

## Bangladesh: Golden opportunity

**All the values that came with our thousands of years of heritage, culture, and history are being drowned in the degradation of our society which has been overcome by greed for power and money, nepotism, intolerance, perversion, intellectual bankruptcy, socio-political degradation and so on and so forth. Luckily for us, this disease has affected only a small portion of our society that, I believe, can be removed like a tumor.**

AKKU CHOWDHURY

**T**HE optimism that the caretaker government has brought in with all its actions and activities is unprecedented.

The latest "daring act" of arresting prominent figures has overwhelmed the people, and there seem to be euphoria about "good times" coming.

The honourable chief advisor and his colleagues have taken an incredible responsibility by raising the people's expectations to a great level. It will take a lot of determination and hard work on the part of the advisors to deliver. Not since our freedom from the

hands of the Pakistan army in 1971 did the people have this great hope and feeling of trust that there is, at last, a light at the end of the tunnel.

We have had many opportunities to take the country forward, but none of them were utilized and we failed our people every time. This is a golden opportunity, and we better make good use of it.

Let us forget the interests of a few, and move the nation forward to meet the challenges of the new millennium.

Let us, like the "Phoenix," be reborn in this golden era to give Bangladesh the place it truly

deserves.

There is no end to desire, happiness and wish-lists. But what is most important is that the caretaker government should make sure that all the basic institutions -- the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, political parties, government institutions etc.-- required to make democracy sustainable are in the right order.

All these institutions must work transparently, honestly and efficiently. Competent people who are knowledgeable about their subject must head them.

There has to be passion, independence and dedication in the

leadership of the institutions.

As most people have expressed, they are willing to give enough time to the present caretaker government because they know that time is needed to establish rule of law and form democratic institutions, which no political government had done ever since our birth as a nation.

Not being able to crawl out of the "tunnel" of darkness has been a never-ending problem for the unfortunate Bangladeshis ever since independence.

Every time we see a light at the end and hope rises, the exit is blocked out by the falling rocks.

But we were at a chaotic crossroad again, from which we have managed to come out and I am sure that, with all our support, the caretaker government can build a system of governance that will be transparent, accountable and patriotic.

This is a golden opportunity, and we want the present caretaker government to dedicate

itself to laying a solid foundation for future governments, to build a country where social, economic and political rights are equally available for all citizens.

We support them fully, and are willing to make the sacrifices needed for a brighter future. The people of this country have, time and again, proved that they are willing to make great sacrifices to bring about changes to make their, and their fellow citizens', lives better.

It is the common people who made the maximum sacrifices during the liberation, and time and again during the last 35 years. In political upheavals they have been the sacrificial lambs in the name of democracy and political rights.

No one should be above the law. The law must be equal for all, and those who are in government must remember that they are "of the people, by the people and for the people."

Politically, we have been locked for years in immature

debates over trifling matters which could have been overcome with matured thinking.

But then that was a process for democracy to come into shape.

Unfortunately, not only the politicians but the civil society, cultural activists and business leaders also didn't show maturity. Rather, they became part of a vicious circle of mediocre leadership whose sole purpose and goal was to get onto the bandwagon for "quick riches."

Nobody really had it in their minds to work towards establishing a democratic process and building a country where all would be benefited, and the dreams of our freedom fighters would come true.

This has resulted in the people becoming totally disgusted with politicians and the political system.

The sad part of our history is that when democracy is only at an embryonic stage, being merely 15 years old, there is already apathy in the general public towards

politics, the system and the value of democracy.

I will repeat again, the caretaker government can save the nation from this apathy and deliver a true democratic system to the nation.

I repeat, we can only become true patriots by consuming ourselves in our work and trying to be the best in whatever we do, which will ultimately contribute to nation building.

If we can be focused about our country, and be passionate in our responsibility to our country, this nation of ours can surely move forward.

We can dedicate ourselves to nation building with our services and professional ethics in the true spirit of our freedom struggle.

To do this we don't have to sacrifice our entire material world. All we need to do is try to practice in our daily lives basic the moral values that make us "human beings."

Our culture, heritage and

religion teach us to be disciplined, to value and respect others, to be content with very little, and to be resilient to overcome all kinds of misery very quickly, and, definitely, to be hard-working and creative.

Unfortunately, in recent times, we are getting divorced from all those values and embracing an alien culture that goes against the natural fiber of our society.

All the values that came with our thousands of years of heritage, culture, and history are being drowned in the degradation of our society which has been overcome by greed for power and money, nepotism, intolerance, perversion, intellectual bankruptcy, socio-political degradation and so on and so forth.

Luckily for us, this disease has affected only a small portion of our society that, I believe, can be removed like a tumor.

Akku Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## Now it is up to us

**However, we cannot just blame the corrupt politicians and then retire. We all must do the best in our capacity to take our country back from the grip of these miserable politicians -- there is no other way around it. So, we must respond affirmatively to the call of Dr. Yunus and be proactive now to strengthen his hands; otherwise we have to blame ourselves for inaction and missed opportunity, and our future generations will not forgive us for our failure to act.**

MATIUR RAHMAN

**N**OBEL laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus in an open letter addressed to all Bangladeshis at home and abroad has asked for everyone's opinion, support and suggestions about his plan to launch a new political party, for the reasons clearly explained in his letter in the context of the prevailing political situation which is well known to all.

Now, it is up to all of us to decide how to respond to his clarion call to serve the nation. This author, among many others who are probably flooding Dr Yunus with an affirmative response, not only supports his plan, but also congratulates him for the courage, conviction and commitment that he has shown in his expressed intentions.

What made Dr. Yunus uniquely great is his principled confidence in the innate goodness and trustworthiness of people, particularly the deprived and downtrodden ones in our society and the communities around the world. With this principle in mind, followed by firm and sustained actions over several decades, he has helped millions of helpless families to become financially independent -- an accomplishment that was not even thought of being possible by traditional banking systems and pundits all over the world.

Now that Dr. Yunus is embarking upon the great mission of reforming our politics in order to give some meaning to democracy and good governance, scholars and pundits will again be doing their calculations to assess the risk for his political endeavor and some may even politely advise him not to tarnish his great image and reputation by entering into politics that is considered so polluted today.

However, I would say that his expressed mission at this politically hopeless juncture of our

nation is what is needed most for this poor country. Moreover, Dr. Yunus has proven himself to be a man of extraordinary vision, wisdom, competence and love for his fellow citizens, and he knows best what he is entering into now and why.

Many conscientious people in our society have spoken, written and emphasized on the ideas and ideals of political reforms that needed to be adopted and implemented by our government and major political parties. Nothing that our existing political parties and their leaders were not either interested or good enough for the desired true reforms and rectifications necessary to bring about any tangible changes to our political arena, this author, in a number of writings published in The Daily Star, had repeatedly suggested the need for launching a new political party (or a movement) with revolutionary ideas to eradicate the ills of our politics that have been eating into the vitals of our nation.

And now it is Dr. Yunus again who has accepted the challenge facing the nation. By doing so, he is in fact throwing the challenge in front of all those who have been yearning for a substantial change in the quality of our politics. Dr. Yunus's plan has practically opened up a golden opportunity for those who thought they had ideas that could change the tide of our politics, but did not find an acceptable platform to put their thoughts into actions.

Now that the opportunity has been created by Dr. Yunus, there cannot be any excuse for anyone for not doing whatever it takes to make an impact on our polity.

Our good and honest people and intelligentsia had always shied away from politics for various reasons, and their absence in the political field has contributed to the shocking state that we are in now. The longer we leave the business of politics to those who

are proven time and again to be visionless, inefficient, greedy and outright corrupt, the more harm we are doing to ourselves, our future generations and the nation as a whole.

Therefore, it has become a patriotic duty to all conscientious citizens to engage in direct actions to change the culture of our politics. People say: "If you are not part of the solutions, then you are part of the problem."

The political mission that Dr. Yunus is about to embark upon is not going to be easy and it is certainly not possible for him alone to do the job. The task is huge and the challenges are even bigger, especially because the morally vanquished parties will try to use all of their ammunitions -- and they have some really bad ones under their disposal -- in this ultimate fight for their survival.

So, for success in the political mission that is about to be initiated by Dr. Yunus, there is critical need for a large group of genuinely dedicated, competent and visionary people in the leadership role to chalk out a workable strategy and implement it with utmost zeal. The party must also be able to attract young, energetic and devoted grass-root level workers and volunteers.

The political party, as proposed by Dr. Yunus, must start its organizations simultaneously in all cities and towns, districts and villages, with honest and hard-working people coming from all walks of life. In intensity and magnitude, the activity of this party shall be no less demanding than that of a true revolutionary movement. Therefore, leaders of this proposed party must be capable of motivating all patriotic citizens to voluntarily participate in this movement for nation building.

When formed and organized, the party must vigorously campaign for elections and contest in

all seats of the Parliament, Municipal Corporations and Union Parishads throughout the whole country, and must put its best efforts for winning majority seats in the Parliament. Otherwise, Dr. Yunus alone, or with just a handful of MPs in his camp, will not be able to make a dent to the empire of corrupt political parties.

Our CTG and military have already declared their plans and strategy to free the nation from the stranglehold of the corrupt and criminals in our politics today. Dr. Yunus and his group must be able to build effective partnership with the present administration and make the best use of it. One of the most effective ways the CTG can help pave the way for honest politicians coming to power is by keeping the guilty among the arrested politicians locked up and their accomplices on the run, and putting just the right pressure on their leaders who are still out in the society shedding crocodile tears for democracy and, very importantly, by delaying the national polls to allow the honest and right minded people enough time to organize and prepare themselves for elections.

The fruits of our hard-earned independence have been looted over and over again by a shamefully opportunistic group of politicians and their hoodlums in the BNP and the AL. Their corruption and inordinate greed for wealth have deprived the helpless people of their legitimate shares in our economy. Their political mischief has harmed our democracy beyond limits and brought the nation to the brink of collapse.

However, we cannot just blame the corrupt politicians and then retire. We all must do the best in our capacity to take our country back from the grip of these miserable politicians -- there is no other way around it.

So, we must respond affirmatively to the call of Dr. Yunus and be proactive now to strengthen his hands; otherwise we have to blame ourselves for inaction and missed opportunity, and our future generations will not forgive us for our failure to act.

Dr. Matiur Rahman is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## An open response

**Regrettably enough, your performance as a voice of conscience in your own homeland, for the last several years in particular, was far from reassuring. Over the last several years the battered human rights situation of our dear homeland was of the cause of grave concern for many conscious souls around the globe. Ironically, you have been totally mum on these reprehensible acts of a government that derived its authority from a constitutional process.**

MOZAMMEL H KHAN

**T**HIS is an open response to your open letter to the citizens of your beloved country, the country which you have brought to centre-fold of pride in the international arena through your winning the much-coveted Nobel Prize for peace.

Your winning the Nobel Prize for peace has put an additional burden on you to live up to the expectations of the people, not only within the geographical boundaries of Bangladesh but also in the current global village at large.

Regrettably enough, your performance as a voice of conscience in your own homeland, for the last several years in particular, was far from reassuring.

Over the last several years the battered human rights situation of our dear homeland was of the cause of grave concern for many conscious souls around the globe.

Oppression of minorities and opposition workers, custodial torture and death, the brutal techniques of custodial torture of politicians and intellectuals alike and the most despicable of all crimes committed by the government, which has been termed by human rights organizations as "terrorism by the state," where people were being killed on daily basis in so-called "crossfire," were carried out with absolute disregard for the law.

Ironically, you have been totally mum on these reprehensible acts of a government that derived its authority from a constitutional process.

While you have endorsed the civil society movement to elect honest and suitable candidates, you were totally silent when one of our brightest bureaucrat-turned politicians was killed by an assassin's grenade.

It was puzzling to note the indifference of one of our most gifted sons, even before you became a Nobel laureate, vis-à-vis such a heinous crime and tragedy.

If the "denial of bank credit to

the poor people is a violation of human rights," then "denial of the right to know, and to teach the true history of the nation to our school children" is a violation of human rights of at least equal magnitude, if not more.

During the dark era of the last BNP-led government, when our history was systematically distorted, you, as not only an illustrious citizen but as an active maker of that history as well, did not express any words of criticism.

In one of your addresses against corruption, you proposed the idea of forming a "sufferers association" whose members, you expect, would come to ACC with evidence.

However, when poor Nuruzzaman was arrested and tortured for his "crime" of bringing a simple allegation of bribery against the son of a minister, I did not read any words of sympathy or protest from you to rescue Nuruzzaman from the torturous arms of the state machinery.

It was none other than Irene Khan, the chief of Amnesty International, who had to issue a statement of condemnation in favour of the poor sufferer.

Termining the present situation a new one, you said that it was high time to start politics from a new angle. However, I am afraid, you had no part, whatsoever, in the creation of that high time.

Over the last two years or so, when the opposition political parties were putting forward their demands for reforms to create a level playing field to hold a free and fair election, you had no words of sympathy for them.

Quite to the contrary, only the other day when Prof. Iajuddin Ahmed was carrying out one mischievous act after another to help his benefactors materialize their blue-print, and while the whole nation was critical of his actions and inactions, you evaluated his performance with an A+, which perhaps encouraged him to carry on with his partisan activities.

In full tune with the BNP led

alliance, you were in favour of holding the election on January 22 in order to "save the constitution."

In fact, it was the determination of the AL-led political alliance to derail the farcical electoral process, the support of the international community in favour of a credible election, the ceaseless efforts by a section of civil society, and the timely action of our armed forces in full harmony with the wishes of our people that saved the day.

The widely acclaimed and prudent actions of the Fakhruddin government in carrying forward the multi-prong reforms only prove the full-scale merits of the demands raised by the AL-led alliance.

Fairness demands that you at least extend your thanks and gratitude to these stakeholders, including thousands of political activists who took to the streets braving the police brutality of the Iajuddin government, and specially to those who laid down their lives for creating this "high time" for you to float a new political party.

I could not agree with you more when you say: "It is now clear to all that it is not possible to reach the goal maintaining the existing political culture; it is only possible by bringing a comprehensive change in the culture. Through my work and experience, I feel with all my heart that the people with their innate sense of endeavour and creativity can achieve the impossible if political goodwill, competent leadership and good governance can be established."

However, I am taking strong exception, for two reasons, to your intention of putting yourself at the helm to lead that endeavour by forming a new political party.

Firstly, through your sheer indifference to the cause of human rights and rule of law, specifically over the last five years of darkest rule, you failed to portray yourself as a moral beacon, as was devoutly done by Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed and others, for our citizens to emulate and take strength from.

While I respect your democratic

right to form a political party, by the same token, I am sorry to mention the gap that exists between what you practiced and our expectation from you in the arena of human rights.

Moreover, I am not too sure about the potential success of your endeavour, either. Even Bertrand Russell failed in his multiple bids to secure a seat in the House of Commons in the cradle of democracy.

We have two types of politicians: one with firm conviction, the other with sheer opportunism.

In the leadership level the latter vastly outnumber the former, while at the grass-roots level, a completely opposite scenario exists.

In response to your call to help with the formation of a political party, in addition to many who failed to secure a berth in either of the existing political camps, I can visualize the latter group flocking into your camp in large numbers as they may not be willing to ride on the sinking ship anymore.

Another group of our citizens, which always stays on the sidelines during the hours of need of the nation, but was attuned to your unfortunate comment characterizing all the politicians as being corrupt and devoid of any political conviction, will be clapping your arrival to the domain where controversy is a name of the game.

Personal honesty has never been a shield against criticism for a politician.

If you get to reach the corridors of power, it will be the same group who will, most likely, take no time in placing you in the same bracket where they have put the leaders of the main political parties, without any differentiation, albeit they are not a political force to reckon with.

In fact, this is the second reason why I am vehemently opposed to your entry into the political fray, since it would be extremely painful to see any dent, through an iota of controversy around you, on our pride which you have raised multi-fold on October 13, 2006.

Our nation expects to see you as its conscience, whereby you will be working as its de-facto ombudsman in promoting human rights and rule of law. You have no right in your good sense, Professor Yunus, to demolish the glory that you yourself have engraved on the face of the nation.

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

## Tomorrow, tomorrow

**The people who brought America reports of WMDs when none existed, and the slogan "Mission Accomplished" when it was not nor likely to be, now say that American troops cannot leave. Not yet. Not soon. Not on a timetable. Judge the truth of that conclusion by the truth of their past statements.**

ANNA QUINDLEN

**T**OMORROW. That's when the United States should begin to bring combat forces home from Iraq. Today would be a better option, but already it's tomorrow in Baghdad, in the Green Zone fortress Americans have built in the centre of the city, out in the streets where IEDs are lying in wait for passing soldiers and every marketplace may be the endgame for a suicide bomber.

The course of this war has been a

consistent scene of carnage with ever-changing underpinnings. Uncover weapons of mass destruction, lay hands on Saddam Hussein, oversee elections, teach the Iraqis to police themselves. Bring stability to the region. The last has been an illusion. Over the last year many Americans have finally realized how thoroughly they were sold a bill of goods. The picture of the peaceable kingdom painted by the Bush administration nearly four years ago was that of a country, riven by religious and ethnic violence for centuries,

suddenly turned into the equivalent of a Connecticut suburb: town meetings, friendly neighbors, a common purpose, perhaps a shopping mall.

Nearly four years of photographs and footage of dusty corpses, cinderblock barriers, shredded cars and bereaved families, and the absurdity of that view is absolute.

No one tries to sell that snake oil anymore. Now the party line is that American forces will get out, but they cannot get out now. They cannot get out now because Iraq

would become a place of civil war, of untrammelled violence, of complete chaos.

Iraq has been a place of civil war, untrammelled violence, complete chaos for a long time now. American intervention has not made that better. It has made it worse.

Get out now. Provide plenty of consultants to organize police forces and help with reconstruction. Persuade the Iraqi government, such as it is, to ask for peace-keeping assistance from other nations. Put the arm on allies in the Middle East to participate for the sake of stability in the region. Recognize that much of this is about access to oil, and negotiate accordingly while trying to persuade Americans to go to rehab for their fossil-fuel addiction. The most tangible past America

made with the Iraqi people was to capture Saddam Hussein and bring him to justice. Done. The most nonsensical and paternalistic one was to bring freedom to the Iraqi people. That they must do themselves.

This is not rocket science. Since the war began there has been an entire shelf of good books written describing the conditions that doomed a military incursion. Each has documented the history of occupation that scarred the Iraqi soul and that American leaders ignored, the powerful insurgencies that somehow came as a surprise to the United States.

America finds itself back where it began, before more than 3,000 U.S. soldiers died, before hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed or maimed. When George W. Bush was bound and determined

to send troops to Baghdad, most of his European allies counseled more diplomacy, more attempts to shape Iraq from the outside, more involvement from other Arab nations. The answer to the mess the administration has made since then is to go back. It should go back to the solutions it rejected in favor of international chest thumping, chest thumping that has now cost thousands of American families their sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, and has cost the people who engineered that plan nothing in terms of personal loss.

This month journalism lost one of its most honest and strong-minded practitioners, the opinion columnist Molly Ivins. Breast cancer finally did what her detractors couldn't, wore her down and

shut her up. But even as she was fading fast, she felt compelled to dictate a column about the president's plan to shore up a disaster with a mistake by sending more troops to Iraq.

She did not call for George W. Bush, whom she had nicknamed "Shrub," to change course. She did not plead with the Senate, whose craven bickering last week as soldiers continued to die on their watch would have surprised her not at all. She always understood the pointlessness of counting on legislative bodies for smarts and sense. She called on those she trusted, the American people. Her dying declaration in print was this: "We are the people who run this country. We are the deciders. And every single day, every single one of us needs to step outside and take some action to help stop this

war." The people who brought America reports of WMDs when none existed, and the slogan "Mission Accomplished" when it was not nor likely to be, now say that American troops cannot leave. Not yet. Not soon. Not on a timetable. Judge the truth of that conclusion by the truth of their past statements.

They say that talk of withdrawal shows a lack of support for the troops. There is no better way to support those who have fought valiantly in Iraq than to guarantee that not one more of them dies in the service of the political miscalculation of their leaders. Not one more soldier. Not one more grave. Not one more day. Bring them

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.