

NATIONAL CONSENSUS

The Concept and its Application in the Politics of Bangladesh

Major General M Khalil ur Rahman (retd)

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

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 BNP (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 jointly. 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 on track 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, be 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 study 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

Basic Organs of Democracy:

In order to make democracy functional and effective, some of its basic organs must be well established and institutionalized in our administration, body-politic and social order. These are, an independent judiciary, a free media (both free press and free electronic media), free and fair elections at all levels, and perhaps the most important, a properly functional parliament. All these are written in our Constitution and a national consensus exists for establishing them. But the establishment of independent judiciary and free electronic media was delayed by the past government (s) and very fortunately is now being done by the present government.

Parliament: A word about the functional and effective parliament which should be the centre point for all major decision making, in fact, all major activities of the country, will be relevant here. It is a general feeling that our political parties have not been responsive to this vital requirement of the nation. Party antagonism and at times personal animosity were allowed to overshadow the national requirement of consensus. It was always the practice for the government party and opposition to oppose each other in the parliament just for the sake of opposition. A helpless nation was looking on with utter frustration. Needless to say that such an atmosphere in the parliament does not render it effective. Although the present government is inviting the opposition for consensus and the opposition is also reported to be willing, their attitude in the

parliament 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 socialistic 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 to 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 discontentment 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.

Foreign Affairs

A national consensus exists in our policy regarding foreign relations in very broad terms. Friendship with all and malice to none, good relations with our neighbours and Muslim countries — these are our foreign policies, generally speaking. In order to 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

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 override 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 in favour of the view that the consideration of the atrocity 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

goes on 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 as 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.

The above analysis shows that India should be quite keen to resolve the problems. India knows that the enduring solution of these problems need good will and mutual respect between the two countries. Both the countries are aware that the problems are of such a nature that they cannot be tackled in isolation. The water-sharing issue should be addressed first. A simultaneous approach should not be ruled out either.

Efforts should, therefore, start without any loss of time to solve the problems. For this we shall need a national consensus. To that end our first effort should be directed towards educating our public opinion. We must not forget that 24 years of hate-India campaign during the Pakistani rule of our country greatly succeeded in instilling in our minds an acute anti-India feeling. Then the long spell of autocratic rules in our country also utilised apparently popular but essentially harmful retrograde methods, to woo public opinion and perpetuate their reign. Whipping up of anti-India sentiment was the most popular method. In such a back drop it is necessary to educate the public and mind regarding the beneficial aspects of Indo-Bangladesh cordial relationship. As this is being done the political leaders from both sides should also sit together. Then the subjects should be debated in the parliament.

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

least, the problem is politically volatile, economically expensive, and inhuman. How does it feel to think that we are perpetrating on our national minority similar (if not the same) atrocities against which we laid down our life in a Liberation War only a couple of decades ago. This problem must be solved, and soonest. For this also we need our national consensus. The process is the same — all political parties must sit together, debate in the parliament and simultaneously educate public opinion through well informed and enlightened media.

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 expects that it takes the main political opposition into confidence as it will save time and sweat and also guard against any possibility.

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, Bangladeshi nationalism vs. Bangladeshi Islamism.

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 Bangladesh 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)

Saturday 3rd August

(All programmes are in local time. We recommend programmes printed in bold. There may be changes in the programmes.)

BTV

3:00pm Dohing Announcement
Al-Quran 3:10 Recitation from the Triptak 3:15 Movie of the Week
4:00 News in Bangla 5:00 News in Bangla 5:25 Banashori: Folk Songs 6:00 News in Bangla 6:05 Shamachar: 6:30 Moner Mukure 7:00 News in English 8:00 News in Bangla 8:30 Mah-e-Mausam: Programme Based on Agricultural Development 9:00 Ananta Chira: Based on Music & Culture 10:00 News in English 10:30 Shasthakatha: Health Programme 10:35 Drama Series: Dynasty 11:30 News in Bangla 11:35 Tomorrow's programme summary 11:40 Close down

BBC

6:00am BBC World News 6:20 Britain in View 7:00 BBC World News 7:10 Newsnight 8:00 BBC World News 8:20 Window On Europe 9:00 BBC World News 9:05 Assignment 10:00 BBC World News 10:20 Stephen Hawking: The Big Question 11:00 BBC World News 11:20 Window On Europe 12:00noon BBC World News 12:05 Everyman 1:00 BBC World News 1:05 BBC Global Report 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Tomorrow's World 3:00 BBC World News 3:30 Time Out: Summer Holiday 4:00 BBC World News 4:05 Horizon 5:00 BBC World News 5:20 Britain in View 5:50 Earth Report 6:00pm BBC World News 6:05 Madness 7:00 BBC World News 7:20 This Week 8:00 BBC World

News 8:15 World Olympic Report 8:30 Time Out: Building Sights 9:00 BBC World News 9:05 Assignment 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 Time Out: Lisa Clayton-Alene Around the World 11:00 BBC World News 11:15 World Olympic Report 11:20 This Week 12:00noon BBC World News 12:20 Stephen Hawking: The Big Question 1:00 BBC World News 1:05 Horizon 2:00 BBC World News 2:15 World Olympic Report 2:30 Time Out: Top Gear 3:00 BBC World News 3:25 Window On Europe 4:00 BBC World News 4:25 This Week 5:00 BBC World News 5:20 Stephen Hawking: The Big Question

CHANNEL V

8:30am Asian Top 20 VJ News 10:30 Bal Board 5:00 Countdown 12:30 Big Bang Weekend VJ Alessandra 2:30 The Ride VJ Trey 3:30 Rewind VJ Sophia 4:30 House Of Noise VJ Luke 5:30 (V) 1's 6:00pm The Vibe Weekend VJ Luke 8:00 BPL Oye! 9:00 The Ticket 9:30 Palmolive Extra Time Pass 3 10:30 Videocon Flashback 11:00 VSPOT 12:00 House Of Noise 12:30 The Ticket 1:00 The Ride VJ Trey 2:00 Music Update Tokyo 2:30 Over The Edge VJ Sophia 3:30 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 5:00 Frame by Frame

STAR PLUS

6:30am Voltron 7:00 Kids Movie 7:30 Big Foot 8:00 Around the World in 80 Days 15:15 8:30 Count Duckula 37:05 9:00 Sabar Rider & The Star Sheriff 21:52 9:30 Zoolite With Jack Hanna 10:00 Katts & Dog 10:30 Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea 11:30 The Wild West 12:30 Movie: Mr. Belvedere Goes To College 2:30 Movie Classics: The Pied Piper Of Hamelin 4:30 Hardcastle And Mc Cormack 5:30 Movie Television

6:00pm Fantasy Island 7:00 Thailand: Panorama 7:30 The Addams Family 8:00 The Simpsons 8:30 Baywatch 9:30 Star Trek: The Next Generation 10:30 L.A. Law 11:30 Code 3 CT 128 12:00noon CBS 12:30 Mystery Movies: B L Stryker 7:12 Grand Theft Auto 2:30 Movie: Tanamera Park 3:30 Wind Wild West

STAR Sports

6:00am Indoor Mountain Bike Racing 6:30 Australian Football League Highlights 18:30 Sports India 2 8:30 World Wrestling Federation Mania 6:00 9:30 NBA Inside Stuff 10:00 Gillette World Sport Special 9:30 The Asian Football Show 31 11:30 Cricket Week 4 12:00 World M'Cycle Champions Australian Preview 12:30 Indian Football Kalyan Bangla Label Federation Cup From Bangalore Quarter Finals H 2:30 The European Tour Dutch Open Day 4 4:30 Inside PGA Tour 27:30 5:00 Football Mundial 30 5:30 Asia Sport Show 5:45 6:00 Live Umbro International Football United v Ajax 8:30 Live Umbro Int'l Football Chelsea v Nottingham Forest 10:30 Castrol St. Leger Race HIL 11:00 Tr. Nations Series South Africa vs Australia 1:30 Asia Sports Show 45 2:00 Classic Sports World Cup Classic Matches 1996 England v West Germany Final 4:00

ZEE TV

6:00 News 6:30 Jagran 7:00 A To Z Computer 8:30 All Out 9:00 Bourminta Quiz Contest 9:30 Yo Namesto 10:00 Ad Mad Show 10:30 Game Anygame 11:00 Shahi Dawat 11:30 Cartoons 12:00 Philips Top Ten 1:00 Top Mol Ke Bol 1:30 Asian Sky Shop 2:30 Nirouk, Ashana 3:00 Positive

Australian Football League Highlights 18:30 Castrol St. Leger Race HIL 5:30 The European Tour Dutch Open Day 4

STAR MOVIES

7:30 Film City: 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) 8:30 The Preview 9:30 Battle Cries Mash 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Comedy: How to Get Ahead in Advertising 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Fright Night: The Raven 12 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:30 Action: Kickboxer II 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 5:30 Thriller: House of Games 18 (Hindi Subtitles)

EL TV

6:30 Ched Chad 7:30 Music Time 8:30 Taranne Aur Fasane 9:30 Best of the Best 10:30 Lakhna Advance Booking 11:00 Zee Hero Anupam Kher Show 11:30 Karz 12:00 Special 01:00 Special 02:00 Special 3:00 Fat or Fit 3:30 Karm (Serial) 4:00 Tere V Chup 4:30 The Moov Usha Uthup Show 5:00 Pichcha Kar 05:30 Special 6:30 Special (Ht Gaan) 7:30 Zaka Ka Safar 8:00 Jawah 8:30 Froob: It's My Choice 9:00 Amar Prem 9:30 Peoples Club 10:00 Sorry Meri Lorry 10:30 Silsila 11:30 Special 12:00 Newsline 12:30 Dance Dance 1:30 Best of the Best 2:30 Tarana Aur Fasane 3:30 Music Time

PTV

8:00am Tilaawat Aur Tarjuma/Hamd/Naat 8:20 Cartoon 8:30 Khabraan 8:45 Visitors Book 9:10 Phool Khushboo 9:25 Dastarkhwan 9:40 Mehman 10:05 Aap Ki Anwar Maqsood 10:30 English Film: Tarzan 10:55 Milli Naghma 11:00 Khabraan 11:10 Meri Pasand 11:35 Janan 12:55 Duran-E-Hakeem 1:02 Bismillah 1:15 Grand 2:05 Larval 3:37 2:55 Hussain-E-Insaf & Sports Coaching 3:20 TV Encyclopedia

Health Show 3:30 Zaka Ka Safar 4:00 No Problem 4:20 TVS Sa Re Ga Ma 5:00 Galaxize 6:00 Commander 6:30 Woh Keya Sin Hai 7:00 FLU 7:30 Suh Taal 8:00 Helpline 8:30 Maa 9:00 Asian Paints Yaadon Ke Rang 9:30 Paribarban 10:00 Tanaav 10:33 The News Round Up 11:00 Ghamta Aala 11:30 Player's Gold Action Movie: HFF 1:30 Colgate Gel Yodlee To 2:00 Shakti 2:30 Zee Arabia Arabic TMM 5:30 Zee Arabia Entertainment TMM

SONY ET

8:30 am Kuch Dil Ne Kaha 9:00 Yaddon Ki Baar 9:30 Cine Matinee-Hindi Feature Film 12:30 Chamar 1:00 Siddhi 1:30 Kaash 2:00 Sunday Ki Sunday 2:30 The Nirlep Raso Show 3:00 Khoya Khoya Chand 3:30 Movie

TOM and JERRY

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JAMES BOND

AT THE ORANGE RIVER BRIDGE...

3:40 Sports Time 4:05 Daastak

5:05 Medicine 5:25 Computers 6:20 Adu Courses 7:00 English News 7:20 PTV Music Library 7:30 Virsa Pakistan 7:55 Ghazal Uss Naye Saare 8:25 Dantonc World Of Sports 8:45 Anas 9:00 Break For Headlines News 10:00 Khabraan & Commercial News 10:35 TBA 11:55 The Flash Point 1:05 Urdu Feature Film: Khas

Khabraan Close Down

DD 7

10:30 Janmadin 10:35 Movie Club Film: Chandhans (Cast: Amar Malik, Chuni Duttal) 1:00 Movie Club Film: Kanchan Ranga (Cast: Tripti Mitra, Latika Basu) 1:30 Nijer Sange Dekha 2:00 Prathingsha 2:30 Bandhu Chale

Bhalo 3:00 Kemon Aachen 3:30

Comedy Quiz 4:35 Movie Club Film: Dada 5:00 Jishu 5:30 Nijer Sange Dekha 6:00 Nijar Dupure Premier Gaan 6:30 Prathingsha 7:00 Nandanik 7:30 Bangla Sambad 8:00 Dhtang Dhtang Role 8:30 UJALA: Surer Asar 9:00 TBA 9:25 Classical Music 10:00 Drama 10:30 News and Bengali Sambad

A GREAT JOKE - EH CHIKUITA POND THOUGHT THE DUMMY ON THE TRACK WAS YOU BEFORE HE DIED!

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

LOOK AT THAT CUTE LITTLE FRONT DOOR!

YEAH.

BUT JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THAT BIG BACK DOOR!

6-23

Shakdi on Zee TV tonight at 2:00 am

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