



HUNDRED DAYS OF DEMOCRACY



March of Democracy: An Overview

S. M. Ali

AN evaluation of the performance of a government in power and a look at the working of democracy, both during the same hundred days, present a number of common features. However, the two should be judged at different levels, with slightly different yardsticks in mind.

The evaluation of a government is essentially an assessment of an administration in which the party in power plays a pivotal role, without being its sole custodian, with the civil service taking a major responsibility in its day-to-day operation.

The perspective becomes much wider when we look at the working of democracy. Here, too, the party in power occupies a pivotal role, but it shares the responsibility for the success or otherwise of the system with other political parties, especially the Opposition, the student community and the labour front, the media and special interest groups.

In a superficial sense, a country can have an effective administration without enjoying the benefits of a democratic system. But a democratic system can run into a crisis when it fails to give the country an effective administration.

The fate of an administration and that of the democratic system are, of course, mutually dependent, if not irrevocably linked. Any move made to destabilise an administration or the party in power can, if successful, undoubtedly weaken, perhaps even destabilise the system as a whole.

However, in the final analysis, the strength of a democratic system should be measured in terms of its ability to withstand any challenge posed against the administration. In other words, a party in power should not assume that every crisis it faces in running the administration places democracy in danger. After all, a government is not synonymous with the state.

These are all oft-repeated views about how a democratic system works — or rather

ought to work — in a country like Bangladesh as well as of its relationship with the government in power.

The question is, how has the system performed in its first hundred days here? What would an overview reveal?

On balance, the performance has been largely positive in most areas, including in some unexpected ones.

To what do we attribute the success of the system?

A member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party would say, "The system worked because the government worked." A spokesman of the Awami League would view the positive achievement of the system as a "direct result" of the helpful role played by the Opposition. Even leaders of smaller left and centre-of-left parties might say that they too contributed to the success by upholding the need for national consensus on major issues, especially on the question of the form of government.

To varying degrees, all the three claims — and similar ones by others — have substance.

The fact is, an indecisive government harassed by a disruptive opposition, with smaller groups fishing in troubled waters, would have surely posed a series of problems which could add up to a crisis, for the new parliament and the fledgling system.

Here, in retrospect, we also face the realisation that the country took time, several weeks to be exact, in moving into the phase of what we recognise as constructive politics. In fact, at the start of the country's journey back to democracy, the mood prevailing inside the new parliament was one of non-cooperation, often of confrontation, between the ruling party and the Opposition. Apparently feeling somewhat uncomfortable in

the Sangsad setting, the Leader of the House, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, seemed aloof and withdrawn, while the Opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina, appeared more interested in exploiting Begum Zia's lack of parliamentary experience than in bringing into her own role the dignity and a sense of responsibility that it deserved. Then came the devastating cyclone which, among other things, made Prime Minister Khaleda Zia more determined than ever to prove that her government was capable of handling the situation on its own, without setting up an all-party national advisory relief committee. Meanwhile, tension developed between the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Begum Zia, revealing the weaknesses, political and administrative,

inherent in the diarchy of the government. If a section of politicians were out to exploit the situation — a few in the ruling party felt it was time to put the judge in his place — some cliques within the civil service, better known as bureaucracy, were anxious to provide a side-show to the main play, mostly in their own interest.

The situation could not have continued much longer without creating a credibility problem for the BNP government, the Acting President and perhaps for the system as a whole. It goes to the credit of both Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Begum Zia for defusing the crisis, with the Acting Presi-

dent urging all parties, especially BNP, to move fast in resolving the constitutional questions about the form of government as well as about his own return to the judiciary. The Judge's plea, made in a controversial TV/Radio address, was followed by his meeting with BNP leaders, led by the Prime Minister herself. We believe, this meeting helped the ruling party in assessing its own choices and options in an increasingly complex situation.

It is in this context that the decision by the ruling party, prompted by Begum Zia's own change of position on the issue, to switch to the parliamentary form of government

assumes great importance. The move by BNP resolves a number of complex questions and clears the stage for a smooth march of democracy, based on strong institutions and increasingly pronounced role for the Jatiya Sangsad in the country's decision-making process.

Had the ruling party decided to "go it alone" with the presidential system, there would have been surely the demand from the Opposition, within the parliament and outside, for the replacement of the present Begum Zia administration by a caretaker one during the presidential polls, a contentious attempt by the ousted president Hussain Muhammad Ershad to enter the race and, above all, a country-wide Awami League-

led agitation directed against both the BNP and the presidential system.

All these would have brought tremendous pressure on the political system that the country would have found hard to cope with.

During a recent conversation with The Daily Star, reported in full elsewhere in this issue, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia suggested that she had never publicly committed her support for the presidential system and hence there was really no shift in her own position on this question when the party decided to support the parliamentary form.

The popular assumption that the Prime Minister did change her position on this issue only adds to her political stature and suggests that she is perfectly capable of recongising the political realities in a given situation. Again, if it is true that a majority in the

BNP leadership was in favour of the switch-over to the parliamentary form, Begum Zia's acceptance of the mood in the party augurs well for democracy in the organisation's decision-making process. This, in turn, would strengthen the working of democracy in the country as a whole.

While democratic forces should be pleased that, in immediate terms, the march of democracy in this country may well be smooth, along a predictable course, they should be now thinking of future tasks.

Both BNP and Awami League would be now thinking of new legislations to deal with problems of defections and floor crossings which, experts say, contribute to the supposed instability of the parliamentary system. On the other hand, the ruling party appears con-

cerned about bringing in technocrats who may not be elected members of the Sangsad into the cabinet, but within a fixed quota. Again, some experts believe that, as in Britain's House of Commons, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House could well be two different persons, a move that, if adopted here, would leave Begum Zia relatively free to concentrate on running the government, while a senior member of the cabinet would take charge of all parliamentary affairs as Leader of the House. Finally, would it be good move to set up a second chamber in Bangladesh to accommodate nominated and elected representatives of special interest groups, such as women associations, labour, students, intellectuals and even consumer bodies, who need a platform to make their voices heard in the corridors of power?

Many of these issues relate to our long-range planning for the future of democracy in Bangladesh. At the risk of sounding pompous, we would say that, together with this long-term thinking, we need political education for members of political parties at all levels, the special interest groups, the electorate and even the media — in this order. Through such an education, we may well develop a new understanding of inner democracy within each political organisation and the need for each party to work out its own socio-economic agenda for the country. It is precisely this process that would eventually help the political groupings — and the country as a whole — in bringing into the mainstream of our democratic system the best men and women capable of raising the level of the working of democracy in the country, more qualitatively than in sheer number, and giving the whole system a new dimension.

In this monumental task facing the country, our work has just begun.



The fifth National Assembly in session. — Star Photo by Mohsin.

After Hundred Days in Office

Need for Bolder Policy Initiatives

by Mahfuz Anam

The hundred days old Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government is up for its first performance report. The time frame is of course arbitrary, and the practice borrowed from the western media, who are past masters in creating their own events to report on. We are a bit unused to the practice as we are with many other democratic customs. The hundred day report is not an attempt to make a government look either good or bad but a process through which the people are given an impression as to how their elected representatives are doing, and the government gets the benefit of a feedback as to how their performance is being perceived by the public.

Any report on performance is essentially a comparison. So with what do we compare the performance of Begum Zia's government? We could either do so with that of the first hundred days of the previous governments, or with our own subjectively arrived at level of 'public expectation'.

The problem with the first is that the previous administrations are not comparable. The problem with a subjectively arrived at level of public expectation is that it is so subjective. The BNP government may not appear to have performed well if our expectations were pegged unrealistically high to start with, or it may appear to have worked wonders if what we expected of them was to fumble and flounder. So, how are we going to look at it? Is the proverbial glass half full or half empty?

There are two broad categories under which the BNP governments performance days could be judged: its politics and its policies. Though it is too soon to make any tenable judgement about the government's political achievements in any field, it is necessary to remember that BNP came to power riding the crest of a mass uprising that threw up a lot of expectations among the general public. Much of it remains unrealised, prompting some quarters to say that only people have changed and not the system — a comment justified, in my view, till the ruling party's dramatic shift on the question of Constitutional Amendment. But not anymore. It can be said with some amount of justification that Be-

gum Zia's government has been able to create a positive feeling all around. That the government is not arrogant — at least not yet — and is sensitive to public needs. BNP's decision to take the route of the joint declaration of the three alliances has earned it goodwill, sympathy and support. The fact that the party chairperson had to change her own preferred position to make that decision possible has restored confidence among party workers that their opinions matter and that they can affect changes in party's fundamental policies.

In our political culture of sycophancy, leaders do not change their minds, parties do. Seldom, or perhaps never, have we seen political parties challenging their leaders. Instead they bow to the latter's whims and arbitrariness. The example of party cadres and senior leaders being able to carry the day has brought in a new enthusiasm among the workers, which in the long run will help to strengthen BNP. If this practice can be institutionalized in all parties, especially in the leading ones, then politics in our country will attract more democratic-minded and honest people, enhancing the quality of our politics and politicians in general.

A significant achievement of Begum Zia's government so far has been its continued clean image. Corruption which had spread like cancer, remains far from being tackled. But a no-nonsense approach at the very top has already had the singular effect of ending the old free-wheeling corrupt days. So far the clean image of the ruling party has not been questioned and the longer the BNP can sustain it the more effective will be its anti-corruption drive, which in turn will strengthen its position with the people.

Another plus for the BNP has been its attempts to go for a national consensus as shown by their dramatic shift on the question of the form of government. As this writer has mentioned earlier, such a decision by BNP called for self-confidence and political maturity. The challenge before the ruling party now is to extend this consensus into other basic policy areas, especially in making hard economic choices that will need to impose aus-

terity measures whose implementation can be greatly facilitated through a bi-partisan accord between BNP and the AL and better still larger understanding between the major alliances.

While the BNP can be credited with having scored significant political gains, it cannot boast of similar successes in the field of policy formulation, especially in the development sectors. In fact the record is almost blank. What we have had so far, in the name of policy formulation, is rhetoric uttered in various public meetings. In response to a question on the priorities of her government, during her interview with The Daily Star, the Prime Minister said, "Agriculture, education, health, housing, industrialisation — all the basic needs." It sounded more like a 'wish list' or like the development agenda for the coming decades rather than the immediate priorities of a political government.

Take first the issue of the economy. If the budget be any indicator of the government's economic policies then the most generous comment that can be made is that it is pragmatic. So far the government has not really shown any extraordinary initiative or adopted any bold or creative move in any area which is likely to have any dramatic impact on our economy. The steps have more been geared towards maintaining status quo with discordant attempts to favour the private sector.

The nailing of the defaulters has justly earned the government limited praise. Limited because it was well intentioned, highly appropriate but not a well executed step. A more thorough measure would have isolated the genuine cases from the willful wrong doers, providing corrective measure where necessary and going for legal actions where appropriate.

In agriculture, which the Prime Minister told the Star was her top priority, the approach so far has been piecemeal and uncoordinated. The BNP government has written off agricultural loan up to Tk.5,000 and tax upon land up to 25 bighas. Begum Zia deserves our praise for living upto her election pledge. However more could have been made out of this give-away. As

implemented now, it will have very little positive impact on the economy. On the other hand if the same measures were tied to some planned moves to increase agricultural productivity or to some incentive schemes then the return on the same largesse could have been more positive. More importantly we would have been able to get away from the free ride mentality.

In education, to which the government has given its highest allocation, the scene is similar. We await a policy from the government as to how the abysmal literacy rate of 29 per cent (official figure, but in reality it is lower still) can be increased; how the 80 per cent drop out rate at the primary level can be stemmed, how the secondary education can be made useful, and vocational, and technical education more accessible. We would like to know how the new government plans to make our higher education more creative and development oriented, and one which produces more scholars and fewer politicians.

The health sector remains in a limbo with the discredited health policy of the Ershad era thrown by the wayside and nothing new so far taking its place.

There is yet to be an industrial policy and no steps have been taken in the population and family planning areas. In short we await the government's initiative in most of the areas relating to our development needs.

The severest blotch on the performance sheet of the BNP's first hundred days in office, is of course its failure to restore discipline in the educational institutions. Taking over of the Chittagong University campus by a particular student group; making forts literally — out of student dorms in Dhaka University and exchanging gun fire as if it were some border outpost and not the very heart of the capital city; and armed clashes in the Jagannath University College are only a few examples of the despicable lawlessness that has become the way of life of our premier educational institutions. While the main responsibility for this failure lies squarely on the shoulder of the government, the parties who are giving shelter to discredited students and those sus-

pected of criminal backgrounds and even of being involved in murders, cannot escape their share of responsibility in this sordid affair.

The most heartening aspect of our hundred days of democratic governance is the gradual evolution of our parliament as the centre stage of our democratic identity. We are beginning to look upon the parliament as the source of all our laws, as the place to take the government to task, and most importantly, as the guardian of our freedom. It is in the healthy growth of this pivotal institution that the future of our democracy lies.

Elections and parliament are the two unique and irreplaceable ingredients of democracy. We have them both now, the latter coming to its full glory after the passage of the much talked about Constitutional amendment. To make both of them effective, what we must inculcate is the culture of democracy. For this we need tolerance, we need to free ourselves from prejudices and narrow mindedness and above all to develop the self-respect and the confidence which will enable us to place the interest of our country and that of our electorate before that of ourselves or of our party. For all of this, we need time, which are must give to our new parliament and to our new government.

Wherever we are, in the treasury bench or the opposition, in a particular political party or in the opposite camp, inside the parliament or outside it, we must devote all our energies in making the institution of the parliament stronger and that of the elections, regular. Herein lies the real challenge to all our political parties, especially the two leading ones. With a strong and functioning parliament, and regular holding of elections, many of the defects in our democracy will surely disappear.

The memories of the first fumbling and unsteady steps in our march towards democracy are now specially receding into the past. The first hundred days of our democratic journey shows unmistakable signs of growing confidence in ourselves and in the viability of our institutions.

Views expressed by staff writers in their articles on page 5 and 6 do not necessarily reflect the position of The Daily Star on issues under discussion.

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Begum Zia : Emergence as a Confident Leader

by Reazuddin Ahmed

PRIME Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, who took over a fragile democracy 100 days back, now seems confidently looking towards a period of stability. If everything moves smoothly, the country will return to a parliamentary democracy within the next few weeks and Khaleda Zia will assume full executive powers, within the limits of the system.

Under the existing dispensation, although the Acting President is the chief executive constitutionally, Begum Khaleda Zia has been exercising *de facto* executive powers as the Prime Minister. But the situation has not always been very smooth. There have been some petty differences between the Acting President and the Prime Minister, which came to a head in the first week of this month. But the crisis was averted and the dust settled sooner than expected. This was possible because the ruling party decided to go back to a parliamentary form of government, thus ending a political debate over a very touchy issue.

In politics, the ruling party usually gains by defusing tension and avoiding confrontation. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, during the last 100 days, seemed to have adroitly planned things to achieve this goal. The post-election scenario was not as stable as it appears today. The situation was a little restive mainly due to the major opposition party's offensive against the majority party. The Awami League, the main opposition in the parliament, had opposed the formation of cabinet by the BNP. Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed also compounded the situation in a post-election address to the nation. He pointed to certain constitutional lacunae in forming a cabinet by the BNP. But Begum Zia faced the situation with usual calm and sobriety. She refrained from reacting publicly and instead called on the Acting President to stake her claim to form the government. Thus a possible confrontation was averted at the early stage of our nascent democracy.

There has been a dramatic turn in the country's politics after the debate over the form of government ended. The ruling party will move the bill within a couple of days to revert to a parliamentary form and to send back Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to the Bench.

Begum Zia told The Daily Star that her party had decided to opt for a parliamentary democracy to prove once again that the BNP can cope well under either system. She said her party did well even under the presidential system during the period between 1976 and 1981 which she describes as the best period for Bangladesh.

The ruling party is, however, moving very cautiously to avoid instability inherent in the system. The weaknesses of a parliamentary form of government, which may be exploited in a developing country, are being plugged keeping the basic principles of parliamentary democracy in force.

As reported, there may not be major differences between the Treasury Bench and the Opposition on basic principles. There may be minor additions here and there.

The ruling party's decision has delighted Members of Parliament belonging to all parties. But according to reports some Opposition leaders are not very happy with the decision. The decision has caused some disappointment among the leaders for the simple reason that a popular political issue has been successfully buried by the ruling party.

Parliamentary democracy was the Awami League's main election pledge. But the Awami League did not get the mandate to change the system of government. The party, however, prepared a constitutional amendment bill (private member's bill) to go back to a parliamentary system. Normally a private member's bill is not carried through in the House. But the Awami League has done it perhaps only to record that it was their baby and they wanted to nurture it.

But Begum Khaleda Zia has decided to kill the Awami League's stillborn baby and is now more comfortable both inside and outside parliament. When asked if she felt the bill would be passed on the basis of a broad consensus she replied in the affirmative. But she has tended to add: "If anyone blocks the bill, who will be the loser?" Obviously, not the BNP.

As stated before, Khaleda Zia has reasons to be confidently looking for a period of stability. She has tackled the political situation very efficiently during the last 100 days. The period was very difficult for her for so many rea-

sons. Firstly, she was in charge of the administration without any experience; secondly, she was in parliament for the first time and that, too, as Leader of the House; and thirdly, she had to face such adverse situations like a devastating cyclone, deteriorating law and order situation, 'jail unrest' and also her government had to make a budget within the shortest possible time with serious resource constraints. She told The Daily Star that now she feels confident at the helm of statecraft. She also looks relaxed these days.

Khaleda Zia's days in parliament during the first session were very exciting. At times has looked tired of the 'unnecessary' debates and 'wastage' of time. But the more she attended the session the more she got used to all these things. In the second session, Khaleda Zia seems to be enjoying the proceedings. And now she gives more time to the House.

One of the biggest advantages of parliamentary democracy is that the politicians everyday face their rivals in the parliament and frequent meetings tend to have lasting effects on personal relationships. Khaleda Zia has, in the meantime, built good rapport with the opposition MPs. She responded on the floor to some of their demands and earned applause both from the Treasury Bench and the Opposition. She conceded to their demand for diplomatic passports, saying that the representatives of the people shall get the highest honour.

As mentioned earlier, the ruling party benefits from defusing tension and avoiding confrontation on trifling issues. The Prime Minister has systematically followed this method. She defused the Opposition members in parliament by supporting the adjournment motion, involving Treasury and Opposition MPs in development activities and relief operations, etc.

During the last 100 days, Khaleda Zia has emerged as a confident leader and a determined administrator. She has built up an image that she is willing to submit to the collective will of the party leaders and supporters and the popular will. This has been manifested in her dramatic decision to go back to a parliamentary form of government.