

Due process

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SI ZAMAN

BANGLADESH never had a monarchical system per se; those that existed hundreds of years ago were historically insignificant. Nevertheless, the system we inherited post-1971 is a miserable copy of the system we had in the post-1947 period. This system tacitly allows whichever leader is in office brazen opulence, audacious unaccountability, ruthless nepotism, blatant abuse of power, and a total disregard for the law of the land.

In the guise of "democracy," the system propagates a sort of monarchical regime where a son (crown prince) of the leader can get filthy rich by amassing illegitimate wealth, while another son can get

all the lucrative businesses by ruthlessly "kicking out" most of the legitimate competitors with utter disregard for the law -- a fitting act by a "crown prince" one might surmise!

And the other "pretenders" do not just stay innocent by standers, they also scramble to make an easy million or two while the going stays easy. Who said "democracy" is a bad business?

There have been several arrests of high profile politicians recently. Let us not shrug these aside as being merely some front page sensationalism by the CTG -- obviously the ACC must have done all the required "homework" before making these arrests and making them public. Let's face it, the ACC has always existed, but could it

function properly before the present CTG?

Were they not forced to tag along with the existing ruling party agenda? Ever since the present CTG took over, the newly empowered and formidable ACC found breathing space, like a fish jumping back into water.

Before the AL leader left for US, she had lauded the present CTG's witch-hunt of the corrupt bigwigs, and she also tacitly suggested that this probing by the ACC should go on without any partisanship. Was it that she was trying feebly to capitalize on the prevailing lull in the political scenario? Or was it yet another unperceptive move by the AL leader?

The media should always be prudent and responsible when

reporting an allegation. The report should never be specific about the allegation, so as not to influence or jeopardize the process of justice or, indeed, a fair trial.

Unfortunately, the reporting by all the national dailies on the allegation against the AL leader has been far too sensationalistic. Merely a mention of the "extortion" would have sufficed.

Certainly, allegations of this sort are extremely grave -- and the gravity should ensure that the ensuing investigation is carried out impartially. Certainly, the law should take its own course whilst ensuring that due process is not denied. Bangladesh should show that there is no one above the law.

The other political high-ups are right now dithering whether to leave the country or to stand and face the music. However, it can not be overstated that the decision by the present CTG, to send the two leaders into exile, has been the most compassionate and the least derogatory for the leaders; despite a catalogue of serious allegations

against the leaders and against the members of their families.

It has been suggested by some, with a certain amount of discontent, that the two major political parties will be like "carriages without the horses." Indeed -- but is there really a dearth of experienced, seasoned and "clean" politicians who could take the helm and rejuvenate the parties along a proper party line and with proper vision?

Could not these new leaders clamp down and begin a clean-up (a la the present CTG) of the corrupt members within their party? In developed democracies, the stepping down of a party leader is not uncommon. In the UK, after a defeat in a general election the party leader usually resigns, and the party members elect a new leader. This occurred at least four times for the UK Labour party over the last 38 years, nevertheless, the party survives.

The latest move by the CTG, concerning the indictments of the

AL leader and the two sons of the BNP leader, is certainly beginning to cement the non-partisan stance of the CTG. The official position is that the government is not going to file any specific charges against the two leaders as there are no specific graft charges against them. However, the charges should not have been made public before scrutiny by the relevant authorities.

Nevertheless, the actions, so far, of the ACC are undoubtedly laudable; however, time is running out. Considering the 18-month deadline as per the chief adviser's recent address to the nation, the following questions crop up inevitably:

- Will the CTG be able to complete the "clean-up" process of the administrative system within this time-frame?
- Will the CTG be able to create a totally full-proof transparency within political and bureaucratic mechanisms?
- Will the CTG be able to create an atmosphere for a free and

fair election within this time frame?

- Can this present CTG uphold the constitutional principle that no one is above the law?
- Most importantly, within this time frame, would the CTG be able to complete the trial of all the political big-wigs who have been indicted thus far?
- Will the process of justice ever see any settlement, or will it merely drag on till the next elected government takes over, which, as fate would have it, might just harbour empathy towards these political bigwigs. And then these corrupt politicians might walk without ever having their cases tried fully.
- The common folk of this country, who are essentially honest and peace-loving, could, at least, hope for a peaceful and just Bangladesh in future, where they would never be victims of perennial social and political injustice.

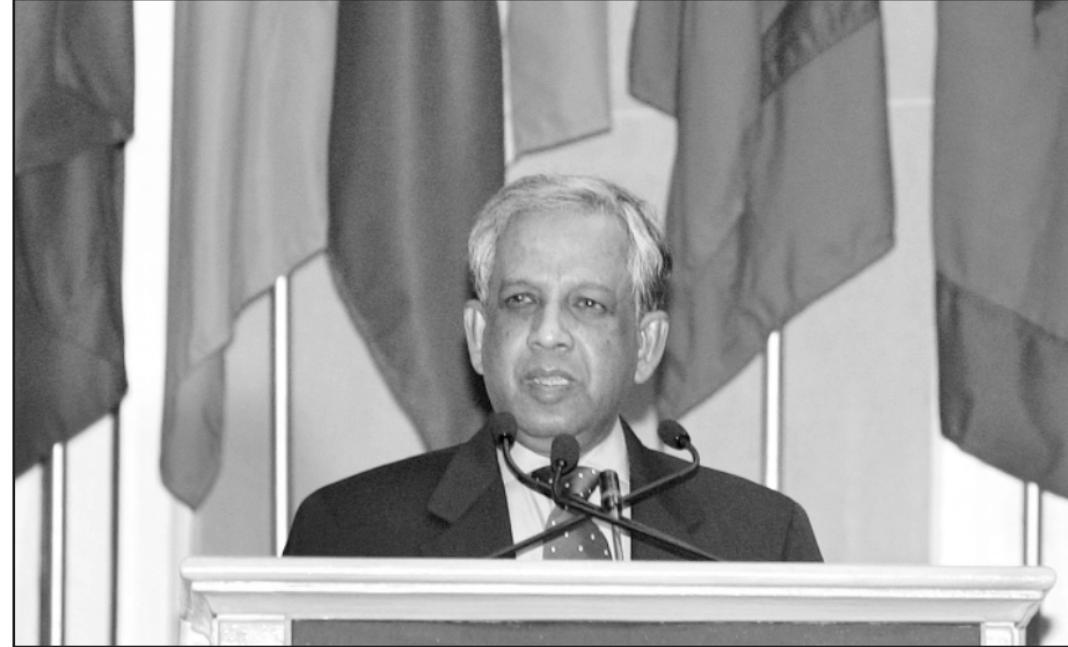
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formidable task ahead. And, naturally, all the citizens should extend their total support to this CG. Some have also suggested, in criticism, that the care-taker government should not lengthen its tenure, i.e., a non-representative government is not "good" for the nation. Fair enough!

However, the work done by the CTG over the last three months makes it abundantly clear where the previous "representative" governments had failed miserably. The question, whether or not a formal democratic system is good for this country, is purely academic at this stage -- rather the question, whether or not the general masses from all echelons of our society are breathing a sigh of relief, or the question, whether or not all the administrative mechanisms are functioning as they should be, are germane.

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Where are you taking our country?



MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

I have so many questions to those in control of the country that I do not know where to begin. The initial euphoria that began when this the caretaker government (CTG) led by Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed took over reached a climax when Tarique Rahman was arrested, but has ever since gradually transformed into a feeling of restless discomfort and uncertainty.

The recent steps of the CTG to put into exile the leaders of the two major parties revive the nagging doubt about the real motivation of the government and also brings into question how much independence this CTG really has in terms of decision-making.

One cannot but wonder about the curious timing of the charges against Sheikh Hasina and Tarique Rahman's brother combined with direct and indirect threats to ensure the exile of Sheikh Hasina and

Khaleda Zia (along with their families) and ask why these are necessary.

The government with support from the military has clearly been in total control of the country's political space. Many of the leaders from both parties are in jail. The ban on indoor politics is maintained without much resistance. Under these circumstances, is it justified to send these leaders to exile on the grounds that they may cause undue political and social unrest? If they do, the government clearly has enough strength and control to counter it -- what is the point of sending these leaders to exile?

There is a difference between rooting out corrupt elements from the political parties and rooting out political parties altogether and right now the CTG is walking along the thin line that distinguishes the two. If the motivation of this CTG is to re-establish democracy, shouldn't they be concentrating more on

strengthening the democratic institutions, the judiciary and the anti-corruption commission instead of going to great lengths to forcibly send leaders to exile.

I am not saying that the country will lose much without leaders like Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia since it may well be argued that they have possibly collectively done more harm to the country than good over the years. But it should be left to the people's mandate to decide whether to accept or reject them and to the legal system to decide their fate -- not unanimous and uncontested decision by the government to keep them out of the country.

For now, my one source of comfort and hope is that I am able to write my thoughts in a newspaper. A corner of my mind still dreads the day that this government will "put the press to exile" too by saying that the press is contributing to political unrest. If the CTG ends up doing that, no amount of justification will be able to convince me that the CTG is not just "new wine in old bottle."

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A parallel peacemaker

NEWSWEEK

In the living room of his home in suburban Maryland, Ibrahim Soliman unfolds a topographical map of the Golan Heights, the territory Israel captured from Syria in 1967 that remains at the heart of their dispute. Covered on both sides with thick plastic sheeting and marked up with lines that divide the plateau into seven zones, the map was a prop in one of Soliman's first secret contacts with Israelis in the early 1990s. Soliman, 70, is a Syrian-American businessman with close ties to the Assads, the ruling family in Damascus. Though he is not an official of any government, Soliman has been quietly conducting a kind of backdoor mediation between the two warring countries for more than 15 years, relaying messages and discussing peace initiatives with private Israelis. His recent talks with the former director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry even produced a draft accord, which Soliman showed leaders in Damascus and which others presented to US officials. Washington's response? A resounding silence.

I sincerely hope that these worries and curiosities will prove to be unjustified in the long run and that the CTG in collaboration with the army will make way for democracy to flourish so that the existing parties can re-define their priorities and leadership, the emerging parties such as Nagorik Shakti can make a headway as an alternative political platform, and the new generation can participate in clean and honest politics of reform rather than destruction.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Damascus marked the latest challenge to the Bush administration's policy of isolating Syria for its alleged support of terrorism. It also raised new questions about the US approach to peace talks between Israel and its neighbors. President Bush has chosen to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian track, sending Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Jerusalem and Ramallah four times since January. But a growing number of Middle East experts, in and outside of government, now believe progress is more likely on the Syrian track. "There's certainly more potential there and fewer complications,"

says Dennis Ross, Washington's main Middle East troubleshooter for a decade under Republican and Democratic presidents.

The complications in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are bound up mainly with Hamas, the Islamic group that dominates the Palestinian government and refuses to recognize Israel, much less forge a peace agreement. In contrast, Syrian President Bashar Assad has offered face-to-face talks without preconditions, a formula Israel had long sought. But officials versed in Mideast diplomacy say Washington has pressured Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to continue spurning Damascus. Rice made the case to Israeli leaders just last month, say knowledgeable Israeli and American sources who didn't want to be named revealing details of closed-door meetings. She argued that talks would amount to a reward for Assad's backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon and his ties with Iran, the sources say. (Asked about the exchange, a State Department spokesman says the US position is to "not encourage" Israel to engage with Syria.)

Soliman believes Americans are misreading Assad. A member of the same Alawite sect as the Assads, Soliman first met Bashar's father in 1957. Hafez Assad was an Air Force lieutenant at the time, serving under the command of Soliman's older brother in the city of Hama. "There was a casino along the river in Hama where he and I would drink coffee and play backgammon," Soliman tells Newsweek in a rare print interview. Hafez impressed Soliman as "very smart and very ambitious" but also "bitter about events in the Middle East -- the creation of Israel and the partition of Lebanon from Syria. Soliman left Syria to study in America the following year, but kept in contact

with Assad, who grabbed power in 1970 and led Syria for three decades. Soliman says Assad came to terms late in life with Israel's existence and focused mainly on retrieving the Golan, an objective he bequeathed to his son. "Bashar wants to see the Golan returned to Syria, and he's genuinely prepared to make peace with Israel to get it back."

Israel has its own qualms about negotiating with Syria. Olmert told Pelosi recently that talks could begin only after Assad expelled leaders of Hamas and the more-radical Islamic Jihad, and stops the flow of weapons to Hezbollah, the group Israel waged war against last summer. With a plummeting approval rating, Olmert must be worried that bargaining over the Golan would alienate hawkish voters. Adhering to Washington's veto might be his way of avoiding the issue altogether. But Olmert also faces pressure from some key cabinet members who are agitating for the government to at least test Assad's sincerity. So are a few top military officials, who believe a potential war with Syria over the rearing of Hezbollah might be averted through negotiations.

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IN FRONT OF THE BOX

Tigers still deserve to return as heroes

PAUL MASON

ONE of the most disappointing aspects of this tournament is that it has underlined the decline of the West Indies as a superpower in world cricket. Of course some of the other heavyweights such as England, Pakistan and India have been woeful this time round, but you somehow sense that these teams will go back to the drawing board, and have the resources as well as the depth in domestic cricket to hit the comeback road.

For the West Indies however, it is hard to see a resurrection on the near horizon. Like many fans of cricket, I'm saddened by this prospect.

Growing up, I used to marvel at the Windies -- we all did. They were formidable -- filled with legendary names: Richards, Holding, Garner, Marshall, Lloyd, Geenidge, Kallicharan and so on. I used to be able to rattle off their averages and feats by heart. Remember the 5-0 drubbing they gave England in 1984? I was living in Islamabad

when the Windies came to town a year later -- playing an ODI in Rawalpindi. My classmate Jeremy came from the only Barbadian family in the capital, and so his parents played host to the team. I wasn't invited to the party, and was very bitter about this, but my mum and dad went, and I remember lying awake wondering what it might be like to be surrounded by such heroes -- feeling sure it must have been a sparkling, magical affair.

The decline of the West Indies had already set in by the time Nasser Hussain's England finally achieved a series win against them in 2000, the first by England in 31 years. I watched with something of a pang in the final test as the England players lined up for a guard of honour for Ambrose and Walsh -- the last of the great Windies opening bowling pairs, and the final time I saw the team as a powerhouse.

So, though yesterday's game between the West Indies and Bangladesh was a dead rubber in terms of this World Cup, both teams needed the win to earn

some respect. For me this was a meeting of the future and the past: a young Bangladeshi team made up of raw talent with an eye to potential conquests, against a West Indian side whose talismanic captain is perhaps its last link to a glorious past.

In the end Lara only played a cameo innings of 33 off 27 in the West Indian total of 230. This was a decent score -- but in reality only a late flurry of runs in the final five overs masked another unconvincing team effort with the bat. Sarwan was once more their most assured batsman, his in-form 91 renewing his claim to the captaincy.

One of the positives for Bangladesh to come out of this tournament has been their bowling, and I thought the Syed-Masrafe combination was again impressive with the new ball. Both bowlers extracted some useful movement to pick up early wickets, allowing the spinners to stem the flow of runs in the middle overs as they have done so well throughout this World Cup.

In truth little positive can be

said about the Bangladesh reply. For me all the questions asked of the Tigers at the moment therefore, hang over the heads of the batsmen -- in particular their susceptibility to bounce and pace. This is a general weakness that must be addressed or it will continue to be exposed.

The pitch in Barbados had been described as a West Indian pitch of old -- and it certainly suited the hosts. Powell was fiery and effective with 3-38 off his ten. It is worth noting that at this ground all of Bangladesh's batsmen have succumbed to short pitched deliveries.

This match also pointed to another area that needs work -- and here I sound a bit like a scratched record -- and that is for the Tigers' batsmen to find a balance between their natural, attacking stroke play, and the need to be more level-headed when the situation requires it.

Thursday, with three down for little on the board Ashraful had no business trying to pull one -- his compulsion for the shot out of place here given the condi-

tions and the mess his team was in.

When Bashar came in at 34-4 you could sense he was at the bar ordering a drink while the doors of the "Last-Chance Saloon" swung behind him. There is only so long you can hide a drastic loss in form behind the captaincy, and another 12 scratchy runs did little to help his cause.

Only the partnership between Masrafe and Rahim brought any sense of composure to the Bangladeshi innings, but with so many wickets down it was always going to be an uphill battle. Masrafe once again demonstrating his all-round capabilities and perhaps staking a claim to move further up the order.

And so the result of this match was somewhat deceptive: a 99-run win masks the inadequacies of a demoralised West Indies team, but is also a false reflection of the promise that Bangladesh have to offer and the talent they have shown in this World Cup.

Though the Tigers must feel disappointed with their efforts in

the last two outings, they still deserve to return home as heroes. Their goal on entering their third World Cup was to make the second round, which they achieved in what was clearly the hardest group in the competition.

In the second round they thrashed the top ranked team in the world, and were unlucky not to beat England. Their presence in the Super Eights added much needed colour and excitement to what was otherwise a lukewarm affair. They ought to be thanked on those grounds alone. Though this tournament has underlined Bangladesh's need for much greater consistency, the general mood of the squad still ought to be upbeat.

After all, World Cup 2011 is being played in their back garden, and many of this team will be older, wiser, and still around to contest it. I certainly look forward to once again commenting on the Tigers, though this time I might just have to get out from "in front of the box" and make the trip to Bangladesh to hear their mighty roar.

