

Government's move is well-advised

But do not blame media over 'speculations'

WITH the military-backed interim government having decided to rescind its earlier steps regarding Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, the political atmosphere has become a lot clearer. We commend the decision of the government to step back and enable the Awami League chief, now abroad, to return home. By the same measure, we feel that its clear statement on the position of the BNP chairperson will allay much of the concern lately expressed about her future. What is obvious is that the government, by refusing to allow Sheikh Hasina back into the country and trying to compel Begum Zia into going abroad, had veered off into a direction that was patently untenable. We are heartened, though, that it eventually realized its error of judgement and did not hesitate to go for a reversal of its earlier stand. It was surely an act of courage and a demonstration of maturity.

There are, however, some questions that we feel the government has raised through one of the two press notes it issued on Wednesday evening. It hinted that media reports about the status of Begum Zia had been speculative, which is another way of saying that there was no truth to the news that the former prime minister and her family were under pressure to leave the country. Our position on the issue is very clear. The reasons for speculation, if indeed there were speculations, have to do with the government itself. The meeting between Begum Zia and her elder son at an undisclosed location, the detention and release of her younger son, the visit to the central jail by Tarique Rahman's wife and mother-in-law, reports of efforts to have Saudi visas granted to the family, et al, were enough grounds for the media to believe that the administration was intent on sending the Zia family out of the country. These were open secrets for which the media cannot in any way be blamed. The media, we will assert here, were absolutely on track. Besides, by its latest reversal of action regarding the two political leaders, the government has admitted its errors. That is why this tangential attack on the media becomes difficult to understand or accept.

All said and done, there is now a sense of relief that matters are back where they should be. In other words, we expect the authorities to refocus on such issues as fighting corruption and preparing the ground for holding general elections expeditiously through necessary electoral reforms. As for the political parties, the position of Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia notwithstanding, it is necessary that they seriously look inward and undertake the internal reforms so essential for a democratization of their organizations and a concomitant strengthening of pluralist politics.

We would like to strongly reiterate that the nation cannot go back to the politics of confrontation, of blame game, of mindlessly oppressing the opposition, of hartals and parliament boycott. These two leaders must acknowledge their share of responsibility for such politics.

Nor'wester fury

Let's brace ourselves for the challenge

THE 19 minute nor'wester that lashed the districts of Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Rangpur, Kurigram and Brahmanbaria early this week wrought death, injuries and destruction in a vast tract of land. Standing IRRI-Boro crops on about 1000 hectares were also damaged by the twister that said to have lasted only for 10 minutes in places.

So horrific is the tale of damages that we have to shun any casual approach to such seasonal ravages.

Nor'westers is an annual phenomenon with which the people of the country have to cope -- but mostly in their aftermath as a *fait accompli*. Majority of people who live in the rural areas are the worst victims of this fury with their 'kutcha' abodes and standing crops compared to those in the urban areas.

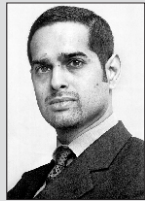
In cities, however, they cause a separate set of problems such as water logging and power supply disruptions.

Nor'westers are likely to continue perhaps with greater ferocity due to continuous deterioration in world's climatic conditions, yet ways and means have to be found to provide advance warning allowing for evacuation of people to safer zones and reaching succor to those affected.

There is a very relevant proverb to quote: 'To be forewarned is to be forearmed' meaning staying ready to face any imminent challenge. It is scientifically possible to forecast a twister or tornado ahead of its occurrence in a particular place. Our disaster management ministry and the meteorology department should explore such a possibility and try and remove the gap in the equipment base that we have in this sphere.

Simultaneously, since it is well known which month or months are vulnerable to nor'westers, a relief and rehabilitation program must be kept handy for implementation on a short notice. Aside from immediate food relief and house building assistance, the poor farmers, we suggest, may be provided with soft term agri loans to rebuild their lives.

Risk assessment



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE fiasco surrounding the so-called "minus two" plan to send Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia into exile seems to indicate that the current interim government shares at least one trait with its predecessor elected governments -- to put it kindly, a competence deficit.

The entire process was a travesty from beginning to end. From the start, the plan was clearly ill-conceived, but even an ill-conceived plan can be executed with a minimal level of efficiency. From the contradictory public statements of the interim government, to the apparent failure to take care of elementary issues such as the agreement of one of the intended host countries, to the issuance and withdrawal of warrants and the filing and dropping of charges -- the entire sorry spectacle has only succeeded in diminishing the much-needed credibility of the interim administration.

Indeed, the interim government's record over the past three months has certainly left

much to be desired. But perhaps I am being too harsh. In mitigation, one could argue that the reform agenda that it has chalked out is unprecedented in its scope and ambition, so that errors are inevitable, and that things are certainly not helped by the fact that the council of advisers is not the only body making and implementing executive decisions.

Perhaps this is, in fact, the crux of the problem. One of the main hesitations that many have had about the functioning of this caretaker government is that it remains unclear where authority is ultimately invested and that there is neither transparency as far as how decisions are made or accountability is more likely to make mistakes than one, which is transparent and accountable is Politics 101.

Thus, perhaps the way forward for the interim government to regain its credibility and to ensure that further

missteps (and there have been plenty, not just the "minus two" plan, e.g. slum eviction, removal of hawkers markets, etc) are not taken is to operate with greater transparency and openness. Essentially, what I would suggest for any government, democratically elected or otherwise.

Both problems -- lack of transparency and confusion over who is running the show -- have the same root: right now power is being shared between the interim government and the army, and there is no unitary executive authority.

The solution is for the caretaker government to operate with the same level of openness that we would expect from any government and for it to make clear to its backers in the army that the more authority the government has and the smaller the role the army has in running the affairs of state, the better.

To the extent that without the state of emergency, at the behest of the army, the nation would have been subjected to a farcical one-sided election

on January 22, the fact that the army has stepped in and is playing a role in carrying out much-needed reform, while problematic, is not necessarily a bad thing. Similarly, it can be argued that but for the army, the likes of Tarique Rahman would never be behind bars, and this too is a positive intervention

But, however necessary army support is for the current state of affairs, we should all be able to agree that the smaller the role it plays and the further in the background it stays, the better -- both for the country and for the armed forces as an institution.

No one wants martial law or for the army to take more direct control over the affairs of state. Even those with no memory of our last unhappy experience of military rule instinctively sense that no possible good can come of such an eventuality.

However, the most worrisome aspect of the current dispensation is the establishment of a governance culture without transparency and

CROSS TALK

A quickly-cobbled translation from Sharat Chandra Chatterjee: Superior love doesn't always pull together, but it often pushes away. It means there is a time to come close and there is a time to stay far. The begums have chosen to stay close, when they should have gone far. Harder the bounce, harder the fall. Again, a nation will wait to feel the pain.

say both leaders had gone to exile. It could be an opportunity for them to do some soul searching once they had settled down in their homes away from home. They will not be able to do that in the country for the same reason fishes don't learn to appreciate it when they are in water.

May be in exile the begums would have realized that they had gone too far. They could find time to study history. Then they could grapple with questions surrounding their politics and popularity.

Why didn't anybody die or why didn't people pour out on the streets when the military-backed government asked them to pack up and go? May be in the solitariness of their exile, they could hear the truth blowing in the wind. People don't mind when their leaders ride on them to go to power. But they don't like it when power is used to ride on them.

It is said that there is a woman behind every successful man.

But each of the two begums has an illustrious man behind her; one has the father, and another the husband. But then there is something about history in this neck of the wood. The begums have always lived to pay for the sins of their men.

Well, it will be hard to find a blow-by-blow match between the begums now and the begums then. But the overall fate is more or less the same. It is the same intriguing sons, husbands and fathers, the rise and fall of political fortune, then the long afterlife in financial distress, isolation, neglect, fear and ignominy.

Lutfunnisa, the widow of Sirajuddaula, lived for 34 years after the brutal assassination of her husband. She spent all that time in pecuniary crisis, petitioning to the British to increase her allowance and then frequenting the tomb of her husband in Kush Bagh cemetery.

Both Ghasiti and Amina, Aliwardi's wayward daughters,

were drowned in water, their boat capsized under the order from Mir Jafar's son Miran. Amina had prayed that Miran should be struck with lightning for his cruelty to them. Her prayer was answered within a few days when a thunderbolt killed him.

Other begums suffered equally except Munni Begum, the widow of Mir Jafar, who used her wealth and good demeanor to hold sway over Clive and Hastings. She would be the only begum to get gun salutes from the Company after her death, 90 of them corresponding with the number of years she had lived.

Murshid Quli's daughter Zinatunnisa lived in the care of Ghasiti and her husband until she died. Aliwardi's wife Sharfunnisa lived in Murshidabad with Lutfunnisa and spent her last days grazing in memories.

The entire saga started with a Brahmin who had converted to Islam. Murshid Quli, the Mughal Diwan of Bengal, had married his

accountability and rule of law. Not that this is anything new for us. Indeed, these were the hallmarks of the last elected government. But in many ways the current situation is far more opaque.

No one knows who is making what decisions and on what basis. With fundamental rights suspended and it being unclear what the chain of command is and what the relations are between the various parties sharing power, we don't even know how to go about seeking transparency and accountability for decisions made and actions taken.

Nevertheless, even knowing all of this about the past three months, many Bangladeshis have been willing to go along and give the current situation the benefit of the doubt. The thinking behind this attitude has been that cleaning up Bangladesh's politics and creating a truly level playing field for the next elections was always going to require some degree of irregularity, but that this was the price that we had to pay. These were acceptable costs.

But key to the notion that the costs of the enterprise were acceptable was the belief that this was a temporary situation only and that the army would quietly move into the background when things were done. In retrospect, it always was a gamble, requiring a great deal of faith and trust, and, of course, good sense.

All things considered, it

seems to me that the most prudent course of action for the nation would be for the interim government to wrap up the anti-corruption and election reform drives as quickly as possible and move towards elections at the earliest.

If certain politicians are banned from politics as a result of their crimes and misdeeds, that would be a good thing. Most of the problems in the system can be resolved with appropriate legislation.

One hopes that the shock of the past three months will be sufficient that, moving forward, it will ensure that the corruption and the criminalisation of politics can be reduced to a minimum.

This may not be the grand sweeping reform that many had once hoped for. But the truth is that that was always an unlikely prospect and it is becoming crystal clear that the risks associated with the current situation may soon outweigh the likelihood of a positive outcome.

It seems to me that the best we can hope for now, realistically, would be to ensure that the very worst offenders are removed from public life and that systemic changes be put in place to make it difficult for the kind of criminalisation of politics we have endured for so long to return, and to move forward. It is not a perfect solution, but it might just be our best bet now.

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Begums bounced back



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHO could ever think that things were going to turn so sharply and the two powerful begums would first go out of power and then be marked to go out of country? Last week, one begum was ready to leave the country, while another was restrained from returning home. It looked as if an exasperated nation wanted to slam its door in their face. But nay, the door flung open last Wednesday. There is a change of plan.

All said and done, it has been a considerable departure from the past. This time we have decided not to kill our leaders, but to give them a chance to live. They could leave the country and slip out of the net. We could spare them, and they could spare us. What is better than live and let live? But the begums have chosen to stay in the country. So be it.

For argument's sake, let us

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Well, it will be hard to find a blow-by-blow match between the begums now and the begums then. But the overall fate is more or less the same. It is the same intriguing sons, husbands and fathers, the rise and fall of political fortune, then the long afterlife in financial distress, isolation, neglect, fear and ignominy.

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The entire saga started with a Brahmin who had converted to Islam. Murshid Quli, the Mughal Diwan of Bengal, had married his

daughter to Shuja Khan who disputed with his father-in-law and set up his own court in Orissa.

Shuja took a distant relative named Mirza Mohammad to his service and Mirza's sons Haji Ahmad and Aliwardi wrestled power from Shuja's son Sarfaraz, who had discredited himself by dishonouring the beautiful daughter-in-law of Jagath Seth.

After Aliwardi became the new Nawab, he married his three daughters Ghasiti, Maimana and Amina to Haji's three sons. Now the plot begins to thicken. Ghasiti and Amina, while married to their husbands, fell in love with Husain Quli, which alarmed their virtuous mother Sharfunnisa.

But Husain Quli made no secret that he was more inclined towards younger Amina and a jealous Ghasiti joined her mother to take revenge. It fell on Sirajuddaula to see that his mother's lover would be brutally killed.

Meanwhile, the wheel of fortune turned again. Mir Jafar, who was related to Aliwardi and had sworn by the holy Quran to stand by Siraj, overthrew him. The irony of history is that Siraj would be stabbed to death by an ungrateful Mohammad Beg, who was raised in Aliwardi's house. Lying in a pool of blood the fallen Nawab said to his assailant that he was done for

the blood of Husain Quli, which was shed by him.

The purpose of this narration is to remind that politics has transformed since the days of Plassey and, thank God, it is now in the hands of people, not in the hands of families. I would like the begums to think about it. They wanted to take power in their grip and let their families run the country. And that was going to strangle the aspiration of freedom-loving people, the same aspiration which is now protecting them by forcing us to give them a choice.

It appears now that the choice has changed. The begum who was gone will rush home. The begum who was dawdling is not going anywhere. But history is full of surprises as it repeats the cycle of crime and recompense. The begums have bounced back, which, if anything only makes it harder to tell when and where the circle should close.

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Press cartoons and freedom of expression



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

NO NONSENSE

Subjecting the media to intimidation and censorship to counter the frenzy of innuendos and sensational "exposés" always culminates in counter productive outcomes. The cartoonists' creative expression of "thousands words in a caricature" mustn't be stifled; columnists in op-ed articles mustn't be suppressed. Hamstringing the media will simply generate fear among the people, and put off creative thinking while reinforcing the cascading confusions that the government intended to offset.

have noticed that some of the media are publishing or broadcasting dishonest and unprofessional political statements, satirical sketches, cartoons, features, etc, which are creating confusion among the people."

The PID's letter also claimed: "The mass media's role in carrying out the government's ongoing multifaceted reform programs has been praised by all quarters. Because of this positive role, the government is always proactive in maintaining the freedom of the electronic and print media in spite of the country being under a state of emergency."

These statements appear disingenuous. In effect, isn't the government saying: "We like you when you

print good things about us and so, keep it that way, or else?"

No democracy can thrive if the media is told what it can broadcast or print. The government's reform initiatives will reach deep if they're allowed to proceed with public participation through media scrutiny. Only the media can eliminate the confusion that is spawned out of rumours, gossip, and tall tales -- press censorship, on the other hand, will only compound the confusion.

To suggest that printing cartoons, dishonest and unprofessional political statements, satirical sketches, and so on, is confusing the people is tantamount to insulting their wisdom. This is also inconsistent with the laissez faire paradigm of the free market process.

Newspapers which publish material that lacks professionalism and is contrary to public interests, will automatically find their exit out of the news business. So, let the readers decide what to read and what to believe, instead of the government dictating what to publish-- unless, of course, the interim government may want to have its "own brand of media freedom" to resonate with its "own brand of democracy."

There is no such thing as license to absolute freedom of expression. Newspaper publishers should exercise their own discipline, guided by professionalism. If mistakes creep in, the national press council should be the arbiter of choice to mediate the occurrence -- but curtail media freedom is a self-

defeating measure. Writing op-ed columns and publishing satirical sketches and cartoons can be complementary, or two completely separate formats of freedom of expression. How does the phrase go: A picture says a thousand words.

Cartoons, as a means of expression, can be understood across national borders, as they permeate through the language barrier said Rana Lurie, an American cartoonist. For Lurie, the act of cartooning as a vehicle of expression was necessary, but not sufficient. He "wanted to take a physical part in the action" and, therefore, interviewed political leaders and elite throughout the world, trying to intrude into and unearth their hidden schemes.

On April 11, a panel of eminent international press cartoonists convened at the French Ministry of Culture to inaugurate the "Cartooning for Peace" exhibit and debate the potential perils of press cartoons in the political realm. Cartoons have a universal reach, and mollifying effects, yet they may also lead to violence and bloodshed (Prophet Muhammad cartoons).

An Algerian cartoonist, Ali Dilem (under trial for 24 cases), discussed

a more stereotypical yet well founded vision of press freedom in Muslim countries. He fearlessly spoke out that all Muslim-ruled countries lacked press freedom and were poorly governed.

Danish cartoonist, Carsten Graabaek, argued that cartooning is about what is happening around you, adding that: "freedom of speech is a worldly affair, a secular affair," and that cartoonists "should be aware of the fine balance between lampooning ... and offending the inner feelings of people."

Ramize Erer, a female cartoonist from Turkey, "epitomized the amazing liberty that we can't even imagine in Muslim countries like Turkey" observed Jean Plantu, the French cartoonist for French newspaper Le Monde since 1972.

One may wonder if the press cartoonists profile themselves as journalists. Maybe Plantu thinks that cartoonists and their work are fulfilling a civic duty, and that their essential goal is to produce "a cartoon that can do good."

Political cartoonist Michel Kichka famously said: "Freedom of expression means spilling ink, not spilling blood." As for Dilem, he wouldn't have published a cartoon if it imperiled the lives of others. He believes:

"Nobody deserves to die for a drawing."

Khalil Arafah, a Palestinian cartoonist, believes that when Hamas and Fatah entered a civil war his cartoons may have helped to end it.

Newspaper editors who expurgate forceful yet undeniable content on the premise that the authorities may come down on them are, in fact, undermining the power of speech and rejoinder of those portrayed in the caricatures. In this Internet age, everybody has the publishing forum to counter in his own defense.

Referring to the PID's instructions to all newspapers not to carry any comment of Sheikh Hasina, Law Adviser Mainul Hossain said: "PID does not do this, but you have to remember that a critical situation is prevailing in the country and fundamental rights do not work at present." Make no mistake, black-out of Hasina's statements only created more gossip mongering.

No one doubts that the fervour with which the interim government has been purging political corruption is unprecedented in our country, which is why it enjoys steadfast public acclaim -- at least until now. Privately, there are whispers of rising fear and anxieties. Then there

are people who guardedly wonder why no retired army officers, for instance, are yet to be charged.

Possible violations of human rights are also being insinuated in international forums. All former political leaders, regardless of who they are, should be prosecuted in the country for their culpabilities, for setting a precedent. Any unconstitutional measures against any one (exile) may only elevate them to a position larger than life to their followers.

Subjecting the media to intimidation and censorship to counter the frenzy of innuendos and sensational "exposés" always culminates in counter productive outcomes. The cartoonists' creative expression of "thousands words in a caricature" mustn't be stifled; columnists in op-ed articles mustn't be suppressed. Hamstringing the media will simply generate fear among the people, and put off creative thinking while reinforcing the cascading confusions that the government intended to offset.

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