

Thirty-five Days to the Pedestal of Power

Excerpts from the Daily Star Interviews with Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia



Hasina - The leader of the masses

'Ershad will be free if Special Powers Act goes' AL alone can't amend Constitution: Hasina

How do you evaluate the outcome of the recent anti-autocratic mass upsurge in the country? Do you think the democratic movement has achieved its final victory?

In 1969, the people of Bangladesh rose against the autocratic rule under the leadership of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and again in 1971, under his leadership the people achieved independence defeating Pakistan's Occupation Army. But in 1975, Bangabandhu was killed by the anti-democracy and anti-independence forces and the country was placed under Martial Law. Since then, autocratic rule and the process of changing power through bullets had continued in the country.

We continued our movement for long 15 years to end the autocratic rule with a view to establishing democracy on a firm footing. We achieved our independence on December 16, 1971 and the Bengalee nation achieved its liberty from the grip of autocracy and military rule on December 6 last year. The united movement of the students, teachers, peasants, workers, lawyers, doctors, journalists, professionals and of the people that turned into a mass upsurge resulted in the downfall of the autocratic regime.

After the fall of Ershad, a neutral Caretaker Government under the Chief Justice was formed for holding a free and fair parliamentary election. This is the initial victory of the movement. The final victory will emerge when Parliamentary democracy, on the basis of 1972 Constitution is established with a Government accountable to the Parliament. This is our pledge and it is also the aspiration of the people.

A proposal is there from some parties for the formation of a National Government after the election for a certain period of time. What do you think of the idea?

Awami League will not hesitate to form a National Government if it becomes necessary to end autocracy and military rule, ensuring transfer of power in a constitutional way, establishing Parliamentary democracy and to protect national sovereignty and independence.

If your party wins the election, will you bring any amendment to the Constitution to go back to Parliamentary form of democracy?

I myself, my party and my alliance consider this election as a mandate to re-establish the spirit of Liberation War and Parliamentary democracy by



HASINA - Ready to form a National Government but...

bringing an end to 'Zia-Ershad style Government'. If we get the mandate, we will go for Constitutional changes to fulfil the aspirations of the people which has been reflected in the recent mass movement.

If your party fails to get two-thirds majority in Parliament, do you hope then to reach an understanding on this issue with BNP and other parties?

On November 6 last year, I suggested a modality for Ershad's resignation and transfer of power to a Caretaker Government under the provision of Articles 51 and 55 of the Constitution. Later on November 19, the 15-party, the 7-party and the 5-party alliances jointly put forward the same modality which envisaged transfer of power by the Caretaker Government to the sovereign Parliament. This modality is the commitment to establish Parliamentary democracy in the country. Through the modality, three alliances including BNP, demanded holding of the election for the first transfer of power of the sovereign legislature. Non-cooperation of any party or alliance in Parliament for establishing Parliamentary democracy will be considered a treachery with the blood of martyrs of the mass movement.

According to the Constitution of 1972, socialism is one of the four state principles. To implement this the Awami League Government had adopted the policy of nationalisation. Do you still stick to that principle and the policy?

Socialism does not mean nationalisation. It is for ensuring food, clothing, medicare and social security for the poor. Socialism aims at making the country free from exploitation and injustice. Bangabandhu used to say that Bangladesh's socialism would not follow the models of socialism in other countries. According to him, our socialism should be consistent with the mentality of our people. Bangabandhu was the first to say about transition to socialism through democracy and the idea has now been accepted universally. The recent changes in East Europe is the reflection of the idea.

Many industries were set up in war-ravaged Bangladesh by Bangabandhu which were also profitable. At the same time, he encouraged the private sector and allowed investment of up to Taka 10 crore for setting up industries. The value of 10

crore taka during that period was much higher, if compared with the existing value of taka. At that time, the exchange rate of one US dollar was Taka eight which now stands at about 38 takas.

Bangabandhu had a plan to build rural infrastructure through multipurpose village cooperatives for strengthening the rural economy. If this plan could be implemented, the country would not have to face the present bankruptcy in the economy.

The economic policies of developed and developing countries cannot be the same. Some realistic steps are essential for transforming a developing country into a developed one.

What will be your attitude towards the denationalised industries and banks?

We will not nationalise the industries which have already been denationalised. Perhaps you know, 55 per cent of the denationalised industries have now become sick enterprise. This is detrimental to the economic interests of the country.

What will be your policy for the nationalised industries which are losing?

The loss in the nationalised industries was well planned and deliberate. Denationalised banks were bought by the private sector with loans taken from nationalised banks. This is very much against economic principles. Public sector has been ruined due to Junta rule of 15 years. The bankruptcy in the economy is the result of 15 years of corruption and the next elected Government will only inherit this bankruptcy.

By eliminating all obstacles with the cooperation of the people, efforts will be made to make the nationalised sector profitable.

If voted to power, what steps will be taken by your Government for the trial of Bangabandhu's killers?

There is law in every country for the trial of killings. But our country had to suffer since there was no trial of the killers of Bangabandhu. Rather the killers were allowed to move freely. It was our Army which had to suffer much. So far, 600 Army officers and 2,500 Jawans had to give their lives. The killers of Bangabandhu are still engaged in conspiracy. If they are not tried, injustice will prevail.

There is a demand from different quarters for the repeal of black laws like the Special Powers Act of 1974. Do you think that the present Interim Government should take a decision on it or leave it for the future elected Government to decide?

Ershad will have to be released if this Act is repealed. Do you want that? Once I said that no law could be branded as black or white. The question is, how the law is exercised. The law, under which a man like Ershad was arrested, cannot be branded as a black law. This law was in force during the rule of Ziaur Rahman as well as during Ershad's regime and it still exists.

How do you look at the possibility of a national consensus on major issues like education policy, and the health policy?

We are going to establish a parliamentary system. Parliament will set principles and decide on basic human needs like food, clothing, health, education and shelter.

What is your reaction to the current turn of events? Or do you think some other development would have been better?

We were in a continuous struggle for the last eight years against the government of H. M. Ershad. He had overthrown the elected government of BNP in a coup and established his autocratic rule. All his pledges to the nation were nothing but lies. There was no rule of law and corruption was rampant. Ershad wanted to perpetuate his autocratic rule by eliminating BNP. That is why people gave their blood. BNP workers suffered a lot but did not give up. They fought resolutely to oust Ershad.

We never accepted his Government nor participate in the election under him as this would give his government some measure of legality. We were fully convinced that election under the Ershad regime could never be free and fair. People had lost their faith in election. We had decided that we would participate in the election as soon as a caretaker Government was formed. We had reached an understanding with another big party not to participate in any election under Ershad Government. But they deviated from their pledge and took part in election for sheer personal gain. Their participation in the election gave Ershad legality to continue his rule. But you have seen we were on the streets. This had forced Awami League to take part in the movement. There was movement against Ershad Government in 1987.

When Ershad government was shaken following the movement; some individuals, parties and few persons in our party betrayed the cause of the people and Ershad survived. We had nothing to do at that time. It is difficult to patch up internal trouble and as a result a section of our boys was misguided. They could not proceed as per their strategy. It they could proceed accordingly Ershad would have had to quit.

Again in 1988 election was held. The people had shown no interest in the polls. No party took part in it. Foreign observers saw the holding of polls and people's total rejection of it. The movement was always there and it has never stopped.

In 1990, we started movement with renewed vigour and had set specific programmes. We had resolved that Ershad must be ousted by 1990. You have also observed as to how the movement had progressed. The way Ershad brought the country to the brink of ruination it was essential to oust him without delay. The Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) also drew up programmes for the removal of Ershad by 1990. They formed All-Party Students Unity (APSU) and launched intensified movement against Ershad.

People from all walks of life spontaneously took part in anti-Ershad movement which brought his fall quickly.

What was your reaction to the resignation of General Ershad three days after his announcement of handing over power 15 days before filing of nominations for Parliamentary polls? Where you surprised or did you know about this development?

No, I was not surprised. But I was not sure that such development will take place within three days. Ershad had no alternative, so he quit.

Were you ready to participate in the polls at this stage?

We had difficulties in selecting our candidates. We

participated in elections in the past. BNP had specific programmes and election manifestoes. The present popularity of BNP is the result of past programmes. We got little time to publish manifestoes. These are now under print.

What is your main election issue? Why will people vote for BNP against Awami League?

We shall stick to our old 10-point programme. But our main objective is to establish production-oriented economy so that food, shelter, health

introduced multi-party democracy when it was in power. During BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League) rule journalists could not write freely. Only four newspapers were published under government control and all other newspapers were closed down. BNP freed the country and its people from this curse. I personally feel that any system of Government can function well if it has respect for people's wish and sincerity to serve public cause.

'BNP inherited presidential form from AL' No fair polls without arms recovery: Khaleda

Under Presidential system the chance of misuse of power is greater than the Parliamentary system. What is your view on it?

Those who have no link with the people, mislead the people. But those who enjoy people's support and confidence they do not need any abuse of power.

If you retain Presidential system, have you any desire to give more authority to the Parliament?

Our committee will think about this. We want welfare of the people. With this objective in mind we shall act accordingly.

If elected to form government, what would be your foreign policy, especially with our neighbours?

This aspect has been clearly defined in our manifesto. We want friendly relations with our neighbours but no big brotherly attitude nor any interference in our internal affairs from any one.

Do you think we can depend on World Bank aid to tide over present economic crisis?

I have already said General Ershad has systematically destroyed our economy through unprecedented corruption. Without foreign financial assistance it is, at this stage, difficult for us to survive.

Do you want the Caretaker Government to try former President H. M. Ershad?

We want Ershad and his associates be tried under the existing law of the land. They must be arrested for the sake of free and fair election. And for that we have demanded the bureau of anti-corruption probe into the corruption of Ershad and his men and bring them to book quickly.

The main task of the Caretaker Government is to hold a free and fair election. If it decides to hold trial of Ershad and his men, then the main objective of the Interim Government may suffer. Do you agree?

People took to the streets because of corruption and misuse of Ershad and his men. People want their trial. There are specific cases against each of them on the basis of which they must be sent to jail. The trial may be held after a reasonable period of time.

Do you think proper election can be held following the measures so far taken by the present Government?

I do not say anything about steps taken by the Election Commission. But congenial atmosphere is essential for holding the election. Mere enactment of laws is not enough, one should protect these. For this we have repeatedly demanded that the criminals and persons against whom specific charges have been framed must be detained. Government has asked for surrendering illegal arms but response is poor. Arms are being manufactured in clandestine armories in various parts of the country. So it is difficult to predict whether the situation would remain peaceful during the election.

Have you talked to the Acting President about this?

Yes, we have talked on a number of times that if the possessors of illegal arms are not brought to book forthwith election will not be free. If polls are held properly, BNP would come to power. This is evident from people's spontaneous response to BNP's programmes. This has shaken the evil doors. They have resorted to largescale terror tactics so that election is not held properly and BNP does not return. This would help those corrupt elements to go unpunished.

Was there any discussion among the major alliances and political parties for framing code of conduct so that everyone desist from resorting to intimidation and mudslinging against each other?

Those who are loudly proposing such code of conduct are themselves violating it by their actions. First of all they must show respect for other's views. Awami League is saying that there was autocratic rule during the 15 years. But they were in the Parliament which was formed in 1979 after fair election. Again they participated in 1986 election under the ousted president H. M. Ershad which gave Ershad some sort of legality. Does such actions come under the purview of any code of conduct? Moreover, Awami League is telling precisely such things as this party will get 10 seats and that one would get second position in the election. What sort of utterances are these? Freedom of speech does not mean one should undermine the position of another. This is cheap politics.

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KHALEDA: Arms being manufactured in private armories

were psychologically prepared for the election.

Do you think that the time you have got is too short for participating in the polls?

For us, the time we have got is short for taking part in the polls. We were busy in the movement for the last eight years.

Are you satisfied with the nomination of your party candidates? Will you get majority of the seats?

Certainly. People have confidence in BNP. We got 5,000 applications seeking BNP tickets for the election.

What are the reasons that people would support BNP?

People have watched BNP for the last eight years. They have also seen those parties which took part in the polls under Ershad and their past role when they were in power.

Many say that your personal popularity is more than your party. This was also true in respect of late President Ziaur Rahman. Do you agree?

It is not true. Some people enjoy popularity. That does not mean popularity at the cost of party. BNP is a strong organization. This is evident from the fact that party workers are organising meetings at different unions, thanas and in other places. I go straight from Dhaka. The rest is done by BNP workers. Without organisation, it is not possible to survive.

Many feel that both BNP and Awami League suffer from some sort of weakness. The weakness is reflected from the fact that they could not announce manifestoes before giving nominations. Do you agree?

BNP is not a new party. It

introduced multi-party democracy when it was in power. During BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League) rule journalists could not write freely. Only four newspapers were published under government control and all other newspapers were closed down. BNP freed the country and its people from this curse. I personally feel that any system of Government can function well if it has respect for people's wish and sincerity to serve public cause.

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Khaleda - The champion of people's rights

The two interviews of Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia were conducted on two separate occasions by a team of senior journalists of the Star consisting of S.M.Ali, Editor, Mahfuz Anam, Executive Editor, Reazuddin Ahmed, Deputy Editor, Khalilur Rahman, Associate Editor, Amanullah Kabir, News Editor and Chapal Bashir and Mainuddin Naser, Senior Staff Correspondents.