play than the Grand Alliance but appear to have administered the coup de grace to the institution of CTG.

The crisis for democracy

The passage of events which have brought the institution of CTG to its critical situation imperils the democratic process. The 4 Party Alliance is right to argue that the electoral process must go ahead since elections remain an essential part of our democratic institutions. However, multi-party democracy remains at the core of our democratic process and this demands a credible multi-party election. An election where some of the major political players, representing half the electorate, stay out of the elections cannot preserve the institution of multi-party democracy. Similarly, a CTG which cannot ensure a credible multi-party election, which was its raison d'etre in the first place, will have failed in discharging its mandate, and should, to preserve the integrity of the institution, consider resigning from office.

The mandate to hold elections in 90 days is undoubtedly important but this goal is subordinate to the primary mission of the CTG to hold a free, fair, and peaceful election, participated by all the parties where the outcome represents the authentic democratic mandate of all citizens eligible to vote. The notion that in order to hold elections within the stipulated 90 days, with or without the participation of a significant part of the political spectrum, the CTG will need to deploy the full force not just of the law enforcement agencies but the armed forces is an affront to the very concept of democracy not to mention commonsense. Any dictator or autocratic ruling party can order a one-sided election held under the guns of the armed forces. We have witnessed such elections in the past. But such a militarized approach to the electoral process is repugnant to the spirit and indeed the constitutional mandate of the CTG.

Preserving the democratic process

If the democratic process is to be preserved and Bangladesh is to be spared a long night of confrontation leading to bloodshed and prolonged instability, with incalculable costs to the economy as well as our democratic institutions, all parties to the crisis need to pull back from the brink. The two principal political alliances need to sit down to a serious negotiation, which could be convened by the president, which could discuss and resolve the following issues:

- The resignation of the president from his position as chief advisor.
- The identification and appointment of a chief advisor by the president, who is acceptable to all parties.
- An agreement on a new date for the elections, possibly 60-90 days from now. This would be backed by a reference to the Appellate Division, to which both alliances would be signatories, seeking a constitutional dispensation for rescheduling the elections.
- The reconstitution of the original council of advisors who in their original incarnation performed a commendable role.
- The appointment from within the above advisory council of a committee chaired by one of the advisors, to oversee the restructuring of the administration prior to the elections, to ensure the non-partisan conduct of the elections.
- A commitment by both the alliances to abjure from calling hartals/oborodhs during the tenure of the CTG and, preferably, during the tenure of the next elected government.
- A commitment by all parties to abide by the results of the elections and to participate actively in the next Parliament.
- The commitment by the two alliances to honour their commitment to nominate "clean" candidates.
- The constitution of a national election monitoring body, which brings together the entire spectrum of civil society institutions, to oversee the elections in every polling center.
- A massive and unified deployment of international observers, led by an internationally recognized personality, such as Presidents Carter or Clinton or former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to monitor the elections.
- A commitment by both alliances that whomsoever wins the elections will abjure from acts of vengeance and violence on their defeated opponents. If wrong-doings have been committed by members of either alliance, this will be addressed through the due process of law and not arbitrary administrative or vigilante actions.



The above suggestions can be elaborated and/or modified. The operating issue is that both alliances need to sit together to resolve the issue of preserving democracy once and for all. Their commitment to put aside the bitterness and anger, which pathologically divide them on almost tribal lines today, will depend on whether they remain committed to the preservation of democracy and the institution of CTG. If either party is motivated by other, unspoken agendas, then we may well be seeing the end of caretaker governance and the dawn of a dark age in the blighted political history of Bangladesh.

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