

The core message of independence

Clean politics is the key

AT the outset we would like to say that our national independence came the hardest way imaginable. Millions had to give their lives and countless women suffered indignities. Teeming millions took refuge in India receiving hospitality in the friendly country having been driven by genocide of an unparalleled magnitude.

Awami League played the vanguard role with the towering figure of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman making seminal contribution to the liberation movement. Moulana Bhasani played a key role, too.

We pay homage to all of them including those valiant Bangladeshi soldiers in Pakistani armed forces who revolted and joined the liberation war.

We are observing the independence and national day perhaps not in the best of times but there is convergence of possibilities and opportunities to turn a new leaf in our national life. We cannot let go of it.

How does Bangladesh move forward from here? Thorough cleansing of our politics is the need of the time. Few reforms have already been carried out and others await urgent attention. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been reconstituted to keep corrupt people out of the electoral race. The central bank and NBR are at work against the black money holders and tax evaders in order that they can be disqualified from contesting election. Most importantly, the Election Commission (EC) has been reconstituted to prepare an authentic electoral roll with voter photographs and carry out electoral reforms concerning expenditure ceiling, furnishing of candidates' assets, liabilities and other antecedents, the power to disqualify candidature and setting up of speedy election tribunals. Now the nation awaits a timetable, even if notional, for completing these tasks followed by declaration of an election schedule by the Election Commission.

On the part of the political parties they need to register with the Election Commission, reform themselves internally along democratic lines and put up honest and clean candidates for the election.

All this conjures up vision for a new democratic Bangladesh we must strive to build. Let's take a vow for this today.

Remnants of JMB militants

Destroy the network

WE note with great concern that though organizationally less coherent and politically less empowered at the moment with the kingpins awaiting execution, the banned militant organization JMB is not totally out of business. That the young militants refuse to be daunted by the death noose hanging over their top leaders has become evident with the recent haul of grenades and explosives and arrest of some members of the suicide squad. This also indicates how the operatives are trying their best to regroup themselves once again into a force worth reckoning and likely to avenge the imminent death of their leaders.

The disconcerting part of the story is that these derailed young people continue to be groomed and influenced by the next-in-line leaders to pursue their collective objective, which is establishing a society based on exploitation of religion to serve their obscurantist ends. The resolve of these overzealous young people is fanatical enough to turn them into cold-blooded murderers, and when some of them blew up innocent people two years back we were given the clear signal as to how far they were capable of going if they had the opportunity.

Therefore, the question of the hour is: Shall we allow this dangerously motivated outfit to grow in size and power and fan out to destabilise our society? We know we cannot do that and therefore, to be able to wipe out the remnants, strong vigilance needs to be mounted at the probable recruitment and training centres. It is now widely known that poor madrasa students are being targeted by the leaders of JMB and other similar militant organizations; therefore, villagers and parents of the students need to be made aware of the biased interpretation of Islam.

We believe, it is the need of the hour to recast the religion-based curricula so that a madrasa-educated student may easily qualify to join mainstream education and compete in the job market. There is no denying the fact that poverty has to be addressed in the communities where its toll is higher and fallout is devastating. These are the breeding grounds of militancy, which need to be plugged if we want to see the back of the militants.

Reflections on our Independence

Thanks to our industrious farmers and industrial workers (particularly of the garment industry), our notable expatriates workers and their steadily increasing remittances from abroad, and reasonably good macro-economy management, our economy has not performed poorly. Although many feel we could have done at least twice as well if we had had good governance, harmonious politics and been able to corner (and lock away behind bars forever) the beast of endemic and rampant corruption that has plagued us.

A. TARIQ KARIM

TODAY we celebrate the 36th anniversary of our national independence. There are many good things to celebrate. After all, Bangladesh defied the doomsday prophecies at its birth and did not become a bottomless basket case. Quite the contrary, despite singularly inept leadership from successive governments, we have done not so badly at all.

After all, to be survivors against unceasing buffettings by natural and man-made disasters, we must necessarily possess innate entrepreneurial skills. As a nation, we have established quite a reputation for innovating new institutions.

First we invented the institution of micro-finance lending that captured the world's imagination and earned for the country the globally prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace (via its inventor and the institution he established to formalize the concept, although arguably its informal practice commenced immediately after liberation).

Despite some rumbling naysayings by doubting Thomases, there is no question that micro-finance has had considerable success in significantly helping Bangladesh's over-all efforts at poverty alleviation and establish-

ing a modicum of gender equality - although its application elsewhere in different parts of the world, in different settings, have provided a mixed bag of results.

Whether it has been successful in effectively reaching the poorest of the poor (well below the official poverty line) in critically sufficient numbers is another matter that needs verification and further inquiry. This should be done in the face of persisting statistics that assert that over 50% of Bangladeshis continue to live below the poverty line.

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To the lexicon of democracy, we added a new and unique concept -- that of the non-party caretaker government (or NCG) as the inter regnum of choice between two consecutive elected governments. It is another matter

that this institution ultimately belied the promise it had held out at its inception, of acting as a neutral umpire between feuding parties in the electoral battlefields of our political history.

With the passage of time, this institution that had been hastily contrived by men to surmount man-made political disasters also proved the capacity of men who excel in positive innovation to have imbedded within them an equal capacity to subvert and negate their own earlier good deeds.

As the nation indulges in feeling good about itself and basks in the messages of felicitations that flow in from all corners of the globe, perhaps it is also time to do some serious stock-taking and critical introspection as well. In his famous speech on March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu had declared: "Ae baarer shongram muktir shangram; ae baarer shongram shadhinatar shangram."

But are we truly a sovereignly independent nation? Yes, we wrested ourselves free from the tyranny and oppression of our neo-colonial masters, but were we able to emancipate ourselves from the shackles that still chain our minds? If we did, then why are we a country comprising 98% Bengalis, with no significant ethnic, caste, creed, tribal or clan divisions, so bitterly a divided nation today? Why is our body

politics' schizophrenia so out-of-control and set on a self-destruct course?

The trauma of the two national divorces, of 1947 and 1971, of which we are the progeny, scarred our political psyches deeply. The roots of this go further back in history to 1940, when two great political leaders from Bengal presented different visions of national configuration at that fateful conference of the All-India Muslim League at Lahore which on March 23 resolved as follows:

"[T]hat it is the considered view of this session of the All-India Muslim League that no constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to Muslims unless it is designed on the following basic principles, viz. that geographically continuous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted, with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the north-western and eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute Independent States (italicized here to draw attention of readers), in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign . . . Adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specifically provided in the Constitution for minorities . . . for the protection of their religious, cultural, economic, political, administrative and other rights."

The resolution was tabled by a Bengali Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq who, for reasons of politics, had migrated from his own Krishak Proja Samity to become a member of the All India Muslim League.

However, it is noteworthy that Husseyin Shaheed Suhrawardy, I would humbly submit here

who was distrusted by the Muslim League but also attended the conference, had argued passionately that "each of the provinces should be accepted as a sovereign state (again italicized for readers' attention) and each province should be given the right to choose its own constitution or enter into a commonwealth with the neighbouring provinces."

So while the Bengalis of East Bengal lent critical mass to the Pakistan resolution that ultimately resulted in the partition, the question of the manner of how such independence status should be configured was left unresolved, even after the separate independent state of Pakistan was founded by the partition of India in 1947.

I would argue that the unresolved debate continued post-partition, in the chambers of the constituent assembly of Pakistan, for nine long years before the first constitution was adopted. But the core of the problem was still left unresolved, as is testified by the fact that the constitution was abrogated by the military coup of 1958.

What should have been resolved through civil discourse within parliament, therefore, was thereafter forced into a combination of street and underground political dissent by the Bengalis that proved tenaciously irrepressible.

The wheels of history turned full circle when a little over two and a half decades after 1940 Bangabandhu launched the famous Six-Point program, essentially reaffirming the demand voiced by Mr. Suhrawardy at the Lahore Conference. The rest is history.

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that while we did wrest our independence from Pakistan, we were unable to emancipate ourselves from what may perhaps be best described as the "Pakistan syndrome" (for want of a better term), that continues to haunt our politics till this day. In the regional "hot-cold war" between India and Pakistan that has waged relentlessly between the two countries since partition, Bangladesh has become the unfortunate "Berlin."

But steeped as we are in the mind-set of seeking the enemy without for our problems, we ignore the essential truth -- we are in this situation because we have allowed ourselves to be jockeyed into this situation.

If we were able to create an independent Bangladesh, we also need to be able to transform that into an emancipated Bangladesh, by asserting that our politics, and our destiny, are essentially pro-Bangladesh rather than pro or anti Pakistan or India. Until we are able to do that, Bangabandhu's impassioned call of March 7, 1971 that fired the Bengali nation will continue to remain only half realized.

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Big Bang reform and its sustainability

I feel that the ongoing reforms process should get a name. For example, Japan in 1996 started massive financial reforms with a name the "Big Bang" reform under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Mr. Hashimoto. Vietnam started their reforms toward transition from centrally planned to market economy under the head "Doi Moi" (literally which means change and newness) in 1986. Giving a name to the reform process help us locate, evaluate, and monitor these reforms. Otherwise, it may lose its way.

MONZUR HOSSAIN

A big bang reform process is now underway in Bangladesh under the auspices of the caretaker government (CG) formed on January 11. The reforms are now taking place in the areas including judicial system, electoral and political process, good governance, anti-corruption commission, and to a lesser extent in the financial sectors.

It is understandable that the CG places higher priorities to reform these areas because this CG has been the resulted failure of the governance and politics. Nonetheless, these reforms have been a long-standing desire of the people, development partners and the civil society in order to enhance the development process of Bangladesh, but unfortunately the political governments failed to do so.

We believe that to enhance and strengthen the development process, widespread reforms, namely "Big Bang" reforms must underway in order to ensure sustainable development as the

main strategy for achieving effective and long-term poverty eradication and economic and social well-being.

Specifically, the reforms that are now taking place in Bangladesh include:

- Separation of judiciary from the administration.
- Providing necessary legal and logistic support to anti corruption commission.
- Demolishing illegal structures.
- Drive against corrupted politicians and businessman.
- Reconstituting election commission and reforms in electoral laws.
- Reforms in electoral process such as voting system, voter identity system, vote-casting system, and political institutions etc.
- Improving and making effectiveness of anti money-laundering laws, banking-company act, foreign exchange regulation act, etc.
- Improving relations with neighbouring countries.
- Initiatives toward making

effective and viable use of big infrastructures like sea ports and airports, etc.

- Cutting the link between bureaucracy and politics.

Among these reforms, some are short-term and some are medium-term. What we expect from the CG is to lay out a roadmap for reforms (including long-term) that sets out "comprehensive and time-bound targets" and "effective monitoring and review mechanisms" in each of the areas mentioned above. At the very least, this roadmap will ensure building institutions and its proper functioning and help it run in the future without the influence of political institutions.

Moreover, for achieving the goals of sustainable development, a road map for long-term reforms and policy guidelines are also needed:

- To ensure energy security.
- To design an effective industrial policy.
- To formulate an agricultural policy.
- To reconstitute the current

bureaucratic system -- for example, a separate recruitment, training and promotion policies of personnel of technical ministries such as finance, industry, trade and agriculture from other ministries etc.

- To reappraise of agricultural banking system -- how this banking system can effectively help poor come out of poverty, etc.
- To design an environmental policy.
- To design a transportation policy.

What is the most important is to include all stakeholders, experts, and bureaucrats in formulating these policy reforms.

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The next important point is to develop a monitoring and review mechanisms of the ongoing

reform process for its sustainability. These mechanisms would inform decision making at the national level to set new benchmarks and continually adjust reform activities towards a model of sustainable development.

The information generated through this process would be used to set policies, incentives, standards, and benchmarks and to facilitate capacity-building efforts.

The lack of coherence among the bodies involved and the consequent lack of synergies among the concerned bodies must be effectively addressed. However, clustering technical ministries could be only a first step towards a solution to focus on the development process and isolate bureaucracy from politics.

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Finally, to sustain the ongoing reform process toward economic development, it is also expected from this government to lay out a proper guideline to overcome all controversies on national leaders like Maulana Bhasani, A.K. Fazlul Huq, Husseyin Shaheed Suhrawardy, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman and M. A. G. Osmani.

The CG can set certain norms so as to pay tribute to these

national leaders in the right way, on which a national consensus can be urged. They are our national pride and they should be treated as "national" rather than a part of political parties or politics. Political parties must stop doing politics with these national leaders and they must concentrate on pro-development policies.

The political parties must maintain forward-looking politics by leaving their backward-looking nature. This is very much needed to turn our "politics of division" into "politics of development." Although it seems that our expectations are high, this is the right time to go with all out efforts to accomplish these tasks and to show a proper guideline to the nations.

For this purpose, the CG can make use of all sorts of national and international expertise in order to build a new Bangladesh. Only then Bangladesh will find a way to take-off. However, historical experience suggests that if reform process remains partial or unsuccessful, its economic, social or political cost could be formidable.

Dr. Monzur Hossain writes from Tokyo.

Seeking educated leaders

Education also gives one a confidence and wisdom to stand fast in their beliefs. We have seen a profound moral weakness in the majority of our politicians, which I believe can partly be attributed to a lack in education. These leaders, sometimes the head of parties, have only come up by virtue of family relations and not through any contribution or achievements of their own.

WASIM RAHMAN

SOME would feel that the current governance in our country is doing an outstanding job of cleaning up the rot that had set into our politics ever since Independence. For once I personally have a pride in my nationality, which was hitherto absent, especially when dealing with people from more developed nations.

Many feel that even a legendary figure like Dr. Yunus cannot succeed, as he is not a "politician." But we should ask our selves, why are we still looking for "politicians"?

Politics, as we have seen it in our country, has become a symbol for misrule, corruption, nepotism, cronyism, selfishness, and greed. In the last 36 years our politicians have constantly abused our trust in them and disregarded the responsibility they had towards their nation and the future of

its' people.

Their modus operandi was to gain control of the people through criminal means only in order to systematically transfer the wealth of the nation into their own bank accounts. Every single government in the past has done this, and individually, only a handful of politicians can claim that they have not.

Hence I feel that to achieve the goals set out by this caretaker government, we need to remodel our perception and also our expectations. One must understand that we have rolled so far behind that it is not possible to make a sudden turn and reverse course.

We must stop the negative momentum first, then turn it

around and then push it forward into positive territory. We cannot become Malaysia or Singapore over night. But one thing is for certain, the "politicians" we know now will never be able to orchestrate this change. If they could, they would have done so already.

So I suggest we change our requirement altogether and not go looking for "politicians" anymore, as, it is leadership, not politics, which we need now. Let's change our collective psyche to visualize and then celebrate the emergence of leaders, not politicians; leadership, not politics.

We do have this kind of expertise amidst us. In a proper environment we could even be able to use our NRB wealth, which is out their waiting to be tapped. Bangladeshis are out there leading various organizations and international institutions with success. I am sure they would be glad to use their acquired knowledge to improve of their motherland.

Hand in hand with the need for good leadership goes my second point, which is the need for educated leaders. Many of the leaders now have little or semi education. We have clearly seen the consequence

of this.

Without education one lacks vision. There is a detachment from history, which creates major pitfalls in