, and, definitely, to be hard-working and creative.

The people of this country have, time and again, proved that they are willing to make great sacrifices to bring about changes to make themselves and their fellow citizens lives better. We don't need to look too far back in history to see examples of such chivalry, when, a few years back, many people sacrificed their lives to establish democracy.

Just imagine if you can, the festivity and fervour of Eid was not yet over, but a few dozens were mercilessly killed by their fellow citizens for no rhyme or reason, other than political gain for a few. I am sure the friends and families of all those people who were beaten to death could have never expected their near and dear ones would become victims of such atrocities. I can't imagine how the perpetrators of these crimes can sleep without having nightmares, nor can I understand why there was no protest from the onlookers.

The whole drama of "power transfer" reached a climax, and the ending shocked most people so much that everybody accepted it

very calmly. Although we have not seen the end of it all yet, we can only pray and hope that we don't have to see such ruthless violence in the future.

All said and done, our political forces talk about democracy, but in practice it is autocracy and totalitarianism. As a result, to meet their goals or demands, they are more comfortable in using the politics of streets and violence rather than the house of parliament. This has resulted in the people becoming totally disgusted with politicians and the political system. The sad part of our history is that when democracy is only in an embryonic stage, being merely 15 years old, there is already apathy among the general public toward the system.

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All said and done, I am very proud of my country and still believe that we can come rise like the phoenix.

There is so much to be proud of in Bangladesh. Our rich history, culture, and heritage, just to begin with. The great War of Liberation, the pride of the nation the valiant freedom fighters, the resilient people who continue to survive the natural and man-made disasters that face them in all seasons, the natural beauty of the rivers and lush



greenery that abounds us, the hard working farmers who, with their toil and innovation, keep our dinner plates full all the time. The list can go on and on and will, any day, outweigh the negative side that we read about in our dailies everyday.

I am not a politician, nor am I blind that I cannot see the endless problems that confront us every day, and make me so frustrated that one wishes he or she could take the first flight out of here. But if we take some time, and a deep breath, to really look at the root of all the problems, we might end up seeing that the lion's share of the problems is each one of us -- individually.

In the thirty-five years since our independence, when the surrendering Pakistani army crippled the country intellectually, economically, and politically, the country has come a long way. At the time the country became independent billions of dollars worth of infrastructure was destroyed. Most of the highly qualified doctors, educationists, bureaucrats, technocrats, and businessmen who could have been valuable assets to the newly formed country were brutally murdered by the Pakistani

army before their surrender. The vacuum thus created is taking many years to be filled. But look at each of us, and see where we are compared to where our parents were 35 years ago.

After experimentation with one-party government, military dictatorship, and what not, the people demanded democratic form of government, which they achieved in 1990. Ever since, we have had three very successful elections and the parliament is working, although we have some hiccups and teething problems. These problems are caused by the immaturity of our politicians, not that of the citizens. The elections are held smoothly and the voters try to make the right choice, but the candidates nominated by the political parties are not necessarily the best of the lot.

The bureaucrats are expected to be the servants of the people, but the kind of salary and other benefits they are provided is laughable. With the qualification and pressure of work what they are expected to give us in return for their remuneration is simply unjustifiable. Even under these circumstances they have given us a working administration, which has carried on the



system of governance for over three decades quite well.

Our education system has collapsed, many would claim, but we are still producing bright students who are shining stars, even when they are competing in the world arena. The non-formal education systems practiced by the NGOs have increased the literacy rate amongst the non-privileged. Education has become available to the masses, and one can find university graduates from a larger cross-section of the society. The success of the NGOs is very well known to all of us and is our pride.

The micro-credit concept conceived by our own Professor Yunus, and practiced by his Grameen Bank, needs no introduction or acknowledgement. He is a familiar face, and well respected in all corners and corridors of not only the world powers, but also in the slums of the poorest countries. He has empowered the powerless by giving them the respect of being trusted with credit, which the conventional financial institutes could never dream about. He has brought laurel to us all by winning the Nobel Peace Prize for this year.

The business community has

not lagged behind in my list of pride.

The garments industry has given a new opportunity to not only female members of the society, but also to many small entrepreneurs to expand into the backward linkage industry that supports the garments factory. The textile industry has expanded manifold, giving employment to thousands. The computer boom has given silent growth to another sector, which had been untapped previously. Globalization has opened a new window of employment for our youth in many new sectors. The service industry is growing and has tremendous potential for employment. The overseas job market has given the country the chance to earn much-needed foreign currency.

There is always a silver lining, and it is that which makes me very positive about my country. I look forward to the new generation in business, politics, culture, education, NGOs who will lead us to a better and brighter Bangladesh.

Akku Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

In the name of the people

The caretaker government is a task-oriented government. It is to hold a free and fair election to the national parliament. Governance, for the caretaker government, should be geared to that goal. For a free and fair election, it has to be ensured that the entire paraphernalia of the electoral machinery is not used for partisan ends. It should be empowered strongly enough to deal firmly with subversive elements.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE other day a yellow cab charged me Taka 200 for a ride from my place at Wari to Gulshan 1. There was a virtual convocation of public transports of all sorts, CNG three-wheelers, black cabs, and yellow cabs. It brought me little relief because none of them was willing to go anywhere. This has become the rule of the time. I surrendered to one of the yellow cab drivers for a fare that pleased him. The meter box was gone. He pleaded in self-defence that there were maddening traffic jams all over the city.

We are in the season of show-downs. The politics of brinkmanship will not halt at anything for a chance to rule the country. Both the contending parties, the Awami League and the BNP, are sanguine that the people are with them. Therefore, whatever they do they do in the name of the people.

Political programs descend into turmoil. The turmoil wreaks havoc, killing, arson, spreading panic and paralysing public life. It makes things dangerous for the common man, and life

becomes difficult. The two parties will not settle for anything less than their demands. Anything to the contrary will unleash hostilities. The rumblings of the distant thunder are here.

In this scary time unease lies the head that wears the crown. The Awami League has targeted the president on the plea that it was unwise of him to skip over three options for the appointment of the chief adviser and take over the office himself. And add to it his recent untimely remark that the country is now under a presidential form of government.

He is vulnerable on more than one count. The foremost being that he is BNP's hand-picked president. The present system best suits a jurist, and he is not a jurist. And, perhaps, he is still convalescing. The situation he is in is not of his own making and, presumably, he did not seek it. His refusal would have subjected him to the tragic fate of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, being branded by BNP as a national betrayer in this political slugfest.

It is not an electoral battle for the hearts and minds of the

people. Most of all, delay would have plunged the country into a constitutional crisis necessitating third party intervention.

Lajuddin has further encumbered his own responsibilities by keeping more than his reasonable share of ministries. It would have been a useful confidence-building step had he handed over the home ministry to one of his advisers.

The BNP, on the other hand, has cocked its guns on the caretaker advisers to match Awami League in pressure tactics. It is unfortunate that our political parties, Awami League and BNP in particular, sit on judgement on the caretaker government while the very system is a legacy of their failure in building a political climate of trust and understanding. The chief adviser and the members of the caretaker government have risen to serve the country and its people in times of dire need. They have volunteered for the responsibility that, unlike political office, carries no perks and benefits of permanent nature.

This is one of the most perilous times in the 35 years of the country. Bangladesh is in a state of dangerous drift, and

the fear is building that we are heading towards a precipice. Awami League and BNP leaders fully understand that personal preferences and duty can exist side by side, and yet function honourably. The members of the caretaker government are no exception to it. Without this understanding, even the holiest system will break down.

I wish both the parties would do a bit of stock-taking, away from political gambits. In the simplest analysis, the Awami League does not have anything to account for as far as governance is concerned. That is an advantageous position, especially when BNP stands tainted on many accounts. The soft spots are many, corruption, price hike, power failure, and the prince himself.

Vigilance is good, but a party in such a commanding position should not be so unwise as to unleash its foot soldiers for confrontational politics that adds to the misery of the common man. They were the losing party in the Black Saturday fury. A peacefully held election will possibly translate into Awami League's gain. They should let the people speak. When the people speak the only thing to fear are the fears inside.

BNP on the other hand is on the ropes. They have been imperiously extravagant with their large mandate. The most striking feature of their governance was spiteful nonchalance. It was reflected in the

personal liberties many of their ministers, public office holders, representatives, and functionaries took. They were focused on perfecting a machinery that would assure them another term.

And they convey the impression that they are impregnable placed to win the next election. They have done what political parties in Bangladesh generally do. The black footprints are all around. Even BNP's supporters cringe at its electoral prospect. A sensible course for them is to stay away from a confrontational stance, and distance themselves from the president as honourably as possible.

In this scary situation, Dr Yunus explained to the president that the people like strong government. This is not possible in the present situation where the government is under siege, and governance is in a state of dereliction. The caretaker government is a task-oriented government. It is to hold a free and fair election to the national parliament.

Governance, for the caretaker government, should be geared to that goal. For a free and fair election, it has to be ensured that the entire paraphernalia of the electoral machinery is not used for partisan ends. It should be empowered strongly enough to deal firmly with subversive elements. This can be carried out only when the impression is effectively planted that the gov-

ernment is in the driving seat. Most of all, normalcy should return to civic life. Presently, Awami League and BNP are making the task difficult.

The election has to be held in January 2007. Time is ticking away fast. After 36 years, the day of reckoning has come for the political parties. They will have to convince the people, in whose name they do politics, that by contesting in a national election they seek popular approval to govern with the consent of the people.

It is not the mere crossing of the Rubicon for capturing Rome. Politics in Bangladesh is not the art of the possible for the greater good of the greatest number. Power and plunder, the two offspring of politics, function in the name of the people, but do very little for them. It is the majority they seek, that will install them in power. And once installed in power the nameless millions are forgotten. The pageantry and the feasting follow.

Politics, misuse of power and plunder go on, no matter which party is in power. How true it was of Edmund Burke to say: "Don't talk to me of majority, for I have seen what crimes are committed in its name." It is not a bad idea to further empower the minority. At least it will keep the majority under leash. That will bring a lot of relief to the people of the country.

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Back to basics

KAZI SM KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

MANy wish for a Mahathir Mohammad in Bangladesh. This is somewhat fatalistic. But, are Mahathir's visions that fatalistic? Perhaps, many remember a comment of Mahathir Mohammad when he last visited Bangladesh. Yes, he emphasized on social justice rather than rule of law. Admittedly, one of the basics of good governance is accountability. We always long for democracy. But, we have so far been able to establish a democratic system which is completely devoid of accountability.

That is why I believe that our democracy is faltering at every step. That is why a novel and noble concept like caretaker government -- though an upshot of mistrust -- is about to perish. For quite a long time now, the Awami League (AL)-led 14 party alliance and many civil society groups are engaged in an intense agitation for resignation or removal of the CEC and other commissioners. Will only the CEC's departure, however, ensure a free and fair election in the real sense of the term?

This is, however, not to defend the current CEC, MA Aziz. That man is by now beyond redemption for the damage he has caused to our electoral system and democracy. Arguably, it is that single man who was instrumental in planting the seed of suspicion in the minds of the then main opposition party and the civil society which exploded towards the end of October and resulted in deaths and injuries to many valuable lives.

Had he been removed in time, and had a credible voter list been prepared, even the agitation against the former chief justice might not have occurred. AL might have committed a real blunder by playing down the demand for removal of CEC during the dialogue with BNP. Did AL ultimately make a good bargain? Perhaps not.

Back to the question: whether CEC's exit would ensure a free and fair election? Sorry, I find hardly anything to be optimistic about in the present circumstances because a successor -- if not an upstanding man -- might well be haunted or, even worse, attracted by the current CEC's legacy which might be cited throughout the world to be a unique example of institutional (and perhaps, constitutional) despotism, devoid of modicum of accountability as well as self-respect.

Moreover, will our current system make the CEC answer for his actions while in the post once he is gone, let alone sue him in a law

court for his disruptive activities, at least for wasting crores of money from the national exchequer? Lamentably, however, it is, in fact, not applicable to the position of CEC only. Many people of the nature of CEC have got off scot-free in the country for which reason democracy is repeatedly passing through crunch periods.

Civil society groups -- though rising -- are not yet in a position to wage mass agitation in our country. Thus, their repeated calls for crucial institutional reforms such as making the Election Commission truly strong, introduction of identity card, making perfect and credible voter roll, introduction of transparent ballot box, banning loan defaulters and ill-begotten money holders from taking part in the elections, are losing the way in the agitations against individuals.

And, it is my firm conviction that the stated institutional reforms are the basics and no election in the country could be truly free and fair unless the basics are put in place. Awami League could have gone for a rigorous movement for such reforms rather than playing to the gallery.

Anyway, accountability is the most neglected phenomenon in the domain of our politics and officialdom. No one has to answer here for his or her misdeeds. No one has to feel shame for plundering money in this land of horilut. Most politicians here cry hoarse for democracy but don't say anything about accountability, and many official incumbents cite constitutional parentage to legitimize their misdeeds but don't feel even responsible, let alone accountable.

Have we ever thought deeper in our hearts that many in the country feel rather unwilling to pay a rickshaw-puller even one taka more, but they have to pay thousands as grease money? Some people at times beat even little boys mercilessly for stealing a few coins or a piece of bread, but they are perfectly happy to be at the mercy of those who plunder thousands of crores.

Aren't we beating about the bush in the political arena? Is there any alternative to going back to basics, that is, establishing accountability at every sphere of our life and ensuring social justice rather than rule of law if we are to avoid recurring political movements and proceed as a civilized nation?

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