

Kamal Hossain Explains the Reasons for his Latest Political Move

DR Kamal Hossain has the rare ability of being articulate and evasive at the same time. Whether it comes from his training as a politician or his expertise as an eminent lawyer, with a brilliant academic credentials, is largely a matter of speculation, but perhaps a little immaterial. What is of immediate importance is that having been on the sidelines of the politics of the opposition Awami League (AL), especially in its decision-making system, Hossain has emerged on the scene, capturing the limelight, if not exactly taking the centre stage.

During his 90-minute conversation with *The Daily Star*, the 56-year-old, Oxford-educated lawyer spoke with confidence, but it did not obscure his reluctance to make clear-cut statements on his future objectives. Here, his political training probably guided his responses. Among many of his achievements, Kamal — as he is called in the media — had been responsible for drafting the Constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 and then successively serving as Ministers for Law, Foreign Affairs and Petroleum and Minerals.

Where Hossain was totally unambiguous was in his scathing criticisms of the failure of the system, of the erosion of hopes raised by the introduction of the parliamentary democracy, of the law and order situation, especially of the campus violence and of the absence of a national consensus on basic issues among political parties in the country. By avoiding any direct attack on either the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or on AL, he seemed to emphasise his non-partisan position or of the new party that may well come into being in coming days. We publish below extensive extracts from the conversation between Kamal Hossain and the team of *The Daily Star*.

The Daily Star (DS): Over the last two years two developments have taken place where you are playing the pivotal role. One is the formation of the Democratic Forum of which you are the convenor and another is the recent move of floating a political party. We would like to know what made you think of these two moves.

Kamal Hossain (KH): Well, you look back two years from now. There was then a growing concern among us who took the initiative to launch the Democratic Forum, as a civic organization, aiming to achieve consensus and to get citizens, ordinary citizens, regardless of their party affiliations, to play a more active role in shaping up democracy.

Political parties played their important roles but vital roles had also been played by professional groups and many conscious citizens who strengthened the movement through their participation.

It was a very extraordinary kind of event — the restoration of democracy after a very long period of authoritarian rule.

DS: Let's move to the contemporary scene.

KH: Right. During the last days of the anti-autocracy movement it was felt that the situation in the country required a concerted response to create an environment in which you could harness the productive capacities of the people. Also there was the need for an environment where students could pursue education.

But one has always sensed and shared with a lot of our countrymen the feeling that we've lost a lot of time. We lost 24 years from 1947 to 1971. And then, from 1971 to 1993, long 22 years have passed.

DS: What led you exactly to the decision of forming the Democratic Forum?

KH: One began to sense that somehow the parliament itself was not functioning to that end. I say this because I have great expectations from the parliament. Our experiences with presidents are that they tend to be insulated from reality, insulated from people's feelings and concerns.

Now we have a parliamentary form with elected members of parliament with an active opposition. The effective functioning of an opposition makes the parliamentary system far more responsive.

DS: Could I ask at what stage the Democratic Forum which you conceived of then turned to be different, and you decided to go for a national convention?

KH: There has been a very natural kind of progression between the Forum and this initiative for having a national convention.

We wanted to get across why the parliament is not more active, and more responsive to our needs and concerns. We would have to play a much more active role in bringing to the attention of parliament, of government, of opposition, our concerns about issues like campus violence. This became a matter of great concern to parents, to students, to teachers, and indeed to any conscious citizen because we all recognize that the survival of our economy and of our society depends upon the younger

Within the next few days, the country would know if it has a new political party. Many analysts believe that the three-day National Convention, organised by the Democratic Forum, starting tomorrow, will lead to the launching of an organisation that has been already dubbed as a "third force". However, a sizable number of observers are keeping their fingers crossed; some are plainly sceptical of prospects of such a move. How will it be structured? Will the proposed party divide secularist pro-liberation forces? What will be its agenda?

*The man to answer these questions is of course none other than Dr Kamal Hossain, the Convenor of the Democratic Forum, formed last year, and now the primemover of the proposed new political party. Despite his busy schedule, Hossain found time earlier this week for a wide-ranging conversation with *The Daily Star*, covering most but not all the issues, on this latest development. In what was a candid exchange of views, *The Daily Star* team was led by Editor S M ALI who was assisted by Executive Editor MAHFUZ ANAM and Chief Reporter M ANWARUL HAQ. Photographer ENAM took the pictures.*

people, and on the development of our human resources.

DS: You are still a bit vague about why you formed the Democratic Forum. You mention campus violence, what are some other reasons?

KH: There is a whole series of things. I was highlighting violence because this is a matter on which there is a very clear concern and there's no controversy about it in any quarters.

Take other issues such as the function of the administration. The people expected a democratic administration, a government with less of corruption, less of obstacles being put in the way. People who are interested in setting up an industry or seeking solutions to problems of a sick industry, all require quick prompt decisions. Now here was a government brought into place and a democratic government who would be responsive to the needs for restoring and reviving the economy. But you found that somehow they had a record of chronic failure to come to decisions, to take follow-up actions. And so, on the economic front, you sensed there was a persisting stagnation.

On the level of law and order, and that has to do with campus violence as well, you wanted to see a restoration of the rule of law. Impartial application of laws and the recognition of the principle that no one can be above the law.

DS: At this point you had several options. First, as a member of president of Awami League, you could help AL develop its



own think tank. Another option was to go for a forum which is totally non-partisan and does not give the impression of being a platform of dissidents from AL. And a third one was to set up a 'committee of hundred' which is something very, very non-partisan and non-multi-party. Why didn't you think of a think tank?

KH: The Think Tank was very much at the core of the forum idea and very much at the core of what we're doing now. Now within our political parties, and I have almost 25 years of association with AL and 12 years of continuous membership...

DS: May be it is a subject you do not want to talk about...

KH: No, I am very happy to talk about it. Because I really feel this is something I can share even with my party colleagues and I regard them all, including the leader of the party almost as close as members of my own family. You see, parties have developed their own way of working, their own methods of working and I have progressively found that the method, the kind of work that I wanted to do, was not there. Their ways were perhaps perfectly sensible for what everyone else wanted. But not quite responsive to the things that I felt also needed to be done in a way which would be complementary to what parties do.

And precisely this business of Think Tank, of drawing people together who do not necessarily belong to a party, is certainly what we have achieved in the Forum. We had, in the Forum, participation from a large number of people who did not have any party affiliations. On a number of issues, like education and the economy, we were able to form working groups. We went on an exchange of views programme throughout the country. We were holding meetings in districts where we were just inviting people regardless of their party affiliation to come and exchange thoughts on what we could do to build national consensus on certain issues. How to develop a democratic environment and build a civil society. This I think was a very major concern to strengthen democracy, to make democracy functional.

DS: If you are accused of abdicating your responsibility to the rank and file of Awami

League whom you could educate in the kind of thing you are doing, what would be your response?

KH: I have certainly given the best years of my life to the party — from mid-forties to mid-fifties. That is precisely the time I have exclusively devoted to AL. I have worked at every level, if any work was expected of me. I feel I have not shirked responsibility in terms of making myself, my time, my energy available to the party.

But I felt that some of us at least should be working on strengthening a civil society, on trying to pull people together from across and beyond parties, to become a force for sustaining democracy. Because if democracy is caught in a kind of confrontation, in a struggle between major parties, I have a feeling not only will the parties be doing damage to themselves but be doing damage to democracy and its prospects.

DS: Yes, but there are people who say Kamal has deserted us...

KH: I respect everyone's sentiment. And I certainly have had long conversations with people who felt like that, and explained the situation. No single party I believe can cope with the present state of affairs. Neither the government party nor the opposition can cope with the kind of plight which is prevailing in the country. To restore institutions and make democracy function there has to be a kind of concerted, united national effort. I don't believe that there is any substitute for that.

My first appeal to political parties would be to try to find a bipartisan basis for coping with certain survival issues: restoration of the rule of law; restoring congenial atmosphere in the educational institutions and allowing them to function, and making a common effort to revive the economy. And of course even in the area of foreign policy there is an urgent need for bipartisanship.

DS: Would you like to make any comments about the differences between AL and BNP in the pattern of organisation and in the decision making process?

KH: Instead of talking about their differences, I would like to see both the major parties play a very positive role to build democracy. They have a glorious opportunity. One forms the government, the other has a very strong representation in the parliament. Can't the government and opposition sit down for a moment and say that all the contentious issues be kept aside and let us have a minimum agreement on these four national issues: getting the educational institutions working again, getting the economy working again, getting the rule of law established and taking some bipartisan initiatives in foreign policy to resolve the outstanding issues which are standing in the way of meaningful regional cooperation.

DS: We are at the moment looking at the possibility of a new party emerging on the scene. Does a new party complicate matters in the bipartisan scene or does it make it easier?

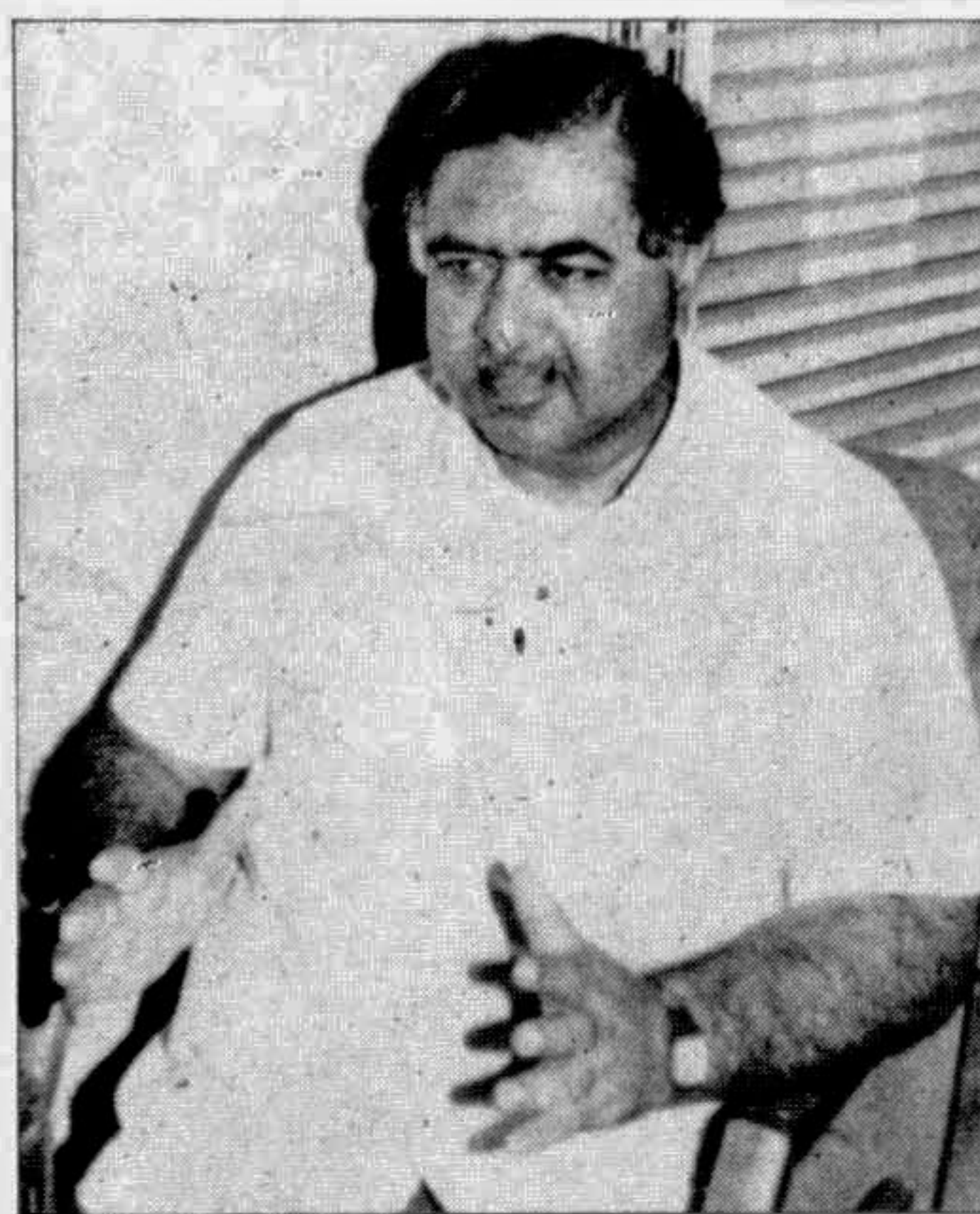
KH: Well, I'll tell you how we have come to this position. Every ordinary citizen would like to see meaningful initiatives being taken by the government, in which the opposition would also be playing a very creative and constructive role.

If a large number of us keep making individual statements, it does carry much weight. But, I felt, if a few thousand of us get together, representing cross section of people cutting across parties, professions, whom the people basically find to be sensible, then this would carry more strength and weight. In democracy, organised public opinion has a great role to play.

You see there has been no meeting of the parliamentary committee on education since November 1991. And I have asked this question from a number of public platforms. You say you are an accountable government, members of parliament are accountable, so why are you not responding to my concern?

It's a kind of total insensitivity, total lack of response from all quarters. We don't get any response from the government neither do we get any response from the opposition.

When we wrote into the constitution that power belongs to the people of this country, those were not empty words; these cannot remain meaningless words. But today I feel that all of us, all ordinary citizens, are totally powerless, because representative institutions are absolutely unresponsive to our



survival demands.

DS: Is this why you thought of floating a new political party?

KH: No. That was the process of having a national convention. We thought let us all meet together, let us exchange our thoughts together. We need to have a unified national programme, a unified national agenda. A lot of people then came with their own organisations saying we would like to associate ourselves with this process. If you find at a certain point that in order to be able to get things done, and translate what you are saying into meaningful action we need to get organised, then why should you hold back? I will not remain out of it.

DS: The agenda that you have is nationalism something that all believe in. One of the ways of promoting this agenda could have been to work through AL and to ensure that people like yourself and others are not marginalised by the time the next election comes along. That is one point of view that has been heard. Why can't we try to do that?

KH: I feel fairly convinced now by my experience that there is a need for much more involvement of the people who have been outside the frame of conventional political parties. There is a culture of traditional political parties which I respect, I have been part of it. But I think something more is needed.

The challenge of the nineties, of the new century, does require a much more active involvement. Even the language of the current political scene has changed. It talks of 'empowerment of the people', of 'participatory democracy'. When you, Mr. Editor, and I used to read our books of political science these concepts were not there. There were much more formalistic concepts.

The traditional politics has led to too much of confrontation. There has never been a sense that politics is about people pursuing certain positive goals. And the sense that we all have certain common objectives, that we are not all adversaries, has to be brought into our politics.

DS: Then your view is that forming the new political party will basically put an end to this kind of politics — politics of confrontation?

KH: I hope that a new political culture will slowly grow. It needs to be nurtured. It's a very uphill task to get people to have mutual tolerance, a respect for each other's rights, or not believing that there is a monopoly of patriotism enjoyed by any particular formation.

DS: I've noticed that you do liberally avoid the use of the word 'formation' of a political party. Your convention is just a day away. Even today, you are not saying whether you will form a new party.

KH: To be very frank, I think there is a very strong feeling among the representatives that there should not only be a programme but also a decision to get organised and unified to pursue the programmes. So it's pretty close in a way — I'm not avoiding it. I just don't want to anticipate the decision of the convention. One should respect the convention.

DS: You might have an opinion as an individual.

KH: As a convenor of our convention it would not be proper for me to express my

personal opinion before the convention. It should be an open convention with everybody freely expressing his/her own points of view. I don't think their is really much doubt about the trend.

DS: Then why aren't you saying it?

KH: Because I don't want to anticipate you see, all of those who have been working in this process, have been coming and discussing the programme, I think we want to see an effective instrument emerge from the convention.

DS: That means launching a party, is a possibility?

KH: Yes, a unified organised strength is something everybody is looking for.

DS: In that case, if you are going to announce a new political party with the consensus of the convention, what do you foresee as a reaction on the part of AL, with which you have been attached for such a long time?

KH: Our process is very sincerely committed to creating a broader unity with all those who share the same goals. And I would like to believe that AL has the same, common goals and values. When we talk of the mainstream, it's in a very special sense. There are certain values, that I believe, that those who have been in the mainstream of Bangladesh's political and social life share. It's not something isolated. We all share these common values: democracy, non-communal politics, nationalism, and a concern for the common man and having an economy which will be productive and meet the basic needs of ordinary people. And to provide education is an important part of this.

DS: It has been said that you are ignoring the risk of weakening the opposition.

KH: This is one apprehension that is being expressed but I do not see why that should happen.

We have only tried to activate those who have been inactive.

DS: Have you decided on the common national agenda?

KH: First is to consolidate democratic institutions, get people together, who are conscious of the need for the restoration of the rule of law and respect for law, at all levels. Of developing respect for each other's rights, of creating a democratic environment of mutual tolerance and working together. And by sitting together and realising there are certain common priorities, the survival priorities of getting our economy going, of getting our education going and getting people not to kill each other and not to be impeding production, not to be impeding education but really trying to make up for lost time.

It's not only getting our educational institutions in line but having the curriculum changed, producing really young people who are employable, creating opportunities for employment, including self employment. These are the things we should be concerning ourselves with instead of creating an atmosphere of tension and conflict in which none of us can really concentrate.

DS: What are some of the specific goals of the convention?

KH: What I keep saying is let us see if we can have a common view about the prevailing situation. Is everything wonderful? In which case, fine, we can all go and pursue our individual goals. If everyone says we think everything is wonderful, democratic institutions are functioning perfectly, national priorities have been established, everyone of us is working in the best way possible then we say fine and celebrate.

However, on the other hand, it is more likely that we will all express deep concern for the state in which our society finds itself in 1993. There are areas of

so long as pursuit of the common objective is concerned. We don't immediately have to start talking about what will happen when an election comes.

At the moment to me it is much more important to mobilise public opinion, create broad based support for these common values and common objectives and not allow fundamental forces or, rather, disruptive forces to detract us from the mainstream. Making the mainstream forces more active will give strength to all those who stand for the mainstream. I believe what we are doing will strengthen us.

DS: Who are 'us'?

KH: Ordinary people, ordinary people who believe in these values.

DS: But at the cost of, one might say for argument's sake, the erosion of the power base of AL.

KH: That is not necessarily the consequence. I don't see why this should necessarily detract from AL. AL is not something we are opposing. There is no reason why a party of AL's standing should become very concerned about a complementary activity, about an activity which is happening parallel to them. We will positively mobilise in pursuit of a set of values.

DS: The fact that you didn't want to join Awami League as an advisor was taken as a negative signal of your disenchantment with the leadership of AL.

KH: As I say, it's the mode of work, the mode of functioning is something which at this stage of my life I did not want to be a part of. If you divide a person's life into five parts, four fifths of my life has been lived. This is being realistic. One should try to live consciously, and use the time that is left in the most useful way. I have felt, in the kind of process I have created, one can be a little more useful. I would like to share certain values, certain ways of doing things. I believe very strongly that we should try to do 'institution building'. I am very strongly against personality oriented politics, any kind of politics being built around individuals. This is something from the depth of my conviction I believe in.

DS: I have a very blunt question on the tip of my tongue. If there is a major shake up in AL and the way is opened for AL to play the kind of role that you want the organisation to play, would you consider a return to the position that you had in AL?

KH: I do not see the scenario in that way. If AL is working in the same way as us, for the same objectives, wholehearted cooperation at every level will be there, from today, from the day after the convention. I don't think we have to wait for anything else to happen.

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major concern: increasing unemployment, increasing landlessness, farmers not getting price for their crops and therefore being in a real crisis. What can we do about it? This is, we feel, an alternative programme.

DS: So, you are going to give the nation an alternative programme?

KH: We will present a draft programme for discussion. I don't believe that anybody has the perfect solution, or that there is one perfect solution for every problem. We have tried through a process of discussion, to draw upon all. We have tried to distill what we have got.

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DS: At the end of the convention if a new party is announced, there will be parting of yourself from AL. Will you regret it?

KH: What I would like, is to maintain mutual respect for each other, mutual relations that have existed through many experiences for almost 25 years. I'd like to work together for the common objective. If people decide to change the form of working together, that does not mean that there should not be any lack of respect for each other.

DS: Considering the type of political culture we have in our country one or two persons become the catalysts. So whatever comes out, your role, your personality will be in the focus. You are going to face a lot of scrutiny about your own personal and political life styles. One impression that people have about you is that when crisis comes, or things become a bit critical, you tend to go abroad. Please don't take it personally but people have the question.

Also, what was your role during the time when Mujib was in jail during the liberation war?

KH: Actually much of this is already on record, in the fifteen volumes of the 'History of the Liberation Movement'. There is a long statement of mine which records the fact that I was in solitary confinement for nine months in Haripur Central Jail and Bangabandhu was in Meawali Central Jail.

I had received a notice in September that my trial would also begin for treason against Pakistan. The same tribunal which had heard Bangabandhu's case in August was expected to come towards the end of September or early October to Haripur. A court room was also arranged in the jail hospital. War broke out and from October it was deferred to November and ultimately because of the emergency the trial could not take place.

On December 28, I was taken out of Haripur jail and brought over to Seahala rest house where I found Bangabandhu has been brought from the Meawali prison. So from December 28, we were together in same rest house. Later on January 6 or 7, we were flown out together to London. Subsequently, on January 10, we came back to Bangladesh. In Haripur jail it was a period of very rigorous solitary confinement.

And for the other question, I feel that most of my life has been lived in the public view. I believe that we all are very fallible human beings with a lot of weaknesses. And that is why one relies more on institutions rather than individuals. And that is what I have been emphasizing all my life. Individuals are fallible and tend to make mistakes. Moreover, all individuals are mortals. So nothing that is built around individuals can really endure.

I still remember my conversation with Bangabandhu on the plane as we were about to land in Dhaka on January 10. He asked me what form of government should we have — a presidential or parliamentary? I said 'obviously parliamentary, because that's what you have stood for all your life. And you should build up institutions'.

On January 11, as I was wondering around enjoying the exhilaration of the new found independence, I was called to Hare Road, where a cabinet meeting was underway. Bangabandhu asked what can be done to convert from the present presidential form to parliamentary one. He said 'I want to switch over to parliamentary form today'. So Mr Abu Sayeed Chowdhury was asked to come. Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, Amirul Islam and I, we together drafted a one line gazette notification that the president shall do everything on the advice of the prime minister. Sheikh Mujib turned to Abu Sayeed Chowdhury and said tomorrow you will be sworn in as the president. Mr. Abu Sayeed was the person who was most taken aback.

On January 12, we switched over to parliamentary form, entering which we drafted the Constitution. So this is where you can say that my strength or weaknesses is. If you consider my weaknesses I think I have more deficiencies than possible strengths. But I feel that the real thing is to contribute to good causes in any way.

As part of sharing with others any duty or task I can perform at this particular juncture, call it catalyst, call whatever you like. But everybody together must put his or her shoulder to the wheel. I am not looking in terms of this party or that party, I think people must be there all over the country, in every village in every town, every district and in the capital who can contribute something or other to the nation. We must try and bring them together and say that let us all make a concerted effort and then may be we can leave behind a society, a viable society for our children.

DS: This is a nice positive way of thinking. We would like to thank you for your time.

