

FOCUS

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.

In the wake of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent renunciation of hartal, considerable efforts are under way to obtain a similar commitment from the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia. The expectation is that with both these leaders making no-hartal commitment, Bangladesh will finally be able to get rid of the hartal menace.

Rampant hartals have indeed become a serious problem for Bangladesh. There is hardly another country in the world, where general strikes or hartals are called so frequently and for such long periods. The irony is that, more than any other country, it is Bangladesh which needs peace and tranquillity most in order to focus on her acute economic, social, and environmental problems.

Various quarters of Bangladesh's civil society have been trying for quite some time to get no-hartal commitment from AL and BNP, the two major political parties. Newspapers such as The Daily Star have taken numerous such initiatives. Even foreign missions have been active in this regard. Although it is somewhat unseemly for foreign missions to get involved in domestic political issues, the hartal problem has become so acute, and the incapability of our domestic actors to solve this issue has been so frustrating, that even intervention by foreign ambassadors seems to be in order!

However, solution to the hartal conundrum still seems to elude us. Khaleda Zia has refused to make a no-hartal commitment despite her two rounds of meeting with foreign diplomats. She has repeated allegations that AL cannot be trusted, pointed to the fact that AL enforced 173 days of hartal when it was in opposition, and said that whether or not BNP would call hartal in future depended on AL's behavior, thereby leaving the door to more hartal essentially open. It is therefore quite likely that Bangladesh may again be headed toward a period of intermittent and continuous hartals.

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 easily desirable. At some point of time, a government may indeed do something so outrageous that a 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 Bangladeshi 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

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.

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. "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

in contact with a number of deputies and they believe that there's a point where you have to say, 'no more.' And if the military wanted to do something anyway, the conditions are no longer there, with foreign funds from the Japanese and others propping up mining, fisheries and other industries. All that would go."

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 under the new constitution whose text he controlled."

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.

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

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, "compatriot 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 touchstone 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

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.

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.

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 the assurance of security. Our confidence would grow and the inner strength of resistance finds 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 Hefzur Rahman VS Shamshunnisa on maintenance), it is very clear that even when we have inner strength and fight

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



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 and 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".

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 be 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 puts women inside the 'purdah' 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 realize this dream, that is, to make the world a violence-free place for all our sisters.

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 some 46,000 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 Basmati 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 Leyaqat Hossain, chairman of Burigoloini 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 Blatkali 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-governmental organisations) working for the development of rural poor also played a vital role to encourage women, especially in the lowest tier of local government, 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."

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. Basmati 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."

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News Network



Victims of circumstances: Whither social security?

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".

By contrast, a shorter term will firmly establish elections as the only route to power, and thus help increase political stability. The dictatorship mode, either military or civilian, of attaining political stability may be more generic. The real purpose may be to create a situation favourable for removal of the government either through election or through other means.

There are many anti-democratic forces still left in Bangladesh who may just be willing to make use of a government paralysis created by hartals and depose an elected government.

Thus, the purpose of the amendment to the constitution reducing government's term from five to four years is to 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.

Shorter government term will establish elections firmly as the only mode of government change. It will also 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.

It 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.

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