

## Bangladesh: Viewed from Afar

## An Idea to Reduce Hartal

by Nazrul Islam

**The main appeal of continuous hartals is, in their potentiality, to create a government paralysis, which may then pave way for a change of government, either through mid-term poll or through other means. It is necessary to delink hartals from government change. Shorter government term will establish elections firmly as the only mode of government change.**

Zia to Sheikh Hasina, all prior changes in government have been direct or indirect consequences of coup, insurrection, mass-uprising, and other non-electoral events and processes. In this backdrop, it is heartening that the parties are talking about "elections."

The question is, why should there be mid-term election? Mid-term election is generally held if the government fails to prove its majority in the Parliament at some point during its term. Nothing of that type has happened in Bangladesh. Thus, the demand for mid-term elections is arising from something outside of the parliamentary process. In other words, although the parties have become somewhat "election oriented," they are yet to become "parliament-oriented." This is clear from frequent outright boycotts or sporadic and minimal participation in the work of the Parliament by opposition parties.

Yet, on the other hand, opposition parties feel that the term of the government is too long, and they don't want to wait that long. Since they cannot find any parliamentary reason for demanding mid-term election, they try to enforce this demand through street agitation and hartal. Thus, the demand for mid-term election and the phenomenon of continuous hartal have become inseparable.

## Two Types of Hartal

Why is mutual no-hartal commitment proving so difficult to obtain? To answer this question we first need to distinguish between two types of hartal, namely "sporadic" and "continuous." Sporadic hartals are those which are called to protest "specific" government actions or policies. On the other hand, the purpose of continuous hartals is basically to paralyze the government and ultimately to bring it down.

It may not be possible to do away entirely with both types of hartals. Such a goal may not be even desirable. At some point of time, a government may indeed do something so outrageous that it is general strike may rightfully be called for. From this point of view, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent commitment not to call hartal under any circumstance is certainly noteworthy, because it defies the usual political maxim, "never say never." Given Bangladesh's acute socioeconomic problems, and given the Himalayan task the nation faces to solve these problems, it is certainly desirable that the Bangladesh political parties never resorted to hartal. Hence Sheikh Hasina's announcement certainly needs to be appreciated.

The purpose of the idea suggested here is more limited. It will not eliminate all kinds of hartal. However, it will certainly reduce continuous hartals. To the extent that virulent succession or continuous hartal are most debilitating for the economy, finding a way to reduce this type of hartal may be of primary importance.

## Hartal and Mid-term Election

The link between continuous hartal and desire to change government is clear from BNP's response to the Prime Minister's announcement. BNP has put forward sixteen pre-conditions that need to be fulfilled before it would agree not to call hartal. The first and foremost of these is holding of "mid-term elections." In other words, BNP feels that the regularly scheduled election is too far away. It wants an electoral showdown sooner.

In a sense this is progress, because it means that political parties in Bangladesh are at least talking in terms of elections. For most of the post-independence period, the country has been under direct or quasi-military governments. Except for the last two (from Ershad to Khaleda Zia, and from Khaleda

effective term of a government will be three years and nine months. There is no way that the public will think this to be too long a term to warrant mid-term election.

Hence, even if an opposition party demands mid-term election, it is sure to fail in rallying public support for the demand. Loss of public support will hurt the opposition in two ways. First, without public support its continuous hartal campaign will eventually backfire. People will turn against it. Second, the loss of public support will cost it dearly in the next election, which will not be too far away. The irrational and destructive behavior of the opposition will be quite fresh in public's mind when they go to polling booths. We should always have faith in people's collective wisdom.

Thus, reduction of government term will create a built-in resistance to the demand for mid-term election and to continuous hartal programmes as a means of enforcing that demand. This resistance will be systemic and will not have to depend on verbal or written commitment by political parties and their sincerity to keep their commitment.

**Bring Focus on the Parliament:** With the possibility of mid-term election diminished, shortening of the government's

during election campaigns that politicians come close to the poor and the downtrodden. In villages, politicians set up tea stalls to treat average voters with some tea. Some of these things may not be appropriate from a very strict and puritan point of view. However, this is the reality of Bangladesh. While the rich and powerful may have access to politicians all the time, this is not so with the poor. Only during elections they feel somewhat valued. Thus, shorter government term will require politicians to go to the poor more frequently. The public will have more occasions to scrutinize politicians. Perhaps the poor will have more chances to feel that they may not be too bad if the process at the same time helps reduce hartals!

## Some Counter-arguments

There are however some counter arguments to shorter government term. These need to be considered carefully.

**Increased Political Instability?** One of the most commonly heard arguments against shorter government term is that this increases political instability. But, life is always richer than abstract reasoning. Experience clearly shows that it is long government term that has become a source of political instability. The long term is leading to opposition's demand

tion is becoming more limited, and the role of the private sector is becoming more dominant. It is also clear that with regard to functioning of private sector, what is more important is overall political stability. By comparison, which particular party is in power is becoming a less significant issue. Hence, by increasing overall political stability, shorter government term will better help private sector to develop.

Shorter government term will help public sector economic activity too. We have already noted its beneficial impact on accountability and transparency of government activities. This will also help improve the quality of government development projects that are approved and the efficiency with which these are implemented. Frequent succession of governments will weed out many wasteful projects, which are undertaken because of either patronage or whim.

**Departure from the British Model?** It may be argued that our political system is modeled after the British parliamentary system, and switching from a five to four-year government term will put us at variance with that system. It is true that in many developed democracies, the term of the government is five years. However, there are counter-examples too. The most prominent of the latter is the US. The US presidents are elected only for four years. Nobody in right mind will say that this is hampering political stability or economic activity in the US. Members of the US House of Representatives are elected for only a two-year term.

More importantly, we do not have to blindly imitate practices of other countries. Instead, we need to find our own solutions in the light of our specific conditions. Bangladesh has set a very good example in this regard by amending the constitution requiring elections to be held under caretaker government. This has caught attention of many developing countries (including certain quarters of India). So Bangladesh should not hesitate to find her own solution to her problem.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, therefore, we can say that Bangladesh should go forward to make another amendment to the constitution reducing government's term from five to four years. Such an amendment will generate a different political dynamic. It will take away any basis for demand for mid-term election. This will make continuous hartals redundant, because the main appeal of continuous hartals is, in their potentiality, to create a government paralysis, which may then pave way for a change of government, either through mid-term poll or through other means. It is necessary to delink hartals from government change. Shorter government term will establish elections firmly as the only mode of government change. This will bring opposition's focus back to the parliament. It will increase political stability, increase accountability and transparency of government activities, reduce corruption and raise the role of the poor and downtrodden in the political process.

Note that term-change proposed above is not to apply to the current government. This government was elected with a five-year mandate and it should be allowed to complete its full term.

However, it is interesting to note that even some time before the recent political agitation the Prime Minister herself hinted that she might schedule elections in 2000 instead of the due year of 2001. Why did she do that? Of course, I cannot vouch for all her considerations, but certainly this is a reflection of the fundamental feature of Bangladesh political scene. In Bangladesh, under the current circumstances, it is difficult to hold off elections for so long and yet leave the opposition engaged with the government and the parliament. Perhaps, the Prime Minister, given her natural ability to perceive nuances of political reality, instinctively felt this need and thereby voluntarily hinted at early elections. Why not go one step further and initiate a constitutional amendment to make four-year term a permanent arrangement, and thus help enhance political stability and strengthen democracy? Such an amendment will certainly be Bangladesh's best safeguard against the madness of rampant continuous hartals.

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## Rokeya's Dream: A Long Way to Go

by Khaleda Khatoon

**Rokeya's dream is yet to be achieved and become a reality. The women, should struggle every moment of their lives to realise this dream, that is, to make the world a violence-free place for all their sisters.**

It is horrible to see that when women become victims of social and sexual violence, there is always the ready proposal to put them back into their homes. There is a common thinking that she is safe there. Even though she is not. It is a terrible truth that most women are victims of sexual violence both within the 'protective custody' of their homes and also outside the home. Whilst the latter type of violence often makes headlines, or is so obvious that it cannot be ignored, most of us are shy to talk about the violence inside homes, for instance incest and wife beating.

During Rokeya's time she was advanced in her own thinking. A major thinker, writer, social activist and practicing feminist of her times and albeit of this century, she thought that if we put men inside the home (or behind the bar), the society would be safer for women and children. We, the women, could then roam around freely and with assurance of security. Our confidence would grow and the inner strength of resistance find its right way. In a society where men are mostly the perpetrators of sexual violence, theft or any other serious crime, the almost completely all-male law enforcing agency is corrupt, and judiciary is male biased (in the recent case of Helzur Rahman VS Sham-sunnessa on maintenance), it is very clear that even when we have inner strength and light-

ing spirit we may not get justice. We still have a long way to go towards a just society.

No societal norms, however unjust, could stop Rokeya from dreaming. In "Sultana's Dream" when Sultana takes a walk with sister Sara her hand trembles in Sara's hand. Sara assures her by saying that, "You need not be afraid of coming

But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut the harmless women and let loose the men!"

Though Rokeya discusses the issue with satire and wit, it has a deep meaning and we need to focus upon this meaning. We have to use the same argument today, at this stage of our women's movement. When the movement against the campus sexual violence is taking strong shape the VC of Jahangirnagar University stressed that girl students should remain in their halls after sunset. Some of the teachers also demanded that 'sunset law' should be reintroduced to stop rape and sexual violence. Is it not funny? Rokeya correctly spoke against the so-called social norms which put women inside the 'purdha' and allows virtue-less men to be free. Today, almost a hundred years later, we have to fight against the same norm, which allows rapists to go scot-free and put women inside the home! Is it not a shame? The harmless ones are kept inside homes, or in 'protective custody', and harmful ones or perpetrators are freely roaming outside in the open, often given protection by the patriarchal society, when they should have been behind the bar.

Rokeya's dream is yet to be achieved and become a reality. We, the women, should struggle every moment of our lives to realise this dream, that is, to make the world a violence-free place for all our sisters.



across a man here. This is ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here." When Sultana asks Sara, "Where are the men?" She answered that they are in their proper places. Sultana got puzzled an asked what do you mean by "proper places?" Then Sara added that Sultana does not know the custom of ladyland. "We shut our men indoors", Sultana reminded her, "just as we are kept in the Zenana". Then sister Sara said, "How funny!"

## Remove the Obstacles that Women Face

Each Union Parishad has now three women members elected in direct vote thanks to a new law that seeks to give more power to women at the grassroots nearly a year after the elections many of the women members find themselves sidelined by their male counterparts.

by Fateh Osmani and Deep Azad

WHEN direct elections filled seats reserved for women in each Union Parishad nearly a year ago the new system was hailed as a big step forward in ensuring the empowerment of grassroots women. Today, many of the elected women UP members find no decision to make and no job to perform. They are being ignored by their male counterparts.

According to the Election Commission, 46 women were among the total candidates who contested the UP elections held in December and January. Many of them contested for the seats reserved for them. There are now nearly 13,000 women UP members across the country. Some women were elected chairmen and members in contest outside their reserved seats. The women fought against men and won. But the Union Parishads are still dominated by men. Women have little say.

In the past we thought women were neglected because they were nominated instead of being elected in direct polls. The situation would improve once women were directly elected. But nothing has changed for us. We are treated as badly as before," complained Basnati Mohanta, a member of Rajnagar Union Parishad in Rampal (thana of Bagerhat district). She said, "The women members have tremendous interest to work. But the men don't allow us to work. They don't take us into confidence. They treat us as if we are second class citizens. We can't make any decision."

After visiting some areas in Khulna and Bagerhat districts, these correspondents found that though the elected female

members regularly attended the UP meetings, they were not encouraged to take part in discussion and offer any opinion even on subjects that affect the women. In most cases the women members were assigned the job of looking after education or health care. They were not included in committees that dealt with development projects. Women were ignored in matters where money was involved.

Asked about the discrimination Leyakat Hossain, chairman of Burigolnini Union Parishad in Shymnagar thana of Satkhira district said, "We are trying to engage the women members in various activities and I personally talked to the Thana Nirbahi Officer in this regard, but we have not yet got any instruction."

Echoing Leyakat Hossain, chairman of Bhikhal Union Parishad Alamgir Haider said, "The women members are not well-aware of the functions and responsibilities of Union Parishad. Before taking any responsibility, they have to learn about it in details," he said. But Deputy Commissioner of the district M Ashraf Islam said that there is a clear instruction from the government to include the elected female UP members in the thana development coordination committee. Changes in the Local Government law encouraged women to contest in the elections. But NGOs (non-government organisations) working for the development of rural poor also played a vital role to encourage women, especially from grassroots level to take part in elections.

An official of the Association of Development Agencies

in Bangladesh (ADAB) pointed out that at least 90 per cent female contestants in the UP polls were NGO members. Sawpan Guha, chief executive of Rupanar, one of the NGOs, said, "It's true that the government has widened the scope of empowerment of women by making legal provision for them to contest the local level election, but it's not adequate as there is no specific description regarding the role of women members. Taking advantage of this loophole," he said, "the people who protect the personal and group interests are preventing women from playing their role. Salma Begum, an elected UP member of West Jafong Union in Gainghat thana of Sylhet district said, "Before the election we had hoped that we would be able to work for the women as they can't go to men with their complaints, but they would come to us without hesitation. After the election I have realised that there is still a long way for us to go."

Another female UP member of Mirpur Union in Jagannathpur thana in the district also had the views same as Salma's and said she wanted to work for the poor and repressed women. Even though the amendment has been seen as a huge step forward in the empowerment of women, still it's inadequate to bring about a real change in the conventional system of power delegation. To ensure effective representation of women to the lowest tier of local government, policy makers will have to think of ways to implement the law properly. Basnati knows it better. To make the new system work for the benefit of women the government will have to remove the obstacles that we face."

- News Network



Victims of circumstances: Whither social security?

-Star photo

## Ruling Paves Way for Dictators to Enter the Dock

Jeremy Scott-Joynt writes from London

For a decade and a half Pinochet and his supporters tortured, killed and exiled their enemies. Even Chile's own government, under the thumb of the military as it remains, officially ruled that between 1973 and 1983 Pinochet's direct orders had led to 2,095 extrajudicial executions and deaths under torture, and 1,102 "disappearances".

Elsewhere, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was unusually forthright in her joy at the verdict. The decision... will hearten human rights defenders around the world," said Mary Robinson, Ireland's former president. "It would have been unthinkable not so long ago."

Pinochet took power in a bloody coup in 1973, overthrowing the elected Socialist President Salvador Allende partly at the behest of a US government concerned about the risk to business interests of a popular left-wing government in a strategic state.

As part of the transition to democracy, Pinochet and his minions had granted themselves immunity against prosecution. As a senator, Pinochet is guaranteed immunity under the new constitution whose text he controlled.

The UK verdict allots to Pinochet's Chilean immunity no weight at all. It followed a month of speculation since 16 October, when Pinochet — in London to buy arms, and side-tracked into a clinic for a back operation — was arrested in his

hospital bed.

Spain had asked for his extradition, based on laws that allow it — in line with the international Conventions on Torture, Hostage-Taking and Genocide — to prosecute crimes against humanity whatever the jurisdiction in which they took place.

The UK government seems to have wanted to sweep the affair under the carpet, amid protestations from the Chilean President, Eduardo Frei, that Pinochet had diplomatic immunity and in any case that the whole affair was a domestic matter.

That option now seems entirely out of reach. Constrained by the Extradition Act, and the Conventions, "compassionate grounds" or — bizarrely — "Politically motivated charges" are the only figleaf with which UK home secretary Jack Straw could cover a decision to send

the general home.

Apart from the usual considerations of realpolitik, it has to be said that Pinochet has hitherto benefited from much better press than the run-of-the-mill dictator or ex-dictator, partly because he is a technocrat for free-market liberals.

"The Chilean Miracle," they claim, may have required a coup — but it set the country's feet on the path to economic nirvana by booting out a chaotic socialist government in favour of market reforms.

This is one reason for the UK's reluctance to act. Pinochet may be politically suspect, but economically he exemplifies the prescription on offer for developing countries everywhere. He, and Chile, are supposedly the evidence that the medicine works.

All of which is entirely bogus. The first ten years of his government cast the economy into chaos, with privatised industries passing into the hands

of the regime's friends to form vast conglomerates. That, and the near-destruction of the unions, led not to economic growth, but mass unemployment, lower wages, plummeting GDP and currency, and riots in the streets.

Only renationalisation, the reintroduction of collective bargaining and controls on foreign capital saved the economy from complete meltdown.

Now, with Pinochet's impending extradition — and if Spain's right-wing government falls, as some are predicting, France, Switzerland and Belgium are waiting in the wings — the false reputation could be re-examined. Healing the wounds caused by ex-dictators could help save those of countries suffering from over-exuberant economic liberalisation as well.

Regardless of what happens next, the ruling has been seen as a dramatic blow for human rights and against dictators everywhere.

British law is notorious for excluding international expectations from its deliberations. "The law of the land" has historically been sacrosanct.

Not now. Britain's 1978 State Immunity Act says no-one can be prosecuted for exercising the functions of a head of state acting in an official capacity. But the three Law Lords who backed Pinochet's extradition reinforced the message of the international Conventions: that certain acts, wherever, however and whenever committed, cannot be so defined.

Although incumbent heads of state — breathe more easily, Syria's President Hafez al-Assad or the DRC's Laurent-Désiré Kabila — are still immune, according to the Law Lords, international law has triumphed over national considerations.

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SHORTLY after 2pm on 25 November, one of the most archaic supreme courts in the world pronounced its verdict.

Against all expectations, three of the five elderly men sitting on the red leather benches of the UK's House of Lords stood to declare that the former Chilean dictator and now senator-for-life, General Augusto Pinochet, should be extradited to Spain to face trial for crimes against humanity.

It was Pinochet's 83rd birthday, and at the hospital in North London where he and his supporters awaited the verdict, limousines, ambulances and police outriders were all ready to whisk him to the airport for the expected journey home. In the event, the old general received what must have been the most unwelcome birthday present of the year.

Outside the Lords, the reaction amongst those waiting — both Chilean and British — was

one of jubilant surprise. "We're off to the Chilean Embassy," one said, passing the message his mobile phone had just delivered to him. "We're going to sing happy birthday."

Nearby, a woman turned to a Chilean to tell him that a mutual friend was "screaming" now that the decision had been announced.

"Why is she screaming?" the man asked in surprise.

"She's so happy she can't talk," replied his companion. "So she's screaming for joy instead."

Luis Muñoz, a former torture victim and London representative of the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared, said that talk of a possible coup by the military — one reason given for why Pinochet should be quietly released — was no more than empty bravado.

The generals still rule Chile, and the fear of Pinochet and his henchmen is in people's hearts," he said. "But I've been