

Caretaker priorities



We must also, in view of the changing circumstances, set up a constitution review commission. In addition, urgent reforms of the law enforcement agencies and the bureaucracy must be initiated. Elected government must do these reforms. But the consensus for the changes may be developed and some useful initiatives may be taken during the tenure of the newly formed CTG. However, holding fair and meaningful elections should be the highest priority for the new government.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

A lot of dramatic events took place in Bangladesh in the last few months. The climactic end of the drama came through the resignation of the honourable President Iajuddin Ahmed from the position of the chief adviser of the caretaker government (CTG), the declaration of the emergency, and the cancellation of the elections to be held on January 22. We hope the nation can recover from the ill effects of these unfortunate precedents.

However, we are pleased that an honest and competent individual, Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed, has become the new head of the CTG. He has already brought on board ten other advisers. We congratu-

late Dr. Fakhrudin and his colleagues with their success.

We feel that the new CTG faces quite a few daunting challenges. In order to identify the challenges, we must first dispassionately and in a nutshell assess the current state of the nation.

It appears that we have over the years managed to create a totally criminalised political system in Bangladesh characterised by endemic corruption and plundering. In fact, we now have what may be called a system of "gangster democracy."

Political parties in essence act like syndicates and the elected representatives in general do not represent the aspirations and interests of the people. The self-serving and patronage based

politics has managed to divide the nation which was solidly united even in 1990.

The governance failure is all encompassing. Poverty is well entrenched and the deprivation of the common people is naked and widespread. In the backdrop these monumental problems, religious extremism has cropped up in the country with the intention of creating an alternative theocratic state.

Given this state of affairs, the incoming government faces several challenges. The first and most serious challenge is to hold fair elections in the shortest possible time. Fair elections require:

- Absolute neutrality of the CTG.
- The effectiveness and neutrality of the Election Commission (EC) and its commitment to

public interest.

- The even-handedness of the administration and the law enforcement agencies.
- An overhaul of the electoral laws and rules.
- Good behaviour of politicians and their playing the electoral game by the rules.

Creating public awareness for fair and peaceful elections and educating them about the issues.

The EC is mandated by the constitution to hold elections. Thus, it is important that the EC is strengthened, made independent and, most of all; competent individuals are immediately appointed to the commission.

In order to make the commission independent, it must be given financial independence and control over its own secretariat. Such changes will require amendments in the Representation of the People Order, 1972 (RPO), which may be effected through the promulgation of an ordinance by the president.

Strengthening the EC will require total house cleaning and its immediate reconstitution. Fortunately for the nation, the CEC has now resigned. His colleagues should follow suit, otherwise they must be removed for incompetence, ineffectiveness and partisan behaviour by referring the matter to the Supreme Judicial Council.

Most serious allegations against them are that they have failed in their constitutional responsibilities to prepare a reliable electoral roll on time, delimit constituencies and play fairly. In fact, the president in his last speech to the nation made serious allegations against the commission.

The commission has also squandered away about Tk 175 crore for preparing an electoral roll, which was declared illegal by the highest court of the land. In addition, it failed to fully and completely implement the Supreme Court judgments on electoral roll and disclosure of antecedents by parliamentary candidates.

For these reasons, especially for the commissioners' showing disrespect to both the law and the judiciary and the inability of the CEC to tell the truth, not much public confidence is any longer left for the institution itself.

The most important priority of the new CTG must be to prepare an accurate electoral roll and a reliable identification system,

although issuing picture IDs to each voter will be an expensive and time consuming affair.

It should be noted that fair elections require not only accurate electoral roll and delimitation of constituencies; it will also require significant electoral reforms. With such reforms, owners of the black money, the muscle power, the corrupt, and bank and bill defaulters -- that is, the criminal dons -- must be kept out of the electoral process.

Electoral expenses must be reduced and disputes quickly resolved. Candidates must be required to disclose their antecedents and those disclosed information must be widely publicized so that voters can make informed choices.

To give the voters meaningful choices, a system of negative voting must be introduced. These changes for fair elections can also be implemented through an ordinance to amend the RPO.

However, fair elections are not enough -- they must be meaningful. Elections are pre-requisites for democracy, but elections are not democracy. Election-centered democracy necessarily leads to *ijaratana* or leaseholder rights, and to perpetuate such rights for generations, dynastic rules are often established.

But democracy is not a "one-day" -- election-day -- affair. A truly democratic system depends on what happens in between elections.

The futility of the one-day or election-only democracy can be seen from our own experiences. After the fall of the autocratic Ershad regime in 1990, it was naively believed by many that with a few free, fair and impartial elections, democracy would grow deep roots and become institutionalised in Bangladesh.

However, the experiences of the past 15 years provided a rude awakening for the most. After three successive reasonably free and fair elections, we have institutionalised an ineffective, corrupt and criminalised governance system in the country.

Thus, fair elections are not sufficient for democracy -- it is only a necessary condition for such a system -- for a truly democratic polity elections must also bring about qualitative changes in the elected representatives.



Qualitative changes in the leadership will obviously require the reform of political parties.

Political parties are the engines of democracy and without democratic, transparent and accountable political parties, fair and meaningful elections are not possible and democracy cannot become effective.

In fact, the present crisis in our democracy is largely due to the weaknesses of our political parties. Good and democratic behavior of political parties can only be ensured through their compulsory registration under the EC.

The political parties must also be required to give its primary members -- and they must have primary members -- a clear say in the nomination process and unwanted individuals, including those who have not been active members of the party for at least three years, must be prevented from getting nominated.

In addition, the affiliated bodies of the political parties, such as their student wings, must be banned to bring an end to the divisive politics. All these changes can also be brought about through an ordinance.

Another issue, which should deserve the attention of the new CTG, is holding elections of the local bodies. Local government is part of the basic structure of our constitution.

Article 59 of our constitution mandates the creation of elected local bodies at each administrative unit. The full court bench of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, in a unanimous judgment in 1992, directed the government to

hold elections of local bodies in six months.

However, because of the vested interests of the members of parliament, three successive governments failed to hold these elections, defying both the constitution and the court directives.

Thus, we recommend that the CTG seriously consider holding both zila and upazila parishad elections along with the parliamentary elections. This should be an attractive proposition for the political parties too as they will be able to accommodate more candidates.

It is now generally accepted that there is a built-in instability in our political system because the political arena has become a den of criminals. Most serious criminal activities are now carried out under the tacit protection of political parties.

A system, which is based on immorality and illegality, cannot last forever. History teaches us that you can fool some people for some time, but you cannot fool all the people for all the time. Many self-respecting politicians candidly agree in private conversations that our present criminalized political system cannot and will not last.

This must be the realization behind the recent rise of JMB in the country. Thus, we must immediately take some bold initiatives for long-term changes, if we are to prevent unplanned and unexpected developments in the future.

As part of these initiatives, we must take drastic actions against the looters and criminals. For this purpose, we must make the independent Anti-Corruption Commission truly independent by

allowing it the rule-framing authority and also replacing the present ineffective commissioners with courageous individuals.

At the same time, we must review and replace the appointments in the highest judiciary, the Public Service Commission and even in public universities these institutions have been "hijacked" and stacked with partisan and incompetent individuals. Setting up non-partisan commissions must make desired changes in them.

These critically important institutions form the very foundations of the state and with the weakening of them over the years; the state itself has become weak.

It is gratifying to see that the judiciary has recently been separated from the executive through the interventions of the Supreme Court, but now the challenge will be to make the judiciary truly independent.

We must also, in view of the changing circumstances, set up a constitution review commission. In addition, urgent reforms of the law enforcement agencies and the bureaucracy must be initiated. Elected government must do these reforms.

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Can this nation fulfill its mission?

But even if the new caretaker government meets the nation's expectations with reasonable credit, the next challenge for the new political leadership to come, and our secular intelligentsia, would be to get off the bypass to the privileges of the world and extend a hand of comradeship to the nation's underprivileged, to walk together with them and not fly above them.

MD ANISUR RAHMAN

THE nation has been brought back from the brink where its "godfather democracy" had taken it. This nation has great talents in its people and in its youth. Its ordinary farming people have made the country self-sufficient in food, confounding those who had considered the land-mouth ratio and its declining trend to be very unfavourable.

The talents in the field of art and culture, in this riverine, cloud-bedecked, rain-soaked country that stirs the creative dreams of its youth, are being recognized all over the world. Our young cricketers are daring to challenge the world's best.

Great strides are being made by us in IT, and so on, to keep us feeling proud of our people, men and women, boys and girls, and wishing that they will have the fullest opportunity to fulfill their talents and potentials.

Yet our political leadership has kept failing us. The great promise of the liberation war was squandered with the humiliated departure of its architect Tajuddin Ahmed who was committed to the egalitarian ideals of the nation -- a sad action of the "Father of the Nation" that could be the theme of a great Shakespearean tragedy.

Rising from a feudal culture, the "Father" obviously loved his *nayabs* and *lathials* more than he loved his "subjects," whom he asked to wait for three years while his near and dear ones were allowed to chase the luxuries of the

world.

Thus, the growth of corruption and inequalities was kicked off, and that sharply divided the country into an elite class with its fortune seekers, and an underprivileged people. This served the interest of "globalization" well, expanding the market for goods and expertise of the developed countries.

On its part, the underprivileged

of the nation had been eager to participate in the task of nation-building with whatever they had, not waiting for condescending "poverty alleviating" projects and programs, as they demonstrated in popular initiatives like "Ganamillan" of Gurudaspur, the "Rangpur Self-reliance Movement" and the "Shahjal Shyamol Sylhet." These initiatives were sidetracked, or even ravaged, by the state machinery.

Those unaware of these, and many other such self-development activities of the country's underprivileged, may look at the recent study of people's self-initiatives all over the country, conducted by about 70 journalists in a project of the Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) under the leadership of Kurratul-Ain Tahmina.

Like in that song of Tagore: "The auspicious moment that had come to unite us flew away, and my pain could not be fulfilled through inauguration of this union" (*mamo dukher shadon*), we have let the great moment of national unity that came with our independence flee away.

This, the dis-uniting of the nation and missing the chance we had to teach the faith of humanism to the whole world as articulated in the teachings of the greatest poet-philosophers of our soil, is the supreme failure of ours as a nation to fulfill our promise.

And Bengali nationalism stands for a secular faith, keeping religion as a personal matter and regarding humanity -- *manobata* -- as the universal faith.

This has been the indigenous faith of the soil of Bengal, articulated in the poems and songs of its folk poet-composer-singers, in the joyous sharing of festivities of any religion by followers of all religions, finally reaching sky-high

in the poems and songs of its greatest bards Lalon Shah, Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam.

The spirit of this faith has been to serve humanity, a "religion" that Bangladesh could, indeed, teach the whole world in this era of great moral crisis of our over-glorified civilization.

But leaders of our "godfather democracy" have squandered, by politicizing religion for partisan power gains, this great opportunity we had to lead the world in enlightened humanism.

And fundamentalist religious forces have been able to reach and mesmerize large sections of our people through the gap created by our elite, including the intelligentsia, by distancing themselves from the people, some talking of them but none holding their hands.

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The war of liberation divided the society into collaborators with the occupation forces on the one hand, whose best standpoint was to preserve at any cost an undivided Pakistan rooted in Muslim nationalism, and people supporting East Bengal's self-determination on the other.

The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation has kept this division, on the basis of national ideology of the society, alive. It is now taking the character

of intense difference on the question of a secular versus Muslim-nationalist Bangladesh.

This division has also taken the form of the non-secular side seeking to obliterate from national memory the entire history of our struggle for economic and cultural self-determination, and trying to establish the falsehood that the nation's liberation struggle in 1971 was merely the "mechanical" response of a military crackdown on the nation by the Pakistan army on March 25, 1971.

They are also simultaneously attempting to revive the cultural hegemony that West Pakistan had sought to impose on us, promoting mechanically interpreted Islamic literature and highlighting the contributions of Muslim poets and composers, underplaying the contribution of Bengal's own poets and philosophers who espoused the "religion of humanity."

This deep division in the society got crystallized into a bitter polarization of social forces around the country's two major political parties representing the two poles of this conflict in national ideology.

The practice of dialogue and negotiation, to live and work together for progress of the country in a democratic framework notwithstanding fundamental "ideological" differences, has been altogether absent, with the language and practice of violence within the parliament and in the streets being the only form of voice and action the two sides have known.

On top of this, a menacing "fundamentalist" Islamic trend, that does not have any room for liberal-democratic dissent, has gained ground. Its followers sided with the Pakistan military in the 1971 conflict and were behind the massacre of intellectuals in December 1971 and have been training thousands of cadres in savage terrorism.

Over time, the collaborators of

1971 have crept into the social political and bureaucratic arenas of power. Furthermore, the "ideological" difference between the two major political camps has been getting blurred, as both are admitting independent muscle-men, bank-loan defaulters and other unscrupulous elements in a bid for political power. They are bidding to buy off each other's members and supporters, with lakhs to crores of takas, simply to win votes.

Even the once secular political force is also forging alliances with specific fundamentalist religious forces, merely out of political considerations, although the respective high commands are still polarized in their public stances, drawing hard-core middle class support on the basis of the above ideological divide.

With all this, are we very late, or shall we get another chance for the nation to fulfill its mission? Does the fact of the nation having been pulled back from the brink, where it had been taken by our "educated" but unbelievably "illiterate" president who has unthinkably shamed his noble teaching profession, offer any hope in this regard?

A part of the answer rests in the hands of the new caretaker government which has a historic opportunity, if so wills, to wrench the nation decisively from the godfathers and criminals to put the nation on the road to a saner democracy where parliamentarians will truly represent the people and their aspirations, as well as the indigenous humanist moral values and enlightenment of the ordinary people of the soil, and will be directly accountable to them in their daily actions, and not just seize their votes by money and muscle power.

The nation is watching with expectations the response of the new caretaker government to this call.

But even if the new caretaker government meets the nation's expectations with reasonable credit, the next challenge for the new political leadership to come, and our secular intelligentsia, would be to get off the bypass to the privileges of the world and extend a hand of comradeship to the nation's underprivileged, to walk together with them and not fly above them.

This -- an egalitarian nation -- was precisely the heart of the promise of our liberation struggle to which we refer so often, and is still the promise enshrined as a fundamental principle in our constitution, battered though it has been by the poundings of the godfathers.

Failing this the same wide gap between the elite and the people will continue, for anti-people, including fundamentalist forces, to seize the people's hands and to disorient them toward patronage seeking or fatalism, and the future of the nation will be determined thereby.

If it is not considered easy to undo the great inequalities in the society that our political leaders have unleashed, including most of their own ranks amassing dizzy fortunes, it should be possible, to start with at least, to curb the ugly lifestyles that sections of our rich are exhibiting.

The lavish marriage ceremonies in Dhaka, with four dazzling community feasts for one marriage when the guest control order, I understand, is still in force but going a-begging, and the young bride who has to plead to her middle class parents for a wedding sari worth Tk 75,000, or else face humiliation in her in-laws' family (a personal knowledge of the writer about a family friend!), is but one example. And the display of a *korbani* cow bought for Tk 2 lakh...!

And over-luxury cars -- what are we trying to prove in a country

where a village mother is allegedly forced to sell her child to pay off a small loan she has taken from the Grameen Bank (as spokesmen of both the major rival political parties are claiming)?</p