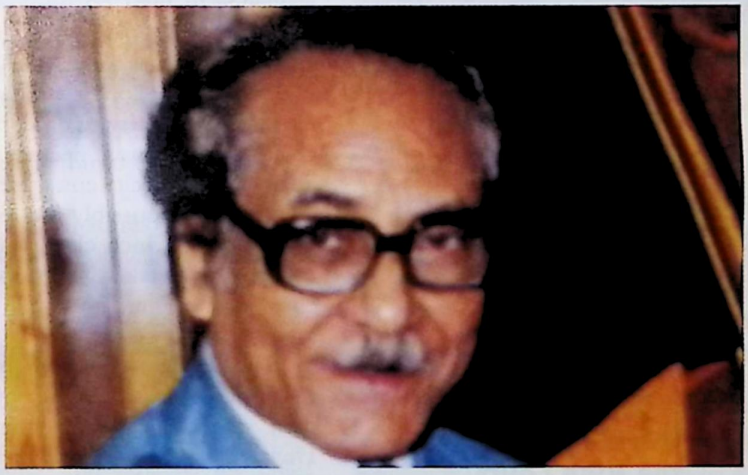
The twilight of caretaker governance?

Are we seeing the end of the caretaker government system, and what are the implications of the current crisis for the long-term political future of the country, asks Rehman Sobhan









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THE idea of a caretaker government (CTG) originated in the apprehension of political parties in opposition as well as a large segment of citizens that a regime in power could not be relied upon to hold free and fair elections. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh there is a long history of "managed" elections to support the logic for a CTG.

The amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh enacted in April 1996, institutionalizing a caretaker government was, thus, widely appreciated in the country and hailed in many countries around the world victimized by the partisan conduct of elections. We now, sadly, appear to be witnessing the possible twilight of the caretaker government system which filled us with so much hope for Bangladesh serving as a global role model for free and fair elections.

The decision of the Grand Alliance to boycott the January 22 election on account of their perception of the partisan character of the chief advisor and the resultant loss or confidence in the CTG to preside over a free and fair election has turned the clock back to the last days of 1995. At that time there was a widespread demand for elections under a non-party caretaker government. The failure of the ruling BNP to respond to this demand and the resultant boycott of the polls by the Awami League-led alliance did not deter the ruling BNP regime from holding a one-sided election in order to ensure constitutional propriety. This led to a voter-less election in February 1996, the subsequent constitutional amendment for a CTG, and the eventual electoral defeat of the BNP in the June 1996 election. The main difference between 1996 and 2007 is that it is the very institution of CTG, which was seen as the political panacea for escaping from partisan elections, which has invoked a boycott of the January 22 poll because of its perceived partisan character. Can CTG survive this gradual erosion of its institutional credibility?