

Zia Remembered

Ziaur Rahman's nation-building vision was rooted in the active part he had played in the Liberation Struggle. It was patriotic and dignified in its essence. This sets Ziaur Rahman apart in a class of his own.

At the outset of the Liberation War his announcement in Bangabandhu's name over the radio resonating with the full propriety of a responsible warrior dedicated to the cause of his motherland's freedom, was a rallying-point of hope and inspiration indeed to so many in those dark moments of despair and uncertainty. He raised the Z-Force which carried out successful military exploits into the occupied territories as crucial battles won in the nine-month-long saga of a war. Not merely content with organising the command structure of Z-Force, he went on to lead from the front, not for a moment losing sight of the totality of the military campaign, and almost always being in touch with military and political leaders of the government-in-exile. The essential quality of Zia was a consultative flair, which he subsequently brought to bear on his conduct as the President of the country with marked effectiveness.

From August 15, 1975 when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated until November 6, 1975, the country passed through a most critical phase of our history. During the three fateful days from 3-6 November, when there was virtually no government in the country, there he was, in captivity, with his credentials established enough for the people to turn to him. He had more of a builder's instincts than those of an adventurist.

He thus came to power for what followed as a productive phase in our national life interspersed though it was with several coup d'état attempts. He survived them all — with due credit to him — but the last one, which proved to be his undoing, widely believed to have been induced by his growing preoccupation with party affairs in a civilian frame of mind in contrast to a tailor-made role his detractors might have wanted.

What goes even further to his credit as a liberaliser in politics is that he brought back pluralism to it. Fetters on multi-party politics were removed. The Newspapers Annullment Order which had disallowed publication of all but four government-owned papers, was revoked. The size of the press expanded with a due reflection of the plurality of opinions in society. Government's tolerance of criticism grew with Zia in particular showing a rare quality of taking political dissent in stride and, even with grace, as the Dhaka University incident had proved. Some of the former judges have also vouched for Zia's respect for the judiciary.

Had Ziaur Rahman not laid the foundation for privatisation of the economy and its close companion competitive free market, we would have lagged so much behind in these respects today. It was with a long-range view that he had diversified the aid sources to obviate the rigidities and conditionality associated with a limited number of choices. His dynamic role in foreign policy led to the foundation of SAARC and improved Bangladesh's image abroad and endeared him to some world statesmen including Yugoslavia's Tito. Former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi also took note of his vision for his country when paying tribute to him after his assassination.

That such a man was snuffed out by the assassins' bullets is a great pity. On the thirteenth anniversary of Ziaur Rahman's death, we express our strongest condemnation of assassination as a method of political change.

These Ominous Puddles

Every time there is a drizzle, this near-megacity evokes remembrances of some water-swamped picture which Dhaka once was — for five hundred years or more it has almost floated on water, a Venetian variation. Drizzles, and not so much downpours now fashion in a matter of half-an-hour scores of canals replacing roads. Although our poets, from Kalidas to Rabindranath, have, down the ages, sung to celebrate the rains and an approaching spell, with an overcast sky setting the right mood, sends the Bengali mind to trips of ecstasy, the blissful showers in the Dhaka of these nineties do regularly transmit shockwaves of panic through the worrying citizens of the metropolis. The fright is not produced exactly by the impediments rainwater creates for the city's road traffic. The worry is rather about what will happen when in Shrawan it would rain interminably and floods would also come enveloping from the north or the west or both — and may be as a bonus from the east as well. Happy is the Bengali who doesn't yet know that when there is a long spell of heavy rain, the Bay swells like anything and sends its waters deep into the riverine sinews of Bangladesh. That is to say, striking a patch of bad luck, come Shrawan and we can be flooded from all of the four directions. Yes, what will happen then to Dhaka's chronic ailment of water-logging?

These worries, one understands, moved the government to go for Dhaka's integrated flood protection action. Securing Dhaka against all watery incursions by throwing a continuous dam around it was the idea, readily agreed upon and put into action. Some misgivings sounded at the time of commencement of the programme were curiously brushed aside. Waters do not invade always from the flanks, they do swoop upon more as a heavenly host. With excessive rain occurring, the protection dam will only help drown Dhaka by a man-made flood every year from now on. No, the planners and engineers said, the trapped water would be pumped out with as powerful machines as need be. How about the pumps? Whereas even one kilometre of dam or protection wall will significantly affect the movement of floodwater, already about 29 kilometres of dam and five kilometres of walls have been constructed. And there is no relieving news yet from the pump front.

There is, therefore, every chance of this year's waterlogging situation worsening beyond all experiences. And this is a result of sheer callousness. And this is playing with the life of tens of millions of our people. Not only that — with Dhaka crippled for even a fortnight, the whole nation will be harmed beyond easy repair. The government must fully comprehend what is at stake here, — and act before it is late.

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

Matia Chowdhury, MP and Secretary for Agriculture and Cooperatives, Bangladesh Awami League, argues in favour of holding the next general elections under a caretaker government.

Interviewed by Sohel Manzur

THE political parties in the country reached a consensus on some major national issues during the mass upsurge of 1990. The issues were related to ensuring the voting rights of the people by strengthening the election system, establishment of an accountable government and economic development of the country.

It was also expected that the elected government of BNP would lead the country towards the common goal of development and that there would not be any recurrence of past incidents in Bangladesh. But unfortunately, the experience of BNP's three-year rule is totally disappointing.

We fulfilled our pledge by demanding and working for the Bill for parliamentary democracy to ensure accountability of the government. BNP opposed the bill, although it agreed to from an accountable government in the joint declaration of the three alliances in 1990. Later, the BNP itself

placed a bill on the parliamentary form of government in the Jatiya Sangsad in the face of movement by the opposition political parties. Parliamentary democracy was restored. However, accountability of the government was completely absent during the last three years.

The ministers, in most cases, do not disclose the real thing during the question and answer session of parliament. Either they avoid the questions or they answer those superficially. The Leader of the House often remains absent from the Sangsad, but she does not miss any sitting when the opposition parties boycott the parliament session. The parliamentary system is not being implemented properly. The elections system in the country is now at its worst.

The government has completely jeopardised the election institution of the country by resorting to the practices of the autocratic Ershad government.

Five different results were published after the Mirpur by-elections.

The BNP, which was defeated in the Magura constituency with a margin of 31,000 votes in 1991, won the last by-elections by a margin of 33,000. Total votes increased by 64,000. How could it be possible? How the Awami League candidate and others could not get a single vote in

the results of any elections. I see no reason why the BNP is opposing the system of caretaker government. The same system will continue if Awami League comes to power, not that only the BNP will have to hand over power to the caretaker government. Moreover, the Chairperson of the ruling party is the biggest beneficiary of the caretaker government system. She was voted to power after an election which was held under a caretaker government. So, why should BNP have any reservation about the system? The leaders of the ruling party often say that they came to power with the mandate of the people, so they should not bow to such demands. But, I wonder if the people have voted them to power to destroy the electoral institution by a democratically elected government.

BNP Secretary General Salam Talukder recently raised a question as to why the Awami League did not support the Jamaat-e-Islami when it tried to bring a bill in the House during 12th Amendment for holding all the national elections under caretaker governments. The answer is clear. Awami League had no evil motive behind raising this demand. It hoped that the BNP would prove a caretaker government unnecessary for holding free and fair elections. But the BNP has completely failed to fulfil the common hope and aspiration of the people. Rather, it has proved that no elections under the BNP government can be free and fair. The Awami League has raised the demand against the backdrop of its bitter experience in the last three years.

In fact, the BNP is a minority government. It went to power with the support of Jamaat-e-Islami and because of the provision of 30 reserved seats for women, in parliament, which was introduced

by the autocratic Ershad government. The ruling party has abolished the upazila system on the ground that it was introduced by the Ershad government. But, it did not take any move to repeal the provision of 30 reserved seats for women. The Jamaat-e-Islami, with whose support BNP was able to form the government, is now pressing for the demand of a caretaker government.

The understanding and the spirit of cooperation necessary in a parliamentary democratic system could not be achieved because of the attitude and behaviour of the BNP government. It did not take any initiative to reach a consensus



chinery shamelessly. The government has also victimised and harassed those people in the administration who wanted to remain neutral. So, how can the EC execute its powers with this machinery which is now politically biased? How can the machinery act neutrally? The government transferred the Sub Inspector and Superintendents of Police of Magura before the by-elections violating the rules. What could the Election Commission do about it?

The Election Commission also proposed formation of an all party committee during the elections. BNP consented to the proposal but refrained from proceeding further with the matter.

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has recently proposed providing funds to the political parties from the national exchequer on the basis of the votes they would get with the objective of reducing the evil influence on the country's politics. The Finance Minister proposed this at a time when the basic structure of electoral institution and fundamental rights of the people is in jeopardy.

There is no scope for cosmetic reform before repairing or reconstructing the system. Why the Election Commission is not being able to enforce the ceiling on expenditure of the candidates for election campaign? Why black

money is still dominating the election results? The matter of maintaining the ceiling on expenditure would have to be taken up seriously and a mechanism would also have to be developed to enforce it. Otherwise, Saifur's proposal would not reduce the influence of black money on politics. The ruling party is often saying that there is no provision for a caretaker government in any country. Similar statement was also made by the autocratic Ershad government. But he had to submit his resignation letter to a caretaker government.

The system of disposal of election cases would also have to be developed. There is no instance that a verdict in such a case was given before the end of the term, if it went against the government.

Some of the leaders of the ruling party are saying that one can ensure that the caretaker government will be neutral. In fact, many of them did not even expect that the government of Justice Shahabuddin would remain neutral. If one has the will to resolve a crisis, it can be resolved with sincere efforts. But the BNP has consistently been trying to bypass the issue by raising irrelevant questions and arguments.

Another issue that has to be taken up seriously is providing identity cards to the voters. It can reduce the rigging to a great extent, although the necessity of a caretaker government would not be removed with the introduction of identity cards. We cannot rely on the signature of the presiding officers, who are in fact part of a highly politicised administration.

BNP is now advocating strengthening of the Election Commission (EC) for ensuring fair polls. They put it as an alternative to a caretaker government. But I want to make it clear that there is no alternative to a caretaker government for holding parliament elections which will be conducted by an EC — strong and independent in the true sense. The sooner the ruling party realises this — the better it is.

Tomorrow Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, MP and Acting Chairman, Jatiya Party argues in favour of the proposition.

The National Debate: Election under a Caretaker Government

THE debate on whether or not the next general election (and possibly two more following) should be held under a caretaker government, initiated by The Daily Star, was a welcome thought. Politicians who have spoken so far have given us set speeches, all rehearsed before, and perhaps duly vetted by the respective high commands. That it would turn out like this, a tame thing, a monologue where the opponent is not there, could be apprehended at the start. Though lacking the drama of a genuine debate, something which BTV could provide in its *Mukhomukhi* (Face to Face) programme and which a print media cannot, the debate so far has at least produced one result: it has helped us understand the main points which either party has been able to make so far in this set game.

I am prepared to go that far with the Opposition. But when the Opposition wants the ruling party to introduce the bill for the required amendment, I would stop there. And if the Opposition would make the ruling party's agreeing to that a precondition for joining the forthcoming budget session of the parliament, I would say, that is asking for too much too soon. If the Opposition sticks to that, it may well be interpreted as a negative approach to the whole issue.

I am not suggesting that the ball is in the court of the Opposition. On the contrary, it is in the court of the ruling party. The ruling party has the moral responsibility to send out a clear message that it is willing to talk, and it has definite proposals in its bag. So far, if the Opposition can be blamed for

the inflexibility of its demands, the ruling party, too, can be equally blamed for its refusal to accept that there has been serious interference in some by-elections held in recent months.

Short of accepting the guilt, at least two of the spokesmen of the ruling party have made strong pleas for further tightening election rules, carefully avoiding the more crucial point of further strengthening the Election Commission vis-à-vis the administration. The bitter experience on which the Opposition has built its case for a caretaker government is

PASSING CLOUDS
Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

the one provide first by Mirpur, and then by Magura-2 polls. To put it simply, local administration, inspired by the Centre, can easily undo what the Election Commission would do. After witnessing how the best efforts of the EC were frustrated by the forces of naked power, no amount of pious plans for perfecting the rules will cut any ice.

How can the ruling party show convincingly that it wants the Opposition back in the Parliament? They should know better than I, if there is any such thought in their minds. Going back to my earlier suggestion — a period of truce — the two sides can arrive at some understanding of how they will take up, and proceed with, some of the more important work over which there has been a stalemate. I am not sure if that will be enough for the ice to melt

into a club of the millionaires. The Sangsad will then have very little tear to spare for the country's poor.

Apparently the Election Commission, especially the valiant Chief, has its own ideas. As a test case of this, they tried it in Dapuria, on a much lower plane though — Union Council elections. The Dapuria experiment has been hailed as highly successful. Our warmest felicitations to the Commission and its Chief. We hope the same success will be repeated in some other Union — not claiming the Chief as our man — in another zone of Bangladesh.

Without detracting from the merit of the experiment, we may still ask a few questions, arising out of the Dapuria case. How high are the stakes in a Union Council election? or for that matter, in any local body election, in their present shape? A more convincing evidence of this model of elections being conducted smoothly, costing less money and no blood, at a place, and on a level, where stakes are much higher, will be eagerly awaited. Especially by those who are not skeptical, and who have firm faith that the future of our democracy lies in a system of strong, many-tiered local self-government.

We are too much concerned with immediate prospects in the political arena, — the budget session round the corner, the lingering crisis over the combined opposition's boycott of the Sangsad. Hopefully the crisis will be overcome, through the combined wisdom of Position and Opposition. But the distant prospects too should be kept in view: building the edifice of local self-government, which along can put substance into our hollow frame of politics. — all words, words, words, as Hamlet said.

Thanks, finally, to The Daily Star for the public debate it has initiated, the opportunity it has given to many, particularly our politicians, to explain their position in respect of general elections under a caretaker government, — without doubt a hot topic of the day; and also for the enlightenment plus amusement which its readers are receiving, the one as a regular fare, and the other, as an extra, like: 'BNP has not learnt how to tamper with the electoral process, nor does it wish to learn the technique.' M Saifur Rahman (Star May 26).

Though it may sound idealistic, one suggestion of Mr M Saifur Rahman's deserves serious consideration: election expenses to be borne by the government in future. That would reduce, if not fully eliminate, the dependence of the parties, on funding from 'unidentified sources'. That would also increase the chances of better and poorer people to contest for Sangsad seats. As things are now, Sangsad will soon turn

Mangoes are sour!

Sir, In our childhood we read a story where a frustrated jackal was saying that the grapes were sour. We could hardly taste a grape or two. But our taste was cloyed by too frequent sweet mangoes.

These days not the jackal but we hear people say that the mangoes are sour. There is no abundance of mangoes in the market. Whatever mango is available is very costly and beyond the reach of the common people.

We are spending crores of Taka from our public exchequer on research and development of our Rajshahi man-

goes. But why is our Rajshahi mango research is totally silent? Would they kindly let us know why there is such a shortage of mangoes in the country?

O H Kabir
Dhaka

Desai's statement

Sir, Allow me to thank Lord Meghnad Desai for taking the trouble of visiting us with his panacea for the economic ills of the South Asian continent. Had there been no 'historic mistake' in 1947 Mr Desai would not have bothered to visit Dhaka and his listeners and other participants would

have been the members of his own particular tribe. The local experts who participated in the discussions could never dream to enter into the hall and sit on the chairs had there been no 'historic mistake' in 1947. This is historic truth.

Mr Desai is an economist. But his diagnosis for the economic backwardness of the Indian Union in relation to Korea (South) is neither correct nor sound. South Korea, after surviving the North Korea's onslaught started to work hard for its economic development and Japan, as a model it followed Japan. During this period the South Koreans neither killed their own citizens on the

ground of race, religion etc. nor they wanted to manufacture the weapons of mass destructions just for the fun of it. The leaders of the Indian Union simply ignored the Korean example. They wanted to become a superpower.

That Mr Desai would speak in the way he spoke is understandable. But it is not clear who invited Mr Desai and for what purpose? Bangladeshi experts were there only for applauding the somewhat anti-national statements of Mr Desai! We are sorry for them.

Abdul Azim
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