

Politics and People

Leadership Letting People Down

by Mahfuz Anam

It seemed just the other day that we began the most stunningly successful non-cooperation movement from March 1, 1971; were mesmerised by Bangabandhu's speech on March 7; saw the unfolding of a play-acting in the name of negotiations by the Pakistani authorities, the unleashing of the most venomous and brutal genocide against our people, and the glorious nine-month of struggle to free our motherland from the clutches of Pakistani rulers who never took us to be their equals and made second class citizens of us all. Heart begins to beat faster, hair-raising excitement flushes through our veins, and a unique pride equals our inner being for having liberated our country, making us all feel far taller than we ever were, or have been since those glorious days.

It might seem to be the other day, but already 24 years have slide by. Today, as we enter the 25th YEAR OF OUR INDEPENDENCE, the natural question is: what have we done with our independence?

Sometimes I have felt that many of us do not understand what a precious gift it is to have an independent and sovereign country of our own. During my 14 years with Unesco, I met many Palestinians, Kurds and several Armenians. All of them were parts of nations who did not have a country of their own. It was the plight of the Palestinians which brought this point most poignantly home to me. These people, perhaps the brightest of the Arabs, were indiscriminately killed, thrown out of one country after another (even from those which professed eternal fraternal love), and forced to live in makeshift tents for decades. ONLY BECAUSE THEY DID NOT HAVE A COUNTRY OF THEIR OWN. Oh, what an object of jealousy I was for them, especially when they came to know that I got it within nine months of armed struggle. Unlike them, I could look at the map and point to one part of it and say, "this is where I belong, this is my home."

On my part I used to look at them, and visualise where and how I would have been if we had lost our liberation war in 1971 — stateless, securityless, going from door to door, from people to people, seeking help for our struggle. God knows for how long.

So the point is, we take too much for granted, trivialise what is ours, and have a tendency of focusing a disproportionate amount of energy and attention on the negative rather than the positive. Thus, we hear so much about our people being mean, narrow-minded, selfish, and jealous of other's success, and almost never anything about their sacrifice, patriotism, fellow feeling, warmth, generosity, patience, and an uncanny will-

ingness to learn new things (ask anybody who works at the grassroots level, and you will know from where I have learnt all this).

Yet the little that I understand of history, I think we have the most extraordinary people, whose love for freedom and democracy was the principle factor in liberating our country. It is this same trait that over and over again defeated the forces of dictatorship and autocracy, and brought in representative government for us. I feel quite confident that a Castro, a Suharto or a Marcos could never have lasted, and perhaps never can, last here for as long as they have ruled in their own countries. Castro's one-man rule has held the grip of power since 1959. Suharto has been in absolute authority since 1965. Marcos had a personal control of the Philippines for 17 years before he was toppled. It could never have been possible here.

The story in our part of the world is quite different. If we start with Ayub Khan, the man who pulled us into the quagmire of military dictatorship, one sees that he stayed in power for ten years, the maximum that a dictator lasted. Others, including Ershad, the last of such examples, could not stay in power more than nine years. To me this particular set of facts proves that there is an ingrained and overwhelmingly powerful love for freedom. On the other hand, there is a very deep-seated, and almost instinctive, disgust for any form of authoritarian government. This particular characteristic of our people, our aspirant leaders, including the military ones, has been misread terribly. Perhaps, the most unexpected, sad and tragic instance of such a misreading of the public mind was by no less a man than Bangabandhu himself. He who was a peoples' man, whose political career began from the very bottom, being one who could understand public feelings and communicate with them as seldom a leader can, — even he grossly underestimated the negative feelings that would be created by his one-party government. In what can clearly be cited as the single biggest error of his life, and one that stands in contradiction to everything he stood for and fought for, he concentrated all power in his own hands. He abolished all political parties and destroyed a vibrant and free print media, bringing in one-party rule and the presidential form of authoritarian government. His enemies took full advantage of that mistake, and murdered the man who led us in establishing an independent country of our own.

If we take a sweeping view of our recent history, we can certainly say that it is our people who struggle hard and gain democracy, and put the

politicians in power. But, then, this is followed by the politicians messing up things, leading to military take-overs. This is also followed by yet another struggle by the people who, through tremendous sacrifice, bring down the autocrats, once again putting the politicians in power. This is what happened, almost cyclically, with Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and H.M. Ershad.

I say this to bring home the point that as we enter the 25th YEAR OF OUR INDEPENDENCE, the failure that appears to me to have been the most glaring one that has done the biggest harm to our people, to our efforts to establish democracy and to push for economic growth, IS THE FAILURE OF THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP to give democracy an institutional shape and entrench it in the body-politic of the country. We have not been able to build upon the urge for freedom of our people. Instead, our leaders have only used them to come to power. Our political leadership made full use of the democratic aspirations of the people, and with their help, toppled one autocratic regime after another. But unfortunately, when they themselves come to power, they forget their pledges to the people, and do not strengthen democratic norms.

In an ironic twist of facts, many people blame the massive illiteracy, the economic backwardness and the high incidence of poverty as the main reasons of the failure of democracy to sustain over a long period. They say, "people get the type of government they deserve", meaning dictatorships come because our people do not know the value of democracy. They say that our people are not ready for democracy. Some go one step further and say, our people are not fit for democracy.

To me it is a typical case of blaming the victim. Such comments ignore the almost continuous struggle that our people have waged against all forms of authoritarian regimes and tendencies since the British colonial days. No, in my view the truth is the exact reverse. IN FACT IT IS OUR PEOPLE WHO ARE DEMOCRATIC, IT IS OUR LEADERS WHO ARE NOT. I will go one step further. Most of the ills that Bangladesh faces today, I will lay at the door of leadership. It has been their singular failure to take the country FORWARD according to the ideals of our liberation war. Not only that the leadership did not bring about any positive changes among the people, it is they who are mainly responsible for most of the negative tendencies that have so vitiated our lives.

The current stalemate in politics is perhaps the most telling example of our leadership failure. Our people, having defeated autocracy and quasi-military rule through a mass

uprising, participated in a peaceful free and fair election. Then the minimum expectation was that people would have some respite and things would move for the better. From the very outset a nasty bitterness marked the relations between the two leading parties, and more so between their two leaders. Within three years, the parliament came to be non-functional, and by the beginning of the fourth, it crumbled in all but name, bringing politics to a dangerously suffocating, and yet now, confrontation.

Nothing to me marks more clearly, the ineptness of leadership as the present crisis. It is their narrow-mindedness, lack of vision, lack of flexibility and incapacity to see beyond their nose, that is responsible for the present crisis. It is the mindlessness of it all which is so very agonising. Where do we go from here? Will all problems be solved, if the government agrees to a 'caretaker government'? Will strikes and hartals ever stop? Will not the ruling party of today behave in the same manner tomorrow if it should be in the opposition? During anti-Ershad struggle, people knew that toppling Ershad would end all the immediate problems and there would be a new beginning. But now there appears to be no end in sight? Will another free and fair election bring peace and common sense back into our politics? These and other questions vex people's mind.

There will be no moving away from all this unless the pattern, nature, and mindset of our leadership change. Thus, when I look back at the 24 years of our independence, the one thing that I feel most strongly about, is the need for a changing quality of our leadership. Whoever wants to lead our people will have to realise that old thinking, old methods, and old ways of doing things will just not work on the eve of the 21st century. They will have to change. Leading a nation requires public support, charisma, winning elections and being able to reflect public sentiment. But, just as importantly, it needs skills, expertise and VISION. To make it all work, it requires flexibility, spirit of accommodation, tolerance, and mutual respect (and definitely not, hatred). And finally, all of the above will have to operate within a very strong environment of accountability and transparency. It is not that we necessarily need new leaders. Because new ones may as well have the same attitude and beliefs. What we need is a new philosophy, a new mindset, a new heart in all those who are already in the leadership, among those who aspire to be in the same shoes, and finally those who want to join this coveted rank in the future. Only such a change will make the latest 1991 victory of our people durable.

AS we enter the 25th year of our independence, it may be the proper time for some introspection, soul-searching and stock-taking. Have we been able to settle, once and for all, the basic questions which arose in the wake of the Liberation War? Why do we still have a running debate on who declared the independence of the nation? Is there really any difference of opinion about it? Why should it be necessary to agitate to protect and promote the 'spirit of the Liberation War'? It is alleged that certain elements in the country are still opposed to what is called in Bengali "Mukti Juddher Chentona" and who try to denigrate and undermine the spirit of the Liberation War. Diplomats and foreigners are puzzled by such controversy. What is it all about? What is exactly meant by the phrase? Are these some sort of code words? My usual answer to them is: yes, these are indeed code words which compress the whole story of our struggle for independence. Bengalees instinctively know the meaning and significance of the expression. It not only stands for the long struggle against alien political domination and economic exploitation but it also evokes the memories of the genocide, the rape and arson, the tears of mothers and the blood of the freedom fighters, their heroism and sacrifice and above all, the invincible spirit of the nation which refused to submit to alien rule imposed by brute force.

Many people in the country — perhaps the bulk — believe that Bangladesh has abandoned the principles on which it was founded and further, it has deviated from the ideals which inspired the nation during the

Reflections on the Independence Day

by Shah A M S Kibria

long years of our struggle for independence. It is a serious charge. Much emotion and a lot of bitterness is generated by this issue. While celebrating the 24th anniversary of our independence it may be appropriate to take a close look at the allegation in order to determine if there is any reasonable basis for holding such an opinion.

No one can, in all conscience, dispute the fact that the struggle for our independence was led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. His 6-point charter of demands acted as the catalyst for uniting, motivating and eventually galvanizing the nation for the struggle for independence. He inspired and organized them and set the goal before them. He was the duly elected leader with a clear official mandate from the people to speak for them. By March 1971 he had emerged as the symbol of Bengali national aspirations. It was his historic speech on 7 March, 1971 which set the stage for the final phase of the struggle. His declaration of independence on March 26, 1971 marked the birth of the new state. If anyone else relayed his declaration anywhere else in the country, he did so by drawing on the moral authority of undisputed leader of the nation. Freedom-fighters took up arms and fought and died in Bangabandhu's name; he called upon the people to resist the occupation forces and even the most humble peasant in the remotest corner

of the country responded to his clarion call. Except a small section of collaborators the nation fought against the enemy until victory was achieved on 16 December, 1971. Sheikh Mujib was declared to be the first President of the Republic when the new government was sworn in on 18 April, 1971 in Mujibnagar. He gave a constitution which was hailed by the nation as one of his greatest gifts to Bangladesh. Yet today, while we observe the Independence Day, the name and memory of this man who led us to our independence and who is revered by millions as the Father of the Nation, is taboo for the government headed by Begum Khaleda Zia. There was no official holiday on his birthday nor any official mourning on the day he was killed. No one in the government takes his name even on occasions such as the Independence Day or the Victory Day. Far from telecasting any special programme on his life and achievements, the state-owned television and radio shows his name carefully. Under the omnivous eyes of the government, school text books have been written to malign his name and downplay his contribution to the nation. What, one may justifiably ask, is the reason for drawing the curtain on the name and memory of the man who, by all accounts, is the founder of Bangladesh? His killers do not appear to hold any positions of direct power these days and yet the current regime's be-

haviour has led many people to believe that the killers and their supporters till exert a considerable hold over the government. The government's failure to repeal the infamous Indemnity Act and permit the trial of the killers of the Father of Nation certainly gives credence to such a view. Indeed, all the actions taken since August 15, 1975 lead to the inescapable conclusion that the forces defeated in 1971 managed to turn the tables in 1975 and are today at the helm of affairs. There is thus a reasonable ground to conclude that there is considerable substance to the allegation that Bangladesh has indeed moved away from the spirit of our Liberation War.

The politics of South Asia had suffered for decades from the curse of communalism and religious fanaticism. Millions died as a result. The people of Bangladesh were also duped and exploited for 25 long years in the name of religion. The credit for moving away from this divisive and destructive politics must go to Sheikh Mujib who turned, as early as 1955, the Awami League into a non-communal nationalist party which embraced secular political ideas and outlook. As a consequence, the Bangalee nationalist movement which gathered momentum during the following two decades and reached its climax in 1970-71, was secular and non-communal in character. In fact, it was possible to unite the entire nation, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, for the war against the Pakistani occupation forces only because it was the shared sentiment of Bangalee nationalism that inspired and motivated them.

This was a fundamental achievement of the struggle for independence. We were able to erase the scars of communalism and set an example for South Asia. Communal enmity and discord was replaced in Bangladesh by unity and solidarity on the basis of common language and literature, common culture, shared history and heritage and territorial integrity. This great achievement was thrown away when in 1975 the clock was turned back and Gen Zia legalized religion-based politics in the country. Step by step, he changed the character of the constitution and reintroduced those policies which reflected a return to the ways of the Pakistani era. Bangalee nationalism was replaced by the so-called Bangladeshi nationalism. The communal character of this brand of nationalism was barely concealed. Why did Zia ban the Bangalee battle-cry "Joy Bangla"? Is it because it was anathema to the Pakistani occupation forces? The freedom-fighters fought and died with these words on their lips. He brought back collaborators into the centre of the nation's politics and appointed an arch-collaborator as the Prime Minister. It was the defeated forces which were placed in positions of power. Small wonder, then, that a great number of people in the country feel that the character of the state which was born on 26 March, 1971 has been changed. The changes have been made deliberately and in stages, with premeditation. There was, for example, no popular demand for a change in the constitution when Gen Zia amended the constitution. Similarly, there was no demand for public agitation to change Bangladesh from a secular state to an Islamic state. Ershad took this step because he wanted to clothe his illegal regime in religious garb.

The spirit of the Liberation War has been undermined by the changes made since 1975. It is certainly high time, twenty-four years after independence, to resolve these basic issues so that we can devote all our energies on the urgent nation-building tasks. How can we concentrate our energies on meeting the difficult challenges of achieving faster economic growth, eradicating poverty, educating the people, and developing the country's human resources if the nation is still divided between pro and anti-Liberation forces? Many observers of the country's political scene are heartened by the convergence in economic philosophy of the major contenders for political power. However, there is a failure to recognize the very real differences in their views of the rule of law, society and the state, which are rooted in the history of these parties. These differences, which colour their view of the character of the nation created in 1971, must ultimately determine how successful they will be in meeting the social and economic needs and aspirations of the people under a democratic system of government. Today the people of this country must ponder over the question of whether real progress towards the goals of the Liberation struggle can be achieved under those who remain opposed to the principles underlying the independence movement.



The historic 7th March 1971: The Race Course address

Governance in Bangladesh

by Mohammad Mohabbat Khan

An academician long involved in research on public administration provides a thumbnail sketch of the politics and governance scene in Bangladesh that has emerged over the last twenty-four years. Four characteristic features of the politics-and-governance situation in Bangladesh, namely, 'dominant executive', 'weak legislature', 'nature and character of political parties', and 'lack of independence of the judiciary' have been singled out, signifying possible gaps and blanks that demand increasingly critical and programmatic interventions.

Aristotle's definition may appear to be too broad to many, but any discussion on politics must begin from here. 'Governance' was defined way

back in the fourteenth century. It then meant the act, method, manner and functions of governing. But, in the centuries that followed, both the terms

were used in a number of ways. It is increasingly realized that "politics is a complex process involving citizen attitudes and interests, group organization, electioneering, lobbying as well as formulation, implementation and interpretation of law". To put it differently, the present trend is a shift towards the ancient Greek interpretation of politics. Politics includes any aspect of society that directly or indirectly affects the institutions of the state. Governance in the present parlance refers broadly to "the system of government, concentrating on effective and accountable institution, democratic principles and electoral processes, representative and responsible structures of government in order to ensure an open and legitimate relationship between the civil society and the state". In other words, both politics and governance are closely related.

The foregoing analysis makes one thing clear. In spite of the crucial importance of the terms — politics and governance, it is indeed extremely difficult to discuss, within a brief canvass, all the variables involved. So, an attempt is made here to focus on four dimensions of governance and politics in Bangladesh.

Dominant Executive

Political institution-building

in Bangladesh indicates a growing trend to strengthen and consolidate all powers in the hands of the chief executive. Constitutional amendments, suspension of the constitution and invoking of the emergency powers of the constitution were utilized for this purpose. The constitutional amendments had been used on occasions to legitimize one-party rule, to validate all actions under the martial law and to legalize highly controversial issues. The constitution remained suspended for over eight years due to military take-over of the state power. Emergency power of the constitution has been used in some cases to suppress democratic opposition to the government in power.

Weak Legislature

In the past in Bangladesh, the all-powerful executive systematically reduced the role of the legislature to a 'talking club'. None of the four previous parliaments was allowed to complete its five-year term. The Parliamentary approval of each and every executive act was taken for granted. The present parliament, before the opposition boycott of its sessions, showed symptoms of its diminished role. The non-performance of the designated role of the par-

liament was a consequence of a number of factors. These were the bestowal of the ordinance-making power on the executive; restriction imposed on the MP to vote according to his/her conscience; non-members of parliament to become and remain members of the cabinet; the practice of the standing committees headed by ministers; the non-establishment of the parliament secretary and an Office of Ombudsman; the inability of the parliamentary committees to discharge their responsibilities due to heavy workload, lack of relevant information, non-implementation of their recommendations and lack of adequate staff and other logistic support; and almost an uninhibited continuity of out-of-date rules of business and warrant of precedence.

Nature and Character of

Political Parties

Political parties have significantly contributed to the malpolitical development in the country. They have been unable to lead and guide people at different crucial junctures. Rather, on such occasions as the movement that finally toppled the Ershad regime, the leadership was provided by students, labourers and professionals. The reasons behind such a situation are the opportunist nature of the leadership, the fragmentation of political parties into smaller factions/groups, promotion and democratic practice.

Lack of Independence of the Judiciary

The judiciary was made subservient to the executive branch of the government by the fourth amendment to the Constitution in 1975. A private member's bill was placed in the Parliament in July 1991 by an opposition MP. The bill was in accordance with the agreed outline of the three alliances,

which was formed during the flag-end of the Ershad rule by political parties, for protection of the fundamental rights of the people, independence of the judiciary and ensuring rule of law. After a lapse of almost three years, the select committee report on the constitutional amendment was placed before the Parliament in February, 1994. All the opposition MPs including the sponsor of the bill vehemently opposed the introduction of the report and the amended bill claiming that such an action would strike at the root of the whole question of the independence of the judiciary and the magistrates exercising judicial functions. They felt that amendments would allow greater executive inroad in the affairs of the Supreme Court through the modalities of making appointments of the judges.

Two actions taken by the Government generate suspicion and unease about the independence of the judiciary in this country. First, in 1992, the government turned down a High Court Division full court decision relating to the promotion of the sub-judges. Second, on February 4, 1994, as many as nine judges were appointed to the Supreme Court without prior consultation with the Chief Justice. The first act violated the spirit and intent of Articles 109 and 116 of the Constitution and the second act deviated from an established convention.

The discussion above gives only a brief picture of politics and governance in Bangladesh. One of the major causalities of such a situation is a weak and disjointed system of political accountability.



Moulana Bhasani trying to break Section 144 by praying on the road in front of Baitul Mukarram during the '69 movement. Courtesy — MuktiJiddha Shriti Trust Album