

Assets into Liabilities: Devaluing Bangladesh's Political Prospects

by Rehman Sobhan

Inherited political wealth is subject to depreciation if it is not regularly maintained by sensible political behaviour. Abuse of the wealth which actually damages our political structures could erode popular confidence in the democratic process itself. This could encourage anti-democratic forces, who could take advantage of a political milieu where the principal political parties are alienated from their democratic base by their persistent inability to prioritise popular concerns over parochial ambitions.

Counting our Blessings

BANGLADESH appears to be possessed of an uncanny ability to convert its assets into liabilities. Nowhere is this more true than what we are doing to squander our political inheritance. To begin with, Bangladeshis have a rather low sense of self-esteem about the state of their domestic politics. Unfortunately we do not appreciate how blessed we are. Read the papers on what is going on amongst our fellow South Asians. The BJP government has just collapsed and the politics is exposed to yet another bout of instability with a third general election in three years a distinct possibility. Nepal has been through a long episode of political instability and is in the midst of its third election campaign over the last few years. In Sri Lanka the Kumaratunga government has just lost its parliamentary majority though this will not affect the life of the government which is centred around the office of the President which is tenured for five years. However, Sri Lanka faces the most serious political problem in the region due to the ongoing bloody Tamil insurgency which threatens the very coherence of its polity. In Pakistan we read that the Leader of the Opposition faces a five-year prison sentence for corruption leaving Pakistan exposed to the hazards of one party rule under the almost absolute power now enjoyed by Nawaz Sharif. The remaining states of South Asia, Maldives and Bhutan, are basically one party states without exposure to any form of political contestation likely to displace the ruling regime.

In contrast to our neighbours, Bangladesh has been exceptionally fortunate even if we do not appreciate this. We have been through two universally acclaimed free and fair elections in 1991 and 1996. We are the only country in Asia, if not the world, to have a constitutional provision to hold elections under a caretaker government. This provision is viewed with some envy by our neighbours, where at least in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, a constitutionally established process of elections under a caretaker government is seen as important for sustaining the credibility of their respective electoral systems. These elections have given Bangladesh, first in 1991 and again in 1996, governments with a clear electoral mandate to rule the country for five years, free from any threat to the stability of their majority in Parliament.

In 1991 the BNP was elected to office with the Awami League as the strongest parliamentary opposition party in the region. The BNP, in spite of the political turmoil of its final years, served out its full five year term because it commanded an unchallenged majority in the parliament and thereby enjoyed electoral legitimacy. It lost this legitimacy when it went ahead with its sham election in February 1996 but until that

time, no amount of street agitation could undermine its political mandate to rule the country. The strength of our political system was reaffirmed by the election of June 1996 where for the first time since 1954 an incumbent government was defeated at the polls and the Awami League returned to the seat of government after 21 years. In turn, the BNP moved into opposition with a powerful presence in parliament. Given the strength of the BNP in the country it has an equal chance with the Awami League of returning to power in the next general election in 2001 when the five year, constitutionally tenured, life of this parliament terminates.

Bangladesh is possessed of a rare asset, not just for South Asia but any Third World country — two strong, mass based political parties who command political support throughout the country. As a result both parties can, through a unique constitutional empowerment, legitimately aspire to come to power and to be exposed to a strong political opposition with a fair prospect of unseating them from office in five year time. Thus neither party, BNP or Awami League, whatever may be their rhetorical posturing, has a guarantee of retaining power in an election. Both parties when in office, have to establish before the electorate that they deserve to be returned to power in the next election.

A further advantage for Bangladesh, not available to ethnically divided societies such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, is the fact that we are, with some important exceptions, a largely homogenous society speaking a single language and with some tradition of religious tolerance, though this is not something about which we can afford to become complacent. This indicates that electoral contests in Bangladesh can focus on political issues rather than on the ethnic or religious complexion of the candidates as is the case in many areas of South Asia.

If one goes further, the political agenda of Bangladesh's two principal parties as regards public proclamations on economic policy as well as most political arrangements such as the commitment to a parliamentary system, attitudes to decentralised government, separation of judiciary and executive, an independent media, commitment to human rights, tend to be indistinguishable. Whilst both parties appear publicly committed to these political goals when in office, they remain equally united in the tardiness with which they set out to implement their proclaimed goals. Thus, political divisiveness has not disrupted the unity in the character of our politics which appears to specialise in making light of electoral promises. Bangladesh today is also witness to the emergence of a vigorous civil society more active in speaking out for the rights of the citizens. There is an increasing demonstration

of judicial activism with the upper courts showing a willingness to make the government accountable for their deeds of commission as well as omission.

The print media remains relatively free, even if some of it is partisan both to political parties as well as the private agenda of their owners. However this has not prevented the press from becoming more investigative in its content. Whilst our electronic media still remains pathetic in its service to the ruling regime a positive step forward is being made with the induction, in the next three months, of a second private TV channel which will for the first time breach the monopoly of the government over the TV media. Though only experience will demonstrate the degree of independence exercised by this channel.

With such a unique political inheritance Bangladesh should today be the showcase for democracy in the Third World. Our parliament should be a place for lively debate where the government is exposed to credible challenge from a strong opposition on every legislative measure or act of misgovernance. The government should be made answerable on every public platform through challenges from the opposition and indeed from a more assertive civil society.

Whilst the government of the day may be associated with numerous episodes of misgovernance this can no longer be kept out of public scrutiny, since such misdeeds always remain under threat of exposure in the press, from public platforms and if the opposition is doing its job effectively, in parliament. Today both transparency and accountability in governance are no longer within the grace and favour of the government but depend on the assertiveness and investigative skills of the citizen. Acts of misgovernance which go undetected today can even catch up with the offender two years later when they no longer enjoy the power to conceal their offense or protect themselves through invocation of political patronage because the wheels of political power may have rolled over once again. At the end of the day the government knows that if they cannot answer for their acts through more effective governance, they will be made answerable at the polls, where the government of the day no longer commands the authority to influence the outcomes of such polls.

Confrontational Politics

So why are our two principal political parties, who have succeeded each

other in office, squandering this historic legacy trusted to them by the people of Bangladesh? Both parties should be using this advantageous political environment to serve the voters through constructive politics because they know from experience that they may be asked to pay a political price for misuse of power both in the government and in opposition. Instead of counting their blessings and using their balanced political strengths to provide stability in our national politics both parties have assumed a totally confrontational style of politics which questions the very legitimacy and even the loyalty of their opponents. In India the major parties such as the BJP and Congress are now hostage to the smaller parties. In Bangladesh neither the Awami League or the BNP face this problem; instead they each use their strength to hold the whole country hostage because of their compulsion to confront rather than cooperate to make the system work. This confrontational approach to politics has been periodically highlighted by none other than President Shahabuddin Ahmad who reflects the concerns of all segments of society at the high costs to the country of such an approach to politics. Such concerns now seem to also have permeated into the consciousness of our development partners who see our style of politics as a principal constraint to accelerating development.

Given the favourable circumstances open to opposition parties to assume power in a general election there is no logical reason for the government to treat the opposition with contempt. When the BNP was elected to office its share of the vote was only 31 per cent the same as that of the Awami League. Today the Awami League holds office with a vote share of 38 per cent compared to 33 per cent of the vote received by the BNP. Neither party enjoys an absolute majority in the eyes of the voters and therefore both need to pay due respect to the opposition who represent such a large segment of the voters. The BNP has good reason to regret that they were not more accommodative to the Awami League in their last tenure of office. This awareness should similarly make the Awami League more sensitive as to how they deal with the opposition today. Instead the Awami League approach appears to be to treat the BNP as they themselves were treated when in opposition thereby setting the scene for reciprocal treatment if they were to return to opposition.

This is not to say that the government does not present

well documented and argued responses to opposition criticisms. But the full impact of such a presentation by the government is weakened by their compulsion to introduce some really provocative comments on the opposition which are not essential to the intrinsic merit of their argument. It is not for example appropriate for a responsible government to make personal attacks on opposition leaders living or dead, even if the opposition is showing no such restraint in their attacks on the government. Certainly not from the benches of the ruling party should indulge in personal attacks on their opponents since this is undignified and constitutes the difference between a responsible government and an irresponsible opposition. Unfortunately, the government's approach to criticism is that whatever the opposition says or does to them they will return the compliment with interest. This is good street politics but not very conducive to the quality or the sustainability of parliamentary democracy or the promotion of good governance.

Today the opposition speaks the language of street. It talks of a one point programme to oust the government from power by forcing it to resign and to call a premature poll. But such an agitation has no political legitimacy behind it. We have no record of a government in Bangladesh or anywhere else having to relinquish power because of power failures or because of corruption and police brutality. We all recognise that the situation today in Bangladesh on all three fronts is dismal, that much needs to be done to improve the situation and that it is largely the responsibility of the incumbent government to resolve these and other long-festering problems of misgovernance. But it is in the nature of democratic politics that an elected government be given five years to prove its worth. If it fails to do so the system permits the electorate to vote them out of office. To attempt to unseat an elected government before its five years are up, no matter how unsatisfactory its performance, reflects an unseemly impatience for power by the opposition and a reluctance to accept the rules of the democratic process. If five years is seen as too long to permit for the persistence of misgovernance by a particular regime we can amend the constitution to set a three year tenure of office. But this process has to be done legally with backing from a political consensus reached through a national dialogue.

The government also has to be tolerant of criticism and not see it as a conspiracy against its existence. It is after all the job of the opposition to point out the faults of the government. It is however not very helpful, for their cause for the government to defend themselves by blaming their predecessors for what are current problems. Such an approach may sell in the first

half of a regime but it does not bring power or water to the people and rapidly loses its credibility as a response. In the second half of a regime, as the situation prevails today with the Awami League wherever the happening is attributed to the failure of the ruling party. This may not be fair but it remains the iron law of democratic politics that by the time a regime enters the second half of its tenure it has either solved its inherited problems or it has demonstrated quite conspicuously that it is on the way to doing so. Thus, blaming the misdeeds on past governments is no longer accepted as legal political tender to explain contemporary misgovernance.

It is evident that the failure of the BNP regime to install new power capacity, service old plants or reduce system loss left the present regime with a serious potential crisis on its hands. But in three years time the present government should have placed itself in a position to both show to and inform the public about what they have done to solve our perennial power problems. The Prime Minister has recently taken a bold public position stating that if the power problem in Bangladesh is not solved in two years the people will be entitled to vote the Awami League out of office at the next elections. This is a rather extreme position but it is hoped that this indicates a categorical agenda to deliver power through both commissioning additional capacity and raising productivity of the system through improved governance. Otherwise the Prime Minister may well have made a self-fulfilling prophecy which may haunt her at the next elections.

Similarly, the law and order situation had already seriously deteriorated during the Ershad regime because his regime was committed to the criminalisation of politics as one of its sources of staying in power. The BNP perpetuated this process so that discussions on law and order were expected better from them, where the role of politically patronised *mastans* were quite common during the last regime. We forget that one of the first acts of the Awami League regime was the convening of a public dialogue by the Home Minister, Rafiqul Islam, in the *Osmany Auditorium*, to discuss what steps should be initiated to improve the poor law and order system inherited by his government. The Awami League appears, regrettably for those who expected better from them, to have done little to sustain the promises made by Rafiqul Islam through that initial public gesture but have perpetuated a tradition set by their two predecessors by failing to reverse the trend of deteriorating law and order.

Thus, if the criminalisation of the police force and the patronisation of criminals is permitted to persist over three regimes it is not surprising that in its most recent phase the law and order situation will appear

to have deteriorated. In such circumstances, only conspicuous demonstrations of action, initiated with due publicity against corrupt police and politically patronised criminals, is going to persuade the public that the present government is attempting to reverse the legacy it inherited from its predecessors. Failure to demonstrate action in quite credible as well as visible ways, ensures that the entire state of law and order prevailing today will be seen as the responsibility of the present government.

Responsible Governance

THE government of the day has the highest stake in ensuring an orderly political process which remains an important ingredient in the establishment of good governance. This confrontational politics is seen as prejudicial to the external image of the country which impacts on relations both with donors and prospective investors. Since both the present and past governments attach great store by what donors think it would be useful for both of them to demonstrate that they are willing to negotiate a set of ground rules amongst themselves rather than under the tutelage of the donors. Such a home-grown gesture would establish the image of both parties as responsible political institutions mindful of their inheritance. It would also help to preserve the sovereignty of the country as well as the representative status of our political parties who were after all not put into office by the donors but voted there by the people of Bangladesh.

Today, regrettably, not only is there more confrontation but Bangladesh has entered a unique phase in its political history where the two principal parties have stopped talking to each other and only communicate through their newspaper headlines. This is unacceptable behavior in a democratic system. Dialogue thus has to be resumed between the Awami League and the BNP. A conciliatory political leadership, not just talking about negotiations but making visible efforts to talk with their opponents, may not always yield positive results but would substantially enhance the credibility of the leader in the eyes of the people and the world. Here the government should always make the first gesture and go on making such gestures. What would this mean in practice? I would expect Nasim, the Home Minister to call Mannan Bhuiyan the BNP Secretary General and indicate to him that he (Nasim) is dropping in at Mannan's house to talk. Even if Nasim's offer is declined he should continue to make this offer until Mannan Bhuiyan receives him. What ever happens Nasim and Mannan should continue to talk to each other weekly even if they do not reach any political agreement.

It is unheard of in any political dispensation that the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition never have any political dialogue. Here again the ice has to be broken by the ruling party. I would thus expect the Prime Minister to drop in uninvited to talk to the leader of the opposition. This may lead to political discussions, it

may lead to stalemate but the Prime Minister should demonstrate her statesmanship by making such a gesture. In the political climate of today such a prospect seems fanciful. But around the world far more intractable foes have negotiated their differences by the same principle whereby we ask the taxpayer or possibly Sonia Gandhi should meet regularly with Nawaz Sharif whether at the end of a bus journey, at a cricket match or on an island in the Maldives even if they cannot reach any agreement on Kashmir. This is known as *confidence building measures* (CBM). Such CBMs have led to encounters between such historic antagonists as Arafat and Rabin, between Mandela and de Klerk, between Ramos and Nur Masari in the Philippines and mostly recently between Blair and the IRA in Ireland, which have led to far reaching political outcomes.

If, therefore, age old enemies could meet, talk, negotiate and reach agreements or even agree to disagree could not Bangladesh's two leaders meet regularly? The Bangladeshi political leader who initiates such gestures, no matter how distasteful this may be to them, will emerge as a political statesman. Hopefully, if both leaders sit together build an atmosphere of political accommodation, whatever be their personal feelings, this will do more to build democracy in Bangladesh, than any sermons from our donors.

There are too many problems lying unresolved in Bangladesh for too long. The nation waits for statesman-trivia which will put to rest the trivium which divides our politics and reach out to the substantive strengths bequeathed to the democratic process in Bangladesh to build the sustainable democracy needed to solve our festering problems. Both history and the voters will reward such a leader. I therefore remain an optimist about Bangladesh's political future because I continue to believe, in spite of many signs to the contrary, that at least in Bangladesh it remains politically advantageous to be statesmanlike rather than confrontational in the political arena.

Inherited political wealth is subject to depreciation if it is not regularly maintained by sensible political behaviour. Abuse of the wealth which actually damages our political structures could erode popular confidence in the democratic process itself. This could encourage anti-democratic forces, who could take advantage of a political milieu where the principal political parties are alienated from their democratic base by their persistent inability to prioritise popular concerns over parochial ambitions. Such a development would ultimately extract a heavy price from both parties which could go beyond mere electoral defeat. Whilst such a price may be seen as retribution for the behaviour of our politicians the ultimate victim will be the people of Bangladesh. Surely the common people of Bangladesh deserve a better fate since they have always paid the price for the usurpation of democracy and have shed their blood for its restoration.

To Him Life was Less Important than Values and Principles

by Kazi Aulad Hossain

Ashura gives greater emphasis on our performances of good and noble deeds directed against evil deeds of other people, against the misdeeds of the oppressors and against the tyrant's tyranny, than on public demonstration of "matam" and grief in the streets on the auspicious occasion.

EVERY year the Muslims all over the world observe, among others, two occasions viz: (1) Ed-ul-Azha and (2) Ashura the 10th of Muharram with due solemnity and they come to the Muslims every year almost in quick succession. The first one (Ed-ul-Azha) teaches a Muslim that he should make earnest endeavour to sacrifice his own interest for the sake of others, and the second one [Ashura] — vis-a-vis Hazrat Imam Husayn's supreme sacrifice for a just and noble cause — teaches a Muslim that he should not bow down or surrender before a cause which is not just.

This is the holy month of Muharram, the first lunar month of the Islamic calendar, and it reminds us the tragic and painful events that took place at Karbala some 300 years ago from now. It reminds us also of an unequal and unjust fight fought between a handful of soldiers and some persons including women and children led by Hazrat Imam Husayn, the courageous grand son of Hazrat Muhammad (peace be on him) and 4000 blood-thirsty cavalry soldiers led by Omar-bin-Sa'd. It may be stated here in this connection that an agreement was executed between Hazrat Imam Hasan, Abdullah-bin-Zubair and Muawiah that after the death of Muawiah, Hazrat Imam Husayn would be the next Caliph of the Islamic state. But there was flagrant violation of this agreement for Muawiah, in-

stead of going through the previous process of election, nominated his ineligible son Yazid to become the next Caliph of the Islamic state after his death. Needless to say Imam Husayn declined to owe allegiance to Yazid and accept such unjust and illegal nomination.

Meanwhile, Hazrat Imam Husayn on the invitation of the people of Kufa left for Kufa with a small band of soldiers and members of his family (including women and children) with a view to helping them for they were oppressed by the governor of Kufa Obaidullah-bin-Sa'd. After passing through a considerable distance when the Imam was not far from Kufa, a tribal chief named Al-Hore along with his cavalry blocked his way and as a result the Imam changed his route course and encamped with his small party at a desert site known as Karbala on the bank of river Euphrates some 25 miles away from the city of Kufa on the first day of the lunar month of Muharram. The governor of Kufa also did not like the Imam's stay and movement in the vicinity of Kufa. He, therefore, despatched a 4,000-strong cavalry under the command of Omar-bin-Sa'd for siege and with instructions to block the way leading to the river so that no one from Hazrat Imam Husayn's party could have any access to river water to quench their thirst.

The revered Imam was very

conscious of the hard fact, among other things, that there were women and children in his small party and as such he made an appeal to the cavalry commander Omar bin Sa'd to allow him to go the place where from he came or allow him to go to Damascus to discuss the whole matter with Yazid for a just solution. His appeal was rejected by the audacious cavalry commander. In the circumstances, finding no other alternative the courageous Imam took courage in both his heart and hands and decided to fight this unequal war to the last instead of surrendering to Yazid's unjust demand. So, this is how Imam Husayn and his helpless party were entrapped and made victims of a conspiracy carefully designed to remove the lawful claimant of the Caliphate from Yazid's way.

About the cruelties perpetrated by Yazid's men noted historian E. Gibbon says in his book *Decline and Fall of Roman Empire*: "In a distant age and climate the tragic scene of the death of Husayn will awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader." But such crimes and cruelties can never belittle the pristine glories and principles of Islam as were preached and propounded by the holy Prophet (peace be on him) some 1400 years ago. Cruelties can't kill values. We may recall here what another renowned historian Syed Amer Ali says about martyrdom of Hazrat Imam

Husayn: "The butchery of Karbala caused a thrill of horror throughout Islam and gave birth in Persia to a national sentiment which afterwards helped the descendants of Abbas to destroy the Umayyads." It may be pointed out that Yazid was an Umayyad.

Ashura gives greater emphasis on our performances of good and noble deeds directed against evil deeds of other people, against the misdeeds of the oppressors and against the tyrant's tyranny, than on public demonstration of "matam" and grief in the streets on the auspicious occasion.

Hazrat Imam Husayn could lead a luxurious and easy life in exchange for his dear life. But he did not prefer that. Life was less important to him than the values and principles for which Islam stands. There may be temporary setbacks in the world of Islam, but it gets its fresh vitality after every setback and it may be stated here that murder of Hazrat Imam Husayn was actually the murder of Yazid and that is why a famous Urdu poet has said in his equally famous couplet:

"Qate Husayn asl main marge Yazid hai
Islam znda hota hai kar
Karbala ke bad."

So, I may say with concluding that the great Imam's supreme sacrifice did not go in vain: it has rather paid the whole Muslim world a good dividend.

Need for Deworming the Children

by Dr Md Shaheenul Haque

In a mass deworming activity, a single dose of antihelminthic medicine for a child will not cost more than half a Taka at current value. And if not possible in mass level just now, the Government or any NGO can take a primary school-based deworming programme in any specific area or in all over the country as a project

ACCORDING to the World Health Organisation (WHO), in developing countries more than two thirds of the total child deaths are chiefly caused due to Respiratory Tract Infection and Diarrhoea related problems. Prevalence of these two diseases are most common in tropical countries like Bangladesh. The main reasons for the prevalence were detected as poverty, unhygienic life style and lack of health education. But an exciting report came from a close and intensive observation of rural and urban slum areas in different parts of Bangladesh in a two-year study.

Bangladesh is a tropical country with moist land, damp climate and a highly dense population which is eventually the very fertile ground for the most common intestinal worms like round worms, hook worms, and pin worms to breed, thrive and spawn. And ironically children under twelve are the most common prey to the common intestinal worms. Practically it has been noted that more than ninety per cent of the rural and slum children are infested with intestinal worms.

In common practice a worm infestation which is diagnosed by either from a history of worm seen directly in the stool or vomit or from a positive result

of larva or ova of worms in a routine stool examination. It is not that worms will always pass through the stool or vomit and if at all pass, except round worms other worms are small enough to be almost invisible in the stool in a gross common view and virtually are not reported.

Stool examination for ova and larva of worms needs huge work like blending the total per-time voided stool in a large amount of Normal Saline to make a liquid solution and then stalling it in a clear glass jar for half an hour to let the ovas and larvas float on the top of the solution if there is any in that stool sample. Then making ten to twelve slides of the floating layer are to be examined under microscope. If all the slides are found negative of ova and larva and if in this way three successive weekly stool tests give negative results only then a person can be considered as worm free. But this system is almost hypothetical in practical mass screening purpose because of cost, hazards and time constraint.

Commonly what is done in a routine stool examination is that taking few milligrams of stool from the sample by a tooth-pick on a slide, blending it in situ with few drops of Normal Saline and seeing it

under microscope where getting an ova or larva of worms is a lucky incident and very uncommon even in a highly worm-infested case.

It is clear that the ways we commonly follow to detect a helminthic case are not purely perfect. Negative history of seeing worms in stool or vomit or a negative common stool examination report does not give a conform negative conclusion of worm infestation. Rather a scrupulous clinical observation is the most important equipment in this situation, which, unfortunately, most of the doctors and health institutions lack or are in a reluctant of for unknown reasons. Rather common stool examination report is more important to them.

It is well established that almost all intestinal worms cause some sorts of irregular indigestion, diarrhoea and intestinal upset and in the long run severe malnutrition especially to the children. The striking fact is that most of the common intestinal worms thrive in the lungs of their hosts for few days in their life cycle and create an allergic condition of the body causing chronic cough, pulmonary oedema, respiratory distress, rhinitis and skin itching. If not treated and these symptoms persist for long time a good

fields is created for Chronic Respiratory Tract, ear and skin infection. All these problems cause more than 80 per cent of the current child health sufferings and child deaths in Bangladesh.

It is obvious from the study that only by regular and routine deworming of the children, more than 50 per cent of the current child health sufferings and child can be easily prevented. The study also reveals that each and every normally healthy child of above two years of age can randomly be given a single dose of anti-helminthic drug without any remarkable side effect at every six months interval.

In a mass deworming activity a single dose of anti-helminthic medicine for a child will not cost more than half a Taka at current value. And if not possible in mass level just now, the Government or any NGO can take a primary school-based deworming programme in any specific area or in all over the country as a project to evaluate everything about the outcome of this study at a very low cost — only one Taka per child per year — to save the lives and reduce the sufferings of millions of our children.

The writer is a physician working with NGOs in rural areas of Bangladesh.

Garfield



by Jim Davis

James Bond
by Ian Fleming
DRAWING BY MORAX

WELL, COME ON... WHERE'S THAT BOMB? HOLD IT UP AND LET'S SEE IT!
CAN'T SEE IT NOW... MILT - LOOKS AS IF YOUR MIGHTY ARM MANAGED TO SLIP AWAY BEFORE THE STUFF FLOATED DOWN HERE!