

NATIONAL CONSENSUS

The Concept and its Application in the Politics of Bangladesh

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After the Awami League government took over on 23 June the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been constantly claiming that her government is the government of national consensus. She wanted to augment her claim by saying that she has taken in her cabinet two members from the opposition parties, one from Jatiya Party and the other from JSD (Rab). What more she invited the main opposition BNP also to join her cabinet. So she called it a government of national consensus.

BNP has promptly and correctly disputed the claim but quite incorrectly said that Sheikh Hasina wants to revive BKSAL, i.e., one party government of 1975. Since then the term national consensus has created a thorough confusion in our political parlance.

There can be nothing like a government of national consensus under the parliamentary system of democracy. Under this system the party which has majority in the parliament rules, and the party which fails to obtain majority sits in the opposition. In a very rare circumstance all parties in the parliament can form the government united. This happened during the second world war in UK. The government then was called the government of national unity. When the very existence of the country is threatened by external danger and the political leaders decide that the country cannot and should not afford the luxury of peace time political wranglings, only then such a government is formed. The only objective for the whole nation is to fight a war for national survival. In peace time such a government of national unity is neither necessary nor desirable. During normal time one party will rule and the other party will find fault (though in a constructive manner) with the government so that the latter remains in tact and delivers the goods.

However, in these circumstances both the parties must also try to achieve national consensus in as many major issues as possible. National consensus, in fact, is the general agreement of the nation on a particular issue, i.e., it political, economic or any other, e.g., education, defence, etc. Achieving national consensus on a number of issues will mean that the efforts of the political parties will not be unnecessarily wasted in political squabbling and quarrels on petty non-issues. In the Western Democracies the areas in which national consensus exists have expanded over the centuries and the areas in which national consensus does not exist are very few. On the other hand, in the East where democratic practices are still in their infancy there are only few areas where national consensus has been achieved. The obvious result is that there are daily quarrels on many issues, and often non-issues, which thwart the progress of the nation, divert the attention of the rulers from the basic problems of the nation and thus alienate the voters.

In Bangladesh, democracy is still in its infant stage. Therefore, the areas in which national consensus is needed are vast and numerous. Unfortunately, very little progress in the field was achieved during the last spell of democratic rule after 1991. Most of that period was spent in confrontational politics, both within the parliament and out side in the

streets. While the politics of national consensus demands understanding, consideration, and mutual regard between the two major parties i.e. the ruling party and the opposition, our politics was marked by confrontation which should be an anathema to national consensus and national progress.

The confrontational politics thrives particularly when the feuding parties know that the general elections will not be free and fair and can be rigged by the ruling party in order to perpetuate itself into power.

The second reason for such politics in our country is scant regard for the voters by the rulers of the country. In the past the dictators whose power base was not the people and they always rigged the polls, had no regard for the voters. During the democratic spell of 91-96 also, the hangover of the past disregard for the voters seemed to continue among the rulers and they did not feel the necessity for the politics of consensus. On the other hand, the opposition believed, especially after the Magura bye-polls, that the power could be changed only through a physical force emanating from a violent street agitation which would render the existence of the government machinery untenable. Hence was the eye ball to eye ball political confrontation of 94-96.

The people suffered but none of the political parties showed any regard for their sentiment. (Some cynics claim, that is why none of the major parties were given absolute majority in the subsequent polls which was free and fair).

We congratulate our new prime minister who is the first person to talk about national consensus in our national politics, even though not in its correct context. We also congratulate our esteemed The Daily Star for inviting opinions of the readers on the subject. In fact lots of comments of the readers have already been published and by and large they point towards the correct direction. It is however, felt that a subject wise arrangement of the matter would perhaps lend itself to better understanding. But the number of the items is so numerous that no list can be exhaustive. For the present we just arbitrarily confine ourselves to a few major subjects e.g., political, economic, foreign affairs, domestic etc.

Political

Parliamentary Democracy: There is a national consensus in certain major areas of our political life. For instance, the need to have democracy in the country and the form of government. The whole nation agrees that we should have a parliamentary system of democracy and no other form.

Some may put forward the argument here that the political party like Jamaat-e-Islami, as per their manifesto, does not believe in democracy at all, let alone a parliamentary form. They claim that the source of all political power is NOT the people, although it is enshrined in our Constitution in very specific terms that all political powers emanate from the people. In claiming this the Jamaat is not only deny democracy they also violate our constitution. Legal action against any such organization is not within the purview of this study. For our purpose it suffices to say that they have little or no support amongst the populace. Therefore our national consensus on the subject

does not quite reflect this. Their erstwhile tendency to call each other names at the slightest provocation, and very often no provocation, continues unabated in the new parliament. Who is more to blame? One wishes one could blame one more than the other.

Economic Affairs

Free Market Economy: Fortunately for the nation a consensus exists in the tricky area of our economic policy. After the Awami League changed their economic policy from socialist to free market economy all major parties, in fact, the whole nation is agreed about the free market economy. How free the economy should be, how much government control or deregulation should be affected, will however depend on the incumbent government policy. While the ultimate objective must need be a completely free economy it will be the job of the government and its planners to chart out their course to that end with utmost dexterity. They have to ensure that maximum speed in economic development has to be attained but a minimum hardship and pain are inflicted on those who are adversely affected by this policy. Otherwise the very ob-

jective of the whole exercise will be jeopardized by the discontent of the sufferers which may as well take a violent form. Therefore, utmost caution will have to be exercised in selecting the limit which the planners of free economy cannot afford to cross. It is obvious that in such a difficult area national consensus is a must. Both the opposition and the government have to put their heads together to evolve a policy which should continue even if the present government is out of power after the next polls.

Poverty Alleviation: In Bangladesh, we need a national consensus in a vital area of economy that is, poverty alleviation. Bangladesh is one of the poorest and over populated countries of the world. Unless the problem of its stark poverty is addressed immediately all our national planning will be cock-eyed and our political stability will be at jeopardy. Eradication of poverty is by no means a simple, straightforward and a short-term method. Any planning for this will have complex implications with economic, political and social ramifications. In a system of free economy the state intervention may be necessary to speedily alleviate the poverty of the most disadvantaged class. This may also mean some small sacrifice on the part of other more fortunate classes of the society etc.

We are certain that national consensus exists regarding the necessity of poverty eradication. It is the method and planning in which all the political parties of the opposition will have to agree. All governments which will succeed the present one can pursue the al-

lative policy. Another major area in which we would suggest national consensus is in our labour policy. In order to avoid political wranglings involving our young but vitally important industrial sector we can lay down broad principles guiding the duties, responsibilities and rights of the labour and the management. These guidelines i.e. the labour policy will also have to be evolved in consultation with both labour and the opposition so that a labour problem of a particular factory may not enthuse a political party to reap a political harvest, to the detriment of our industrial progress.

Foreign Affairs

A national consensus exists in our policy regarding foreign relations in very broad term. Friendship with all and malice to none, good relations with our neighbours and Muslim countries — these are our foreign policies, generally speaking. After the political change in USSR there is a general agreement in favour of cordial relations with the western world. Then there is a general feeling in favour of regional cooperation for economic development i.e. SAARC. These developments are as a result of our appreciation that during the second half of this century trade and commerce have been dominating the relationship among the countries. In order to become wealthy or powerful a country does not have to physically conquer another country. All it wants is an access for carrying on trade and commerce. Then the small and undeveloped countries also have a redeeming feature — they can also become rich and powerful

goes with India in the name of smuggling is enormous. Then the direct support that the Indian government and its people gave to the Liberation War of Bangladesh is also warmly remembered. Yet the nation is divided so far as our relations with India is concerned. In every general election, an anti-India platform is invariably formed to woo the voters who are considered religious or perhaps more gullible.

In these contexts our relationship with India has to be evaluated. But unless this is done in a completely objective manner and free from all emotional considerations the study will be an exercise in futility.

And for obvious reasons both the elements of our society i.e., the ones who have a pathological inclination towards India and the others with a pathological dislike and apprehension against it, must sit together. In other words a national consensus on this is vitally necessary. Once evolved, the policy towards India should be long term and lasting. That will be in the interest of both the countries.

At present the fear of being named as pro-India is so acute in the mind of our political parties that no government, whether pro-India or anti-India, dares take a forward step to India, however beneficial it may be considered for Bangladesh. Because the opposition, again, whether pro-India or anti-India, will surely try to reap a political harvest by crying "sell out to India". Mercifully, however, this blindness about India is much less amongst our people than in our leaders and political parties.

Law and Order

The other domestic issues which must be solved immediately include terrorism, extortionism and other law and order problems.

A national consensus already exists that the problems need to be eradicated in order to sustain economic growth, and save our social life, our political institutions, our education system, etc. Now the national consensus is necessary about the methodology to be applied for the eradication. Although the government alone can eradicate the ill it is better if it takes the main political opposition into confidence as it will save time and sweat and also guard against any recurrence.

Religion in Politics: Finally, there are certain issues which divide the political parties in Bangladesh, but it may not be feasible to arrive at a consensus about them in the immediate future. These are, first, Bangalee nationalism vs. Bangladeshi nationalism.

Second, whether religion will remain a personal affair and thus above politics or whether religion should be allowed to determine state policies. In fact, both these issues emanate from the same basic question i.e. whether religion should play any role in determining state policy and national identity. These issues will ultimately be settled by our people. It is expected that as we progress economically and in education the people of Bangladesh will also keep in step with other advanced nations of the world and religion will remain above politics.

Conclusion

In any democratic political system efforts should be made to reach national consensus in as many areas as possible. This will ensure political stability, speed up economic development and facilitate efficient administration. For arriving at a consensus a constant liaison between the ruling party and the opposition on all major political issues is essential. To ensure this constructive liaison, the political parties should have regard for each other, tolerance for each other's political ideals or views and personal consideration for one another's sentiment. This is more or less absent from Bangladeshi politics today. In order to make a start, initiative has to come from the ruling party. Instead of trying to make political capital by citing instances of weaknesses and mistakes of the past, both parties should look to the future and be more tolerant. If personal example is to be set, that also has to come from the ruling party. It would be profitable to remember that the voters who are constantly watching their leaders have a refreshing habit of preferring humility to arrogance.

(The writer is politician and ex Chief of Defence Staff)

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Nationalisation: The second area where we need national consensus is in the field of our state owned establishments (SOE). It is generally agreed that the loss-incurring public sector projects should be nationalised. But the main hurdle is the displacement of the labour force who have to be rehabilitated. In addition, the general public should also be convinced that the measure is in their interest. In such circumstances not only the labour leaders but also the opposition political party will have to be consulted in order to arrive at an agreed formulae. The successful implementation of such a scheme will greatly depend on the good will of the opposition on the one hand and a favourable public opinion on the other. Therefore, national consensus on such national issues is essential. Normally it takes time to complete the implementation of these plans. A national consensus on them will help the next government to continue the process till it is completed.

through trade, commerce, foreign capital import, joint ventures with the developed countries etc. In this milieu, the historical animosity or friendship between nations acquire new connotations. The head should dominate the heart — the consideration of economic benefit should over ride the sentimental or emotive factors.

Pakistan: Unfortunately the nation is divided in its opinion about our relationship with our two important neighbouring countries — India and Pakistan. Our relationship with Pakistan does not pose all that difficult a problem. All are more or less agreed that we can have close commercial relations with Pakistan. A section of people, however, strongly feels that in view of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani Army in 1971 Pakistan should ask apology of Bangladesh before a cordial relationship is established between the two countries.

India: Our relation with India is, however, more complex. India is a vast country surrounding Bangladesh on three sides. Moreover, it is perhaps the most important country for developing our trade and commerce. The invisible border trade which

We have three major issues to settle with India today i.e. water dispute, the commercial corridor between Chittagong port and Assam, and the terrible imbalance of trade between the two countries. If we analyse these issues, it will become obvious even to a superficial observer that it is greatly in the interest of both countries to immediately solve the problems.

Commercial Corridor

Admittedly the water sharing issue, if kept hanging, does not hurt India all that much. But the commercial corridor problem hurts India more than Bangladesh. India is finding it extremely difficult to economically develop the Eastern States of Assam through the tenuous and prohibitively expensive route through Jalgajuri (south of Bhutan). Therefore, they are looking for a commercial route through Bangladesh for which they will pay. Bangladesh will benefit from the project on many counts — first, it will earn handsome toll money. Secondly, India will participate in building modern and necessary infrastructure i.e. communication network for the easy and efficient transportation of huge amounts of goods through this corridor. This means vast de-

Domestic

Chittagong Hill Tracts: There are numerous domestic issues which demand national consensus. Only the major ones will be discussed here. Perhaps the most important domestic problem which confronts the nation today is the Hill Tracts issue. To say the

The Daily Star Entertainment Guide

Saturday 3rd August

News 8:15 World Olympic Report 6:00pm Fantasy Island 7:00 Thailand Panorama 8:00 The Addams Family 8:30 The Simpsons 8:30 Baywatch 9:30 Star Trek 10:30 Time Out 11:30 Law 12:00mn COPs 12:30 Mystery Movies 8:15 Stryker 7:12 Grand Theft Auto 2:30 Movie Tanamera Part 3 5:30 Wild Wild West

STAR Sports

6:00am Indoor Mountain Bike Racing 6:30 Australian Football League Highlights 18 6:00 Castro St Leger Race HU 5:30 The European Tour Dutch Open Day 4

STAR MOVIES

7:30 Film Club: Plan 9 from Outer Space 12 (Arabic Subtitles) 9:30 Family Little Marines 12 (Arabic Subtitles) 11:30 Classic, The Gang's All Here PG (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Comedy: I Was a Teenage Vampire 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:30 Adventure: Conquest of the Planet of the Apes 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 5:30 Western The Legend of the Lone Ranger 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 7:00 Family Toys 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 9:30 The Preview 9:30 Battle Cries Mash 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Comedy: How to Get Ahead in Advertising 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:00 Special 3:00 Fat or Fit 3:30 Karm (Serial) 4:00 Tere V Chup 4:30 The Muvo Usha Uthup Show 5:00 Pichcha Karo 05:30 Special 5:30 Special (Hindi Gaan) 7:30 Zee Arabic Entertainment: TMM 2:30 Urdu Feature Film: Khas

ZEE TV

6:00 News 6:30 Jagran 7:00 A To Z Computer 8:30 All Out 9:00 Bournvita Quiz Contest 9:30 Yo Namaste 10:00 Ad Mad Show 10:30 Game Anjana 11:00 Shahi Dawa 11:30 Cartoons 12:00 Philips Top Ten 1:00 Tel Moli Ke Bol 1:30 Asian Sky Shop 2:30 Niroj, Ashiana 3:00 Positive

PTV

8:00am Tilawat, Aar Tarjuman/Haft/Nast 8:20 Cartoon 8:30 Khabar 8:45 Visitors Book 9:10 Phool, Khushboo 9:25 Dastarkhwan 9:40 Mehman 10:05 Aap Ki Anwar, Maaqsood 10:30 English Film: Tarzan 10:55 Milli Naqsha 11:00 Khabar 11:10 Men Pasang 11:35 Janan 12:55 Quran-E-Hakeem 1:02 Bismillah 1:15 Grind 2:05 Lasaal Ep:37 2:55 Husein-E-Insaaf & Sports Coaching 3:20 TV Encyclopedia

TOM and JERRY



James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

AT THE ORANGE RIVER BRIDGE...

A GREAT JOKE - EH, CHIQUITA? BOND THOUGHT THE DUMMY ON THE TRACK WAS YOU BEFORE HE DIED!

TOO BAD WE COULD NOT SEE... BUT THE TRAIN WILL STOP TO PICK YOU UP - YOU ARE TO HELP SENOR S'S GUESTS ENJOY THEMSELVES AT...

DD 7

10:30 Janmadaan 10:35 Movie Club

Film: Dado 5:00 Jish 5:30 Nijer

Sange Dekha 6:00 Nijer

Preran 6:30 Pratibha

7:00 Nandak 7:30 Bangla

Sambad 8:00 Dhritang Dhritang Bole

8:30 UJALA: Surer Asar 9:00

TBA 9:25 Classical Music 10:00

Drama 10:30 News and Bengali

Sambad

Bhalo 3:00 Kemon Aachen 3:30

Comedy Quiz 4:25 Movie Club

Film: Dado 5:00 Jish 5:30 Nijer

Sange Dekha 6:00 Nijer

Preran 6:30 Pratibha

7:00 Nandak 7:30 Bangla

Sambad 8:00 Dhritang Dhritang Bole

8:30 UJALA: Surer Asar 9:00