

Was the big cabinet necessary?

The cabinet size can only be justified if it is efficient

OUR hearty welcome to the newly inducted government led by Begum Khaleda Zia who brings to bear a massive electoral mandate on her office to run the country for the next five years.

This is an auspicious occasion. The mood is happy and the feelings exulting. Three elections later, democracy looks stronger, and the supremacy of popular verdict well-established. How assertive people's choice of public representatives can get has been amply demonstrated in the last elections. The heavy mandate that Begum Zia-led four-party alliance has received is without parallel in our recent history. Commensurately, the public expectations from the new leadership are that much high and need to be met with a sense of proportional obligation. Seized of the popular mood, Begum Zia quickly on the heels of being elected as the Leader of the House, said, she would observe the work of the ministers for a year to form her opinion about them, one way or the other. We have all the reason to believe that her sense of urgency to deliver is shared by her senior colleagues.

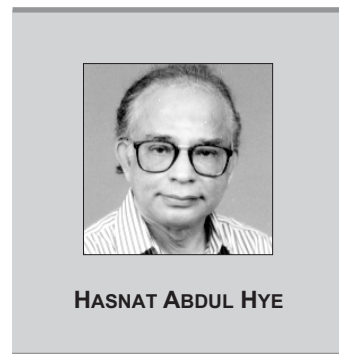
That said, let's now turn to the mixed feelings we have about the size and composition of her council of ministers. This is by far the largest one in the history of Bangladesh with 27 full ministers, 28 state ministers and four deputy ministers taken on board. With Begum Zia as the PM, it is a sixty-member council of ministers and a 28-member cabinet, both markedly bigger by past standards. It is as if a big victory has yielded a big cabinet! It has been a cabinet put together by compromise, accommodation and a certain rewardist recognition of contributions to electoral victory. Old guards have a big presence, regardless of their previous performance-tags, and the number of new faces is very high. Regrettably, some controversial figures have been given ministerial berths.

But what is definitely disappointing is the lack of gender balance and minority balance even in such a wide-bodied council of ministers. Hopefully, the argument is not that a sufficient number of them did not get elected to provide any workable range of choices. In case it is so, we would point to the 10 per cent technocratic quota which could be utilised to strike a balance in terms of gender and minority representations in the council of ministers.

In the present scheme of things what assumes critical importance is the delineation of power, authority and responsibilities between the ministers on the one side and state ministers and deputy ministers on the other. The mechanism of their mutual functioning will have to be clearly spelled out. Allowing for efficiency-friendly latitude to each group of functionaries, the very crucial matter concerning who should report to whom needs to be settled once and for all. Just as nothing should be done over the heads of the ministers, something that the PM has to consciously discourage, so would the state and deputy ministers need some element of freedom of action to add to the decision-making process. One can cite a plethora of instances of relations between ministers and state ministers souring to a point of ministerial paralysis both in the first cabinet of BNP government and that of the immediately preceding AL government. These confused the bureaucracy and created loyalists in their ranks for the ministers and the state or deputy ministers taking their infighting to debilitating levels. In certain ministries work came to a grinding halt. So, the immediate task before prime minister Begum Zia is to make a clear-cut delineation between the power and functions of the cabinet ministers and the state ministers. The fact that there are 31 state and deputy ministers to 27 full ministers makes a clear definition of their fields of competence all the more compelling. In making our suggestion we are aware that with delineated powers state ministers may start acting like independent ministers themselves. The challenge is how to get work out of both the groups of ministers. We do not want to see a cabinet where ministers and state-ministers fighting with each other for power and authority. We also do not want to erode the power of the cabinet ministers. Yet we cannot have a replay of the past situation either.

The big size of the council of ministers portending a sort of burden on the national exchequer will have only appeared in a mellow light if it ended up performing well. People will then think they have got the value for their money. Indeed, the taste of the pudding is in eating, so that a high premium is placed on the new government's capacity to deliver. In the fluidity of the global situation today, they have to start performing from day one to stay on course lest they are overtaken by events. We are forced to conclude with the question whether such a big cabinet was necessary.

Anatomy of a debacle



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

SINCE the election results became public there have been exaggerations galore. The large number of seats lost by the Awami League immediately led to a paroxysm of rage, which soon boiled over into allegations of "crude rigging". Intimidation and prevention of members of minority communities were added to the fulminations made. So far the Awami League was concerned, the people were cheated of their 'votes' through the machinations of the authorities and the four-party alliance. The four-party alliance, led by the BNP, in their turn hailed victory as the mandate given to them by the electorate. Many analysts and a large number of articulate public interpreted the election results as rejection of the Awami League and consequently the BNP alliance becoming the winner by default. Both the allegations and the interpretations are overstated. On the basis of available facts and figures they may be shown to be incorrect, too.

It cannot be completely ruled out that there have been some rigging and other irregularities. With the best of intentions and under the best of circumstances it is almost impossible to guarantee a completely free and fair election. If in a country like America allegations of unfair practices could be made, how can this blight be banished in a fledgling democracy like Bangladesh? It is quite plausible that use of fake ballot papers was resorted to sporadically. Mistakes in counting votes cast, deliberate or genuine, also may have been made here and there. Fracas and scuffles may have taken place injuring polling agents of one party or another. Pre-emptive voting

may have denied the right to vote by genuine voters who turned up late. But all these aberrations and violations of election procedure were random in nature and cannot be construed to be part of a game plan. If 'crude rigging' took place on a large scale this would not go unnoticed by polling agents of parties and by more than half a million observers monitoring the election. Though some observers have mentioned about irregularities they hastened to add that such cases were not alarm-

ures in governance. The immediate reaction among the articulate and literate public has been that votes have been given against the Awami League and not so much for the BNP alliance. In other words, the BNP-led alliance has been the beneficiary of the no-confidence vote given to the Awami League. In support of this 'popular' view that made the rounds on gossip corners at various levels and even in print media, various failures of the Awami League during its five years in

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IN MY VIEW

The election of 2001 is over. Its analysis and post-mortem will continue well into the future because of its landmark character. For the civil society the results have thrown up another challenge which is of grave import. How can popular perception about the image of a party and evaluation of its performance be reflected in popular votes cast? Democracy demands that a party that fails to govern should be rejected directly by the people and not through jugglery of arithmetic incubated in an alliance.

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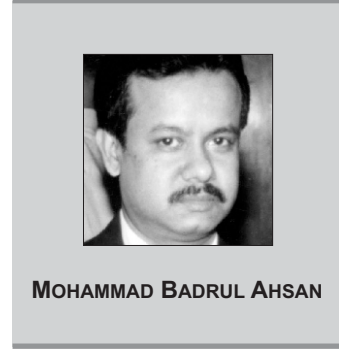
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Ad astra per aspera



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ONE day recently, one of my relatives came to discuss his future with me. Well, he is not a maharishi, a fortune-teller or even a futurologist. He is just a young man, who is studying MBA in one of the ersatz business schools in the country. He is already worried about the future, because the job market is tight and he is not sure if he has been adequately bracing for it.

I did not know what to tell him. But he wanted my advice. So I quoted him from the Tom Hanks movie, *Forrest Gump*. I told him that life is a box of chocolates. Then I asked him to see that movie. The movie opens to this surrealistic scene showing a feather. The feather floats over houses, churches and trees - dipping and soaring. Occasionally, it settles, only to rise again and peregrinate in the air. It symbolised so well the crests and troughs of human life!

Needless to say, the feather is a metaphor for the life of the movie's namesake character. Forrest Gump

has an IQ of 75, but he goes through life with astounding success. He survives bullying, war and freak accidents, while more intelligent people around him get killed or die otherwise. Not only that, he also lives to win medals and to get fantastically rich. He defies the laws of survival as the gravitation of fortune puts him in the right places at the right time.

Thus luck's gratuity surpasses lack of gumption in Gump's life. But

for millions. Amadeus Mozart perished young under the stress of hard work and hardship. John Kennedy's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet at the height of its glory. The last emperor of China spent the last days of his life languishing in the communist labour camp. The prospects of life can be very electric.

Albert Camus once wrote that the human life is an absurd wedge between the unremembered past and the unknown future. But what

should be trained to happily do their tasks in a society. Aristotle saw education as a motivation for citizens to participate in civic duties. Success or failure, man must prepare to go through life understanding and executing his responsibilities.

Above all, education was seen as a communicator between life and living, between existence and exertion. Based earlier in religion, it explained existence with exegesis,

instrument. If the strings are too tight, they might snap. But if they are slack, one cannot play music on them. Education, meant to bring balance, tipped life in anxiety and struggle.

Perhaps religion slackens life by asserting that it is a mission of salvation. But science makes it taut as an unrelenting motion of survival. If religion denies life its living, then science wants to deprive the living of its life. In a nutshell, living may

When luck is forced upon talent, it can cause disillusion. Yet, when talent is forced upon luck, one can be despaired. Peregino's wrote books, which were not selling well. So he killed himself one day, hoping that the news of his death would boost sale of his books. It did not happen.

I told my young relative about a poster I saw during a Career Fair on the campus of Kansas State University, which had this announcement: Your future is in the stars. It was an affirmation that the future is unknown no matter if one is armed with talent or luck. In other words, the lucky will be talented and the talented will be lucky so long as it is in the stars. I told him to work hard for the best and then prepare for the worst, because one could not have control over the fruits of life. For example I mentioned that an eccentric man named John Nash won a Nobel Prize nearly 44 years after he had completed his work.

But my relative reverted to his original question. Was it enough for him to complete an MBA, or should he gather additional skills? I told him what any sensible senior relative would tell. I advised him to learn computers and to go abroad to acquire a foreign degree.

Will that secure the future for him? I told him I did not know that answer. *Ad astra per aspera*: To the stars through difficulties. That is one thing, which cannot change. He must be patient to know his stars.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Between the obliterated past and the obfuscated future, one must go on living, and it may not be easy. Lord Buddha proclaimed that one could escape that uneasiness through the right kind of education. Plato believed that ordinary people should be trained to happily do their tasks in a society. Aristotle saw education as a motivation for citizens to participate in civic duties. Success or failure, man must prepare to go through life understanding and executing his responsibilities.

that does not happen to everyone. True, if one is not gifted with talent, one can be lifted by the transcendent. Demosthenes suffered from a lisp, yet he became one of the greatest orators in history. Thomas Alva Edison invented the gramophone when he was deaf. One American president, who was a C student in Harvard, raised his distressed country from the wheel-chair.

Again, luck can be elusive even when talent is pervasive. Van Gogh died a pauper without recognition, although his paintings are now sold

makes that wedge absurd also makes it so absorbing. Elvis Presley's music teacher did not think Elvis had a future in singing. Lucille Ball had to wait for fame until she was in her 40s. It seems that there is a right time for everything in life, and one must wait for his turn, if that turn is at all in the cards for him.

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expounding that the exertion of this living is to prepare for the existence of life after death. But the Renaissance ushered in a new awakening. It made man the master of his destiny and confined the exertion of this living to the existence of this life. If religion attempted to explain life, science adventured to explore it.

What transformed education, also transformed life. Education, which started as a pursuit of life, turned life into a pursuit of education. Lord Buddha had overheard a musician telling an admirer why it was important to properly tune his

have changed a great deal over the centuries, but life has only changed from despair to desperation.

Which brings one back to the issue of balance between luck and talent. Luck is despairing because it cocoons a man within the limits of destiny. Talent promotes desperation by demanding that destiny is what man makes of it. Nero was a Roman emperor who craved to become an artist. But he was not lucky with the talent for it. At the time of his death, he is said to have resented that a great artist was perishing with him.

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.



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Cruelty, thy name is human

It may be livelihood for the man who's using the monkey; entertainment for those who are watching; but what does it mean for the animal? We don't know. But we have separated it from its own environment for our pleasure, for our profession. Do we ever ask ourselves how much cruelty we are showing to these animals? Laws regarding animal rights need to surface and put to practice.

Attacks on minorities

KAMRAN REZA CHOWDHURY

THE conscious citizens of the country cannot but be worried over the reports of recent attacks on the minority communities in the country following the 8th parliamentary election held on Oct 01. Attacks were reported from different parts of the country including Bagerhat, Gopalganj, Rajshahi.

Bangladesh Awami League has blamed the BNP and its allies, the victor in the election, for the attacks on them. The BNP-led four party alliance has denied the allegation and termed it as 'conspiracy'. In her first reaction after the historic victory in the parliamentary election, the alliance chief and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia urged her party activists not be 'over enthusiastic' and show 'maximum restraint'. She also urged all segments of people to forget all differences with a view to building a happy and prosperous nation.

Again, it was also reported that Idris Ali, President of Awami League unit at Badhal under Kachua upazilla of Bagerhat district, was

arrested on September 28 on charge of setting fire to some houses of the minority community. The OC of Bagerhat DB police said that Idris was caught red handed while setting fire (The Daily Star Sep 30). So it is difficult to comment who have been perpetrating such heinous crimes against humanity as both the parties are accusing each other.

However, it is certain that whoever may be the perpetrators, they are not the friends of the country. They do not want to see prevalence of a happy and peaceful co-existence of all communities in the country.

There is a widespread impression that the minorities, especially the Hindus, are the Awami League 'vote bank'. The idea took roots among the countrymen before the 7th parliamentary polls in 1996 when some BNP leaders and activists circulated different rhymes branding Sheikh Hasina pro-Hindu with a view to alienate Muslim voters.

Even, some BNP leaders in 1996 publicly declared that "if Awami League came to power, the Hindus'

Uludhoni would replace Ajaan of the Muslims". Definitely these were ploys to defeat Awami League in the polls, but the plan proved futile and Awami League came to power. No Uludhoni, even after the completion of the Awami League's five years tenure, has replaced Ajaan at any part of the country. These prove that the countrymen are not guided by any communal sentiment.

Though it was a political tactic, we should discard such utterances. Mentionable, such slogans were not heard from any political activists or leaders of any party during the 8th parliamentary polls. And albeit Jamaat-e-Islami is a component of the four-party alliance, we do not believe that minorities will be undermined in the country.

The notion that 'Hindus are the supporters of Awami League only' is not correct. Because, they are also rational beings and have enough wisdom to judge which party or candidate to be preferred. They are also patriots. They also took arms to fight the occupation forces in the War of Independence in 1971 and sacrificed their invaluable lives for the sake of the nation and the coun-

try.

There are many Hindu leaders in BNP who vied in all parliamentary elections with BNP ticket. Again there are Hindu leaders who were Ministers during the previous BNP regimes. So it is really unwise to push the minorities towards a specific political party, which will surely result in communalised political polarization in the country.

Both the Awami League and the BNP are secular political parties, that is why the minorities may have the choice to be involved with politics of any of the parties. It is very natural.

Hon'ble Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia should prioritize checking of the violent incidents occurring in the country, right now. The BNP leadership should not forget that the countrymen gave them mandate to govern the country being frustrated with unabated lawlessness in the country during the Awami League regime. Every citizen, from all walks of life, interviewed by different media, harp on the same string that their desire from the new government is restoration of law and order in the country.

The image of any government depends largely on the performance of the party during the first quarter since its ascendancy. So please take immediate action to curb terrorism in the society and ensure the security of lives and properties of the minorities in the country. Because, our sacred Constitution has made provisions for ensuring equal rights for all citizens irrespective of sex, religion, cast and creed. If you fail to thwart the evil design of the vested interests out to spread terrorism and communalism, this will, certainly, erode the existing peace and harmony in the country.

Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country in the world. We earned a very bad name in the international arena when branded as the 'most corrupt country' in the world. If we cannot ensure the peaceful co-existence of all people of the society, it will, surely, sully the image of the country as the 'Moderate Muslim Democracy' in the world we gained by practising democracy.

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