

# Four years of alliance rule

PROF. M. ANWAR

ON October 10, 2001, the BNP led 4-party alliance after winning two-thirds majority in the parliamentary election held on October 1, 2001, took oath and formed the government to run the country for five years. The government completed four years of its rule on October 10, and on this day the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia addressed the nation over television and radio. The Prime Minister's address at this time is, no doubt, very significant in the context of the certain issues and problems that the country is confronting and that need immediate attention and interception by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister in her address covered a number of areas including some burning problems of the present day situation and indicated the measures the government has already taken and will continue to take to tackle the situation in the coming days. The Prime Minister, however, admitted the failure of the administration and intelligence agencies in detecting in advance the bombers who tarnished the nation's image and struck at the peace and security of public life.

The Prime Minister mainly dwelt upon the performances of her government in the last four years for fulfilling the pledges made before and after assuming power, and claimed that the government is fulfilling election pledges one by one. The Prime Minister also highlighted the achievements her government made during the period, and pledged to complete the remaining tasks by the time when the government as per provision of the constitution will hand over power to the next caretaker government.

It is now, of course, the time for the people of Bangladesh to recall the election manifesto of BNP and the pledges made after the formation of the government. Some of the targets the

government committed to fulfill are: reduction of corruption and terrorism, attaining self sufficiency in food, control of price spiral, independence of judiciary, strengthening of parliamentary system, and above all, improving the welfare of the people in general through poverty alleviation, equity, and justice. In their election pledges, the BNP and its allies declared that their first and foremost task would be rooting out terrorism and corruption and keeping the price of essentials under control.

In the last four years, the government, of course, tried to fulfill some of its election pledges. The government's initiatives to ban polythene bags and to introduce CNG-run four-stroke autorickshaws to prevent environmental pollution, and recently its drive against adulterated food have been lauded and attracted public attention. But these achievements have been tarnished by some major failures. Unbridled corruption in all spheres have overshadowed these achievements.

It would not be unjust to say that the performance of the BNP-led government is very poor and not up to the satisfaction of the people, because its failures far outweigh its successes, and it finds itself in a difficult position to tackle the overall situation in near future.

In contrast to the government's commitment and pledges, in reality the situation has gone beyond control and rather worsened under the alliance rule. Most of the pledges remain unfulfilled, and the dream of the people has been smashed in the absence of good governance. The prices of essentials have skyrocketed beyond the common people's reach, causing alarming rise in living costs, and unemployment has forced people to live their lives in utter misery and distress. An unexpected rise of militancy has not only posed a great threat to people's life, but also threatened national security and caused

**The time is not yet out for the government to realise that the country is beset with some serious problems like price spiral, rise of militancy, rampant corruption and terrorist activities, and it is not possible for the government alone to tackle and solve all these problems. The government must take the opposition parties, particularly Awami League, into confidence, and should create an environment to sit together in the parliament or outside to talk and discuss all issues in order to come to an understanding on the major issues before the country.**

panic.

In matters of foreign policy, the country could not make any headway, rather the performance of the government is far from satisfactory. Many believe that because of some wrong steps the country has lost some good friends in the international community. Diplomatic relations with China and the European Union countries have become more strained. The government's recent refusal to the Tuesday Group's initiative to hold a seminar on election best practices has added fuel to the fire. The relationship with neighbouring countries, particularly with India, has also reached a record low in recent years.

Holding of free, fair, and neutral elections is considered to be the best indicator for good governance. But the elections held under the alliance rule in different local bodies and by-elections in several parliamentary seats surpassed all records of irregularity, and the influence of the ruling party has been widely criticised. The people still remember how the Dhaka-10 by-election was held last year, which broke all previous records of vote rigging.

In democracy, parliament happens to be sovereign, and is the only place to ensure people's right and government accountability. But unfortunately almost throughout the entire period of the last four years, the parliament remain more or less inactive. The main opposition Awami League continued to remain absent and the ruling party remain indifferent to the opposition's grievances. It should be kept in mind



PHOTO: STAR

The PM addresses the nation on October 10.

that the ruling party has the responsibility to make the parliament functional by creating an environment so that all the MPs can join and participate in discussions on all national issues.

The people of Bangladesh have witnessed with great anguish and concern the killings and assassinations of some important personalities, which have tarnished to a great extent the image of the government and the country, not only to the people, but to the outside world as well. Again, the

cowardly assassination attempt on the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina on August 21, on the British High Commissioner Mr. Anwar Choudhury, and others, are a few examples of terrorism occurring during the present regime. And the worst side is that the government could not undertake full-fledged judicial inquiry for the incident to bring the real culprits to book even a year after the grenade attacks. Investigators are still in the dark about the identity of those responsible for

the killing of former finance minister SAMS Kibria and others.

The country-wide series of bomb blasts on August 17 and bomb attack on courts in three districts on October 3 emerged as a big challenge for the government. Now the most pertinent question that arises is who will take the responsibility for these crimes against humanity. The government in no way can ignore these occurrences, and the ultimate responsibility is on the government to find out the culprits and give

# False hopes or achievements falsified?

MAJOR GENERAL Z A KHAN (RETD)

OF late I have felt compelled to write this piece after a long slumber. I am sure one would ask me why have I been so compelled? Because my conscious is not allowing me to let go unnoticed some of the facts and correct some partisan views that I read in one post-editorial by Professor Bayes published in the Daily Star on October 4.

My instant reaction after reading his article entitled Four years of False Hopes is that Prof Bayes has been biased and wrote his piece with a mindset to malign the government. If it was not for Prof Bayes, a luminary in our intellectual circuit, I would have quoted a couplet from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: "Oh judgment thou art fled to brutish beast and men have lost their reason." Conventional wisdom has it that when critically examining performance, one should consider both the positive and negative contentions of an issue.

I felt intrigued why Prof Bayes picked up only two of the many election pledges of the ruling party. Is it because he wanted to take the 'pleasure' of TI's positioning Bangladesh as number one among the countries that have been labeled as corrupt? I know we have short memory and that is why we fail to

remember what TI had to say five years ago. TI's one source of information is national dailies, and indeed I do not want to point out that not much of this information is substantiated by accuracy, not to speak of their being backed up by empirical research.

My pain was never so severe as when I read: "[S]ecuring first position and more so in successive years ... is always a point of pleasure." Have we forgotten that only this government had the sagacity to constitute an independent Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to stamp out corruption from our national life? One would agree that corruption that has been embedded in our lives will not tip toe out that soon. Endeavours are afoot at the government's behest, and now it is for us citizens to help the government to translate its pledge to reality. Let us not forget that only fools dig canals to bring in crocodiles to swallow them.

Prof Bayes in his wisdom has challenged the statements of election observers from home and abroad about the free and fair elections being rigged, but the fact that this was not so is why opposition engineered hartal (despite their promise not to call hartal even if they are in opposition) did not receive peoples' support and ended in fiasco.

I am not sure whether Prof Bayes

**I think those that have been misled by the biased publicity motivated statements deserve to be informed about what has been achieved during the last four years to give a quantum jump to the quality of life at present in Bangladesh. I believe that a lot more could be written to draw a comparison between the government of 1996-2001 and the present government, and this would humble the AL government.**

I read my article published in The Independent on September 8, 2000 entitled: Gold, Goons and Gun: The Dreaded 3Gs. Overwhelming our Politics? If he did, he would have seen a similar kind of observation then about the prevailing state of terrorism. One may recall how the state and government party MP-sponsored terror gripped our civic lives. One hardly dared to go out of the house after dusk. Houses and shops were looted at ease, bodies were severed with impunity, and black laws (public safety act) were enacted to punish those that voiced opposition. The AL government's reaction to the terror issue is a classic case of thief shouting the most, but surely AL government knew how the fable ended. People felt that perilous politics that prevailed at that time deserved a pause for propriety. So the people once again heralded that the government is not under one party, but under God, the law, and people -- by exercising their right of franchise in the hustings of 2001.

To curb terror that was on the upswing, the present government formed a force with a nod from parliament. Whoever wished to enjoy freedom of movement heaved a sigh of relief to see Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) ranks are moving to and fro, driving out anti-social elements that took the entire nation hostage. There was acrimony in the society to crush those that created a spectre of terror and unbalanced the social harmony.

The government's modest response to this unequivocal call to protect life and liberty of the people was the formation of Rab. There have been some unfortunate accidents in the discharge of the solemn duty of saving public lives that have been heckled in tens and thousands. Rab has disarrayed the miscreants backed by a few godfathers, some of whom were greeted by the highbrows of the AL government, while the current ruling party has not shown any mercy to anyone alleged to be a BNP man when caught by Rab, and never questioned Rab for those alleged BNP

men killed in cross-fire.

As a result of the present government's prudent resolve of forming Rab, all and sundry are making hay even during the Eid shopping spree. If, as suggested by Prof Bayes, mentors (or godfathers) are to be unearthed, then many that he knows would be in the firing line. This does not mean that the defaulters would enjoy a field day, as the present government is up and about to unmask those that wear the facade of Godman when they in reality are godfathers. So may I suggest that please: "Judge not lest you yourself be judged, maybe sooner than you think."

Militancy has gripped the world after 9/11. Bombs are hurled at all with no holds barred. Secured Green Zone of Baghdad, parliament in New Delhi, subway system in London, innocent Bali night club, NE Indian states, resorts of Cairo, mosques of Pakistan, anywhere carrying dignitaries, and everywhere. How many of the perpetrators of these heinous acts were brought to book? How many

of these victim countries have "oikyojote" with so-called religiously biased political parties? Weren't Pujya mandaps vandalised in Bangladesh before 2001? How many instances of bomb explosion have been unearthed between 1996-2001 in Bangladesh? Twice the leader of opposition during the last regime was fired at and many a times she was barricaded (I accompanied the leader on all those occasions) with impunity. At least this government has made honest effort to unearth the perpetrators by employing internationally famed FBI, MI 5 and Interpol.

The government's honest intention has passed the test of time, when after serial bombing most of those alleged to be involved have been caught in the dragnet. It does bring to fore the ruling government's resolve to bring to book the perpetrators of crime against its fellow citizens. Intellectuals are the conscience keepers of society and therefore one would expect them to be objective and to take measures to obviate antagonism that is partisan in

nature. Purging oneself from conscience can only mislead one to draw conclusions that are untoward, unwelcome, and unwieldy.

Who would better define a "failed state" but an economist? Why ride on someone else's back to convey one's own statement about Bangladesh being a failed state or not? I remember having read a news item in which the US named a few countries as failed states, and if my memory has not failed me, I did not see any mention of Bangladesh in that report. The last regime in India was formed predominantly by devout practicing Hindus who preached Hindutva where non-Hindus were sidelined. Did we call it a country of fundamentalists? The major partner of the alliance government is BNP with its own hopes, aspiration, and agenda, and smaller partners have been acting in cohesion and harmony with the major partner, which is anything but a fundamentalist party.

I think those that have been misled by the biased publicity motivated statements deserve to be informed about what has been achieved during the last four years to give a quantum jump to the quality of life at present in Bangladesh. In the late 1990s, Bangladesh was known to be one of the environmentally most polluted countries, a highly crime-prone

country, a country on a down-hill slide with poor liquidity situation, all time low foreign exchange reserve situation, and barely had any capacity to fund ADP from internal resources. Cheating in examinations became a festival, consumers rights were violated, food adulteration was rampant, and foreign policy was partially toe-chained.

This declining situation has been largely reversed by the BNP or steps are underway to undo what has been damaging for our nation. Although concerted efforts have been made at home and abroad to portray our country as a fundamentalist nation, there have been statements from Washington and London branding Bangladesh as a religiously moderate country, despite the letter mailed to US Secretary of State by 19 US Congressmen (pro-AL lobby) suggesting to call us as such, what a shame!

I believe that a lot more could be written to draw a comparison between the government of 1996-2001 and the present government, and this would humble the AL government. Those that made a desperate bid to falsify the achievements of the present government would regret the partisan view that they took.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## WORLD SIGHT DAY

# We need to do more to prevent blindness

PARVEZ BABUL

SOKINA (35) is a widow of Baniyari village in Manikganj. Her husband Belayet died of tuberculosis two years ago. He used to serve his family by working as a *gram police* (member of a village defence party). After the sudden death of her husband, Sokina saw no way to survive with her two children. As a result, Sokina had to start working as a maid servant at a salary of taka two hundred only per month, even without food. But she was unable to serve her family with that very small amount of money. As necessity knows no law, Sokina sent her son Sagor (10) to work as a hotel boy, ending his studies in class four. Food was given him in lieu of wages from the hotel, but no money.

Sokina's daughter Nazma (12) had been studying in class five. But getting an offer from a person to marry Nazma, Sokina eventually agreed with the proposal and arranged her daughter's marriage. Nazma could not continue her education. After two months of marriage, Nazma's husband demanded fifty thousands taka as a dowry. Of course Sokina was unable to pay that and her son-in-law disappeared. Last month Nazma informed Sokina that she has been pregnant for one and a half months. So, definitely this is a trouble upon trouble! Due to these unbearable sorrows, Sokina lost her common sense of what to do, and cries silently without noticing others.

In fact, these types of sorrowful real stories are very common for poor women and children in our country like Sokina

and Nazma.

Compounding the poverty that has pushed them to this level of indescribable inhuman situation, is that due to micro-nutrient deficiencies, they are descending towards blindness (visually impairment).

As is common, Sokina has been suffering from the problem of night-blindness due to vitamin A deficiency. She cannot see at night. I asked her what she eats. Sokina replied that the family eats *kochu* and *loti* (wild plants) and sometimes *dal* (pulse) with rice, as she cannot buy vitamin A-rich vegetables, eggs, fish, etc. Thus Sokina is slowly going blind and the same consequence is waiting for her anemic pregnant daughter Nazma.

So, it is very clear to all of us that the existing abject poverty of our country is throwing the needy into an unwanted hell where their sorrows, sufferings, hunger, and diseases are limitless and correlated with one another. 30,000 children are dying every day due to poverty in developing countries like Bangladesh, and most of the poor people in third world countries are women and children.

Unicef has pointed out that poverty contributes to malnutrition, which in turn is a contributing factor in over half of the under-five children's deaths in developing countries. Some 300 million children go to bed hungry every day. Only eight per cent of those children are victims of famine or other emergency situations.

But more than 90 percent children are suffering from long-term malnourishment and micro-nutrient

**National eye care policy (2005) of Ministry of Health of Bangladesh and Bangladesh National Council for the Blind highlighted that about 40,000 children are blind in Bangladesh. Six million people have been suffering from low vision and 150,000 people are getting blind newly every year. More than 12,000 children are suffering from unnecessary blindness due to unoperated cataract and want of surgical care.**

deficiency. We should remove the problem of contaminated water and arsenic to make availability of fresh water, because contaminated water causes 80 percent of our diseases, along with diarrhoea. Diarrhoea causes malnutrition. Malnutrition causes night-blindness. As it turns out, the majority of our problems and diseases are inter-linked.

If we want to remove poverty, ensure food security and to provide health facilities, especially to women and children up to grassroots level, we will have to work very urgently. Otherwise, the goals of PRSP and the MDGs will be treated as only lip service.

Sokina and her daughter Nazma are aware through television and local people that green leafy vegetables prevent vitamin A deficiency and night-blindness. That's why Sokina suggested that if women and children get training and seeds, they can grow homestead vegetables and food, which will be helpful for them to earn money, as well as getting needed vitamins to prevent night-blindness to keep their eyes well.

Helen Keller International (HKI), Bangladesh has been implementing homestead gardening/food production projects in partnership with the government and NGOs since 1988.

Surveys of HKI revealed that children of Bangladesh eat only 46 grams of leafy vegetables daily compared to the recommended intake of 200 grams. Research and evidence shows that a homestead garden can provide required nutrition for six members of a family. HKI highlighted that prevalence of vitamin A deficiency is very high in Bangladesh in the case of pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children.

Three approaches are urgently needed to improve vitamin A status. These are: 1) Vitamin A supplementation; 2) Food fortification with vitamin A and other micro-nutrients; and 3) Diversification of diet. Vitamin A deficiency is a major health problem in Bangladesh. Post-partum vitamin A capsule supplementation is promoted to boost the vitamin A stores of women after pregnancy and to increase the vitamin A content of breast milk. But distributing vitamin A capsules to the women and children in our country covers less than five (among women) and about fifty percent (among children) only. One hundred percent women and children needs to be covered by distributing vitamin A capsules urgently through concerted efforts with the stakeholders

and increasing awareness.

So the seeds of vitamin A rich vegetables and a very small amount of money as a subsidy can help to create homestead gardens and a healthy lifestyle for the poor. Thus it can help the people save their eyesight. The government, concerned donors, as well as the NGOs, should come forward to take and initiative to implement more projects on homestead food production.

We should remove the vicious circle of malnutrition through eradicating poverty, producing homestead vegetables and foods, and ensuring food security. Sustainable solution is needed earlier to solve the problems of backwardness in the society such as illiteracy, superstition, etc.

The visually impaired or blind have the right to get proper treatment from the state. Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and relevant sectors should ensure to provide necessary treatment, education, Braille text books, rehabilitation and employment to the permanent blind. The right to see is a human right. So, the blind should get back their sight to include them in the mainstream of development through

self-reliance. Blindness is a public health problem of Bangladesh. More attention is needed to control blindness soon. The terrible truth is that every five seconds one person goes blind and every minute a child goes blind in poor countries like our Bangladesh.

If national and international efforts to avert blindness are not intensified, the number of people with severe visual disability will be double by the year 2020. That's why World Health Organization (WHO) designed the Vision 2020 program: The Right to Sight, which was launched on February 18, 1999. Objectives of Vision 2020 program is to: = Increase awareness of blindness as a major public health issue. = Control the major causes of blindness. = Train ophthalmologists and other personnel to provide eye care. = Create an infrastructure to manage the problem. = Develop appropriate technology.

Vision 2020 is an international program founded with active participation of UN agencies, governments, eye care organisations, health professionals, philanthropic institutions and individuals working together in a global partnership to accomplish the goal by the year 2020. Among others, Helen Keller Interna-

tional (HKI) is one of the founding members of Vision 2020. HKI is also one of the implementing partners of the Seeing is Believing program. The government of Bangladesh signed onto the Vision 2020 program on November 30, 2000.

WHO mentioned that 80 percent of the blindness could be prevented taking necessary steps timely. In accordance with the blindness and low vision prevalence survey of Bangladesh, 85 percent of blindness occurs due to cataracts. So, strengthening our determination using the means we have, can show the light to the blind.

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10,000 children are blind due to corneal scarring, which could be entirely prevented through effective primary health care and primary eye care services in the community. Community based preventive measures are required to prevent blindness, which is related to Vitamin A deficiency, diarrheal disease, malnutrition, measles, etc.

Cataract is treatable, but the fact is: the poor people are unable to pay the cost of treatment and operation. The majority of eye patients have been suffering for a

long time because they do not have money. There is also a superstition that blindness is a curse instead of a disease. Within the poor communities, the visually impaired are doubly disadvantaged. So the demand of the day is that eye treatment must be totally free of cost for the poor and to make sure that they get treatment in each Union Council level health centre (because the distance of upazilla health complex is a big factor in not getting treatment).

Findings of several studies noted that the majority of the female population do not receive health services due to poverty, lack of decision making power, negligence, non-cooperation of male members, ignorance and some other socio-economic factors. That's why children and women should be given first priority in offering primary eye care services and treatment with a sympathetic mind.

In closing, let us not forget that October 15 is World White Cane Safety Day. We should make awareness among the people about the importance of using white cane and its users. The sighted people ought to offer helping hands to the visually impaired. The white cane is helpful to make the people alert to fulfill the humanitarian appeal to our fellow men and women.

We can recall the quotation of Helen Keller: "Every one of us is blind and deaf until our eyes are opened to our fellow men, until our ears hear the voice of humanity."

Parvez Babul is a journalist and columnist.