

Who will provide the political base for reform?

Rehman Sobhan outlines the formidable hurdles that a new political party would have to overcome



political process?

Housecleaning of corrupt elements from the body politic is not the same as sustainable institutional reform. Such reform has to emerge out of a democratically mandated political process and will need to be carried through and politically defended by a political party or parties.

In the absence of a revolution within the major political parties, an alternative political force will be needed to institutionalize political reform. Is it possible for such a third force to emerge in Bangladesh?

The historical record does not hold out much promise. Sundry attempts to build such a force have come to grief because none of the attempts could find leaders and workers with the message, charisma, stamina, and financial resources, to challenge the deeply embedded hold of the established political parties, at that time, over

the electorate.

What would be needed for such an alternative political force to emerge? Let me itemize some of the preconditions needed for an alternative political force to emerge:

- 1 A clearly defined agenda which can capture the imagination of a broad segment of the voting population and generate confidence that the party is sincere in implementing this agenda.
- 2 A charismatic leader, who enjoys immediate name recognition throughout the country.
- 3 The leader must be surrounded by associates of established integrity and competence who have not been compromised by charges of corruption and criminality.
- 4 A party organization, led by a general secretary, who has proven organizational skills and an understanding of the workings of the political process at the

local level.

5 All those identified in (2-4) above must commit themselves to work full time (this means 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days of the year) in building such a party. Party building, particularly of a new party, is not a task for part-timers.

6 Adequate financial backing, transparently obtained, not just from more credible financers of means but from small donations from ordinary citizens.

7 Such a party must target the following constituencies:

(i) Political figures in the major political parties who are uncorrupted and who are still committed to serving the country rather than themselves. There are many such figures, including senior figures and MPs in the major parties, who are deeply disillusioned at the state of their parties. However, those with established political loyalties, particularly to long established political

parties, would only consider supporting another party if they were assured that such a party was there to stay and means what it says.

(ii) In every constituency there are respected people -- lawyers, doctors, teachers, retired officials, small businessman, and young people including students -- who are deeply concerned about the degeneration in our political life and the rampant corruption, which has made life insecure for ordinary people. Many of these concerned citizens hunger for leaders and a party who can mobilize their patriotism and passion to build a decent society.

8 There are large number of social and economic groups who constitute the productive core of Bangladesh. Their efforts have largely contributed to the 6% growth rate we now enjoy and who go about their work not because of but in spite of the role of the government. These

groups have been denied adequate official recognition or political support and reckon that in a better governed state their efforts could serve to double our growth rates. These groups include:

i. The readymade garment exporters, which includes not just the entrepreneurs, but their hard-working workers who are the source of value addition in this sector.

ii. The productive elements in the business community who have made new investment or expanded their earlier investments without becoming loan defaulters or tax evaders.

iii. The large numbers of small-scale industrialists dispersed across the country from Dolai Khal to every upazila headquarter, producing a variety of products for meeting local consumption needs, who are denied protection, official support or institutional financing.

iv. The small farmers who have tripled Bangladesh's food production since Liberation, in spite of policy neglect, rising prices for their inputs, shortages of power, and diesel and fertilizer scams.

v. Bangladesh's fast growing professional class whose skills tend to be unrecognized and remain underutilized.

vi. Civil society organizations active in the defense of human rights and/or advocating good governance.

vii. The NGO community who have played a major role in alleviating poverty in Bangladesh and whose large constituency of workers are distributed across Bangladesh.

viii. The large constituency of women who receive micro-credit and other resources which have enabled them to earn their own livelihood and who look to a regime committed to their empowerment.

ix. The millions of hard-working

yet resourceless people who live insecure lives on the margins of poverty, who look towards a day when they can vote a party to power which will put them at the centre of their political concerns.

The above mentioned constituencies, which could be supplemented, constitute a large and important segment of the voting population of Bangladesh. They have been overlooked in the calculations of the major political parties except when they are forced to agitate around specific issues such as Kansat. They are, individually, and as communities, looking for a leadership which recognizes their contribution, is willing to support rather than terrorize or extract resource from them, and, above all, who can be relied upon to keep their word.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawker for a copy of this month's Forum.

The Fakhruddin government: No easy option

Rounaq Jahan sounds a note of caution as to the tasks faced by the current administration

THE initial steps of the Fakhruddin government -- separation of the judiciary from the executive, reconstitution of the EC with ACC in the offing, arrest of high profile political leaders who are alleged to be involved in corrupt and criminal activities -- have raised high hopes and expectation about the performance of the government. Raising people's expectations is always problematic because then the government has to worry about commensurate delivery. It is always prudent to promise less but deliver on the limited promises than promise a lot and fall short on delivery.

The buzz on the streets and on the TV talk shows is one of a "fresh beginning." There is certainly a hunger to get out of the mess of malgovernance and undemocratic politics. Demand is high to sweep out all bad (however defined) practices of the past and begin

anew. But who will do it and how will it be done? Text books tell us that to carry out major reforms we need both inside champions and outside majority constituency support.

Granted that the current council of advisers and their military power base will be the inside champions of reforms, but how will they ensure that the reforms will not be resisted or subverted by the very government machineries they head? After all reforms often get blocked during implementation by bureaucratic inertia and road block. Punishments work only for a limited time. Reform champions will have to figure out what kinds of incentive/disincentive structures they can put in so that the opponents can be neutralized and the majority of inside players will be won over to follow a rule-based system.

However, reforms cannot be done by simply inside champion-



ons. They need outside allies. Today civil society and the media are obviously playing the role of outside advocates of reforms. But can civil society and the media mobilize and sustain constituencies of support? They

can raise awareness and influence public opinion but mobilizing and sustaining constituencies is the task of political parties. The political parties have presence in every village of Bangladesh. Whether we like them or not we cannot wish them away.

In fact, recent studies (BRAC State of Governance 2006 Report) show that in the last few decades the major political parties have strengthened their organizational presence down to the ward level in rural and urban areas. So it will be important for reform advocates to develop incentives/disincentives so that the political parties will find it in their own interest to support the reforms agenda. So far, apart from providing lip service, political parties have not behaved in a way to convince anybody that they are serious about governance and political reforms.

There is a lot of talk about the

possibility of emergence of an alternative political party. But here again the proponents seem to be pinning their hopes on individual leaders i.e. such a party is on if a certain leader gives a call. If the alternative political party is again dependent on a charismatic leader, then how will the nation ever get out of the system of leadership-based politics?

There are no easy options and no quick fix solutions to the problems that have mounted over the years. It will be wise for the current government to be frank about the difficult choices we all face and to take the people into confidence. The people will be able to handle hard facts about what is realistically achievable within a realistic time frame.

Rounaq Jahan is a Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University, New York. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawker for a copy of this month's Forum.

Our window on the world

Rafiq Hasan suggests that a deep sea port serving the entire region is the way forward

PORTS are the lifeline of a country. Most of the foreign trade of a country depends on its sea ports. There are many countries in the world which do not have any sea port. As a result, those land-locked countries face a lot of difficulties in conducting export-import business. We are fortunate that we are not a land-locked country. We have a vast seashore, a number of sea ports, and dozens of river ports. But it is very unfortunate that we could not use the seashore and ports properly.

Exports from Bangladesh have been increasing at a rate of over 25 percent for the last couple of years, while the import volume grew at a pace of around 20 percent. But the country's sea ports, the main channel for foreign trade, have not seen any major changes for facilitating the rising volume of export-import cargo in the last one decade. As a result, the Chittagong sea port which handles more than 80 percent of export-import cargo is overburdened, and has become a constant headache for the nation,

taking heavy toll on the country's overall economy.

Although the export-import trade witnessed significant development in the last one decade, no new major port has been set up in the country for handling the additional cargo. A small sea port was, however, set up in Teknaf during the immediate past BNP regime, mainly for handling export-import cargo with neighbouring Myanmar.

An American company had come up with a proposal for setting up a new port at the estuary of the Karnaphuli river, besides the existing Chittagong port, during the previous Awami League period. The company, Stevedoring Services of America (SSA), had proposed to invest over \$250 million in the first phase. The actual investment would have gone up to \$1 billion had the port come into being.

But the initiative for a private port was resisted by the locals led by Mayor ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury. Although the high-ups of the then Awami League regime initially had agreed to the proposal, it was rejected later follow-

ing massive agitation by Chowdhury's followers. Even though Chowdhury is a prominent Awami League leader, he did not support the AL government in this case. He argued that a new port at the very estuary of the shrinking river Karnaphuli would gradually diminish the importance of the existing Chittagong port.

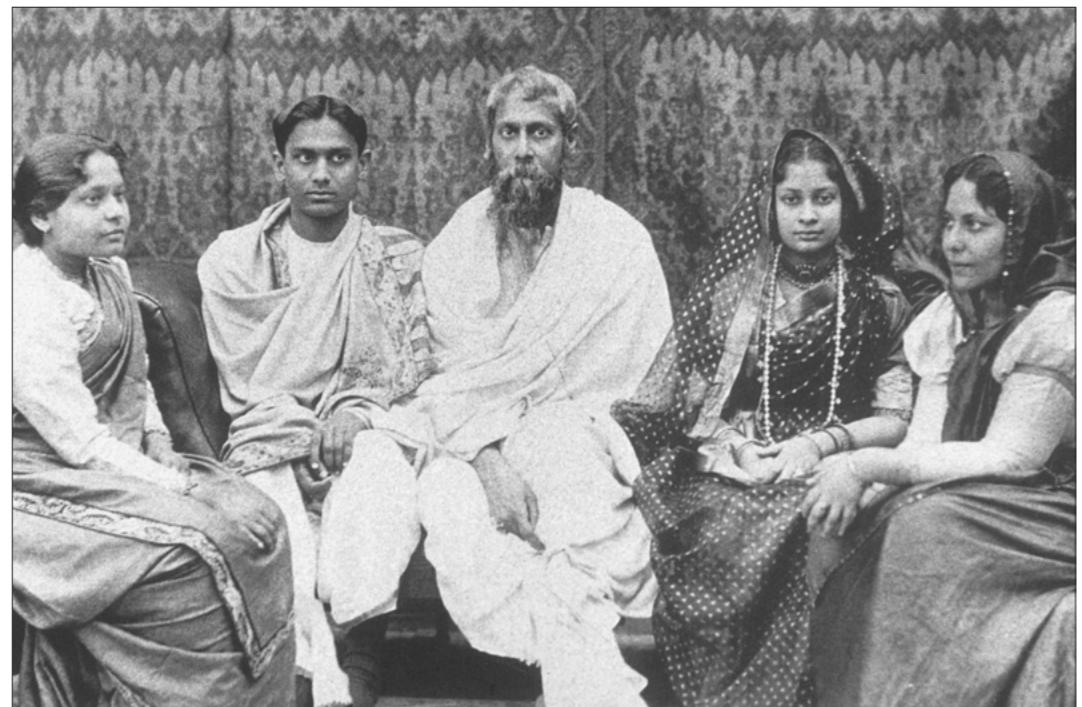
In a sense, Mohiuddin was right: a new port at the point proposed by SSA, would have ultimately killed the Chittagong port. However, at the same time, the country has been deprived of having a new modern port for smooth handling of increasing volume of foreign trade.

As the mega proposal for private port was rejected, no foreign investors have since come up with any such proposal. Nor did the government apparently feel the necessity of setting up a new port in spite of the rapid growth in export-import volume in the country.

Rafiq Hasan is a senior reporter, The Daily Star. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawker for a copy of this month's Forum.

The women in his life

Rubaiyat Hossain discusses Rabindranath's subordination of his liberal humanism to the cause of nationalism when it came to the issue of women



and Sarala Ghosal, two of Tagore's nieces, got married at the age of twenty-nine and thirty-three, respectively, which was quite the exception back in the early 20th century, why did Rabindranath

Tagore refused to educate his daughters in Shankiniketan or perhaps send them abroad to become educated and self-sufficient?

Why did he define their ultimate

fates as marriage when clearly he had the understanding that these marriages were not going to work out for the girls' benefit? Why is it that Tagore never made an effort to educate his wife? Why does

Mrinalini only appear as a self-sacrificing mother who sells her jewelry to save Shankiniketan from sinking?

Whereas Tagore's sisters-in-law were all educated and even appeared in the public sphere, why is it that Tagore's wife lived a very uneventful and private life? She was married at the age of thirteen, bore five children, and died at the age of twenty-nine. Why is it that we see a clear diversion from Rabindranath Tagore's otherwise liberal humanist attitude when it comes to dealing with the social and cultural positioning of women in Tagore's life?

In order for us to attempt to understand this question it would be helpful to comprehend the idea of "individualism" that was created for Bengali middle class women of the 19th and 20th century. When interrogated against the backdrop of colonial political economy, the overall double standards of Bengali nationalism in creating the women's individuality will become clear.

Rubaiyat Hossain is an independent film-maker and Lecturer at Brac University. To read the full version of this article please ask your hawker for a copy of this month's Forum.

M Shahid Alam describes how the ultra-nationalist Americans have met their Waterloo in Iraq

HERE were two components to the neo-con plan. First, they began to work on plans to extend US military superiority to a point where no potential rival would dare to challenge its hegemony in any region of the world. In violation of international laws, the US would enforce its total hegemony by waging preventive wars against any country that acted contrary to its economic or political interests.

But these plans had to be put on hold. President Bill Clinton was not ready to fully embrace their plans, even though his war and sanctions against Iraq prepared the base on which the neo-cons would build later on. The neo-cons were back in the saddle with the election of George W. Bush in 2000. They waited for the right time to unleash their wars in the Middle East. The wars of 9/11 arrived as their Pearl Harbor. The Americans could now be bamboozled to support the neo-cons' dreams of creating a global and everlasting American Empire.

In the aftermath of 9/11, matters appeared to get worse in the periphery. Under the pretense of waging "war against global terrorism," the neo-cons launched their plan for establishing global dominance. Overnight, following the lead established by Israel, the US defined all resistance to American hegemony as terrorism. It was now licensed to carry its preventive wars to all corners of the globe. It also licensed regional powers and local despots to expand their violation of human rights under the cover of the "war against global terrorism."

In the weeks after April 9, 2003, when US troops captured Baghdad, it appeared that the United States was on a roll. Iran, Syria, and North Korea could count the days to their own quick demise. Israel was getting ready to complete its ethnic cleansing of all Palestinians. Pakistan would be asked to liquidate its nuclear arsenal, or prepare to be bombed back to the stone age.

In time, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be dismembered into smaller client states. At some point in this sequence, the oil resources of the region would be privatized and sold for a song to US oil corporations. Finally, with a firm American grip on the Middle Eastern oil spigot, Europe, Japan and China would take their humble stations under the shadow of American hegemony.

In the weeks after launching their war against Iraq, the neo-cons began to imagine that the world was theirs for the taking: the new American century had begun. Yet, how their plans have gone awry. All because a few thousand damned Iraqis decided to rob the Americans of the richly-deserved fruits of victory.

M Shahid Alam teaches economics at a university in Boston. He is the author of Challenging the New Orientalism (Pluto December 2006). To read the full version of this article please ask your hawker for a copy of this month's Forum.

Forum: February issue

Ask your hawker for a copy of this month's magazine.

Breathing space for a new party? Farid Bakht

February 1969: Revisiting the Agartala Conspiracy Case Syed Badru Ahsan

The Fakhruddin government: No easy option Rounaq Jahan

Our window on the world Rafiq Hasan

Bangladesh 2006: A human rights audit Hameeda Hossain

Late Said Fakrul Alam

Cautionary tales from Rangoon Larry Jagan

Has regime change Rehman Sobhan

boomeranged? M Shahid Alam

The question of poverty reduction in Pakistan Akmal Hussain

Why Mahmud can't be a pilot Naeem Mohaiemen

Banished to a better life? Maria Chaudhuri

The evolution of monotheism Zeeshan Hasan

Late Said Fakrul Alam

The women in his life Rubaiyat Hossain

Late Said

Fakrul Alam examines two of the posthumously published works of the great Palestinian scholar



In the long, and characteristically eloquent, interview Edward W. Said gave a few weeks before he died on September 25, 2003 -- an interview now available on videotape -- the Palestinian-American critic talks about the difficulty he was having in reading, writing, talking, and even coping with the simplest demands of everyday life; the twelve-year struggle with leukemia had apparently drained the sixty-seven year old intellectual of all energy. And yet what strikes anyone watching the video is his alertness and the effortlessness and compulsion with which he wants to tell posterity about his life and his works. Undoubtedly, Said was losing out in his battle with

cancer, but, obviously, here was a man determined not to go gently into the night and bent on explaining what he had been up to in a lifetime devoted to Palestine, art and culture, as well as the profession of English and comparative literature.

In fact, late in his life, Said seemed to have found an immense source of energy, as if, before losing out in his race with time, he would do everything he could to leave behind a legacy that would be truly distinctive. It was as if he had decided that his life should be as rounded as he could make it to be. Out of the 20 or so books that he authored, around ten were published in the last twelve years of his life; at least four more have come

seen by one of the fiercest critics of American foreign policy of recent decades; Humanistic and Democratic Criticism discusses the function of criticism in our time (2004), and the other two, Freud and the Non-European (2003) and On Late Style (2006) deal with a phenomenon that fascinated the dying scholar-critic, lover of classical western music and aesthete, something that he characterized as "late style."

What is late style? It is something that Said sees heralding the culminating phase of a great artist's career; a phase when the artist as an old man (Said does not discuss any woman artist who has distinguished herself by her late style in these books) has intimations of mortality and, therefore,

forges a distinctive but disturbing