was Syeda Razia Faiz, for a very long time an Ershad acolyte, and, back in the 1960s, a follower of Field Marshal Ayub Khan in the Pakistan national assembly before making herself part of the Pakistani team to the UN in 1971 to argue against the "secessionism" of Bengalis.

Politics is certainly the art of acquiring power, or striving towards an attainment of it. It is, again, underpinned by the idea of principles, the core belief that individuals and parties, while ever ready for compromise and consensus on significant national



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issues, remain glued to the beliefs that have sustained them through a lifetime of political experience. But what has been happening in this riotous season of much wooing, much pole-vaulting and much merry-making has been as unprecedented as it has been eerie. Consider the huge efforts expended by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to pull General Ershad into its fold.

Khaleda Zia's child, in company with the much-talking and little-producing Lutfozzaman Babar, turned up at the former dictator's residence, had dinner with him, and at the end of it everyone emerged to let the country know that an alliance between the crusty old soldier and the people who had persecuted him (because he had persecuted them in his own glory days) was in the offing. Days later, Ershad went even further, to acquaint the country with a pseudo-philosophical explanation of why he was going over to the BNP-led camp. His Jatiyo Party and the BNP, said he, believed in "Bangladeshi nationalism," which was why he could not link up with those defenders of Bengali nationalism in the Awami League. When his sibling GM Quader chose to disagree, he simply faxed a letter from London, expelling Quader from the party.

And then came the reversal. There were the whispers that Ershad was outraged at the paltry offer of seats the BNP-wallahs were making to him. In contrast, the Awami League, whose leader Sheikh Hasina had, over the years, demonized Ershad in every manner conceivable -- he was a thief, a plunderer, a corrupt politician, a usurper, et al -- was tantalizing him with a better proposition. The general went into hiding for a day, to avoid being pounced upon by the BNP men and influenced into staying with the Bangladeshi nationalist camp.

When he turned up in public, it was to mount the stage at the fourteen-party rally at Paltan Maidan. He bravely declared that he was a soldier and was not afraid to die. In between those bouts of courage, he came forth with apologies to the nation for any wrongs that he might have committed while in office. And that was that. But there are yet the cynics who see little reason to trust Ershad and his party. What guarantee is there that the general will not link up with the Begum again?

Questions, questions! It is a time when principles have been the casualty; and the terrible thought that there is no last word in politics truly and readily seems to have taken hold of politicians' imaginations. Consider the story of AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury. In the weeks leading up to the general elections of October 2001 he had led a vigorous television campaign to undermine the Awami League, to a point where there did not seem to be any difference between his portrayal of Sheikh Hasina and her followers and that of the world of General Yahya Khan and the Pakistan army way back in 1971.

The Pakistanis had pillaged and killed. In Badruddoza's opinion, the Awami League had done a similar thing in its five years in office between 1996 and 2001. The propaganda horrified all conscious, liberal sections of Bengali society. But it worked, and Badruddoza Chowdhury took unquestioned pride in his achievement. But, in line with that old idea of a tide coming into the affairs of men (and women), the same Badruddoza Chowdhury has now stepped forth to wage a combined war against the BNP and its allies.

All things considered, though, it is fair to ask if all the horse-trading that has been going on, all the farce (if you can call it that) enacted, is not a direct consequence of the absence of political leadership in the country. Look around you, and you will be appalled to discover that in this hour of major peril for the country there is no national leader you and I can turn to for courage and support and reassurance where our collective future is concerned.