

AL scraps deal with BKM

It should not have been there at all

THE decision by the Awami League to come out of its pre-electoral deal with the Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis will have surely come as a relief to its members and followers alike. The move is surely an attempt at damage limitation by the party over an arrangement that had left many in the country questioning the secular ethos of Awami League politics. No matter how the Awami League leadership chooses to explain its understanding with the BKM on such crucial issues as the fatwa and no matter how at this point it defends its decision to back out of the deal, the fact remains that a good number of questions have lingered over the issue. When the AL reached the deal with the BKM, the big worry was that principles were being sacrificed in favour of expediency. The worry turned to shock when it was realized that the deal clearly aimed at an appeasement of bigotry, especially in conditions where such communities as the Ahmadiyyas already found themselves in a beleaguered state owing to the obscurantist activities of certain organizations.

The new move by the Awami League is surely welcome, for the very particular reason that, warts and all, the party has generally been symbolic of secular politics in Bangladesh. The furore the deal with the BKM gave rise to was all the more serious considering that not many in the party leadership appear to have been consulted before such a major decision was taken. Perhaps those who took that step were not quite prepared for the resultant outcry which arose throughout the country. Overall, it was a small group in the AL that reached out to the Khelafat Majlis. The price the party paid for it, it is now clear, was rather high. That was because all of a sudden the impression was being created that a historically secular party could soon be turning its back on those whose cause it had defended since its founding in the late 1940s. The argument now being made that it was all part of a pre-election deal does not hold water. Assuming that the political situation had remained unchanged, would the party have upheld the memorandum of understanding with the BKM?

The Awami League has been the guiding spirit behind the Bengali movement for autonomy in the 1960s and the war of liberation in 1971. It has been in power twice in free Bangladesh and in opposition has played a major role in articulating popular aspirations. It is natural, therefore, for the nation to expect that it will uphold its traditional image. With the scrapping of the deal with the BKM, the party will hopefully reassert its old, time-tested ideals.

Parliamentary waste recalled

TIB's report revealing

A recently held press briefing a senior TIB researcher revealed that as much as Tk. 20 crore went down the drain because of quorum crisis in the recently dissolved parliament. On top of it while the parliament failed to discuss and debate such key issues of vital national concern like growing corruption, power crisis and terrorism the members were engaged in playing party politics and indulging in all kinds of unscheduled discussions that included raising of salaries and allowances and other benefits for themselves.

So acute was the situation that during the five-year tenure of the past regime only 9 sessions of the parliament were held on time. Besides out of a total of 373 working days the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition did show up at the parliament for 128 and 328 days respectively. It was also pointed out that the standing committees on as many as six ministries failed to submit their recommendations on various audit objections worth about Tk.13,154 crore. Apparently a mere Tk 63.75 crore was subsequently realised from that staggering amount.

We are fully in agreement with the various recommendations put forward by TIB aimed at streamlining the anomalies standing in the way of effective functioning of our parliament like reducing the total number of days from 90 to 20 for cancellation of membership due to absenteeism from working sessions of the parliament. We also endorse the recommendation for increasing the total duration of the sessions of parliament to be productive enough. The suggestion for appointing a Deputy Speaker from the Opposition bench also deserves serious consideration.

We are now looking forward to a free and fair election. But election by itself cannot guarantee fully functional parliament unless the quality of members in it are competent and honest to be able to represent their constituencies effectively. So, parliamentary reform should form a part of the reform agenda we are addressing for strengthening the institutions of democracy.

A brief history of alternative politics



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

Professor Yunus, when he gets into politics, if he does at all, would do well to reflect on these bits and pieces of history as a way of making sure that he does not stumble. His stature nationwide, as a Nobel Laureate, is remarkable. Abroad, he has in his individual capacity popularized Bangladesh's cause.

We can, in light of the kind of politics we have lived through in these past three decades, observe matters through the prism of history. We will begin with Pakistan's Air Marshal Asghar Khan. He came into politics at a time when the regime of Field Marshal Ayub Khan was beginning to totter.

With every individual being a political animal, it surely makes sense for Yunus, now that he has seen himself transformed into a figure of international repute, to offer Bangladesh's people an alternative vision of politics. He has sought popular opinion about his new ambition, which is again a healthy thing.

If and when he does decide to enter politics, we as citizens will surely observe if he can make a difference, if politics as usual can truly be supplanted by a more modernistic approach. Make no mistake about it.

Societies step into the future through a broadening of the alternatives on offer. In these times, as a lot of people would like to think, Professor Yunus just might offer Bengalis an alternative that they can put to good advantage for themselves.

But there are the pitfalls that have historically prevented alternative politics from taking off. It is these pitfalls, these impediments as it were, that Muhammad Yunus ought to be prepared to tackle before he decides he will be a politician.

Justice Moshred, having been briefly touted as Ayub's successor, lost his hold on politics as

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman went relentlessly into the job of taking the Bengalis out of Pakistan.

That politics is consistently a grassroots affair was demonstrated especially well in the times when Ayub Khan weaned away a faction of the Pakistan Muslim League to his camp in the early 1960s.

The renegades who joined him called themselves the Convention Muslim League; and as long as the military ruler remained in control, they enjoyed the perks that came with power.

The Convention Muslim League disintegrated almost immediately after Ayub's fall in March 1969, despite the brave efforts men like Fazlul Quader Chowdhury and Khan Abdus Sabur Khan put into keeping it alive through the 1970 election campaign. The party died on election day.

A similar ailment would eventually kill the Qayyum Muslim League when its leader, the rightwing Pathan politician Khan Abdul Qayyum Khan, linked up with his arch enemy Z. A. Bhutto, post-1971, to become federal minister for home affairs.

There is a trenchant lesson here for students of politics: every time Pakistan's politicians, as well as non-politicians, have attempted to form or cobble political parties into shape, they have not quite succeeded.

Today, in Pakistan, there are all the parties in parentheses. You have the PML(Q) – the Q is for "Quaid-e-Azam" Mohammad Ali Jinnah – and

you have the PML(N), the N being there for exiled prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

In Bangladesh, the rather rude way in which the Awami League showed its very own Kamal Hossain the door compelled the former foreign minister into forging a new organization he called the Gano Forum.

An unmistakable wave of enthusiasm swept across the country when he did that, and even Saifuddin Manik, the man who had replaced Mohammad Farhad as general secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), ditched his socialism to be in Kamal Hossain's camp.

At this point in time, the Gano Forum is all but forgotten, if it has not actually become irrelevant.

There are other, more uncomfortable truths about parties you can cite here. General M.A.G. Osmany's Jatiyo Janata Party thrived as long as he lived; and it thrived around him.

His death pushed the party into the sidelines. We do not hear much about it these days. In the later 1970s, Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed, having presided over the sordid tragedy of August-November 1975, formed an outfit he called the Democratic League. It did not take off, and its founder died unmoored, for all the right reasons in the world.

These days, we have the rather exciting sight of the Liberal Democratic Party in the country.

Maybe it will create an impact, of a

kind, if it does not have within it some men whom the law needs to pursue for all the wrongs they allegedly committed in their days in the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party.

And, yes, do remember that in the course of his collaborative endeavours with Oli Ahmed, Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury found it necessary to jettison his Bikalpadhara. That was another hint of not many alternatives being on target in politics.

Set your sights longer, beyond the political frontiers of your country. In the early 1980s, David Owen, Shirley Williams and a few other notable Labor Party politicians thought a new approach to politics was called for.

They deserted the increasingly despondent Labor Party and teamed up to unite under a new banner, that of the Social Democratic Party. In the event, the SDP remained a non-starter, until years later when it meshed in with the Liberal Party to bring about a new organization.

Today the Lib-Dems exercise an important degree of influence in British politics, under Menzies Campbell and despite what has happened to Charles Kennedy.

But if the Lib-Dems have offered Britons a healthy alternative, America's entrenched two-party system has made it difficult for Joe Lieberman to wield any great influence on national politics.

He was Al Gore's running mate in 2000. And then he lost the Democratic primary for re-election as a senator in 2006, a shock that convinced him that he needed to come back as an independent, which he did.

In political terms, however, he is now neither here nor there – unless of course he decides to return to his old party, or go over to the Republicans.

Observe India, where Indira Gandhi prevailed against the more

seasoned K.Kamaraj, Moraji Desai and Sanjiva Reddy in the Congress in 1969.

In time, it was her faction of the party, Congress-I, that was to become the mainstream party. But the same has not been true of Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress. She left the Sonia-led Congress, formed her faction, went into government with the BJP, walked out of it and was soon waging a battle against the solidly entrenched Left Front government in West Bengal. She is getting bruised, all the time.

The Trinamul Congress keeps getting marginalized. Maharashtra's Sharad Pawar made precious little headway with his version of the Congress. Today he is part of Manmohan Singh's UPAGovernment.

Spare a thought for Pakistan's Imran Khan. The one-time cricketer has been everywhere in his pursuit of politics and yet his Tehrik-e-Insaf party remains stymied for lack of a sense of direction.

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Amending the RPO



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

In the light of the amendments made by past CTGs, it is desirable that the care-taker government seriously consider amendments in RPO as proposed publicly by the civil society, and an ordinance be appropriately promulgated to ensure a free and fair election.

tions and (d) election dispute resolution mechanisms.

The RPO has six chapters. Each chapter deals with matters pertaining to elections.

- Chapter I define the terms used in the Order,
- Chapter II discusses the powers of the Election Commission,
- Chapter III pertains to the process of holding elections,
- Chapter IIIA deals with election expenses,
- Chapter IIIB gives account of administration and conduct of officers during election,
- Chapter IV was deleted in 1978,
- Chapter V enumerates the process of election disputes,
- Chapter VI deals with offences, penalties and procedures,
- Chapter VIA: Registration of political parties for obtaining certain benefits.

Amendments in RPO by past CTG

The P.O. has been amended fifteen times, the last time being in 2001. These amendments took

place during the tenure of various governments.

The Shahabuddin CTG also promulgated the Election Officials (Special Rules) Ordinance in 1990.

It also amended the RPO, raising the ceiling of election expenses from Tk 100,000 to Tk 300,000 in 1991.

The amendment made in 1991 also required the contesting candidates to submit a statement, within seven days of the last date of withdrawal, specifying the probable sources of funds to meet their election expenses.

The Habibur Rahman CTG amended the R.P.O., through an ordinance in April 1996, disqualifying several categories of people, especially bank loan defaulters, from contesting elections.

The most sweeping changes were made by the Latifur Rahman CTG. On August 8, 2001, the RPO Amendment Ordinance was promulgated, amending a number of provisions.

One of the important changes was to empower the Election

Commission to make rules to carry out the purposes of the RPO, including cancellation of candidature of those who would break the rules.

Furthermore, a new Chapter, VIA, was incorporated in RPO for registration of political parties so as to get some benefits.

The RPO amended in 2001 raised the ceiling from Tk 300,000 to Tk 500,000, and the security deposit to Tk 10,000 from Tk 5,000. However, major political parties fail to register with the Election Commission.

Proposed new amendments of RPO

The constitution provides that election of MPs should be peaceful, fair and impartial (Article 58D2).

That means that the law regulating the election must not be weak or faulty, and should not leave too many loopholes that influence the outcome of the election.

Against this background, certain amendments in core areas are proposed for the R.P.O. 1972 with a

view to conducting a fair election.

The main thrust is as follows:

- The Election Commission should be separate from the executive (government). This means that the structure of the Commission must be such that the government cannot influence the Commission. This implies a separate independent secretariat, recruitment of officers by the Commission, and not deputed from the government, to man the secretariat. It must have a separate budget as well.
- The Election Commission must be empowered to disqualify candidates, besides being invested with other powers. The Election Commission must earn the trust and confidence of the people. This view has been recently aired by the new chief Election Commissioner.
- There must be a correct voters list, with photographs against the names (similar to passport), or ID cards. Proper registration of all eligible voters is a must.
- Registration of political parties currently remains voluntary. It must be made mandatory for all political parties. Registration will provide information about the sources of funds and the expenditures of the parties.
- It is desirable that candidates be selected at the primary voter's level, and not be imposed by the central office of a political party.

The grassroots must have a say in selecting a person who will represent them in the parliament.

• No retired public servant, either civil or armed forces, will be eligible for contesting an election unless some time (say three to five years) has elapsed since his retirement, or resignation.

The candidate must provide to the Commission all his financial statements and personal records so to make him/her look absolutely clean and honest person.

Election dispute resolution must take place within a strict time period, not exceeding three months. The Appellate Division, in the case of G.Q. Chowdhury vs ABM Fazlur Karim Chowdhury, paved the way for disposal of election disputes.

In the light of the amendments made by past CTGs, it is desirable that the care-taker government seriously consider amendments in RPO as proposed publicly by the civil society, and an ordinance be appropriately promulgated to ensure a free and fair election.

Amendments to any law arise out of necessity because often it has been seen that a feeble law is like a cobweb, strong enough to detain only the weak and too weak to hold the strong. The RPO has to keep up with the times and changing situations.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Growing terrorism

Confronted with actual Shia-Sunni situation, an ordinary Muslim is embarrassed and shows horror of sectarian violence. It is said it is possible to de-emphasise them. The point is that in a purely Islamic context inter-sect matters demand serious introspection.

MB NAQVI

TERRORISTS are rampant in north western Pakistan. They have now attacked the Nato's 'right of self defence' to hit targets inside Pakistan. Its political implications and what Islamabad should do will require separate treatment.

Here some basic considerations are to be fully enumerated. The terrorists have struck more than half a dozen times in recent weeks in northern Pakistan.

The security personnel are doing their job in maintaining law and order more or less satisfactorily.

But an ideological foe cannot be countered by police, paramilitary or military alone, it is not mindless violence Pakistan faces.

The ideology behind the terrorist has to be fought mainly with ideas, without ignoring physical resistance.

Terrorists believe in the ideology of Islam, aiming to establish Islamic

Caliphate in Pakistan first and later a universal one.

It is a mixture of Islam and politics in Afghanistan. It is a protest and resistance against the perceived western onslaught on Islam and Muslims – apparently everywhere.

They need to be countered with brains. People should investigate who created this monster and how does it grow and what its traits are.

This is not the whole story. Pakistan is where Islamic rhetoric has been central to Pakistan's rationale and politics.

Instead of building democratic institutions, the Muslim League governments kept talking of ideological experiments, of building an Islamic Utopia and Islam's relationship with the state became the vital question.

Question of sects was, however, unavoidable in Pakistan. Since the government and the opposition vied with each other in being better Muslims, Islam's relationship with the state became the vital question.

There is no explanation of how God's sovereignty can be claimed, borrowed or stolen by certain men in Pakistan.

Earliest hyperbole of official publicists about a new or unique State was fished out by Jamaat-e-Islami