

Emergence of a new challenger for BNP?

ABMS ZAHUR

EMERGENCE of a new political party, Liberal Democratic Party, may be welcomed by the moderate thinking people of Bangladesh because such people are, truly speaking, frustrated by the activities of the largest political parties, namely Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League.

Conscious people consider the present BNP as a conglomerate of people interested only in becoming rich quickly by hook or by crook. It has become an assemblage of opportunists. As it appears, they do not think much, either of their own party, or of the people, or of the country.

This was certainly not the dream and desire of its founder, President Zia. He fought for independence of the country. He dreamt of a Bangladesh where people might live in peace, prosperity, prestige, and harmony. Though out and out a soldier, he could appreciate the value of people's freedom. Unfortunately, his strong desire to please everyone (civilians and non-civilians) cost him his life.

In President Zia, the people of Bangladesh lost a true patriot and a great freedom fighter. His vision was not only a happy and prosperous Bangladesh, but also to establish peace and harmony in South Asia to ameliorate the economic condition of the sub-region where exists the largest concentration of poor people in the world.

His assassination in 1981 could have ended the future of his party had his wife Khaleda Zia

along with his cronies and well-wishers not tried hard to keep BNP alive against the onslaught of President Ershad who lured a large number of front ranking leaders from BNP.

It was indeed an outstanding performance for BNP in forming the first democratic government after Ershad's abdication. Despite lack of experience, it may be said that overall performance of the regime (at least during the first half) was satisfactory. After its defeat at the polls in 1996, it appears, BNP concentrated more on grabbing power than in promoting its ideology as proounded by Zia.

We were surprised to see that instead of pointing towards the follies of AL regime of 1996-2001 it started following them with a sense of vengeance. Thus after its victory in the election of 2001, it became a different BNP. The high command of BNP started concentrating on amassing huge wealth for the party and some of the leaders started making fortunes for themselves. Thus people started losing confidence in the front-ranking leaders of BNP.

A peculiar political and administrative development has become conspicuous with the emergence of Hawa Bhaban, known as the seat of alternate government.

It is said that without the blessing from the Bhaban, no big deal could be executed. Thus two sets of ministers are seen, one blessed by Hawa Bhaban and the other without it. Such an arrangement promoted corruption in the name of collection of huge com-

mission from the big companies doing business in Bangladesh.

It may be relevant to point out that huge investment in the power sector has been made in developing transmission lines and not in increasing production of electricity. What kind of development is this? Can we not conclude that such a farce can only benefit a few commission agents, suppliers, contractors, and concerned officers, certainly not the people?

Another big corruption case is the ex-communication minister's CNG scam. In both these cases close involvement of Tareque Rahman has been reported in different newspapers of the country.

In regard to Awami League, we may have to admit that it deserves credit mainly for attaining independence of Bangladesh. Its founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a great leader. Despite some of his human failures, he is certainly the greatest of Bangladeshis. In fact, there cannot be any comparison with him with any other Bangladesh political leader.

Awami League, as the oldest political party in Bangladesh, faced many problems since its birth in 1949. During the military regime of Ayub Khan (1958-68) its followers and supporters faced difficult times because it was the only political party which fought for the rights of the people, economic emancipation of the people, political independence of the people of the then East Pakistan. Due to some serious political blunders and lack of experience in running the administration of a war-

ravaged nation Sheikh Mujib had to sacrifice his life in 1975.

One of the greatest blunders (perhaps the greatest blunder) for Sheikh Mujib was the formation of Baksal regime in a situation when the economy of the country had still not recovered from the ravages of military rule and war.

Before reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country could be completed, it was sheer folly to impose one party rule on people who love freedom of thought.

After the assassination of President Zia, we were void of able leadership capable of leading a seriously problem-ridden country like Bangladesh. Thus an opportunity came before our armed forces and the then chief of armed forces Lt Gen Ershad grabbed power through a bloodless coup in 1982.

Like many military dictators, Ershad formed a political party, the Jatiya Party, with almost similar manifesto as that of BNP. At its initial stage Ershad tried to attract as many front ranking politicians as possible. This caused maximum damage to BNP because of its lack of mature and seasoned politicians. During the Ershad regime, the members of the party remained mainly as a group of people loyal to Ershad who never liked to develop democratic practices in Bangladesh.

It would rather not be realistic to expect an efficiently functioning democratic institution in the country which suffered military dictatorship for long 15 years. Despite lack of political and administrative experience and weakened party structure we may say that BNP under Khaleda could run the state

rather satisfactorily because of sincere and dedicated support from some seasoned political leaders closely associated with President Zia (like Dr Badruddoza and Col. Oli).

But the pattern of politics of BNP started since the later part of 2000 because of entry of a large number of new leaders. To them, concern for the benefit of the people became secondary. Because of the party's reliance on this class, the high command of the party started dreaming about becoming rich as quickly as possible (through means fair or foul). If the political elite of a party become too corrupt, with no moral or ideological compulsion, it is bound to lose control over administration. As such, it is no wonder that the BNP failed to control corruption in bureaucracy.

BNP no longer depends on people's love or respect, it concentrates on purchasing of votes, and, where necessary, use of muscle power. To capture power again it has thoroughly politicized the administration, Election Commission, and, to a certain extent, the lower judiciary. Even the chief of the CTG is a BNP man.

We are not yet sure as to whether there will be a national election as scheduled in January, 2007 because the 14-party alliance led by AL will participate in the election only if the following actions are taken by the CTG:

- Reformation and reconstitution of Election Commission.
- Removal of identified politicized administrators and police personnel from critical posi-



tions.

- Correction of voter list to make it acceptable.

Apart from the above demands there are other demands of AL and LDP (submitted to the chief of CTG). AL has given ultimatum to the chief CTG to complete the task for implementing demands by November 10, else it will start countrywide blockade from today.

In such a political scenario, we see the emergence of the Liberal Democratic Party with secular outlook. Though mainly composed of dissident BNP members, it has already been

welcomed by the minority communities. It will energize and democratize the BNP because of loss of members and supporters and the threat of exposure of corruption of some eminent members of BNP.

All democracy loving Bangladeshis may welcome LDP as a democratic, secular party though it may not be possible to make any prediction about its future at this stage. However, following factors may be considered for its bright future.

- If it can undertake some positive actions against corruption in the society, it will attract attention of common non-party people.

ABMS Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

We want to believe the president

NAZRUL ISLAM

HE president-cum-caretaker government head Prof Iajuddin Ahmed in an address to the senior officials of the armed forces on Wednesday said: "I firmly believe I'll be able to present a free, neutral, and acceptable election, through concerted efforts of all."

The conviction of the honourable president sounds reassuring and we the members of the public also hope or at least want to believe that that president would create an atmosphere where all major political parties can participate in the election and people can cast their votes without any fear.

But at the same time we are doubtful about the good intentions that the president expressed, as he is yet to act in a direction that would create a level-playing field for all the parties desiring to participate in the upcoming election.

It was the natural expectation of the people that the caretaker government that assumed office amidst a chaotic situation in the country at the fag end of October would quickly create an atmosphere conducive to holding the next general election in a free and fair manner, and that the politically appointed president, who has taken the additional responsibility of the head of the caretaker government would act neutrally.

It is a rare opportunity for the

president, the highest office of the country, to demonstrate his judicious behaviour to the nation by acting impartially. But during the last 12 days, little has transpired in that direction.

I think, like us, the president must be aware of the fact that the immediate past government has created an uneven field in the administration and media, which play a crucial role in the election. In fact, the field level administrative and law enforcing officials are the kingpins who can manipulate the election results.

The present set of officials must be replaced by ones who are non-partisan. If not possible, a check and balance should be made in the field level administration so that none could play foul.

But this act is not possible under the incumbent establishment and home secretaries, who are well-known partisan persons. This has been proved by the changes so far made in both the police and civil administrations. The CTG chief is still relying on the officials loyal to particular parties to create a level-playing field in the administration, leading to doubt in the mind of the people.

Who does not know that media, especially the electronic media, are very powerful in influencing the people's way of thinking. But not only most of the private TV channels, but the state-owned Bangladesh Television and

Bangladesh Betar, are also controlled by the immediate past ruling party leaders and their beneficiaries.

As press reports say, the BTV and Bangladesh Betar are still performing as they did during the period of the past regime. While scanning a number of news bulletins during the past few days, I myself found much bias in presenting news towards the immediate past ruling coalition. This is being happened because of appointment of political adherents in the state-run BTV. Except one or two, all officials in the BTV were the cadres of two student organizations and appointed on political grounds.

In comparison to the BTV, I would say, the private TV channels owned by the BNP leaders are showing more rationality in disseminating news and views.

Moreover, there are a number of contractual appointees and therefore highly politicized persons as heads of the offices of some vital offices like the Press Information Department, Bangladesh Betar, External Publicity Wing of Foreign Ministry, and Media Cell of the Home Ministry. These contractual appointments must be revoked for the sake of justice and removing obstacles in presenting objective news and views. But the caretaker government is yet to do anything towards this end.

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Although the Election Commission conducts the election, the responsibility to hold the election in a fair manner lies on the caretaker government. That is why the president and caretaker chief should enter forcefully into the ongoing debate over the Election Commission.

The obstinate attitude of the chief election commissioner and his deputies, despite a national consensus that they should leave the office for sake of fair polls, has been pushing the country towards a confrontation. The CEC long back has lost his credibility and of late he also resorted to falsehood regarding meeting with an advisor of the CTG.

Actually, we feel ashamed as fellow citizens of the CEC who is not only ignoring public opinion but also not speaking the truth. The constitution under which he has taken oath to uphold the truth and justice certainly does not empower him to disregard the people's opinion and utter falsehoods about his duties.

However, we came to know that he neither reads newspapers nor watches television where the sentiments of the public are being ventilated. So nothing could hurt him or awake his conscience. Moreover, the 4-party alliance partners exposed his partisanship by putting their weight behind the CEC, asking him not to resign due to external pressure.

Without dismantling the partisan Election Commission and creating a level-playing field, participation in the election by the 14-party would only legitimize the grabbing of power by a quarter through an arranged game. This would not only be suicidal for the

14-party, but also detrimental to democracy.

The president's sudden meeting with the armed forces officials triggered many speculations about the future of democracy in the country for the last two days. It has been said that if any inauspicious event happens in the country, the 14-party would be liable for that. But has the 14-party taken sole agency to keep the country's democracy going? The components of the 14-party have been struggling for democracy for long.

Don't the other parties who were extracting the vitality of the country for over 30 years have any responsibility to uphold democracy?

A deep uncertainty has descended upon the fate of the democratic polity of Bangladesh. Our hard-earned democracy is at the brink of collapse due to the indiscreet behaviour of a handful of people sitting at the helm of power.

Their nonchalant attitude is pushing the country towards darkness. If the country's democracy is marred by any means, the names of the president-cum-caretaker government chief Prof Iajuddin Ahmed and his advisors would also be imprinted in black letters in the history of Bangladesh.

Nazrul Islam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

FOR the last couple of years, we have been confronted with the words "good governance" time and again, through newspapers, seminars, study reports, or through discussion over cups of tea.

I have used the word "confront" because the government is least bothered about good governance, and as a sign of frustration the conscious segment of the society has been focusing on this issue most urgently.

Civil society has really taken a continuous action plan so that the general citizens wake up and stand beside them to make the government take measures to establish good governance in government and other economic and social sectors to reduce people's dissatisfaction over the government's poor role in bringing real peace and tranquility in the society.

It is the political will, which dictates in implementing the policies for establishing good governance. Political environment of Bangladesh is not in favour of patronizing good governance, especially in government procurement and expenditure.

We can cite many examples in this respect. Failure in generation of additional electricity is the well-publicized glaring example of non-existence of good governance.

There is one area where political cloud did not exercise their strength or will against good governance, that was financial sector. As a result, many reforms have been made in this sector.

However, the institution which needs reform most has remained untouched, that is ICAB (The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh), which was established under Presidential Order 2 of 1973 for the purpose of regulating the profession of accountancy and for matters concerned therewith.

The most important service the professional accountants provide is auditing of financial transactions or certification of financial statements of business houses, companies, NGOs, corporate bodies, and government projects.

It is the government's obligation to uphold the spirit of Presidential Order 2 of 1973. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the government to strengthen ICAB as a regulatory body. The government should come forward in assisting the ICAB management to create a vibrant ICAB. To meet the need of the time with the advent of open market and globalization, restructuring of ICAB is a must.

All powers belong to the people, not to the president

DR. AHMED ZIAUDDIN

just could not believe my eyes when I watched President Iajuddin Ahmed on television on Thursday assertively reading out from his written text in a meeting of secretaries of various ministries and other officials on the nature of the caretaker government that he heads in addition to his job as the president. His statement instantly caused widespread concern and reactions, which, it predictably should as a statement of no less a person than the president.

Just to avoid translating myself what he said, I refer below how this part of his speech has been reported in three leading English language dailies.

The Daily Star: "I want to remind everyone that since the responsibility of the chief adviser to the caretaker government has been reposed on the president, therefore the present government has become a presidential form of government."

The New Age: "I want to

remind everyone of the fact that the responsibility of the interim administration that has fallen upon me has turned the present form of government into presidential rule."

The Bangladesh Today: "I would like to remind all that after I was sworn in as chief adviser to the caretaker government in addition to my presidential functions, the caretaker government took the shape of a presidential form of government."

Even if three translations are not identical, they essentially reflect what he said in Bangla.

Firstly, he reminded everyone, primarily his audience, the secretaries but also the nation, as he chose to speak before television cameras as opposed to closed meetings, about the nature of the government now in place, combined in his person in the shape of the president and chief adviser, both the head of state and head of government.

Secondly, he characterized the government, depending on how one translates, either as "presidential form" or "presidential rule."

Yesterday, the President's Office came out with an explanation which said, according to The Daily Star, that: "The president did not say anything about changing the form of government ... his speech only mentioned the form of government."

Even if one accepts for the sake of argument the president's explanation, the question that crops up first is, why he felt it necessary to remind the nation about the form of the government, and in this particular tone, as if the people of Bangladesh have forgotten his position. What was he thinking and what message did he wish to convey to the country? I feel these are very legitimate questions to explore.

One explanation could be that he meant the form of the government has now changed to presidential form, which his office refutes. One would not really be entirely wrong if one concludes that this is precisely what he said and meant because of the words he used, the way he crafted the sentence, and delivered it.

The other explanation could be that because of combination of both offices, the presidency and the chief advisery -- the head of state and the head of the government -- in his person, that he believed, in fact and in law, that the form of the government in reality is presidential or the country is under presidential rule, as there is no authority around to challenge his power. So he thought that the country should be reminded of the unaccountable power that he wields.

Whatever prompted the president to explain the nature of his government, his position or powers he got, he was wrong on all counts. He should have looked at the constitution, and in particular, Article 7(1), that reads as follows:

S u p r e m a c y o f t h e Constitution. (1) All powers in the Republic belong to the people, and their exercise on behalf of the people shall be effected only under, and by the authority of, this Constitution.

If he thought he was all-powerful even for a second, that

would plainly be a mistake, as the constitution says, all powers belong to the people and those powers have to be exercised on behalf of the people. The people don't need to be reminded of the president's present power, as the people themselves have deposited these powers to him.

Whatever his intention was

when he wrote that sentence, I guess the people have got the message that they should eternally be vigilant about anything all-powerful, including an otherwise benign president vested with executive powers, even for a short period.

One should always remember,

be he the president with additional responsibility of the caretaker government or the prime minister, or for that matter, anyone else, that all powers belong to the people.