

Opportunity to begin a new political culture

Khaleda Zia starts with the right signal, and needs to follow with the right action

OUR warm felicitations to Khaleda Zia on her leading the four-party alliance to a magnificent victory at the general election in the new millennium. The size of her party-led alliance's triumph carries with it a robust public expectation that her second stint in power would be resoundingly rewarding for the nation.

She has the historic opportunity to give Bangladesh a new political vision and a direction as would sow the seeds of a radically different political culture than the one of hartals and parliament boycott that we have had the misfortune of living with thus far. Parliamentary democracy is stepping into its second decade after its restoration in 1991. But it is the eighth parliament that is about to be heralded signifying the stretch of time we have walked in and out of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban without reaping much by way of positive experience. Leave aside the rubber-stamp parliaments, our track-record in the resurrected stints with properly elected Jatiya Sangsads since the beginning of last decade left so much to be desired indeed. As a matter of fact, we begin on the foundation-stone of experiences gathered through the lifeless working of two virtually oppositionless parliaments. The pitfalls that made a mockery of parliamentary democracy and hollowed it out of substance were the winner-take-it-all working style, total lack of space for the opposition and making insularity in power into a convenient tool to deny the public any knowledge of transparency or accountability status of governance.

The onus would be on Begum Zia as Prime Minister and Leader of the House to initiate a process whereby the parliamentary *hara kiri* of yesteryears could be replaced by all-party activism on the floor of the House. The need for her constructive pro-active role is all the greater for the fact that the alliance she leads commands a make-or-break two-thirds majority in parliament. Given the still-neophyte state of the parliamentary life -- thanks to the alternating boycott by the opposition parties -- it would be patently wrong to entertain any notion of parliamentary autocracy.

She would need time to get on with the job in earnest but given the exigency of the fast-track global developments she can't have too much time either. An efficient transition team could help matters at this stage.

Her initial signals have been extremely positive and confidence-inspiring. She has appealed for national unity, rule of law and end to all forms of violence and anarchy. Her sobering counsel against any attempted disrespect of Bangabandhu's portrait is reflective of maturity and a new sensitivity being shown to the sensibilities of Awami League. As an extension of the same spirit she has urged her partymen to be restrained in their jubiliations over the success they have attained.

She has also urged her supporters to refrain from settling scores over the 'hardship' they might have suffered during AL rule. On this note, let's draw her attention to the urgent need for stemming the tendency towards 'suzerainty' changing hands on the campus or other sensitive places, which seems to have already appeared on the surface.

In a sense we all ought to bask in the sunshine of the triumph of a democratic process so assiduously maintained through the unbroken chain of elections held with great aplomb and character. The nation owes gratitude to the Election Commission for its wonderful performance in conducting an election that has done us proud. The caretaker government definitely has a full measure of the nation's appreciation for the credible job it has done with an amplitude of confidence and clarity of vision that impeccably measured right up to the tasks it faced.

For the victor it is a win that should make it magnanimous and for the loser it is worthwhile to know that there is always a next time in democracy. Embued with a new sense of purpose, therefore, they should now embark together on the mission to take the nation out of the trap of a failed political culture that has exacted too heavy a price from the country to pay it again.

US-Bangladesh relations : Helping each other in times of crisis

FAROQQ SOBHAN

ALL Bangladeshis are appalled and shocked by the recent acts of terrorism in New York and Washington which resulted in the tragic death of so many innocent people. In response to this tragedy we have in different ways expressed our solidarity with the people of the United States of America, with whom we share their pain and anguish.

At this critical moment in time, it is important and essential that the friends of the United States do everything possible to reciprocate the help and assistance that they may have received over the years from the US. Bangladesh has benefited from US assistance in many different ways. But what we will always remember with a sense of deep appreciation is the help extended to us by America in coping with various natural disasters that we have been plagued with over the years.

Bangladesh is and has been for many years now a true and tested friend and ally of the US. We joined the international coalition during the Gulf war, when we were among a few Muslim countries to send troops to the area. Bangladesh, frequently at the urging of the United States, has been regularly contributing to UN peace keeping missions all over the world, including Haiti, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Bosnia, East Timor and Somalia.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Bangladesh extended its full support to the US in its war against international terrorism. Accordingly, when the US government requested us for over flight permission and also, if required, some logistical facilities, the caretaker government after duly consulting the major political parties, promptly agreed to the US request.

Whilst the whole country has been fully absorbed in the elections only passing attention has been given to the state of the economy, in particular, to the precarious level of our foreign exchange reserves. There is every indication that the newly elected government will from its very first day in office has to face an economic crisis of monumental proportions.

During the last financial year ending 30th June, 2001, Bangladesh's exports of RMG (Ready Made Garments) to US was approximately 2.19 billion dollars. The export prospects for RMG to the US

market for the current year, by contrast are extremely bleak. The initial estimates are that Bangladesh could lose as much as 60-70 per cent of the export market in the US. In other words RMG exports from a record figure of 2.19 billion dollars could drop to 600 to 800 million dollars, during the current financial year to the US. Presently, of the factories that had previously received orders for the US or which were doing contract work for other factories, more than two thirds have no work orders.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 many more factories have had their orders cancelled. The existing crisis has now been compounded. BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing and Exporters Association) apprehends that if some immediate steps are not taken to obtain duty free and quota free access to the US

areas through various micro credit and other programmes. Female employment has been the key to the success of Bangladesh in such critical areas as female education, family planning, health care and above all in creating a new awareness and consciousness among women of their rights and their role in society. Female empowerment in Bangladesh is a reality. In the nearly 75 per cent voter turn out in the 1996 elections, the highest ever in any country in South Asia, nearly half the voters were women. This dramatic transformation in the role of women has also ensured that Bangladesh perhaps more than any other country in the Islamic world, can take pride in being a tolerant and secular society, where the overwhelming majority of the population have shunned obscurantism and any form of militancy in the practice of their religion.

Sukarnoputri of Indonesia to the US announced a waiver of all duties on 100 million dollars of Indonesia's exports to the US. Earlier in the year during the visit of Mr. Zoellick, USTR, to India a waiver of duties on 500 million dollars of India's exports was announced. The US senate only a few days ago approved a Free Trade Agreement with Jordan, which will be extremely beneficial for Jordan. This too was done in recognition of the very special relations existing between Jordan and the US and the expectation that Jordan will play a key role during the present crisis.

Bangladesh, after Indonesia, is the second largest Muslim democracy in the world, where the people take pride in following a path of moderation. Following the general elections on the 1st of October, 2001 the newly elected government and parliament will be expected to

uphold the rule of law, the freedom of the press and uphold the fundamental rights of the people under the Constitution of Bangladesh. We are confident that the United States will do everything possible to support the economic and political stability of Bangladesh at this critical juncture.

At a time when our foreign exchange reserves are precariously low, when remittances have declined and may decline even further as the global economy contracts, Bangladesh cannot possibly afford to see a precipitous decline in its principal export product, ready made garments, which amounted last year to more than 75 per cent of the total exports of the country. It has therefore now become imperative that the US, very much in keeping with the special relations that exist between our two countries, will move promptly to extend duty free and quota free access to our ready made garments, thus ensuring that the impending economic crisis, which will certainly disrupt the economic and political stability of the country, with its concomitant disastrous consequences, is avoided.

The new Bangladesh government will have to give this matter the highest priority from day one. A concerted effort will have to be made in Washington to enlist the support of President Bush, the National Security Council (NSC), the US Trade Representative, the State Department and Congress. The Bangladesh Caucus in Congress must immediately be mobilised. The role of the caucus will be of the utmost importance because the caucus will have to pilot the legislation through Congress. Patton and Boggs, who were recently appointed as BGMEA's lobbyist in Washington can also play a pivotal role in advancing Bangladesh's case, as can Ms. Laura Baughman, the trade consultant, who has been commissioned to write a report which is expected to show that giving Bangladesh's RMG exports duty free and quota free access will not have an adverse impact on the US textile industry.

The new government should also try and take full advantage of the forthcoming ministerial meeting of the WTO in Qatar to mobilise support for duty free and quota free access for all 48 LDC's, as was promised at the WTO ministerial meeting in Singapore. Now that the European Union, Japan, Australia and New Zealand have given duty free access to all 48 LDC's, whilst the US has given it to 34 out of 48 LDCs, there should be excellent prospects for all the major players to come together in an effort to persuade the US and also Canada to extend duty free and quota free access to all 48 LDCs.

US-Bangladesh relations today can be described as a special relationship. Following President Clinton's visit to Dhaka in March last year and that of former President Jimmy Carter, last month, there are good prospects for a visit to South Asia by President Bush early next year, which should also include a visit to Bangladesh. The MOU on

the elimination of child labour from the garment factories, the presence of the US Peace Corps in Bangladesh, the amicable settlement of the problem in the Export Processing Zones, are all indicative of Bangladesh's desire to strengthen relations with the US. There is every reason to believe that a number of other pending issues will be taken up by the new government on a priority basis.

Our bilateral relations with the US are clearly a matter of the highest priority for Bangladesh. But there is every reason to believe that the US's relations with Bangladesh, specially during these very difficult times, should be equally important for the US. That democracy, Islam and moderation can co-exist, as it does in Bangladesh today, ought to be a matter of the highest importance to the US. But it is necessary that this point is properly understood, recognised and appreciated in Washington. This will be a test for our diplomacy.

This special relationship, with the US cuts across party lines and enjoys a broad national consensus. However, it will be incumbent on the new government to make a special effort to preserve and consolidate this national consensus. The new government should reach out to the opposition, it should consult it and work closely with it during the critical days ahead when the nation as a whole will have to respond to both the global crisis as well as the crisis at home, both of the greatest magnitude. Bangladesh's voice, that of the government, the opposition, the parliament as a whole, must be heard loud and clear in Washington, in the Security Council in international fora, in key capitals, in support of the international coalition and facing the challenges at home; but this voice must be a single voice, united as never before, in the larger interest of the country.

Bangladesh and the US are both fully committed to democracy, freedom and justice. We must join hands and help each other in every way possible to ensure that these basic and fundamental values that we share are preserved. This is the basis of the special relationship between our two countries; this is why we must extend a helping hand to each other during these critical times.

Farooq Sobhan, a former Foreign Secretary, is President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute.

Our bilateral relations with the US are clearly a matter of the highest priority for Bangladesh. But there is every reason to believe that the US's relations with Bangladesh, specially during these very difficult times, should be equally important for the US. That democracy, Islam and moderation can co-exist, as it does in Bangladesh today, ought to be a matter of the highest importance to the US.

market for RMG exports from Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of people will lose their jobs. Indeed Bangladesh will be faced with an economic catastrophe the likes of which this country has never seen before.

Apart from the closure of more than half of the 3000 RMG factories in the country, resulting in perhaps half a million or more women losing their jobs, there will be a severe impact on all the backward linkage industries, on banks and insurance companies, on transport companies and many other sectors of the economy, which are directly or indirectly linked to RMG exports. Several million people will lose their jobs, not to mention the possibility of several banks collapsing; all of this will undoubtedly have a serious negative impact on government revenues, and the foreign exchange reserves will almost certainly deteriorate to a level where the country will not be able to meet its obligations.

Such a crisis would also undermine perhaps the biggest achievement of Bangladesh in recent years, the employment of over a million and a half women in the garment sector and the employment of some eight million women in the rural

Duty free and quota free access for RMG has been extended by the US under the TDA 2000 to 72 countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Although the act came into force last year in October, it is only in recent months that Bangladesh has felt the full impact. The 20-22 per cent price advantage because of the absence of duties, provides these countries with an unfair advantage. It is no longer possible to compete against these countries without Bangladesh also being given the duty free benefit. For a Least Developed Country, which is so heavily dependent on a single sector in a single market, the US, the absence of a level playing field has only resulted in the diversion of RMG exports from Bangladesh to some of these countries.

The only way to provide some relief to the RMG sector, both woven and knit wear, will be for the US government to extend duty free and quota free access to the US market immediately. In this connection it might be mentioned that only last week the US government decided to withdraw sanctions against India and Pakistan in recognition of their support to the US in its war against international terrorism. The US government on the occasion of the visit of President Megawati

uphold the rule of law, the freedom of the press and uphold the fundamental rights of the people under the Constitution of Bangladesh. We are confident that the United States will do everything possible to support the economic and political stability of Bangladesh at this critical juncture.

At a time when our foreign exchange reserves are precariously low, when remittances have declined and may decline even further as the global economy contracts, Bangladesh cannot possibly afford to see a precipitous decline in its principal export product, ready made garments, which amounted last year to more than 75 per cent of the total exports of the country. It has therefore now become imperative that the US, very much in keeping with the special relations that exist between our two countries, will move promptly to extend duty free and quota free access to our ready made garments, thus ensuring that the impending economic crisis, which will certainly disrupt the economic and political stability of the country, with its concomitant disastrous consequences, is avoided.

The new Bangladesh govern-

"Dead or alive"

KHURSHED

AMERICAN people are going through an understandable anguish and grief. The cumulative effect of the unresolved emotions has caused extreme anger and expressions of vengeance amongst the public and the leadership of America. The prime suspect is to be hunted "dead or alive" and relevant country bases to be used for America's military operations. Most countries have agreed, few have hesitated. In Bangladesh, the newspapers have reported a writ petition against the caretaker government's decision to allow space for American fighting planes in Bangladesh.

If we review our emotions in a prioritised manner, we find that shock was our first reaction at seeing the tallest buildings crumble to dust. Secondly, for those who have relatives in the vicinity, theirs was extreme personal anxiety for the safety of kith and kin. We felt the empathy of grief for the thousands of American families who have been amputated for life by this vicious crime. And we know that these are the very people who have stood by

the third world in terms of aid and assistance that does not belie their generosity and concern for development.

As days pass, we learn to rest our feelings and grapple with the thinking process of analyses. America has reached a level of civilization where it does review its intentions objectively, with compassion and rationalism. America is alive to the adverse effects of an impetuous reaction. The American people's historical progress is that of liberalisation, built on the premises of a human rights approach. It has struggled to keep alive the hope in human rights development in its own country and amongst nations that it supports with aid and assistance.

In the aftermath of this stupendous tragedy, America is like a wounded giant now, declaring war and destruction against the speculated enemy, its only way of soothing the nation's irrevocable grief. America is also a giant country in the world with the highest level of education and civilization. This claim is a fact that cautions this giant to step carefully as millions of innocent lives lie in its path.

America is well aware of these complications. Evaluating their own actions in a fair manner, its political analyses point to their contribution in resurrecting the monster of fundamentalism in order to destroy the influence of Marxism in Afghanistan. The judicial experts realise the need for investigation, evidence and trial in an International Court before the accused can be declared a culprit and dealt accordingly.

The European allies acknowledge the compassion needed in dealing with the millions of refugees imposed on hapless countries, as the aftermath of war.

The management in the US also admit their failure in administering the warnings of disaster and to the failure in shooting down the offending planes in time.

America has reached a level of sophistication, where we expect it to analyse terrorism objectively, with rationalism, to plan a long term solution of psycho-social and economic aspects that lead to terrorism in the world. We are aware that terrorism has a wide network affecting the west and the eastern sphere. Sri Lanka copes with it on a daily basis, India complains of it

the Punjab and Kashmir, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a living example of ceaseless terror. Many more countries fall under sudden attack of an organised mafia. Bangladesh is no exception where terrorists are openly hired; ironically, for the use of a democratic process of electing a new government.

Unresolved interpersonal, racial or religious hatred is certainly a cause for vindictive emotions, sustained over time by misguided religious education and national prejudice. In countries with high unemployment rates, these conditions are conducive to the development of institutionalised fundamentalism which is likely to create terrorists of any belief or mercenaries having no particular belief. Racial discrimination, personal power, religious arrogance or whatever the compelling force, we have witnessed these effects in World War II, in the 1947 communal riots, in revolutionary guerilla tactics and closer to us in 1971 when millions were killed regardless of religious affinity.

The hatred between races over territorial independence has turned into ceaseless wars that apparently

benefits nobody. However it does profit another kind of culprit, namely the war mongers, the business magnets who make billions over war industry and continue to do so with impunity. The longer the wars the greater the opportunity for sale of arms and ammunition.

For the pacifist, war and capital punishment are an anathema. Mahatma Gandhi's life is an unforgettable example of the sacrifices great men make to win peace. In psychological terms, we will go along with the pacifist notion to separate terrorism from the terrorist. Whereas the former is an evil with grievous outcome, the terrorist is a person with a potential for change. A dead terrorist does not remove terrorism in our midst. It will leave an aura of false martyrdom that will be revered into a cycle of avenging suicidal attacks.

We need to be alive to the fact that terrorism is a cult now as strong as the 'isms' it supports such as chauvinism, fundamentalism, militarism etc. In agreeing with the progressive people of the world and development activists, one hopes that America will take the lead for using long term strategies to bring

about a change in the terrorist mind set.

To win against terrorism and human brutality is to follow the pacifist campaign for: a) A ban on nuclear tests, sale of arms and arms industry; b) Establishment of an International Criminal Court; c) Mastering the art of education for peace; d) Freezing assets of war-mongers, proved terrorists and arms smugglers; e) Eliminating the terminology of hatred and war (*jihad*, crusade, revenge); f) Forming a coalition for a revolution of peace.

Understandably this is much too idealistic for an American government that has to contend with an enormous public grief. The culprit is poised in the air, dead or alive, an invisible threat, changing the world into a vulnerable place.

For the American leadership. Posterity will decide whether it's alive or dead to the root cause of terrorism. On its decision to act, what is politically correct or what is morally correct will hang the fulcrum of "Infinite Justice".

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



PHOTO: STAR

Accept people's verdict

Our former prime minister Sheikh Hasina told in a press conference that 'public' has rejected the result of the poll and so she can't accept the result either. Will Sheikh Hasina please explain how she has got hold of this public opinion? How many people have rejected the poll result and in what way?

What is clear from the verdict of 'public' is that they voted less for the Awami League and more against them; and no reckless comment can change this fact. But our political leaders are never ready to show a decent attitude when defeated; though it's not fit for their democratic zeal.

If Sheikh Hasina really thinks that the poll rigging is caretaker government's doing, then the question is why in the first place did Awami League hand over power to such a bias government?

Earlier Sheikh Hasina repeatedly boasted and claimed that the idea of the caretaker government as her brainchild but as the poll result went against her, she now blames the caretaker government which was formed during her reign and according to her own method.

If the caretaker government was so partial, why didn't the Awami League chief protested when it was formed or why didn't she restrain her party from taking part in the polls under them?

The Awami League should learn

to show respect to public opinion and shouldn't make a fuss in the name of innocent people of our country. They should leave us to our own decision, the decision of the majority. Awami League should accept people's verdict and try to find out the causes of defeat so that they don't lose the faint hope of winning next time.

Rutba, on e-mail

Congratulations BNP

The 8th parliamentary election was held successfully and in a free and fair manner. A significant number of male and female voters cast their vote with great enthusiasm. I welcome and congratulate the newly elected party-- BNP. I hope that they would be able to prosper the nation and would work unitedly with other political parties including the Awami League. I also hope that the newly elected government would be able to eradicate terrorism and corruption, the main problem of Bangladesh.

Oly

Utara, on e-mail

The peoples' choice

The voice of the people has been heard, resoundingly. Tired of rampant corruption and terrorism, people have opted for a New Hope. A big responsibility now lies with the BNP to meet those aspirations, and we hope that they would shoulder it responsibly.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



The lessons from the last two elections should be apparent to the politicians-- people cannot be trifled with or underestimated, and woe betides the party that does so. Congratulations to Begum Zia on displaying post-victory level-headedness and restraint. Sheikh Hasina's immediate reaction reminds us of the story of sour grapes, and serves only to lower her self-respect in the eyes of the nation.

But, the real heroes of the hour are the Chief Advisor of the CTG and the CEC. We would be remiss by not doffing our hats to their efforts, which ensured that every voter could exercise their freedom of choice, without fear.

A grateful nation salutes them for restoring their faith in democracy.

Sadat Omar Dhaka

Psychological barrier

There appears to be a psychological barrier between the past political ruling regimes and the new concept of non-political neutral caretaker government, which comes into operation three months before every general election.

The politicians feel left out and cannot take part directly in the decision-making process, and have to go by the rulings of the caretaker government-- the same way as the citizens have to abide by the rules. The realistic non-operation of the parliament for ten years is another

factor due to lack of practice. The politicians cannot run the show, and at the same time do not like to be left out from involvement in policy-making exercises. Their ego and sense of self-importance are bruised.

Our politics is in the formative stage, but the process is being delayed by the non-democratic political parties, who depend more on lone charismatic leadership than internal democracy.

We have too many politicians and political parties, but only two parties dictate the terms. This distortion is creating anomalies in governance. Where to turn for help?

ANA Dhaka

Fire service network

The fire brigade is grossly understaffed, as also without BMRE for a long time (as per recent and earlier press reports), considering the vast increase in the number of factories, large and small, in different parts of the country. The REB network in the rural areas has extended the penetration of factories away from the cities.

Thousands of garment factories have sprung up, located in residential and office buildings not designed for factories; and the awareness level of the management so low that about 200 workers had to court unavoidable deaths in fire scares due to management negligence.

Two immediate ideas come up: a)

The fire brigade may have a factory section, for overall planning and implementation of a national industrial project on safety, and b) BGMEA may also boost up the Factory Safety Cell at their head office; for liaison with the FB for training and equipment installation programmes. Money is no problem, as the rich factory owners can subscribe to the running of this wing.

Thousands of factories cannot be looked after or controlled through files and statements only. It is a huge management task of daily operation, maintenance and training activities, involving hundreds of personnel. Retired fire officers and staff may be engaged by BGMEA to supervise marked zones in cities and districts.

The set up will look very much visible once the first phase is completed, and the show will boost up the morale of the garment workers. It appears there are no clauses for punishment of the owners and management of the garment factories-- they easily get away with a couple of statements, regardless of the number of lives lost.

How and why does the management get scot-free? What are their responsibilities (say, for example, when gates are locked in violations of standing instructions). How many in the garment sector have been punished so far? Where are the enquiry reports of BGMEA and the government?

A citizen Dhaka