

Moves about Hasina, Khaleda

The goal must be restoration of democracy

POLITICS in the country has taken a sudden, unexpected turn with the government's decision to bar Sheikh Hasina from returning to the country. At the same time, moves to send Begum Khaleda Zia into exile add to the uncertainty about the future state of politics, despite the plans now underway for general elections to be organized sometime before the end of the year 2008. Overall, the present situation is quite confusing. When one observes conditions against the record of the internecine conflicts these two leading political figures have waged, one can only bemoan the plight of the country. These past sixteen years have fundamentally been politics of confrontation, conflict and personal hatred of Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia toward each other. These conditions stunted the growth of democratic culture.

The objective reality is that today, despite all the promising new beginning the nation made in December 1990 with the fall of autocracy, democracy and pluralist culture remain undeveloped and the institutions which serve as the pillars of governance left in a pitiable condition. With the restoration of elected government in 1991, it was expected that a strong, enduring democratic political culture would grow and in turn would open up all those possibilities which enable a nation to come level with the rest of the civilized world. To our intense regret, that national ambition did not materialize. At this point of time, we are only too aware of the regressive course politics has taken. In our mood of depression, we cannot but note the questions that have in the last couple of days exercised the public mind. Basically, they centre on the fact of whether the moves against the two leaders will bring about any qualitative change in our politics. Questions will persist about the way in which the authorities have acted to isolate Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia from national politics.

It is a critical stage we are going through. The greatest need today is for old-fashioned, destructive politics to be totally and forever discarded. It is a job that must be done through a quick return to political openness, the aim being the restoration of a well-meaning, constructive framework of democracy. Our goal remains as it always has — a reassertion of our traditional democratic values and aspirations.

A forthright admission

Now work must proceed apace

We appreciate the candid admission of the chief of the National Coordination Committee on Combating Corruption and Crime (NCC) that the caretaker government's cardinal objective of stemming corruption has not progressed as expected. He has cited many reasons among which are lack of experience, ineffective coordination and lack of understanding among the agencies involved. He was forthright enough to say that the task force members under the committee also lack the required experience in the methods of investigation that supposedly has affected the progress of work.

But we have to say that the many-layered approach to the anti-corruption drive may have in some degrees led to the lack of coordination. We have 40 task forces led by the NCC and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) itself with its own structure to work in tandem. But, apparently some organisations also have not been performing as expected. For example, the National Board of Revenue (NBR), as commented by the NCC chief, has not yet filed a case against a tax evader. This also brings forth the necessity for strengthening the legal cells of various organisations dealing with corruption including, of course, the ACC at the top.

It is common knowledge that despite having the immense potential for growth, all-pervading corruption negated our endeavours to progress at a faster pace. Corruption, particularly under the patronage of some vested quarters, wreaked havoc throughout our society and put the nation to shame in the last ten years. It has become an institutionalized bane. Therefore, it is only obvious that the first and foremost objective of the caretaker government would be to address the issue. The job is cut out for the NCC and the ACC.

We believe the forthright identification of the inadequacies in the system on the part of the NCC chief will allow taking pragmatic steps to eliminate the drawbacks and provide momentum in the much-needed drive against corruption.

The general's comments are germane



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

If Lt. General Moeen U Ahmed has to be faulted for his utterances, then he stands guilty of indulging in some very healthy indiscretion. This is so because we are yet to conquer the national foible of fatalism. The general is striving to ensure that falsehood does not have too long an innings before the ultimate moment of truth arrives. He has not used a platform to swim with the tide, as there are plenty of others to do that.

Like many conscientious citizens, he has witnessed a scary decline in the capacity of the public administration to ensure fairness and justice to the people, to enforce law and order, and to deliver desperately needed social services to the people.

Like many concerned citizens, the general has watched with dismay the repeated blows dealt by the power wielders to the independence, neutrality and efficiency of the public service. Unfortunately, he bears testimony to a great increase in opportunism, cynicism and corruption among public servants and the managers of publicly owned utilities.

Still, as a pragmatist, he appears convinced that the present system and its structure, notwithstanding their imperfections, leave ample space for committed and idealistic public servants to carry out meaningful remedial measures as well as perform their routine duties with integrity.

We have to admit that issues of governance, development for the benefit of common people and a viable system of delivery in the social sector are crucial to any

society, regardless of the character of its political system.

Some may argue that these essential conditions can be met even if the political system lacks democratic credentials. However, the linkage is strategically important. One would not be wrong to say that social equity and elitist control of power cannot co-exist for long.

The chief of staff, while focusing on good governance and allied matters, has demonstrated due awareness of the crisis of Bangladesh's political system, which has a bearing on the very survival of the state.

The general believes that the country's social, economic and political situation calls for drastic reforms, and that the status quo is not only undesirable but unsustainable. Time has come to make space for new players and real stakeholders.

The general perhaps compels us to think of Bangladesh's emerging middle-class with a significant component of independent professionals, the strengthened and sensitive media and the impetus to the women's emancipation.

He also points to the disproportionate power and influence of individuals and groups in our elective institutions. His comments make us aware of the presence of emerging forces possessing the potential to challenge the status quo.

It is time to understand that the function of politics is to provide the emerging forces with an agenda of reforms and renovation, and a sense of direction.

A military commander cannot wail like a despairing intellectual, nor can he feel despondent like the little man because things do not proceed in the right direction.

The army chief is perhaps one of those who think that the people can still change things for the better, if dedicated persons with a plan for amelioration come forward to mobilize popular energies and provide the needed institutional sponsorship and support.

In the United Kingdom, in the seventies, when the government was clearly found responsible for lying, an energetic senior public official ventured to defend the undefendable by saying that "the

government has been economical with the truth."

Nobody in Bangladesh played with words as part of any salvage effort when duly elected democratic governments indulged in incredible indiscretions and committed clearly culpable acts. The political masters carried on regardless.

Our politicians have subordinated the individual to the government so completely that, with some exceptions, the nation is now made up of one-dimensional men.

A government that has continually dwarfed its men in order to turn them into docile instruments now finds that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished. We have forgotten that the worth of state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals forming it.

Under circumstances as they obtain now, how useful would it be to question the propriety of the general's comments, or to find out if he has exceeded his jurisdiction in deliberating on issues of governance and democracy?

Till January 10, when countless irregularities were committed by the high and the mighty, we were the unfortunate witnesses to many boneless wonders cowering in their comfortable cocoons.

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assertive, he was silenced by appropriate steps taken by men in uniform.

In our average politician we have the sordid amalgam of lack of intellect with lack of character and lack of knowledge. Bangladesh is standing on the escalator of mismanagement and corruption. So how can responsible citizens stand frozen in disgust and dismay?

We cannot merely look upon the political developments in sorrow, and upon our politicians in anger. Our problem is almost a crisis, and we cannot let it develop into a disaster.

It is time to bring a change from privilege to talent and from accident of birth to accent on caliber, and to ensure that money has to be earned rather than to be got and won. It is time to stop our society from further disintegrating into factions and divisions.

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Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

A river in the World Bank



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

CROSS TALK

The mystery of it is seeded in evolution. The human beings are still swayed by the genetic memory of their ancestors and there is a four-legged animal jumping inside every two-legged one. After the Reformation, after the Renaissance, after the Age of Enlightenment, the affairs of mankind have not changed a tad bit. When it comes to sex, money and power, we behave like monkeys.

man who is amongst the masterminds of the US invasion of Iraq and the supporters of Israel, he has shocked his friends and admirers with this hybrid romance. Rumor has it that Wolfowitz and his lover may have even secretly got married.

Not to worry that Wolfowitz is a womanizer who dated a former student in his days as a university dean. His wife left him over that extramarital affair and they have been separated since 2001. But he has disappointed us by giving favors to his flunkies including a big jump in the salary of a woman he started dating two years ago.

He also sent her on deputation to the US State Department, where, by the time Wolfowitz finishes his term, she will be drawing \$244,960 a year tax-free, which is considerably higher than the salary of Condoleezza Rice.

What gets my goat is that

Wolfowitz has been a hypocrite, a man who hasn't practiced what he preached. Since he was appointed the World Bank President in 2005, his name had become synonymous with the crusade against corruption. Probably the future generation would have used his name to mean crusade in the same way Xerox is used to mean photocopying.

Now, it is not enough to say that Paul Wolfowitz has let us down. He has also confused us. He claimed to be a bank and then acted like a river. May be the secret of success is to create an illusion. Go with the flow so long as others don't know.

Perhaps it has to do with the survival instinct as well. Perhaps the name of the game is to play it safe. Hide your intentions and hold the surprise. But then it should be the luck of man that he

runs out of luck. And scandal is when that loss of luck strikes respectable people, when the surprises pop out of hiding like children playing peek-a-boo and then someone catches them in the act.

That makes Wolfowitz at once the passion and the lesson for those who may be tempted to follow in his footsteps. Then consider this contradiction. History repeats man as much as man repeats history. There have been Wolfowitzes in the past, but we wanted to believe that this one was different, a messiah of moral cleansing who was going to make a difference.

Then our hopes got ditched and we realized that two-timing was very much human, that when Dr. Jekyll went to bed, Mr. Hyde prowled the streets. Scandals are as old as the human race.

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evolution. The human beings are still swayed by the genetic memory of their ancestors and there is a four-legged animal jumping inside every two-legged one.

After the Reformation, after the Renaissance, after the Age of Enlightenment, the affairs of mankind have not changed a tad bit. When it comes to sex, money and power, we behave like monkeys.

It is not a big deal that another wise man has sowed his wild oats. We all do, more or less, and now we have the Viagra in case the libido isn't flowing like Niagara. Frankly, there is nothing to be ashamed if you are hungry.

And of course, there is nothing to be ashamed if that hunger burns in the flesh. Wolfowitz or anybody else has the right to take his dog out for a walk.

Yet most people are annoyed with the scandal not because it is filthy but because they feel cheated. It is similar to priests molesting choir boys or the holy men keeping harems in their closets. It is not like killing someone on the spur of the moment. It is more like cold-blooded murder.

Wolfowitz calculated it every bit of the way. He knew what he was doing was not the right thing. He knew that it clashed with the image of a man who went around

telling others that corruption was not going to be tolerated.

Nikos Kazantzakis compared man to rat, which enters the trap to get the bait on the trip, being lucky to escape before the spring-loaded bar closes on it. But one day the rat gets unlucky, and the bar strikes down and crushes it to death. Somehow there are people amongst us who like to live in that thrill. I am not surprised that Paul Wolfowitz is also amongst them.

Both Wolfowitz and his lover had met because their common interest was to oust Saddam Hussein. He worked for George Bush and she worked for the Iraqi exiles in the USA. They stood firm on their grounds and shaped the events to achieve their goal. But then they crumbled like two eroded banks, and gave up their footholds to float in the stream.

That brings me to my judgment on mankind. Man by default is a precarious animal. And his mind is like a coin. It flips and when it does, it is a matter of chance whether it will show head or tail. Don't praise a man until he is dead. Be that man standing on the riverbank or sitting in the World Bank.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Extortion case



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

NO NONSENSE

The advisers are powerful not because they are empowered by the constitution but because they are backed by the army under the cover of the state of emergency, and also because they are overwhelmingly supported by the people for their good intentions. They are setting a precedent for good governance. So, don't spoil the show by diverting your mission.

THE move to discredit and screen out leaders from the country's political landscape has been growing since the current "state of emergency" backed interim government (EBIG) was installed.

That move reached its pinnacle with the surfacing of an extortion case against Sheikh Hasina, which allegedly occurred on December 12, 1998. The case inexplicably coincided with her foreign trip -- some observers even regard this as a case fabricated only to prevent her from returning home.

The background of the case is that a complainant named Kazi Tajul Farook, Chairman of

Westmont Power Company,

alleged that the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina, on August 9, 1998, summoned him to her residence and demanded payment of Tk. 3 crore in toll, or else face cancellation of his project and dire physical harm. The FIR states: "The then prime minister wanted to break the hands and legs of the complainant if he did not give the money." What a tale!

Are we to believe that a prime minister needs to bring some one to her residence to intimidate him to pay toll? Along time close associate of Hasina was utterly bewildered by the language used in the FIR and remarked that they are "really unbelievable." The language makes the case vulnerable, and may ultimately become the

Achilles heel of the case. Meanwhile, a little over 4 months have passed since the alleged threat, but the complainant was neither physically harmed, nor he was put in jail or threatened again. He paid off the alleged toll on December 12, 1998 only after the PDB issued a cancellation order of the project. The alleged extortion case was filed on April 9, nearly 9 years later.

The case may be true, or may be fabricated -- we have to wait and see. What bothers me, though, are the events, and the statements made, both before and after the FIR was filed. These lead to the misgiving that the EBIG was frantically looking for a case against Hasina.

Suppose the worst scenario is that the extortion incident had indeed happened. People are wondering why the complainant waited for long nine years to drop such a bomb shell. Is he the lone initiator of the case? Did he make any deals with any one because of his own wrong doings in the power sector?

A naïve rationale such as "fear of life" is unacceptable, because Hasina's archrival Khaleda was in power for 5 years looking for such a prime case to destroy her. Besides, the threat to his life, if there was one, didn't disappear even if his house is guarded by police. Observers at home and abroad are looking for a nexus between the case and some crass and puerile statements made by

law adviser Mainul Hosein and others.

Mainul Hosein recently said that the government was not interested in holding any election with the current leadership of different political parties in place, and that the government was especially interested in putting an end to dynastic politics.

A similar statement was made by the army chief Moeen U Ahmed on April 4. These statements reinforce the speculation that the EBIG is trying to create an environment in which the top leaders of AL and BNP would quit politics and seek exile.

In reply to a reporter's question, whether the case had any link with Mainul Hosein's comments, adviser MA Matin said: "It seems that the government had no such plan." If not, why not say "no" emphatically, instead of "it seems...?" This utterly cryptic reply either ignores the gravities of the situation, or displays his inability to speak what he knows.

A mystery surrounding the complainant is that even his family did not know his whereabouts for three days prior to filing the case.

Doesn't his disappearance indicate that he was held in a secured undisclosed place to fabricate or reconstruct the extortion case? Why didn't his family report his disappearance to the police? Why did he appear tense and nervous when avoiding reporters' questions? Was he under compulsion to file such a case? It seems that he might need a lot of coaching and tutoring before facing interrogation in the trial.

Regardless of the merit of the extortion case, some advisers made bizarre and "western cowboy mentality" type "damn care" belligerent statements directed at selected politicians. Some politicians may be guilty of wrongdoing, but they are the same people who fought side by side with the army for liberating the country. No one wants them to be exonerated for any wrongdoings. But they don't deserve being bullied out of politics by unelected pseudo-politicians holding political positions.

Because of incessant bullying, any case against corrupt politicians, even if it is genuine, would now appear fabricated and suspi-

cious. Their bullying gives the impression that "no matter what, they will dig some dirt out to make you guilty and bar you from politics." Who authorized them to bully politicians?

The extortion case against Hasina is 9 years old. It should have been rejected on the basis of statutes of limitations. Maybe there are no such provisions in the Bangladesh constitution.

In most western democracies extortion cases as