

## Let the open-letter season begin

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

**D**EAR Dr Yunus: Your open letter to the people asking for their active, moral and intellectual support to your call for launching a new political party has been made at a time when the cleansing drive of the caretaker government, against corrupt and unruly elements of the state, has the major political parties diving for cover.

Of course, the whole nation is giving a standing ovation to the declared mission of the caretaker government to create a level playing field so that any honest, capable and patriotic citizen intent on entering the political fray can do so without

- Fear of intimidation by hired goons,
- Fear of vote-buying with black-money and
- Fear of partisan administrators bent on currying favours to their

political patrons.

But the timing of your declaration for entering active politics has made many of your well-wishers a bit rushed to make a judgment on your intentions, and the chances of your success in your new-found avocation.

It is true that the nation has been agonising under the yoke of miss-governance, despite the people's expectation, since the toppling of the military dictator in 1990 through a unified political movement.

It is true that the people have been openly venting their anguish and frustration over the loss of life, property and honour at the hands of political operatives in recent years.

It is also true that people are openly questioning the futility of expecting good governance from parties that are themselves not held accountable for actions within

the party, and are not transparent in their financial affairs.

However, your plan to take over the reins of the government through elections echoes a fantasy that many political wannabes have enacted in their minds and shared with their dreamy friends over the years.

I am sure you are not the day-dreaming kind, and a few million well-wishers and potential supporters have already sent in their vote of confidence enthusiastically by phone, e-mail, sms and fax.

I am sure that you are keenly aware of the complexities of creating a political party on the one hand and the monumental challenges in garnering the credibility and trust of the majority of voters on the other hand.

I am also sure that the message of a significant number of well-wishers (nearly 30% of all responses to your open letter) who

do not want to see your name tarnished by meddling in politics is not lost on you.

Professor Rehman Sobhan, in his article published in the Daily Star on February 16, has eloquently presciently the constituencies you have to win over in order to lay a claim on your intended prize.

In fact, Jawaharlal Nehru is reported to have demanded a salary to do justice to his services as secretary general of the Indian Congress Party. But, till today, we do not know of any political party office bearers being compensated officially for their services, while the declared assets and expenditures of political parties are nowhere near the levels perceived to be realistic and commensurate with their activities and campaigns.

One can only hope that you will bring the required changes to the political landscape through your

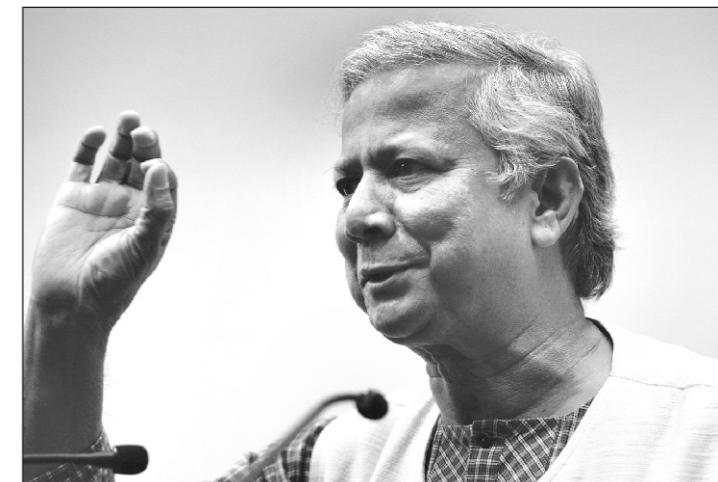
political eco-system does not allow for an honourable full-time occupation (as a matter of fact on this sub-continent it never did, ever since democratic political parties were introduced in the late nineteenth century) as all political functionaries are expected to render their services without remuneration, unless elected to public office.

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One can only hope that you will bring the required changes to the political landscape through your

party so that

- Party workers and officials are held accountable for their actions, and work according to the declared principles and objectives of the party,
- Full-time party workers and officials are adequately compensated for their services so that questions regarding their propriety do not arise,
- Decisions are taken democratically at every layer of the party and are not imposed from the top (e.g. the selection of party candidates for parliamentary or union council elections),
- Party finances are maintained transparently, as in any public institution, with full disclosure to party members and the general public and
- The party is steadfast in its resolve to serve the nation for the long-haul, irrespective of the number of seats won in the parlia-



ment and the union councils.

Just as you were the most successful champion of bringing micro-credit to the poor, though by no means the only champion in this regard, we want to see you as a successful champion of political party reform in our country, so that not only your new party adheres to

the principles of "nation above party and party above self" but all parties are encouraged to live by it.

Wishing you all success in your new endeavour,

Habibullah N Karim is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## Women's participation for clean politics

SHAMIMA PERVIN

**W**ITH the promulgation of a state of emergency in Bangladesh a new situation has emerged in the political arena.

Many of the top political players have been arrested on charges of corruption and misuse of power and authority.

The Nobel Laureate Prof. Md. Yunus and many others have characterized politicians as selfish and money-oriented, which created a huge debate in the civil society.

Politicians and noted civil society members gave statements against this arbitrary comment, and referred to the contribution of the politicians during independence and the rebuilding of the nation.

Now, the professor, also, has shown great interest in participating in party politics. Despite all these debates and stories the political field is, for the time being, apparently vacant.

This vacancy is expected to be filled up by honest, accountable and transparent leadership.

Historically, women took over

leadership during crises, which is true in case of Bangladesh too.

Women fought against the Pakistani army and the collaborators with courage and innovative strategies during our liberation struggle, though the truth is ignored by the history.

Two of our former prime ministers, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, became leaders during crises, although neither of them inherited the mantle of leadership when her party was in power.

Once placed in the position of leadership, they followed their own dynamics and momentum to lead their parties in difficult times.

They were successful as driving forces and unifying factors in their respective parties. They have probably acted as positive role models for women of all ages in Bangladesh, and helped overcome the obstacles towards women's leadership in a patriarchal society.

Women's participation in politics is critical for promoting clean, transparent and accountable governance in Bangladesh.

It's not women's biology or nature, which triggered them to be accountable or clean. Women

could be as corrupt as men, and can misuse authority.

Historically very few women shared corrupt political power. It is well said that learning is easier than de-learning.

So, politicians who thought of political power as a machine to make money, or to exploit people to fulfill petty self-interest, will find it difficult to give up their attitudes and interest.

For women, it is easy to learn democratic behavior and values. Also, because of the social psychological make-up of women, they prefer more transparent dealings with everybody.

Women are less likely to deal with muscle power and mafia for fear of being unable to deal with them.

The increased participation of women in politics can make a difference in the lives of women in Bangladesh.

Raising women's problems in the parliament creates an opportunity to reshape their lives through changes in the policy and the laws. For instance, Nordic countries succeeded in increasing women's political participation through

affirmative actions.

Many laws and policies were enacted in those countries to promote gender equality, because of the presence of many women in political offices.

Although, feminists often argue that women parliamentarians become surrogate men, however, even in Bangladesh, we often see that women's presence in the male domain upsets gender boundaries.

The presence of even one woman alters male behavior, the presence of several women alters it even further. The presence of Begum Zia or Sheikh Hasina in religious programs liberalized religious values and outlook.

Women's movements always advocated for replacing the processes, which exclude the marginalized groups with processes that are inclusive and empowering.

Women's movements seek to transform political institutions. They want the institutions to be egalitarian and not hierarchical, accountable and not autocratic, responsive to people's needs, and not to serve the institutions' narrow organizational interests.

Perhaps the present political crisis requires women leaders in the highest political forum.

Women's right to participate in politics calls for wider participation of people across class, sex and religion, and encourages pluralism in politics.

In addition women's presence in politics encourages shifting of male models of leadership paradigm, which are equated with "power," "domination," and "competition."

On the other hand, women are in favour of promoting a leadership model which is based on "co-operation," "consultation," "sharing" and "consensus-building."

Because of the hierarchical power politics it follows a win/loss scenario. Politics is perceived as a power struggle, where somebody wins and somebody loses. Hence, this win/loss principle needs to give way to win/win principle.

In Bangladesh, Begum Sufia Kamal was the symbol of the country's democracy movement for decades. She demonstrated how one could stand up to autocratic rule through peaceful resistance.

Jahana Imam led the citizen's movement against the extremist

Islamist forces. Motia Chowdhury, a former member of parliament and minister of agriculture, won the election without the use of money and muscle power (Jahan, Columbia University).

She was the only member of parliament who refused to take the privilege of a duty-free imported car.

It is true that the women leaders were not able to change the situation of the country in the same way as leaders such as Gandhi did, but they showed the pathway for leading the country differently.

Hence, the people of Bangladesh will welcome more women leaders into politics to break the myth of political crisis around women's leadership in Bangladesh.

Like Professor Md. Yunus, who is becoming part of the political world from a different background, the new women leaders also will broaden and redefine the political agenda.

Shamima Pervin is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

## Rehabilitate and redistribute

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

**W**ITHIN a very short span of time, the Fakhruddin government has received accolades from all quarters for its courageous steps.

Many positive steps have already been taken in overhauling and streamlining crucial institutions such as the judiciary, the Election Commission and the Anti-corruption Commission.

Steps are also underway to overhaul another crucial constitutional body: the Public Service Commission.

The nationwide anti-adulteration drive has also been successful to a considerable degree.

Admittedly, recovery of government property gobbled up by land grabbers has been long overdue and, thus, the demolition of illegal establishments is also creditable.

However, eviction of slum-dwellers as well as street hawkers – though very justified in legal terms – prior to their proper rehabilitation has turned out to be a bolt from the blue for the evicted ones, and I think it has become a real sore point for many including the current government.

There is no denying that poverty is the most pressing problem of the country, and the evicted ones have now gone below the poverty line.

Even recent surveys show that about 24 percent of the country's population languish in abject poverty despite the GDP growth rate being steady at 5.5 percent per annum for some years now, and about 19 percent of the rural households cannot even afford three meals a day while around 10 percent subsist on two meals or less for a number of months every year.

Around 31 percent of the rural population presently suffers the indignity of chronic poverty – low consumption, hunger and under-nutrition, lack of access to basic health services, illiteracy and other deprivations.

However, the victims of the recent demolition drive have mostly been the urban poor who mainly migrated from remote villages where food and work are rarities most of the time.

A lot of small businessmen have also turned destitute as many markets on government lands have been demolished.

Truly, -- as economist Debapriya Bhattacharya, too, commented in a channel i program -- the establishments were illegal, but the businesses over there were legal and valid sources of income for many.

As he said, this very point should have been taken into consideration before the wholesale demolition.

An incremental approach might have been employed, allowing some time to the small businessmen to search for viable alternatives.

Undeniably, unemployment is another nagging problem of the country, and the hawkers and small businessmen were self-employed, thereby providing relief of sorts to the state.

Their displacement is very likely to aggravate the unemployment problem, thus hurting the social fabric as well. Crimes like pilferage and snatching are already on the rise.

Unfortunately, the situation of income distribution has deteriorated in the country over the years.

A CPD report revealed in 2006 that the widening income disparity in Bangladesh is explained most convincingly when we compare the income shares of top and bottom quintiles of the population.

It also added that between 1999 and 2004 national income attributable to the poorest 10 percent of Bangladesh population declined from the minuscule proportion of 1.7 percent to 1.5 percent.

Besides, the income difference between the poorest and the richest increased from 20 times in 1999 to 24.5 times in 2004.

Experts, however, rightly claim that the sources of rising inequality are linked to the uneven spread of economic and social opportunities, unequal distribution of assets, especially in respect of human capital and financial capital, growing disparity between rural and urban areas as well as between developed and underdeveloped areas.

In this regard, Dr Zaid Bakth, research director of the Bids, said that "unearned" income of a segment of the people has increased over the years, leading to non-distribution of income.

Experts have repeatedly complained that the policies taken by successive Bangladesh governments to eradicate poverty remained grossly "anti-poor."

In fact, poverty as an agenda received only seasonal attention in Bangladesh. It rarely occupied the centre stage of national discourse.

Regrettably, poverty alleviation figured either during election time or during the budget-making season.

Even the political party manifestos were never sharply focused on poverty reduction, except for making false promises.

Now, however, a different proposition has surfaced, which can be termed as a real opportunity for the government to go for redistribution of resources among the destitute.

Yes, the government has decided to punish the plunderers of public money and, to that end, the emergency power ordinance, 2007, has also been amended.

Hopefully, the government will make a point of recovering misappropriated money and resources from the corrupt, in addition to setting examples by bringing them to book.

The government has already started a rehabilitation process, which needs to be reinforced on an urgent and more pragmatic basis.

Reportedly, thousands of crores of taka had been misappropriated by the corrupt elements for many years now.

Even if a portion of that can be recovered, it would be a fair amount for redistribution among the unfortunate ones.

Such a policy will definitely put the government in unity with the disadvantaged section of the society.

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The book opens, appropriately enough, with Albert Einstein's "On The Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies" and proceeds with papers, publications, translations, interviews and reminiscences published and compiled by those intimately connected with the Physics Department at Dhaka, and contains material in both English and Bengali, and even, as in the case of a translated paper and a letter from Einstein to Satyen Bose, in German.

ROSINKA CHAUDHURI

**T**HAT the Physics Department at the University of Dhaka was no ordinary department of science is made evident by the claim made on its behalf by the editors of the book, *Our Alma Mater*, that it is no exaggeration to say that the history of Bangladesh has largely evolved around the imposing building, Curzon Hall, in which the department is housed.

The relative truth in that statement is supported by any examination of the pages of this book published to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the theory of relativity, which attests to the extraordinary fecundity of the brains that powered some of the most seminal contributions to physics made by South Asians in the last century.

This volume has been published by a collective called The Dhaka Physics Group, spearheaded by eminent scientists and intellectuals as a tribute to the generations who have contributed so much to both, department

and nation, through their hard work, integrity and dedication.

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Had the capital of India continued to be Calcutta, nobody could have dared to undertake ven-