

Stop this farcical reshuffle

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NAZRUL ISLAM

THE reshuffle in the civil and police administration so far has been absolutely a part of a sinister design to befool the countrymen and rig the upcoming general elections. The aim of the hurried changes is nothing but an attempt to create an impression in the public mind that the caretaker government is taking measures to de-politicize the highly politicized administrative machineries.

But let us see who are behind the ongoing reshuffling of the administration. It is the establishment secretary who is mainly responsible for bringing changes in the administration. The man who is sitting at the helm of the Establishment Ministry is an identified and well-known pro-BNP-Jamaat element. He is among one of the beneficiaries of the 2001

elections and became secretary from deputy secretary just within three and a half years.

He along with his other colleagues who are also now sitting in various key positions have been reached the highest positions of the administration, superseding their seniors, and trampling the set rules and regulations of promotion. Just a couple of days before the departure of the BNP-Jamaat government, the establishment secretary was posted there in a calculative manner.

And I would say he is a loyal person who is showing his cent percent integrity to his masters BNP-Jamaat leaders. He was prized by the BNP-Jamaat government and in return, he is repaying them by serving their purposes sitting at the top of the administration implementing their designs. I salute him ... at least he did not

forget his masters.

I think, none except the immediate-past ruling parties' leaders, would raise objection in making the administration and Election Commission neutral for holding a credible election. Neutralisation of the administration and Election Commission is a must to hold the election in a free and fair manner. But both the administration and Election Commission were so much politicised that it is very difficult to de-politicise it in an arbitrary way.

It is the collective responsibility of the caretaker government's advisors who are oath-bound to remain neutral and not favour or dis-favour anybody in any circumstance, to neutralize the administration and Election Commission. They would have to create a level-playing field where all the political parties find an equal opportunity. The electors also would have to

find an atmosphere where they can exercise their voting rights without any intimidation and obstruction.

This year, it would be the toughest job for the advisors to crate a level playing field due to a number of reasons:

(1) The civil and police administrations have never ever been politicized like the past five years. Not only the identified dissidents, but also hundreds of neutral officials and employees were persecuted, deprived from promotions, and in many cases sent homes from their services.

(2) Those who were directly or indirectly associated in the 2001 elections (mostly of 1979 batch) were unduly given benefits through giving promotions, lucrative postings and allowing them to do whatever they wanted. All of them are now secretaries of the government. Soon after the 2001 elections, they were brought to the key positions of the administration and during the last five years they have prepared the administrations in such a way that none except the officials of their choices could go to the key positions considered to be vital in manipulating the election results.

(3) In doing so, they harassed and deprived many officers from

their due promotions, and the deprived ones are apparently not in a position (such as secretary, joint secretary or deputy secretary) to go to the key posts if the caretaker government does not take special measures to elevate them in the positions that they deserved in a normal course.

(4) In 2001, the caretaker government chief Justice Latifur Rahman assumed the office having a mindset and doing a lot of homework (probably in collusion with the then dissidents in the administration). That is why, within an hour of his swearing-in, he had transferred a dozen of officials and placed officials of his choice at the helm of the civil and police administrations. And after setting the officials of his choice at the top of the administration, he did not have to look into the affairs of the changes that were made by them. But the scenario is totally different this year.

So far the changes in the administration were no doubt made at the dictate of the bureaucrats sitting at the top positions both at the President's Office and Establishment Ministry. Some of the political parties dubbed these changes as eyewash, but actually these were done to achieve a

definite goal i.e. help a particular group reap benefit by manipulating the election process.

Because, in the existing electoral system, the returning and assistant returning officers, presiding and polling officers, and members of the law enforcing agencies have ample opportunity in altering the election results, particularly at the constituencies where there would be a neck and neck fight.

That is why the caretaker government has to bring changes in the civil, police and other administrations in a judicious and even-handed manner if it actually wants that a free and fair election is held in the country. They would have to listen to the deprived officials and consider the demands placed by the opposition judiciously.

During the 2001 election, the then opposition parties did not have to place any demands to create a level-playing field in the administration. The caretaker chief himself had taken the responsibility. But this time, the head of the caretaker government, who is also the president himself, is a partisan man.

Moreover, the president has kept all the vital portfolios and divisions

under him. It is naturally assumed that the president would act under the guidance of the officials of the President's Office and Establishment Ministry where all the key positions are being controlled by the BNP-Jamaat elements. On the other hand, the parties those are demanding to create a level-playing field do not have access to the President's Office or the Establishment Ministry. They are barking on the streets only. Is it believable that the bureaucrats sitting in the two offices (President and Establishment Ministry) would voluntarily bring neutral officials to the key positions?

There is no reason to believe it. The way they behaved during the last five years, we can confidently say that those bureaucrats would only serve their masters who prized them. We, the members of the public, always reprimand our politicians for being corrupt, irrational, and doing all evils. If politicians are responsible for doing evils, a section of the bureaucrats can be considered the ones to show the way to the politicians to do so.

The election ahead is very crucial for continuing democracy in Bangladesh. But the election

must be a credible one. People would not accept any election if it is held without creating a congenial atmosphere and level-playing field. Without creating level-playing field, any attempt to hold election would only push the country towards chaos and uncertainty.

It is the obligation of the caretaker government to ensure an atmosphere where everybody can participate in the election. The advisors might have different opinions but they have got an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to present the nation a free and free election.

And in doing so, they must not have to rely on the bureaucrats sitting at the helms of the administration. They should first remove the partisan elements from the offices of the President, Establishment Ministry, and Home Ministry. They must stop the ongoing transfer of the officials designed to produce a pseudo impression of creating level-playing field.

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All in the family

MANZURUL MANNAN

THE extraordinary political crisis that engulfed the country on the eve of hand-over of power to caretaker government has established a simple fact of political reality: our political leadership has agreed only to make the country politically, economically, culturally, and religiously more vulnerable.

The deep distrust among politicians hinders ideational and symbolic consensus for the good governance. Politicians are talking in the language of violence and letting loose their supporters to launch a mob beating. The present crisis is the outcome of the gradual failure of institution-building over the period of 35 years of independence.

Politicians are striving for democracy in which they have little faith. Again and again in our political history, politicians questioned the basic political process which not only groomed them, but also buttressed their existence. Whoever – Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiyo Party, etc – forms government, they work to erode institutions and organizations of state, which in turn contribute to weaken the democratic foundation of the state.

We have seen that political parties in government come and go, but their myopic policies and political culture create dynamics that further grind down the institutional values. Over the last 35 years of independence, a political pattern has evolved in which both Awami League and BNP are the opposite sides of the same coin.

When they hold power; they work to erode constitution and institutions under the facade of protecting those. And when they are in opposition; they voice to protect constitution in most undemocratic way manifested in hartals and street violence. They rely on people's vote to form government, but in reality it is the people who ultimately suffer.

Politicians have introduced contradiction into ambiguity to shape the democracy. The contradiction is the result between the

public image of political families nurtured by cultural consideration and state institutions that require flourishing of professionalism.

The families of triumvirate Zia-Khaleda-Tareque or Mujib-Hasina-Joy enjoy considerable public support and many vote not only for Awami League (AL) or Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), but also to Khaleda or Hasina. These supports create a condition for the rise of tribesmen cheered on by kin and loyalists whose relationship is shaped by a culture of primordial loyalties.

The family and kinship ties are so deeply rooted in that it is neither surprising nor necessary Machiavellian to observe that families have used parties to enhance their personal standing and influence, and that parties have relied on kinship structures instead of binding ideologies and principle. Except Zia regime (1977-1981), the core decision-making structure of all regimes of Mujib (1971-1975), Ershad (1982-1990), Hasina (1996-2001), and Khaleda Zia (1990-1996, 2001-2006) are influenced and controlled by their kin. The prevalence of kinship is not only observed at national level, but also it pervades even at the local level politics.

The politicians nurture and reproduce the kinship values at various strata of democratic institutions. Major political parties, which vow to establish democracy, lack inner-party democracy because of the family based kinship politics. Family politics spawn despotic behaviour and authoritarianism instead of democratic practice within political parties. Ironically, it is the people who vote for despotic political parties through the electoral system that Bangladesh polity offers.

Moreover, the problem of democratic governance is that political parties with respective tribesmen form governments. Primordial loyalties and kin politics influence the core decision-making structure of these political parties. When political party assumes the responsibility of government, they establish political supremacy over state-

institutions and public servants works at the behest of political tribesmen. The implication of kinship has two deep implications for democracy and state institutions.

First, ruling parties transform the core decision-making structure of government into a political club. Such political club is glued by kinship and primordial loyalty only to alienate many dedicated party members whose contribution to party development is significant. Many become disenchanted as they do not get access to political club, resulting in the inner party revolts. Revolving members question the credibility of the party leadership. Further, the family domination erodes their support base and they lose their credibility in governing the country, deterring in formation of consensus for institutional stability.

Secondly, the dominance of political families and their loyalists at the hub of power center produce a negative impact on the healthy development of achievement oriented democratic institutions. When tribesmen form a government, they insist public servants to express their loyalties to kin and families of tribesmen rather than to people.

Their loyalties to tribesmen play important role in career advancement rather than the application of their professional judgments, skills and expertise. The future career of public servants depends not on their professional performances and experience, but on the degree of loyalty to the tribesmen and their families. This has in turn deeply polarized bureaucracy into partisan politics. Now inefficient but loyal public servants are rewarded.

As a result, tribesmen protect corrupt kin to accumulate wealth and allow kin to interfere in the governance of the state. Thus, political families play instrumental role in pulverizing state institutions. The continuous interferences make the state dysfunctional and unaccountable to people. Overall inference is that the state's prime institutions turn into defaulters to banks and corruption encompasses the police and judiciary. In the process, the moral authority of the state and govern-

ment to rule the country is being questioned.

The inability of tribesmen to go beyond the narrow boundary of family and party politics dissuade them from understanding that democracy nurtures political plurality and requires the creation of cultural and political space for accommodating diverse and difference of opinions. However, in our case, democracy means the right to overthrow, negation of opinions, absence of respect, imposition of personal whims on other, etc.

Today, democracy means removal of opposition from power and not the selection of competent persons among the competing candidates. On the contrary, Bangladesh is a pluralistic society that is built on several competing value systems. However, ironically these competing value systems spawn a process in societies which fail to evolve value pluralism embedded in ideational consensus.

So long the present system of democracy continues to evolve, Bangladeshis will experience the unabated accusations and character assassinations by one tribe against the other and the legitimacy of government will be questioned at regular interval. For example, in 1990, political parties mobilized people against Ershad regime and he was forced to resign. In 1995, BNP was coaxed to go for election only to experience defeat in 1996 election. In 2001, Awami League thought they would win the election and refused to accept the election result. In 2006, violence was unleashed only to destabilize the nation.

In the final analysis, until and unless all interested parties and professionals meet together for consensus in deciding economic, political, cultural, and religious discourses for the future governance, it is the people who will continue to be at the mercy of the political whims, and democratic values will further erode.

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Republican machine can be beaten

JOSHUA HOLLAND

LESS than a week, Americans will go to the polls. It could be like other recent elections -- votes that recalled Shakespeare's line about a lot of "sound and fury, signifying nothing" -- or it could be an immense, cleansing wave washing away the worst period of one-party rule in American history.

The two parties will do what they will, but ordinary citizens will largely determine which scenario will play out.

It may well be a historic moment. Next week has the potential to usher in a rare electoral realignment -- the kind of political shift that comes about once in a generation. The administration's disastrous consistency in everything it touches, from Iraq to Katrina to Terri Schiavo, could do for the progressive movement what Reagan's "revolution" did for the New Right -- move a whole generation of voters.

Analysts from across the spectrum agree that the Republican coalition is facing a perfect storm; it's not just the meat grinder Iraq has become and the boondoggle that's plagued its reconstruction. It's not just a host of scandals -- sexual, financial, and electoral. It's not just an economy that's growing in aggregate but hasn't put more money into most people's pockets. It's not just the four million Americans who have fallen below the poverty line or the five million more Americans who lack health insurance since Bush was sworn in six years ago. It's all of those things combined with a profound sense of insecurity as health care and tuition costs skyrocket, jobs are shed overseas, Americans are neck-deep in debt, and the country's global leadership is being challenged even by staunch allies.

The reality is that these things are by no means all the Republicans' fault. But reality is

less important than perception, and people tend to blame the party in power. This year, after four years of unchecked Republican dominance in DC, people know which party holds the strings.

For all of these reasons, the environment is ripe for a rare shift in the fundamental balance of partisan power. Congressional Quarterly calls the environment "toxic" for Republicans, and the Democrats, smelling blood, have fielded more credible challengers this year than in any cycle in recent memory.

Stuart Rothenberg of the Rothenberg Political Report, says that "dangerously big waves can be very strong and very unpredictable" and, this year, "national numbers suggest a truly historic tidal wave."

With the national environment being as it is -- and given the last round of redistricting, which limits possible Democratic gains -- Republicans probably are at risk to lose as few as 15 seats and as many as 60 seats, based on historical results. Given how the national mood compares to previous wave years and to the GOP's 15-seat House majority, Democratic gains almost certainly would fall to the upper end of that range.

At this writing, there are 60 races that are separated by single digits in the polls, including some in deeply "red" states and others in districts that have been so gerrymandered that they wouldn't be in play during a normal election year.

But the situation is extraordinarily fluid. As of the last FEC filing (Oct 18), the Republicans still held a \$17 million cash-on-hand advantage, despite a surge in contributions to the Dems. The Los Angeles Times reported that Karl Rove has an "11th-hour plan" to announce millions of dollars in new pork projects for districts with vulnerable Republicans. And the GOP has had enormous success with its sophisticated and pin-point accu-

rate get-out-the-vote infrastructure.

Ultimately, like all elections in recent years, getting the right voters to the polls will be the difference between Republicans holding on to the House (and/or the Senate), Democrats taking a slim majority or Dems building a coalition large enough to get things done. Just a few points at the ballot box could make all the difference.

In 1994, Republicans came away with a 54-seat swing in an epic blow-out, but they did it with just 51.5 percent of the popular vote. 25 seats were determined by less than 10,000 votes, and 15 seats -- enough to give them the majority -- were decided by just 52,000 votes combined.

That's why organizers are stressing how important it is for the grass roots to give everything they can in this final week. Doing so is easier than ever because of the emergence of a nascent but growing liberal infrastructure organized via the internet -- the "netroots" -- are starting to have a real impact by giving average people the tools they need to share ideas, pool resources, and influence the media's narratives. Each cycle they've grown a little bit in sophistication, and each cycle they've had just a little bit more influence than they did in the previous one.

Organizers are calling for people to do more than vote. MoveOn needs volunteers to Call for Change, a project that's enabled its members to call 85,000 Democrats who voted in the presidential elections but not in past midterms. A coalition including the Progressive Majority is organizing a grass-roots get-out-the-vote effort and needs volunteers.

In a turn-out election, just getting friends to the polls can make a huge difference. Before the 2004 elections, AlterNet suggested its readers make a list of friends and loved ones and take personal

responsibility for getting them to the polls.

Clearly, a Democratic win is not a magic bullet that will solve America's problems -- the hole dug in recent years is far too deep, and much work will remain, whatever the result next Tuesday. But the Democrats have promised that in their first four days in control of Congress they'll introduce new lobbying rules, raise the minimum wage by more than 40 percent and broaden the types of stem-cell research that are eligible for federal funding.

They'll move to put the 9/11 Commission's recommendations in place, cut interest rates on student loans in half, allow the government to negotiate directly with the pharmaceutical companies for lower drug prices and bring back the pay-as-you-go budgeting rules that helped turn around the deficit in the 1990s.

According to Gallup, Americans expect all of these efforts from Democrats and overwhelmingly approve of them. According to Nancy Pelosi, the would-be speaker of the House, they'll pay for the agenda by rolling back some of the Bush tax cuts for those above "a certain level" -- she mentioned annual incomes of \$250,000 or \$300,000 to the Washington Post -- and ending subsidies to "Big Oil."

It's a different government with an opposition party that has a seat at the table. Bush's first six years were with a compliant Congress have made the prospect of his last two mired in gridlock and investigations look incredibly appealing.

Even more importantly, perhaps, are the psychological stakes. Democrats and progressives need a win, and they need it badly. They need to know that funky voting machines and gay marriage amendments and Karl Rove's supposed "genius" are not infallible -- that the GOP machine can be beaten.

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Between hell and high-water

OMAR KHASRU

THE turmoil, trauma and mayhem in the last few days evoked the distant, or maybe not too distant, memories of 1971. There are some parallels, waste of precious time and squandering of rare opportunity with endless but vain dialogue between two opposing sides that eventually led to nowhere, perhaps by design, followed by widespread street agitation among them. The street agitation seems to have ended in a never-never land this time around, with worrisome and uncertain aftermath. The eventual and last act of the political discord play is yet to be enacted.

Back then in 1971, even in the tense, violent, and immensely difficult and complex situation, there was enormous hope and exalted expectations. The struggle, sacrifice, and the loss of life, property and the honour of countless women eventually led to

liberation from foreign occupation and alien control and independence of the dear old motherland in 1971. The scenario is much different now.

There is no foreign or extraterrestrial enemy. What we have is basically an intense, somewhat irrational, rivalry and power struggle between two camps of similar ideology with the main difference in personnel and individuals. The immediate past party in power is hell-bent on clinging to all the perks and illicit and extra-constitutional authority and retake the virtual unfettered control and influence associated with political rule by any means possible. The party in power before that is unwavering and steadfast to crawl back to the metaphoric milk and honey of clout and the importance and influence they relished in 1996-2001 at any cost. We, the people, are held hostage and caught in the vice grip of the conflicting forces.

This may all seem like a balance-

ing act between the two unsavoury and grubby competing groups, very similar to the usual practice of preaching, proclamations, and proselytizing of *The Daily Star* that many of us through the years have found perplexing, inexplicable, and aggravating.

The onus must necessarily be on the last ruling coterie because when at the helm of power our politicians indulge in unrestrained, endless and ad nauseam misuse, misdeeds, infractions, and wrongdoing. The successive regimes in the last 15 years have done so ever increasingly but none so brazenly, atrociously, blatantly, and intensely than the recently ended Jamaat and BNP-led 4-party alliance. The regime excelled in boundless capacity for all that is wrong under the sun and contrary to any semblance of good governance.

The abysmal failure to control the horrendous law and order situation, put any lid on corruption and reign in the spiraling prices of

essentials coupled with limitless extra constitutional power and influence peddling by the Hawa Haban are living testimony to the dreadful record in running the affairs of the state and aversion to live up to the assorted pious election pledges.

The Jamaat-BNP unholy nexus logically should be shunted aside for the same set of reasons and by the same rational reasoning, only much insidious in degree and magnitude, as was the case with the previous Awami League-led regime. Many BNP backers are fond of saying that the Awami option will not be all hunky-dory. They may be right. But when presented with a Hobson's choice, you have to discard the last bunch of troublemakers and last real menace to peace, happiness, harmony and contentment as a punishment as well as the fondest hope that things will get better.

It is obvious that the BNP-led alliance realizes it fully well, hence

the desperate move of bringing the despicable Ershad into the group and all sorts of shenanigans to retain power by hook or by crook. So we now have the president, old, infirm and incapable, also as the head of the caretaker regime, surpassing, overlooking, and hopping over three other viable and preferable options to find an acceptable caretaker regime chief. Richard Nixon was booted out from the presidency in 1974 for much lesser violation of the US constitution.

Every wrong, rash, reckless and unwarranted decision will always find feckless intellectual backers to try to justify, rationalize, or equivocate the indefensible act. In this case the president received a lightning quick nod from the attorney general, a party and partisan BNP man, not necessarily a constitutional expert, and Dr Borhanuddin Khan, dean of the Law School at Dhaka University. The latter spared no effort in trying

vainly and most unconvincingly to explain the correctness of the president assuming the mantle of caretaker chief. The knowledgeable and erudite dean obviously considers the audience as a bunch of Neanderthal idiots, as Dr Zafar Iqbal pointed out in Prothom Alo. The politicized party hack faculty members like him do incredible harm to the respective educational institutions, their students and higher education in general. All this is there for all to see.

But Dr Borhanuddin Khan is not alone. There are plenty of seemingly literate and cultured persons on both sides of the fence who demonstrate eternal allegiance, and abiding trust and confidence, in one party or the other, often not hesitating to step on the toes of those who try to bring a semblance of logic, rationality, reasoning, and impartiality to the heated political discourse. If you happen to be a neutral observer and prognosticator, it is akin to walking in the middle

of the road of a busy thoroughfare with fast traffic about to run you over from both directions. And you, as an impartial arbiter, will get it from both sides.

Some of us face this routinely from the avid and die-hard supporters of both BNP and Awami League. A recent "ride from hell" in a car with a passionate and fanatic Awami League supporter was a most unpleasant experience for me. A retired engineer, sober and sensible about most things in life, but with a blind irrational spot of political skullduggery, he made a broadside and personal attack when I mentioned that, while I was fervently anti-BNP, I was not passionately and unconditionally pro-Awami like him. This experience, while exceedingly repulsive, is unfortunately not that uncommon. Neither are people like Dr Borhanuddin Khan and the retired engineer I encountered.

There is a tremendous lack of political understanding and toler-

ance, and civilized and sophisticated political culture. This may be a worldwide phenomenon that once led Clinton to lament to his hardcore, indoctrinated, ideological neo-con Republican rivals: "I am your political opponent, not your enemy."

For the rival political camps, for their hacks and henchmen, supporters and sympathizers, toadies and cronies, let the mantra be the age-old adage of Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Let us pray for sanity and logic, an enlightened sense of reasoning and empathy, a righteous notion of right over wrong, and a modicum of political tolerance and altruism. And finally, let us fervently and single-mindedly aspire and aim for a free and fair election. That is, after all, what the ruckus and cacophonous blare is all about.

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