

New order or right order?

In view of the above, the current debate about a new political order versus a right order has some merit. In fact, it is not one or other, it is both. In other words, a new order must be a right order. For example, the present government's attempt to hold the upazila election first is, indeed, a right order. The upazila election could turn out to be a litmus test for the interim government before the general election, and certainly a right move for the political and economic emancipation of the nation.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THE present caretaker government has just completed three months in office. To commemorate this, the chief adviser addressed the nation on April 13. Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed indicated the direction of his government and presented a roadmap for the next general election. Unprecedented developments have been taking place in the political arena during the last three months. Seeing all the graft cases and corruption busting attempts by the ACC, the immediate past BNP-Jamaat rule was certainly scared. In the meantime, another half a decade from our relatively short period of nationhood has been lost. Perhaps no nation on earth witnessed so many political upheavals since its birth. We are, indeed, an extraordinary race. One may ask, why was it necessary to have a two-year long caretaker government after fifteen years of democratically elected parliamentary governments? It is unfortunate that our leaders took everything for granted over this period. They completely ignored the existence of a third force that every nation nurtures for address-

ing crises, man-made or natural. Certainly, January 22 would have been a man-made catastrophe for the nation. Fortunately, the third force came forward to rescue this nation of 150 million on January 11. In the pre-January 11 period, so many pages had been written on the subject of a third force taking over power if the political leaders refused to behave rationally. No one listened, in fact the leaders absolutely ignored this early warning. It becomes clear now that the present establishment (the executive arm together with the joint forces) has been searching for a new leadership to emerge from the ashes of 15 years of so-called democracy (one would be naïve to say that nothing positive happened during the last 15 years, unfortunately the immediate past government destroyed almost all during the last five years). In order to make the present search a long and lasting process, a few recent developments deserve mentioning: No election before 18 months It is now abundantly clear that the reconstituted EC plans to introduce voter ID and national ID card simultaneously, therefore, it will

be impossible to hold a general election before 18 months, as stated by the CEC and finally confirmed by the CA in his nation-wide address on April 13. The general election is now far away. It is, however, not clear yet whether the present caretaker establishment is going to continue with its present strength and form, or make provisions for expanding the government for effective running of the administration. The last government had more than 60 cabinet members, and the present Fakhruddin government has only 11. Certainly, these are two extremes: the former had an all-time high number, while the latter is an all-time low. Since the government has now drawn its time-line, it is imperative now to strengthen the cabinet further. The CA needs more honest hands to finish the job effectively on time, and handover power to the elected government in 18 months or so. In this regard, the magic number could be a 25 member cabinet. If this cannot be realised, one can foresee the risk that the handful of advisers looking after more than 35 departments would be burnt

out soon. This may turn out to be an administrative nightmare. Alien vs. "home-grown" democracy The conference organised by the Political Science Association stirred an unprecedented debate on the above subject. The CAS, Gen Moeen U. Ahmed, made some observations about the democratic regimes of the last 15 years, and emphasised that the nation needed its own type of democratic process to materialise the dreams of the martyrs. There was no specific proposal tabled in the conference. On this subject, Mahfuz Anam, the editor of this daily, recently published his own assessment of the general's opinion and, since then, the DS letter column has been inundated by comments and counter-comments from home and abroad. Apparently, this debate has generated many positive aspects of the future of democracy in Bangladesh. This will help in the search for new blood and honest bodies during the next 12 to 18 months. I must, however, make it clear that this does not mean abandoning the present political process, but making it more compatible with the new environment and restructured parties to meet the challenges of the 21st century. One must emphasise that the time has come for our old guard to call it a day, and make opportunities for newcomers to climb the party ladder. One may, however, argue that the way the new generation politicians ran the BNP-Jamaat govern-



ment certainly made the nation nervous about the greed, instead of commitment, of the new breed of politicians. This is a debate, I am afraid, that has to be sorted out first and foremost. Perhaps the CAS's concern about the traditional democratic process, and the solution he provides for the problems of greed and dishonesty of the new generation politicians, has some merit. In search of good politicians All this said, one should remember that the civil society led by

Professor Mohammad Yunus proposed to the AL-led coalition and the BNP-led alliance to nominate good and honest candidates for the presently suspended 2007 general election. In the end, what the nation witnessed was "nomination banijia" engulfing the nation. The civil society's movement for good candidates had been thrown into the bay by both the alliances. Everyone, however, knows that the nation's politics has been rotten for a long time. It is hard to point to any particular leadership. It can,



however, be safely said that greed, corruption and loss of character in politics have been institutionalised since the rule of the former president H.M. Ershad. H.M. Ershad, close to the eighties now, does not want to retire and seems committed to a come-back. In such a political environment, searching for good politicians is certainly a futile exercise. Without removing national politics from the hands of the old guard, it will be impossible to create an environment for the newcomers. In view of the above, the current

debate about a new political order versus a right order has some merit. In fact, it is not one or other, it is both. In other words, a new order must be a right order. For example, the present government's attempt to hold the upazila election first is, indeed, a right order. The upazila election could turn out to be a litmus test for the interim government before the general election, and certainly a right move for the political and economic emancipation of the nation. Dr. Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Let us trust our people

Let us not worry much about the constitutional intricacies. Let us concentrate more on salvaging the nation from the evil of corruption and misrule. What we actually need is not a special brand of democracy, socio-economic justice and political freedom in near future. Let us have faith in our people.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE Bangladesh army chief, in a recent statement, stated that the democratic governments could not do much for the people during the last 36 years. They had neither been able to decide about the issue of the "Father of the Nation" nor could they agree to give due respect to the great leaders like Ziaur Rahman, A.K. Fazlul Haq, Moulana Bhashani, etc. Instead, they brought unprecedented corruption, shadow of dynastic rule, nepotism, terrorism, politicized administration, and highly unsatisfactory law and order situation. So strong is their greed that they did not hesitate to deprive the poor from receiving relief goods. Even ministers and lawmakers did the looting of the poor people's goods. Nobody bothered about the necessity for wiping out the stigma of "most corrupt nation in the world" for the last five years. The TIB report was thrown out as a trash based on concoction. The police force (supposed to be public servants) was degraded to the level of servants of the party/parties in position. Far from dispensation of justice the police administration was

completely crippled, and police officers were even directed (in some cases) not to file cases against the activists of the parties in power for crimes committed by them. The four-party alliance government went to the extent of ignoring the admonitions of the donors. The hard-earned foreign exchange was allowed to be squandered in importing luxury items for the pleasure and comfort of the fortunate few. In implementing programs for development, even the basic rules of procedures for calling tenders were flouted. The "blessed few" contractors determined the cost of development projects in collusion with the "commission earners." Did government really exist? It is indeed puzzling as to why Bangladeshis people suffer so much for no fault of the common men, who are as hardworking, intelligent and politically sensitive as people of other countries. The following factors may be identified as being mainly responsible for the people's suffering: Lack of proper leadership. Failure of the elite to guide bureaucracy for the benefit of the people. Inefficient, corrupt, and highly politicised bureaucracy. Political instability.

Lack of mutual respect and trust among major political parties. During the last 36 years two military dictators, Ziaur Rahman and H.M Ershad ruled for 14 years. As such, they should share the burden of failures, even though they were usurpers and not accountable to the people. Merely good governance could have been regarded as their success. Out of 21 years of civilian rule, four years (1972-75) had to be devoted fully for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Truly speaking, if the successes and failures of democracy are to be evaluated we have to focus our attention on governmental activities during the last fifteen years (1991-2006). Broadly speaking, the following factors may be identified for unsatisfactory performance of the government concerned: BNP (1991-96) Lack of experience of the party chief and majority of its front-ranking leaders. Lack of trust, confidence and cooperation from the opposition. In fact, repeated hartals caused huge damage to the economy. The parliament remained ineffective due to boycott by the AL. Too much dependence on bureaucracy, and less trust on the experience and knowledge

of the people's representatives. AL (1996-2001) Spending too much time on recounting the past glories of AL upto 1971. Less concentration on development issues. Deliberate attempts to belittle the opposition, resulting in hostile attitude from the opposition. Failure in attempting arrest of rapidly deteriorating law and order situation. No significant reformative measures attempted, either in administration or in economic development. BNP (2001-2006) Too big a cabinet resulted in lack of coordination, formation of groups in the cabinet. Ignoring advice from the media, donor countries, and the opposition. Formation of an inner cabinet completely under the influence of Hawa Bhaban. Failure of the PM to take right advice. Too much liberty given to anti-corruption and greedy political activists, and promotion of unprecedented terrorism by Tarique Rahman and his associates. Unprecedented corruption in politics and administration. Inspite of its weakness in the field of governance, democracy is a more desirable political system because it cannot be forced on a group of people against its will. In fact, it is unlikely to survive even where a large minority opposes it.



Democratic institutions would encounter rough going if a majority always had to impose its rule on a large minority. Under a democracy, every citizen has equal opportunity to participate in government, the majority rules, the minority has the right to try to persuade others to their views, and so on. How deeply or knowingly the citizens believe in these principles is, of course, another matter. What is actually needed in Bangladesh is the change of attitude of our politicians toward democracy. It is agreed that without

any change in our political parties we may not attain the desired goal, i.e rule by people who are honest, capable, and committed to serving the people, elected through a free, fair and credible election. Let us not worry much about the constitutional intricacies. Let us concentrate more on salvaging the nation from the evil of corruption and misrule. What we actually need is not a special brand of democracy, socio-economic justice and political freedom in near future. Let us have faith in our people. The writer is a former Joint Secretary.

Crime and punishment

It may be that those politicians (be it Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina), or their family members, who are sent into exile would come back within a couple of years by the grace of the next government. Paradise Lost could turn into Paradise Regained!

ABDUL QUADER

IT has been reported in the newspapers that Khaleda Zia, the former prime minister, and her younger son Arafat Rahman will be leaving the country for Saudi Arabia very soon (The Daily Star, April 17). The report suggested that Khaleda Zia had finally agreed to leave the country under tremendous pressure from the military backed caretaker government and on condition that her sons would also be allowed to join her. Referring to a highly placed source, The Daily Star report noted that "the Saudi government agreed to play host to Khaleda and her family if she leaves Bangladesh willingly." It has also been reported that Tarique Rahman would soon follow his mother to Saudi Arabia for "medical treatment." As reported in the newspapers, Arafat Rahman was picked up by the joint forces last Sunday from his mother's house in Dhaka Cantonment. It is alleged that Arafat used his family clout to monopolise the outdoor advertising industry, and pushed through controversial state contracts for commissions during the tenure of BNP-led alliance government (The Daily Star, April 17). Some other instances of corruption and high-handedness of Arafat have also been reported in the newspapers. The above news suggests that the people can get away with rampant corruption if they have the blessings of certain quarters having state power and authority. Things can be manipulated to make such decisions favour some well-known, highly corrupt people. Do law and justice equally apply to all people in a country, or is it justice for some and injustice for others? The point I would like to make here is that if anybody is alleged to have been involved in corruption, whether at political or administrative level, he or she must go through the normal system of criminal justice. Instead of receiving exemplary punishment, the top criminals are being allowed to leave the country following the Pakistani model (exile of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, two former prime ministers of Pakistan). What about the former ministers, MPs and other politicians, businessmen and government officials who have been arrested on charges of corruption and other criminal offences? Why not allow them to exit the country with honour so that

they can live in comfort and luxury with their ill-gotten money in a foreign land, like Khaleda Zia and hersons? Does the caretaker government, backed by the army, think that those people who have committed high level corruption, causing large-scale damage to the economy, the public administration and the society at large, would be forgotten by the people and a new political landscape will emerge out of nothing? Who will make political decisions after the general elections have been held by the end of 2008 as promised? The answer to this question is, obviously, the newly elected government. At this stage we have no definitive answer to who will form the next elected government, because of many unknowns and uncertainties about future political and behind-the-scene developments. It may be that those politicians (be it Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina), or their family members, who are sent into exile would come back within a couple of years by the grace of the next government. Paradise Lost could turn into Paradise Regained! In my view, the virtually forced exile of Khaleda Zia and her immediate family members is the wrong approach to addressing the political issues arising from widespread corruption, mismanagement of the economy and maladministration. The government's decision demonstrates that the executive branch of the state still makes legal decisions with utter disregard of the legal system, although they have boasted that they are implementing the court's order for separation of the judiciary from the executive branch. What a contradiction! Since independence of Bangladesh in 1971, all the governments have, in general, ruled the country by executive decrees to serve vested interests and favour certain individuals or groups of people for political and financial benefit, without allowing existing laws, rules and procedures to operate in most cases. As a result, gross injustice has continued in the society, and the sufferings of the people in general have risen. The current military backed caretaker government should set some credible examples of real justice, as the people in the country have high expectations from them. Abdul Quader is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Don't throw out the baby with the bath water

That the road ahead is long is unquestionable. That corrective measures are due is self-evident. This, however, cannot be achieved by blanket dismissal of the record of and the accomplishments of people, who have lived and muddled their hands in the rebuilding of the nation. Ideals should be rationalized with the realities on the ground. Otherwise, we are indeed throwing away the baby with the bathwater.

MANEEZA HOSSAIN

THE day before yesterday, I made it to the front page of The Daily Star. Alas, my claim to fame was not a scholastic, entrepreneurial, or industrial achievement. It was that as a relative of a prominent public figure being investigated under circumstances that I find problematic, I, together with the rest of my family, have decided to comply with regulations and laws, even while insisting that they are questionable. Not the usual substance for first page coverage anywhere in the world, except, it seems, in Bangladesh. This is not a mere reflection on a personal situation. The current upheaval in standards and norms that Bangladesh is witnessing is a dramatic situation that requires a

careful examination by all, be it the press, political players, or society at large. Bangladesh today is faced with a challenging reality with an unelected New Order that is nonetheless implementing measures demanded by much of the population. The role of the media and of public intellectuals in such a situation should be one of scrutiny and critique. Many voices are seemingly critical, but the end result is just amplification of current negative trends. Addressing issues of corruption is a must, but don't throw out the baby with the bath water. Bangladesh was born a classless society. Not out of choice, and not as a virtue. It was classless because with the departure of the colonizer, all of Bangladesh was devastated. Our leaders, intellectu-

als -- the best and the brightest -- were slaughtered, our economy was raped and dismantled, and our common folks were left destitute. Upon Independence, some, who were driven by ideals of utopian socialism, would have liked to maintain the nation as a classless society: a country of its "people" presumably united in fate and status. Unfortunately, reality came back to bite. If it were not greedy entrepreneurs, it was autocrats who ended up monopolizing the wealth of the country. Bangladesh learned the hard way that the only guarantee of real "people power" is the safeguarding of the individual's initiative, through a democratic system with checks and balances. We did not score well in that respect, and therefore we were

taught a "negative" lesson. We have learned that in the absence of transparency, even democracy gets corrupted. The New Order under which we live today, has set "corruption" as its nemesis and target. However, without accountability and transparency, no amount of goodwill will ever move us forward. Sadly, the media seems to be abandoning a considerable portion of its responsibility as the ultimate expression of transparency. The current lack of transparency in the New Order is seldom questioned, presumably in compliance with Emergency Laws. A clear standard for the target of anti-corruption investigations needs to be set and explained to the public at large: the interplay of politics and money had subverted both our democratic system and our free-market structures. Ideally, an elected government should have tackled this problem. The argument can be made however, that the mutual penetration between politics and money had made it delusional to expect such a reform to emerge from an elected

administration. If we have reluctantly accepted the actions of an unelected New Order, we have both the right and the obligation to demand an impeccable execution of the anti-corruption sweep. The media seems to have abandoned its duty to monitor, criticize, and propose corrective measures for the current anti-corruption campaign. Rather than focusing on the shape of the bathtub of a targeted official, the media should ensure that the anti-corruption sweep abides by standards that realize the national interest. The media should underline that although the Bangladeshi socio-economic elite is burdened with corruption, Bangladesh has leaped forward considerably over its short history. The entire nation should be credited for those achievements, however the role of the Bangladeshi entrepreneur, the risk taker who has assumed the burdens of uncertainty and potentially considerable losses on behalf of society, is not merely the caricature of the corrupt often promoted in media outlets today.

The spirit of initiative and achievement was also a driving force in our successive governments. While it is fashionable today to put down the political class in its totality, public servants under previous administrations have also delivered. Road networks that have transported rural areas into modern day economy, and bridges that have tamed nature and allowed the conduct of commerce to flourish, as well as the management of socio-economic problems on a wide-scale, have contributed to the overall improvements that our nation has enjoyed. That the road ahead is long is unquestionable. That corrective measures are due is self-evident. This, however, cannot be achieved by blanket dismissal of the record of and the accomplishments of people, who have lived and muddled their hands in the rebuilding of the nation. Ideals should be rationalized with the realities on the ground. Otherwise, we are indeed throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Maneeza Hossain is Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, Washington DC.