

PM's 100-day programme

Some pressing public concerns missing

BEGUM Zia in her maiden address to the nation as prime minister has unveiled her list of agenda for the first hundred days. It's a mixed bag comprising good elements while the rest being not 'bad' as such, are but ritualistic, vague and indifferent. 'Indifferent' because they don't carry the sense of urgency one would have expected from a time-bound plan of action. Let's separate the chafe from the grain. The good points are: opening of all educational institutions and stamping out campus hooliganism; confiscation of illegal weapons; arrest of all known criminals and gangsters and conduct of legal proceedings against them; expediting the process of freeing detainees, political or otherwise, held without trial; initiating judicial inquiry into the bomb explosion cases (hopefully on a double quick and non-partisan basis to make up for the inordinate delay already entailed); computer net-working across the important district headquarters; setting right the chaos in Chittagong and Mongla seaports and at the Zia International Airport; and sending teams out for negotiating better garment quotas abroad.

We are rather surprised by the intention expressed to merely start a legal process to rescind the Public Safety Act and Special Powers Act. What holds you from scrapping these altogether within 100-days? No mention has been made of the separation of judiciary from the executive, a matter which, for all we know, has been left at a very advanced stage by the caretaker government.

The brain-waves about staging international seminars, a convention for the victims of political violence and their relatives, special observances of days of prosaic and peripheral nature, hardly the stuff of which the staple of a 100-day programme is made.

The obvious missing link in the chain is the total lack of a reference to traffic congestion and pollution which are making Dhaka life unlivable. This paper is at work to give at the earliest some specific recipes to address those two problems in a time-bound fashion. As for unsteady power supply, some realistic corrective programme could perhaps be flagged off.

Only the other day we wrote in these columns in praise of the PM's decision to form five secretary-led committees assigning them the task to recommend in a week's time a composite sector-wise programme of action for the first 100 days of her government. With the prime minister spelling out her plans for hundred days through her national address on Friday is that exercise at the secretaries' level now put on hold? Or is it being abandoned altogether?

This warrants a clarification from the PMO to put things in the right perspective.

Massive project to battle malnutrition

Poverty alleviation key to the endeavour

BANGLADESH will launch a massive Tk 70,680 crore project to battle chronic malnutrition. Aided by the World Bank, the proposed National Nutrition Project (NNP) expects to build on the experiences of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP) which has performed well in the trial run. Nothing could be more useful than such an effort.

The objectives are focussed on the especially vulnerable like young children, lactating and pregnant mothers, adolescents etc. These groups, who have a smaller voice in managing and distributing social or household resources, are expected to benefit most. Thus, it's not just a nutrition support programme but an empowering one in a real sense of the term. Investing in healthy and health aware young women will mean more aware mothers, who are more able to take better care of their children.

Care giving practices are an important input in battling malnutrition. Enough time to ensure that the mother is able to apply the best practices in the best interest of the child is another.

The fact that 58% of children under 5 are underweight, 51% are stunted and nearly half of Bangladeshi women suffer from chronic energy deficit bares the enormity of the problem. While BINP covered 40 Upazila, the BNNP will expand to 139 Upazila, all of which is positive news for the deprived population.

But malnutrition is a multi-dimensional problem. We know that poor food intake habits, improper caring practices by the mother and the rest of the household, time and space to apply care related knowledge etc are primarily behavior related. But malnutrition also has an economic resource constraint element, which has moved from overemphasis in the populist domain to its denial in the multi-lateral donor aided regime.

It appears that we are willing to live with a malnourished population that is outside the project parameter because we are unable to intervene on their behalf. The fact that we need to undertake this project means we are unable to take care of our poor on our own.

We congratulate the effort. We also draw attention to the fact that the life of the dispossessed is still hanging by the threads of foreign charity. Poverty alleviation must remain the dominant priority.

Election 2001 and the new government



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

THE Bangladesh Nationalist Party with its 4-Party Alliance won a landslide victory in the general election held on 1 October 200, so far with 214 seats, more than two-thirds of the 300-seat parliament. But the news, which created even greater stir among people, was the humiliating defeat of the erstwhile ruling party, the Awami League, having bagged as little as only 62 seats. The verdict delivered at the polls by the people represents a total rejection of the Awami League, its policy and rule. Why? Because, ordinary citizens witnessed the terrible mistakes, mal-governance and repression of the Awami regime. Widespread terrorism, unabashed corruption, rampant extortion and blatant politicization perpetrated a reign of terror in this period. While Awami League leaders were vocal against these, they did little and showed much less in combating these crimes and social evils. Unfortunately, their words did not match with their deeds and often ran counter.

The principal drawback of the Awami League during its last rule was the total failure of its leaders to read the pulse of the nation, their utter disregard of people's sentiments and patronage of terrorists and wrong-doers. In doing so, they were oblivious of the fact that people would never dismiss as untrue at least the pictorial evidences of gun-trotting goons poised to attack opposition rallies. Conspicuous omission to take action against these terrorists and persistent refusal of commission of such crimes by those accused eroded public credibility of the Awami regime beyond latter's comprehension. Besides, unlawful activities of the Awami godfathers at various places under the protection and malafide use of administrative machinery had to be endured by the overwhelming mass of intimidated people in silent protest. In other words, the Awami leadership became absolutely divorced from the ordinary masses. As a result, the hapless people staged a silent revolution and took revenge at the polls. The politically conscious citizens did so by exercising their right to franchise. Of course, entente with the three other political Parties, especially with Jamaat, turned out to be a positive factor in

the victory of the Alliance.

Another gross mistake the erstwhile ruling party committed was creation of the great national divide in terms of pro-liberation and anti-liberation forces. The Awami League claimed it was the sole repository of the former and the opposition parties generally harboured the latter. Evidently, such contention was a terrible fallacy, which calls for little explanation. One may, however, claim that those few who had opposed liberation 30 years ago appear no longer so and are at present law-abiding citizens of the country. Moreover, what role could they play now, if it is said for the sake of argument they had not changed their attitude? Would they work for joining Pakistan now? This would be an unrealistic, if not absurd, proposition. Besides, as Shaikh Mujib himself showed magnanimity and farsightedness by declaring general amnesty to them, what national interest would now serve by witch hunting? People must ask themselves.

Besides, the Awami League stressed the need for incultating the spirit of the liberation war and wrongly assigned the task entirely to itself. Consequently, a substantial part of the energy and action of Awami League regime, as a mis-

leader almost to the alter of a demigod. It is true that public display of due respect to the national leader during the previous regimes was highly unsatisfactory, but the undue emphasis to rectify the situation went much to the extreme and became counter-productive. Love and respect cannot be acquired by force and legislation, as it must emanate from one's heart. The exaggeration of naming a series of important national landmarks after him as well as requirement of legally imposed use of his portrait, in fact, annoyed the general people, who already held him in high esteem, and defeated the underlying purpose. None can indeed cast doubt on the unparalleled contribution made by Shaikh Mujibur Rahman towards preparing the nation for independence. We all, including the founder of the BNP the then Major Ziaur Rahman, worked under his absentee leadership during the liberation war.

Similarly, it would be a fallacy to record his failure as an administrator and, more significantly, the horrible follies committed by him in destroying democracy to achieve which Shaikh Mujib had worked so relentlessly and made so much personal sacrifice all his life. In February 1975, he banned all

and made an advance announcement to boycott the parliament. Against that, the strong contingent of international observer groups, supplemented by even much larger domestic contingent of about 300,000 observers, declared that the election had been free, fair, impartial and generally peaceful. Shaikh Hasina lost one of the 5 seats she had contested from, while her political rival, Khaleda Zia, won all the 5 contested seats and broke her own records by scoring the highest number of votes bagged by any candidate.

Leaders of the Awami League went so far as to make public allegation that the caretaker government and the Chief Election Commissioner had joined the BNP in preparing and implementing a blue-print of plans to defeat the Awami League in the election. People, including foreign observers, did not agree and simply laughed at the allegation. That is why it is no wonder that the Awami League's movement to lay a countrywide seize on 10 October, did not work. This has worried the Awami high command to no end, as it dimmed the prospect of staging a strong country-wide movement in favour of their demand for a virtual re-election. In short, the arrogance of power of the previous govern-

heavy punishment on perpetrators without discrimination but also by way of creating due awareness among the public and promoting a social movement against it. Constitution of special courts to deal with such economic crimes deserves consideration. The role of black money in securing nomination and winning of election by individual candidates belonging to the major political parties have rendered people deeply concerned and utterly dismayed. Its impact is heavily felt adversely on the qualitative nature and even propriety of representation in the parliament. These are, no doubt, long-standing tasks and will take years to accomplish. But, however difficult may it be, the new government must acquire itself well with the task promptly and with much force and vigour.

The new prime minister took some praiseworthy measures immediately after winning the election. In her maiden acceptance speech, she made some notable gestures exhibiting magnanimity in victory. She paid tributes to national heroes, including the founder President of Bangladesh, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. She forbade people not to defile any portrait and debase name of any national leader. The objective was mainly to warn her own party

and consensus. It was a warm invitation to the opposition to shun confrontational politics and to accept a consensual approach. The message was loud and clear come to the parliament and make it the principal forum of democracy which you had been advocating for so long and so loudly. She urged for continuing religious harmony and tolerance as well as promotion of legitimate rights, economic well-being and preservation of cultural identity of ethnic minority and tribal people.

The Awami League must now shun the absurd demand of holding re-election, which had been allegedly rigged, including where they had won. If such a demand is seriously pursued, this would erode Awami League's credibility further. The people generally attribute the past election to be more free, fair and impartial than all other elections held in the country so far. For this, the Hon'ble President, the caretaker government and the Chief Election Commissioner along with all those concerned earned universal praise and appreciation of the nation. Even a large section of Awami League leaders and supporters share that view, though they are unable to express it publicly for reasons of party discipline. All political parties must learn from the past. The Awami League must not repeat the mistakes of the past and chart out its policy and programmes as per dictates of democracy. This would not only put the party in a better stead in future elections, but also satisfy hopes and aspirations of the vast multitude of people. After all, almost 40 per cent of total voters had cast their votes in favour of the Awami League. They must not forget that and seek to sustain confidence of all those voters and more only through adoption of a rational policy and actions commensurate with the spirit of democracy and fair play.

As for the ruling party, the BNP leadership must not remain complacent. They must realize that having won less popular votes than the Awami League, they would have been defeated had the election been held under the proportional electoral system, practiced in many democratic countries, and not under the existing British Westminster-style of parliamentary system. By instituting good governance and promoting general well-being of the people, the BNP must strive to acquire trust of more people in order to sustain its rule in future. Both the major political parties, therefore, have a big stake for their future success and they must co-operate and play their cards well not only in their own interest but in the interest of peace, democracy and development of the nation. This will also help evolve a two-party political system and lead the nation further towards the establishment of a truly democratic tradition.

The author is a member of BNP's advisory council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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guided priority, was directed to the past instead of addressing the principal national issues of the day and leading the nation forward to a better future. While it is highly desirable to apprise the present generation of the glorious deeds of the liberation war heroes of some 30 years ago, this should be widely publicized through educational curricula for learning and appropriate forums for discussion. For the present generation, which constitutes more than half the population and who was born after the liberation war, it is something to learn as a fact of history, albeit a glorious history of their forefathers which they must know and be proud of. But what concerns and interests them more is to resolve their present problems, such as economic and social malaise, with the need for poverty alleviation and employment generation. These and other burning issues deserve solution more seriously and on a priority basis.

Again, rebuilding of Shaikh Mujib's image engrossed the erstwhile ruling party so deeply that they spared no means to try to raise the already highly respected national

political Parties and introduced the totalitarian one-party BAKSAL rule. This is a fact and a part of history, which the young generation has known or will eventually know. While credit must be given where credit is due, follies must also be recognized as failings at the same time. The most befitting parallel example can be cited by pointing out to Mao Ze Dong, who is highly venerated by his people as the founder of modern China but at the same time is severely criticized by the same people for his failure by retarding progress of the nation for a decade by staging the infamous cultural revolution.

However, immediately after the election debacle became clear, the Awami League leader, Shaikh Hasina, rejected the polls, alleging that the election had been heavily rigged everywhere, despite the fact that she had found the election process as satisfactory till the end of the polls on the day of election. She even predicted victory with 170 seats on the same day. The following day, she demanded new election in all the 300 constituencies, refused to take oath for her 62 MPs

ment left in its trail the consequent despair, despondency and, to a certain extent, loss of reasoning by its high command. All this resulted from, according to the opposition, the failure of implementation of Awami League's own blueprint in win election.

Khaleda Zia's new government was sworn in on 10 October. The opposition boycotted the ceremony. This time, hers was the largest Council of Ministers with 60 Ministers, State Ministers and Deputy Ministers ever sworn in the country. The top priorities assigned by her were to control terrorism, remove corruption and secure poverty alleviation. These are no easy tasks to accomplish. Terrorists must be found out and dealt with strictly, irrespective of party affiliation or patronage. But to secure a lasting solution of this problem, one must identify its underlying cause and then try to root it out. If the young people could secure employment and earn their living, the scourge of terrorism would have been reduced to a great extent.

Similarly, corruption could be reduced not merely by imposing

workers and supporters to exercise restraint to curb possible emotional indiscretions and to show due respect to national leaders, virtually meaning Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. Begum Zia was sagacious in appealing to her people not to come out with victory processions, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, this could have been widespread and a long-drawn affair which would have resulted in further bitterness of the vanquished. Secondly, prolonged country-wide demonstrations could have resulted in violence in places and interested quarters would have been tempted to take political advantage of the situation. Her address to the nation on the 19th instant, inter alia, called for the primary need for improving the law and order situation, forging of national unity and warned the nation of consequences of inheriting a bankrupt economy.

A singularly positive and pointed gesture made by the prime minister in both her speeches was to appeal to the opposition Awami League to work together and decide on national issues through discussion

Tasks ahead of BNP

ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

AS it embarks on a second round of governing the country, BNP needs to tackle the hard realities that stare at the party right now. These realities spring from a variety of sources: from the actions of the party in last five years and the promises of changes that it made to the public before and during the elections, from the expectations it has created in public mind and from the perception of biases that rightly or wrongly shrouds the party currently.

The past five years the party had been vocal, in fact quite strident in its protests against the Awami League for the latter's perceived "misrule", for "muffling" the opposition in the parliament, and above all, for "pervasive lawlessness". In its deep chagrin the party sat much of the last five years outside the parliament, agitating in the streets, and shutting the capital and other major cities off and on to prove their points. Well, the country has spoken now. It has given BNP a second chance, and an opportunity to fix what the party claimed had gone wrong over the last five years. The big trial for the party is how it handles its major labours in this next round of government.

To me, the key labours that BNP faces are: providing statesmanship

in separating areas of national concern from political differences, fostering a political vision that distinguishes BNP from its election alliance, clearing the hue of communal bias that tints the party, reining in radical forces within the party,

set at rest any controversy over the founder of the nation and accord him his due place in history. This would require some statesmanship and astute steering of the political factions within the party and its coalition who may not be willing to

late and communicate strongly the broad based nature of the party on which it was originally founded embracing all groups, ethnic and religious. It is not sufficient to keep only party supporters in tow, they have already voted for the party. It

misgivings about the party, and obtain their trust through well-demonstrated actions against radicals and others who cause such misgivings.

The last parliament was a one-way road for much its existence. A

I do not know if the Awami League would stick to the ground and really never participate in the new parliament. It will be unfortunate should it turn out to be so. On the optimistic side, should they decide to join, the onus will be on BNP to bring about a parliamentary environment that promotes debates and discussions that it claimed was denied to them in the past assembly.

establishing rule of law, and introducing and maintaining a parliamentary process that respects and listens to all voices. A good beginning in addressing these challenges would be a willingness in the party leadership to recognize that these exist, and that these need to be handled in a well thought out, articulate and transparent manner.

The Awami League suffered; in fact it paid a huge political price for confusing party politics with national issues. Engaging people across party line over national issues was not a favourite concept with the party. If the BNP wishes not to repeat the mistakes either of the previous government or its own, it should heed the calls now given by all patriotic elements (including a forceful editorial in The Daily Star) to

show such generosity. An early resolution of this divisive issue can only strengthen the party in the long run.

BNP needs to reposition itself as a party distinct from the political idealism of its election partners. It does not serve the party well to be projected as a religious party nationally or internationally when in reality it is not. The founder of the party had tried his best to put together a nationalist party representing all groups and steer it as a centrist party. True, politics does make strange bedfellows. But if unaware, the strange bedfellows may stragulate the partner in sleep. The party needs to be cautious that the political camel that it used for election does not occupy the tent and eject the rider. BNP needs to articu-

late and communicate strongly the broad based nature of the party on which it was originally founded embracing all groups, ethnic and religious. It is not sufficient to keep only party supporters in tow, they have already voted for the party. It

is important to carry the other large segments that did not vote for the party, with a vision that they can share, and support. The adage, a man is known by the company he keeps, need not be extrapolated to mean that a political party is known by the alliance it forms. But the danger is when such alliances give strength to elements within the party who are naturally opposed to the progressive ideals germane to the party. One of the major challenges of BNP would be to rein in these elements -- the radicals -- who may already have given much credence to the religious bias of the party, and intolerance of practitioners of other faiths. The party needs to give confidence to the minorities who may have

post mortem would reveal injuries that were inflicted on the parliament probably by all sides. I do not know if the Awami League would stick to the ground and really never participate in the new parliament. It will be unfortunate should it turn out to be so. On the optimistic side, should they decide to join, the onus will be on BNP to bring about a parliamentary environment that promotes debates and discussions that it claimed was denied to them in the past assembly. We can only hope that the party will not use its majority power to muscle in changes that do not reflect national hopes and aspirations; that it uses its power to bring about greater national cohesion; that it extends its arm of cooperation with others who may not

always agree with it. Parliament should meet where it is meant to, not in the streets.

The country has been through a nearly lawless stage for years now. Private armies have grown in cities and towns with direct support from patrons who adorn political parties. Nationally the lawlessness has brought about fears of existence, internationally it has harmed the country's reputation, driven away prospective investors. One of the biggest challenges of the new government would be to restore peace of mind of the common man, eradicate political patronage of crimes and criminals, and firmly uphold the rule of law. This is one labour which rides above all, and a successful handling of this is going to be true test of the party in the immediate future.

This could be a mere wish list, a litany of claims on the new government. The burden is, however, with the new government to realize that this wish list represents people's aspirations, these are hard realities that confront the party, and the nation. Success of the new government will mostly depend on how it reaches out to the people, and tackle these labours.

Ziauddin M Choudhury, a former civil servant in Bangladesh, works for an international organisation in the US.

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: SAIDUR RAHMAN SHAPAN, A FREELANCER

Crafted in clay

An artisan is giving finishing touch to his work of excellence. Pottery is one of our age-old crafts representing our culture and heritage. Without much government patronisation, this cottage industry has been facing a lonely struggle for survival in these days of ceramic and chinaware onslaught. And if it doesn't receive logistic and financial support from the authorities, this pride of our traditional craft may soon be lost in oblivion.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

As we have been receiving a very high number of letters in the recent weeks, it's difficult to publish those right away. However, we would like to assure our readers that we are trying our best. The readers are requested to send letters not exceeding in two hundred words so that as many letters as possible can be accommodated.

Home Minister's interview

Maj. General (ret'd) Ibrahim BP's comments (October 17) is as balanced as it is unexceptional, worthy of support by the sensible and the sane. The most charitable thing one can say about the AVM's performance is that he was flying "solo"--it was his first press conference--and he crashed but survived with serious injury to himself, with the "aircraft" a total write-off.

One swallow doesn't make a summer. Everybody is entitled to one mistake. The AVM may still emerge as an "ace" if he handles the terrifying security issues facing us effectively and judiciously.

To do so, the minister perhaps should consider taking some "flying" lessons in statecraft and PR from some of his more experienced colleagues and his well wishers

including the press, not unnecessarily downplay or cavalierly dismiss issues fraught with potentially serious repercussions for law and order. **M. Iqbal, on e-mail**

I have read something like a news item in the back page of your esteemed daily (October 17) titled "A Citizen speaks out", attributed to Major Gen (ret'd) Syed Muhammad Ibrahim, BP. Such commentaries, by an individual other than a journalist, I have been used to see in the columns of 'letters to the editor' or 'Opinion'. However, I do appreciate General Ibrahim's thinking and frank commentary.

Mr. Ibrahim said, "...also over the last 15 days' violence of various natures has been the main news" and "you will see a common pattern in the headlines". I am also of the opinion that flood of news relating to

violence, especially involving minorities must have been pre-planned and systematic propaganda by the vanquished and is exaggerated only to attract public attention and sentiment and to keep alive the tension to make the running of the govt difficult.

There was no refutation of the false and baseless reports of exodus of minorities and even preparation of some to cross the border, as nothing such happened. When the Minister admitted the existence of some violence he was not appreciated.

I have a piece of advice to our journalist friends--you don't belong to any political party, your news reporting must not be biased or based on half truth or no truth, for any consideration which may jeopardise greater national interest.

AF Rahman Dhaka

World Mental Health Day

October 10, was "World Mental Health Day". Mental handicap is more than a health problem or social problem. Mental disease is a temporary disability, which can be overcome by medicare and nursing. It is possible to reinstate and rehabilitate the mentally handicapped people in society.

However, mental retardation is a permanent disability. They never come round with medicare and nursing. They could be rehabilitated by special education (except severe and extreme mental retardation).

Mental patient and mental retarded face a hard time in life. They are often abused, isolated and discriminated. This deteriorates their condition. We should remember that mentally handicapped people are not a burden but our

responsibility. **Dr Mostafa Abdur Rahim Director, Samajik Shasthya Kendra**

Baseless TV ad

There are TV ads for education, information and commercial purpose. But the TV media have a logical and moral responsibility to verify the truthfulness about the subject of ad! We live in a democratic country. We should not take advantage of higher rate of illiteracy in our country! On what basis is the expenditure of Ibone Sina Diagnostic Center 25 per cent less! We live in a country, where the specialist doctors' due amount per visit is not fixed. Then on what basis this diagnostic centre is charging 25 per cent less? I urge our TV media to be aware of the matter.

Dr. Lailun Nahar Dhaka, on e-mail