

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?

The New Phase in Dhaka-Hanoi Ties

The opening of a new chapter in the relationship between Hanoi and Dhaka by virtue of the visit to Dhaka by the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam bears more significance than meets the eye at first.

The contemporary perspective is favourable to more meaningful ties between Dhaka and Hanoi. Politically Hanoi's relations with the USA and China have normalised with an attendant potential developing for enormous economic benefits to her.

We can supply Vietnam with consumer and intermediate goods of a large variety. Although imports from Hanoi to Bangladesh have been meagre compared with what Bangladesh has been exporting to that country, the entire volume of two-way traffic of goods, we believe, can be vastly increased in the near future.

The accord on economic, scientific and technological cooperation has identified areas of collaboration such as commerce, fishery, irrigation, agriculture and health care.

But in the light of the still changing complexion of the regional and international relationships what deserves a particular mention is the accord reached between Dhaka and Hanoi to have regular consultations in international affairs and to work together for the promotion of international peace and stability.

Let the impetus to the bilateral ties be not a one-time affair, allowed to dissipate with the passage of time, for any lack of continuous follow-up. The spurt in the bilateral relations needs to be seriously built upon and not left to vagaries of time to peter out.

Disturbing Development

Recently Bangladesh has achieved top spots in a few areas. But obviously we would rather not like to boast such records. One such record made public was the highest population concentration in the country among the nations in the world.

An annual growth of five per cent in city population could mean anything but progress. The report is quite explicit that the massive migration of rural people to urban centres has nothing to do with their employment in city factories or offices.

What does then all this mean? The message is unmistakable. Villages are no longer able to keep the people by providing them with the means of survival. Cities and towns still offer some job opportunities—notwithstanding the poor wages and hardships—for the migrant workers from villages.

What emerges from the report is that the tall claims by the government and some non-government organisations stand in stark contradiction with the reality. Billions of Taka have been poured into programmes often dubbed as innovative, pragmatic and people-oriented. But the results so far seem to have fallen far short of what should have been at least modestly achieved.

We have time and again emphasised the need for creating a production base in villages through a happy blending between agriculture and industry. Small-scale, these agro-industries could be the right answer to the problem of rural exodus towards cities and towns.

In the same breath it should be noted that the people by whose labour the city's service sectors mostly run are the most deprived. Slums, where these people live in, can be provided with some minimum facilities and amenities so that their health and hygiene are not grossly compromised.

HISTORICALLY, we never had a trouble-free election. It was invariably preceded by a mass movement. From the Pakistani days we have been fighting for various causes. First, we have been fighting for the right to vote. Then for the sanctity of the election process and for adult franchise.

The election of 1970 had been free and fair. But the then establishment did not accept the results. After the independence, the nation expected a free and fair election in 1973. But the ruling party manipulated the results. The same thing happened to the '79 referendum. My personal experience of the 1973 and 1979 elections was not totally positive. I won both the elections from my constituency in Barisal.

In the '79 polls, results of three unions under my constituency were blocked for as late as 24 hours following the election. Luckily, with the sympathetic help of the local authority—the results were released late in the night and I won. But after the announcement of the result, some people from the NSI started probing into the poll result. I sought the help of the then Speaker who intervened with the NSI and stopped them from proceeding into the affair.

So, we have a rich history of tampering with people's right to vote. The demand of a caretaker government is not very new. When Ershad first declared to hold

Rashed Khan Menon, MP and General Secretary, Worker's Party of Bangladesh argues in favour of the proposition.

Interviewed by Sharier Khan

election, we (the five-party alliance) refused to cooperate with him. We demanded his resignation first. In 1987, the five-party alliance put forward the idea of a caretaker government. We said, the caretaker government will be headed by an institution, not a person. So we suggested, the Chief Justice would be suitable for the job.

During the 1990 upsurge, this idea became popular. During this period, I suggested in a joint meeting of the three

Ahmed described this idea on BTV, as unconstitutional. I believe, the right to vote is still the big question. This should be handled properly. Because the bourgeois parties take people for granted, and take the advantage of being in power, for staying in power.

So we must change the existing system which has been destroyed by Ershad. He destroyed the backbone of the Election Commission as well as that of the election officials. So far, in the history of

reputable because the memory of elections held under Justice Shahabuddin is still fresh. People liked him. They responded to what he asked for. When Shahabuddin first asked people to submit licenseless arms to the government, many laughed. But a huge quantity of arms were surrendered to the government in the end. Since people know in advance what will be the role of a caretaker government, they would respond likewise. They will cooperate with such a form of



country rather than politics of convenience. At the same time, we believe that the caretaker government is not enough for free and fair election, we should also resist black money and use of muscle power and exploitation of religion in politics.

There should be laws against such practices. The use of muscle power was resisted in the '91 election. But it returned in the mayoral election (the Lalbag murder incident is a case in point). There are inadequate laws against these sorts of crimes, and they are not properly enforced. During the last mayoral election we filed over a dozen cases against candidates breaking the limit on election expenditure fixed by the EC. But police did not take any step in response to our complaint. So, if we all agree to hold elections under a caretaker government, no body can accuse anybody of rigging or biasness. The democratic process will also become smooth. I strongly believe, democracy cannot be defined by a single formula. Democracy should be defined and devised according to our country's own peculiarities and needs. If we incorporate the idea of caretaker government in our definition of democracy, I see no problem.

Constitution is the reflection of peoples' will. We can amend it when people need it. Also dialogue in politics is a very important democratic practice. It is not possible for the ruling party or the opposition to be supportive of democracy by not talking to each other.

Tomorrow Dr. Khandoker Mosharrar Hossain, Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources and Member, Standing Committee, BNP argues against the proposition.

The BNP in its efforts to brush away the demand for a caretaker government has on several occasions said that the by-elections held under the present government had been free and fair. I believe, it is ridiculous to compare a by-election with national level MP elections. During a by-election, leaders of all the parties remain on guard, and stay in the polling constituency. During the general elections, it is not possible. Even with all the leaders of different parties on guard during a by-election, there can be conflicts. Take the case of Magura election.

alliances that provision of a caretaker government should be inserted into the Constitution for a certain period of time allowing us to hold elections under such a machinery for at least two or three times.

But the idea was immediately rejected by the Awami League (AL) which felt sure to win the ensuing polls. BNP was at first hesitant regarding this proposal, but ultimately it accepted the idea. Subsequently I also made the same proposal to all parties as a member of the Special Parliamentary Committee for Constitutional Amendment to introduce the parliamentary system of government in 1991.

But all parties, excepting Jamaat rejected, the idea. Moudud Ahmed, Salam Talukder and Abdus Samad Azad, clearly said no to this idea. But the irony of fate is this, now Jatiya Party and Awami League are in the first row, demanding a caretaker government. Just imagine, even during the last days of Ershad, JP leader Moudud

Bangladesh two elections had been fair. One in '70—under a sort of caretaker government and the other in '91—again under a caretaker government.

The fairness of polls results entirely depends on political consensus. In both these cases—there were, by and large, a political consensus. But in case of election under the party in power, the opposition will face serious problems.

But the question of a caretaker government is not the ultimate point. Our aim should be focused on an independent Election Commission. The present Constitution gives a lot of power to the EC, but not as much as is needed. In the recent mayoral elections, the EC failed to do anything against the candidates for violation of election rules.

As a person, I believe, the CEC is a fine person. But in the last two elections (mayoral and Magura-2), the two major parties did not let him play his role properly. This might happen in the future as well.

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Sheikh Hasina's Recent Visit to Japan

national and the Awami League have maintained close and cordial relations. The recent invitation to Sheikh Hasina to attend the conference ought to be seen in that context. For Sheikh Hasina this warm invitation from old friends gave her an opportunity to renew longstanding friendship and to forge new links. She also availed of the opportunity offered by the occasion to declare in unambiguous terms the new economic policies of the Awami League, firmly based on the operation of market forces and the premise that an unfettered private sector must be the primary engine of economic growth.

Two Japanese political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Democratic Socialist Party of Japan (DSPJ) hosted the conference which was held in the New Otani Hotel of Tokyo on 10-11 May. There two socialist parties were included in the previous coalition government formed by Hosokawa but the Hata coalition includes only the SDP. The Democratic Socialist Party had policy differences with Hata and as a result it quit the coalition. However negotiations are going on for a compromise. The Hata coalition government will fall if the SDPJ votes against him. For the first time in Japanese history the socialists are playing a significant role in shaping government policies as part of the government and not from the opposition benches. It is against this background that the Council of the Socialist International met in Tokyo. The government adopted a supportive stance and both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister hosted lavish social functions in honour of the conference delegates.

The Asia-Pacific Committee of the Socialist International met in the afternoon of 9 May to make final preparations for the main conference. Sheikh

Hasina attended this meeting and raised, inter alia, the question of the quality of development assistance, the need for safeguarding the legitimate interests of local industries in the developing countries and the urgent need for providing access to the markets of the developed countries. She also informed the Committee about the devastation wrought by the recent cyclone in the Chittagong region. These points were well received and were eventually reflected in the resolutions adopted by the council. The council also issued a statement in which it expressed the hope that, given the vulnerability of Bangladesh to cyclones, floods

and other natural calamities, the international community, in particular the developed countries, will extend all possible assistance to Bangladesh to cope with the economic consequences of these natural calamities.

The conference provided an excellent opportunity to Sheikh Hasina to meet and exchange views with a number of important leaders from different countries. The conference was chaired by Pierre Mauroy, the former Prime Minister of France. Ms Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, attended the meeting in her capacity as the Vice President of the Socialist International. Sheikh Hasina had the opportunity to have relaxed meetings with these leaders on matters of mutual interest. Her meeting with the second Prime Minister of Cambodia Mr Hun Sen was very useful in understanding the new geo-political configurations in South East Asia, and

in particular, in Indo-China. Sheikh Hasina also met U Win Khef, the President of the Burmese League for Democracy and a close associate of Aung San Suu Kyi, the imprisoned leader of the Burmese democratic struggle. Sheikh Hasina expressed her concern for the brave leader of our neighbouring country and called for her early release.

The high point of the Awami League President's activities in Tokyo was her meetings with the Japanese Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Prime Minister Hata hosted a grand reception and dinner on board a ship in Tokyo Bay in honour of the conference delegates. While

Japanese leaders have opened a line of communication which will no doubt prove most useful for our future relationship with Japan.

Sheikh Hasina's speech at the plenary session of the Council of the Socialist International on 10 May provided an analysis of the political situation in Bangladesh. She explained Awami League's role in upholding the democratic rights of the people including the exercise of their voting rights of the people including the exercise of their voting rights in free and fair elections. She gave a clear exposition of Awami League's economic policies. "The Bangladesh Awami League stands," she declared, "fully committed to supporting a market oriented economic system." Her party's new economy policy package provides for, she continued, "full protection to foreign investors. Indeed we believe that foreign investment and joint ventures are acts of partnership in which both sides stand to gain. My party believes that the government should focus more on the basic services of the state and the creation of a modern infrastructure. Business should be left to the businessmen so that the society may benefit from competition, dynamic growth and expanding employment opportunities."

These and other remarks made by her were warmly received by the audience and it is expected that Japanese investors would take careful note of her statements on economic policies. Indeed a number of businessmen which included the representatives of Mitsubishi had detailed discussions with her on these questions. Quite clearly the need of the hour is to create the necessary confidence to attract foreign investors to Bangladesh.

The Bengali community in Japan, compared to the ex-

atriate Bengali communities in some other countries, is relatively small and new. It is also beset by many problems. But the welcome accorded to Sheikh Hasina by the community was certainly a memorable one. The reception organized by them was chaired by Mrs Hayakawa, the wife of late Mr Hayakawa, a true friend of Bangladesh. His friendship with Bangabandhu was warmly recalled by Mrs Hayakawa. Before her departure from Japan on 13 May Sheikh Hasina was entertained to an unofficial lunch by senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the course of the lunch she raised, inter alia, the question of helping our Bengali residents in Japan who have been facing numerous problems.

It was a short but eventual visit. Through her contacts she showed that Sheikh Hasina attaches very high priority to the development of close relations with this great country. Looking at the recent economic history of East and South East Asia it is quiet clear that it is Japan which played a catalytic role in providing the initial capital and technology for generating their growth momentum. Bangladesh certainly needs Japanese Official Development Assistance but the role of Japanese direct foreign investment and technology is going to be of much greater importance. Other investors from Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, China and other countries from the region will follow the Japanese trail. The current stagnant economy can be repealed by a vibrant and dynamic one only if investors, both foreign and domestic, begin to invest in Bangladesh with confidence and in growing numbers. Her first visit to Japan, even though it was in the context of an international conference, reflects her assessment of the importance of forging close bilateral links with the Japanese government and business leaders. Her visit was a successful initial step in that direction.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

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the ship was cruising in the Bay the delegates mingled with each other to continue their discussions. It was on board this ship that Sheikh Hasina had her meeting with Prime Minister Hata. During the visit paid by Bangabandhu to Japan and the pioneering role paid by him in laying the foundation of friendly relations between the two countries. Sheikh Hasina thanked Prime Minister Hata for the economic assistance provided by Japan to Bangladesh. In particular she expressed her appreciation for Japan's assistance for the Jamuna bridge. Hata assured her of continued Japanese support to the development efforts of Bangladesh. Earlier in the day Foreign Minister Kakizawa had hosted a lunch in honour of the delegates at the new Otani Hotel when Sheikh Hasina had an opportunity to meet with him and discuss Japan-Bangladesh relations. These initial contacts with the

To the Editor...

Timely editorial

Sir, Congratulations to The Daily Star for its wonderful editorial on Miss Universe, Sushmita Sen, a Bengali who 'did us proud.' It was heart warming to read the effusive compliments justly paid to this young Bengali girl, who suddenly focused the world's attention on the trodden Bengali women. The reaction of the Communist Party is nothing unusual. The editorial is unusual. The Communist Party must be full of fogey, mean-minded Bengali men, who cannot accept the idea at the best of times of their women getting fame and glory. And the idea of a Bengali Miss Uni-

verse has totally shattered the complacency of their narrow minded existence.

Once again, congratulations to The Daily Star for a glorious job done. Let it be a trendsetter for the other self-centered individuals and organisations of our Bengali society, with whom we unfortunately have to share the universe! And congratulations to the young Sushmita Sen, a beacon of hope and pride for the Bengali women. Go it, Sushmita. We are behind you. All the way.

Parveen Haque DOHS Dhaka Cantt, Dhaka.

Giant strides

Sir, US-Bangladesh "good relations" going steady for about 20 years update the "same ideals and goals—those of freedom, democratic government, and economic opportunity for all" shared by the nationals of both the states.

"Giant strides", assessed by the US President about the present Bangladeshi political and economic reforms, represents the super-power's attitude toward the incumbent administration of this South Asian nation.

American head of the state's hope that "people and leaders of Bangladesh will continue to build a free and democratic nation in which the human rights

of all are fully upheld" upholds what the champion of civil rights can brag about.

Regardless of allegation about the violation of Human Rights Declaration in the home of UN headquarters where over two hundred thousand Bangladeshi descents reside, the assurance from the great donor to continue assisting this least developed country's economic development process should be accepted with thanks.

As a matter of optimism, the recent transformation in the world's dictatorial regimes, not overlooking Bangladeshi "autocratic rule" (back to the "democratic" governance now), has evidently

regained the recognition for respect for individual's freedoms in "free" states in the pluralistic "unipolar world".

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Bravo!

Sir, Evertime a natural calamity hits us we fall flat on our face and go begging to the world at large, never once realising what an insult we deal to our national prestige. Not only that, our government proudly presents a list of gratuitous grants it has received.

In the backdrop of such slanderous history of aims-

seeking, the (12th May) television news came as a sweet surprise. In an interview with the new Thai Ambassador, the Prime Minister very politely stated that her government had decided to give all the help needed to the cyclone-battered south-eastern Bangladesh from our own resources and hence no foreign help was needed at that stage, although the kind gesture of the Ambassador was gratefully acknowledged.

Bravo, Madam Prime Minister! You have once again made us feel proud to be citizens of this financially weak country of lion-hearted people. A self-respecting citizen Chittagong