

Are your intentions honourable?

SYED S. KAISER KABIR

WHAT we had over the last 15 years can be described in many ways, e.g., quasi-monarchy, kleptocracy, elected dictatorship, and so on. There is a common thread among these epithets -- viz., a reference to unrepresentative and unaccountable governance that, by definition, precludes democracy.

Indeed, we did not have much democracy since 1991. Public participation in governance effectively began and ended on polling day. Parliament remained largely dysfunctional, vital institutions attenuated through political nepotism, corruption flourished, and local government was effectively abolished. Only the media provided some opening for public

participation in the decision-making process.

Against this background, the recent movement for a quick return to democracy is confusing. After all, one cannot return to a state-of-affairs that was non-existent in the first place. Yet, if democracy is more than just holding polls at specified intervals, then why are there growing calls for holding elections as soon as possible?

The easy answer is that those who had gained unlawfully, or even unfairly, from the establishment since 1991 yearn for a return to the good old days. To them, reforms of the electoral system, judiciary, political parties, etc. are undesirable because such measures could seriously damage their wealth and influence.

However, this explanation is only applicable to a certain section of the population. There are many decent people who believe that holding elections as soon as possible is the only way to avoid a portentous future that is looming on the horizon.

They are, of course, referring to a full-scale takeover of the government by the men in khaki. Such fears are not without foundation, though apparently receding.

The recent botched-up attempts to render the country Begum-Free put the spotlight on the question of who is really in charge. It follows that if the top job in an un-elected regime is up for grabs, then the army is a clear candidate. Moreover, a strong rumour about the appearance of a new political party that is backed

by the army has fuelled such fears even further.

So, according to some, by holding elections at the earliest opportunity the danger of an army takeover can effectively be neutralised. In the process of rushing through the elections many vital reforms would have to be compromised, but this second-best solution is still preferable to being under martial law, or under an army-backed political party larded with opportunist politicians and spineless members of the civil society.

Somehow this line of reasoning seems to be motivated largely by panic. The evidence notwithstanding, what is really the chance of an army takeover?

When the army top brass speak of a new kind of democracy, one is of course immediately taken back

to the days of despots such as Ayub Khan and H.M. Ershad. Yet, such a journey into history should also remind us that the world is very different now.

First, the Bangladesh army, ironically due to radical changes in the last two decades, is now well-trained and professional. Respect for civilian law is ingrained in the training curriculum.

Second, international tolerance for army rule, as seen during the Cold War, no longer applies. These days, a more case by case approach seems to be in vogue.

Third, the Bangladesh army has also developed an international perspective through its UN peace-keeping role. It would be rather difficult to carry the mantle of peace and democracy globally if they are viewed as tyrants in their

own backyard.

Fourth, this army appears amenable to reasoning and, of course, pressure. After protests from civil society, the slum eviction programme has been shelved. Most notably, the drama regarding the exile of the Begums seems to have gone into intermission.

In essence, this army gives the impression of being mindful of public opinion. But is it really so? Why not test the waters? Let there be a documented set of expectations from civil society, and evaluate how the army responds to it. Its key elements could be as follows:

- There must be no ambiguity that the principal executive authority of Bangladesh rests with the head of the interim government.
- Army involvement in civilian life

must be authorised by the interim government.

- The army must return to its barracks if the interim government wishes so.
- Members of the armed forces cannot directly or indirectly promote any political party.
- Members of the armed forces must wait at least three years (after retiring) before joining politics.

The longevity of the interim government largely depends on how comfortable the public is with the nature of its involvement with the army. In this light, it is incumbent upon the army to convince us that its intentions are honourable and transparent.

This government has performed miracles. While of late, pertinent questions have been raised about

its competence, there can be no doubt that it is run by persons with honourable intentions. Given the chance, it should be able to complete its stated agenda of ensuring free and fair elections, and cultivating a suitable environment for healthy politics.

Most of us want reforms within the existing political parties so that clean and competent people take centre stage. Many of us dream of a forward-looking and visionary third force in politics. This government has the capacity to deliver, but the real worry is that questions about its associates in uniform might jeopardise the entire operation.

Defenders of Bangladesh, how honourable are your intentions?

The writer is a businessman.

Corruption is a mental disease

FARUQUE HASAN

UNLIMITED greed for money and wealth is a kind of mental disease which causes white collar people to get involved in corruption. A person, whether he is a politician, a bureaucrat, a businessman, an educationist or an intellectual, whose corruption knows no bounds may behave like a normal person in the society; but, in fact, he is mentally sick.

His corruption may not be detected with the naked eye or be proved in the court of law, because of his skill in hiding it; and he may shout to the heavens that he is an honest person because no corruption charges can be proved against him. Still, he is mentally sick.

In case of physical sickness, the sufferer knows he is sick; in case of mental sickness the sufferer does not know that he is sick. Corruption is a malignant disease, and whoever falls in its grip finds his lust for money and wealth becoming ever more insatiable.

The "art" of corruption in Bangladesh has become so subtle that it is very difficult to prove against political leaders of high stature. They smuggle their ill-gotten money out of the country to inflate their foreign bank accounts, keeping their domestic bank accounts as "slim" as possible. There are some foreign banks where anyone

can deposit his/her ill-earned money, hiding his identity.

More than a decade ago I met a person from Switzerland in Brussels. He was a boastful man, introducing himself to me as an adviser to the foreign minister of his country, or something like that. He was whining about corruption in the third-world countries.

I said to him: "Please, get banks of the developed countries like yours to stop opening accounts for political leaders from third world countries; and the corruption in these countries will be reduced by upto fifty percent." He did not like my idea.

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The politicians of Bangladesh, like in other underdeveloped countries, are almost worshipped by the people, as if they were demigods/goddesses. The hand-to-mouth people put all their faith in them, believing that these political leaders will change their fate, will break the chain of their poverty and hardship.

Most of these political leaders pretend to love their people, but when they come to power they don't give a damn about them; and their only goal is to mint money for themselves, for their relatives and cronies.

He (I omit mentioning his name here) is a political leader, more than 60 years old. He has amassed a huge amount of wealth through corruption

during his long political life. He has no child, and his wife has crossed the childbearing age.

The couple often stays in a hospital, as both of them have been suffering from different ailments for years. Still, this gentleman does not spare a single opportunity to earn some more money through corruption, whenever it comes in his way.

Is he not mentally sick, suffering from excessive lust and greed for money? He is extremely rich, and old without any issues, suffering from incurable diseases. Why does he still need more money, and for whom?

A general election for the provincial parliament was held in East Bengal in 1954. (East Bengal became known as East Pakistan in 1956, and as Bangladesh in 1971.) The election was fought between the Pakistan Muslim League and the Jukto (United) Front. In the election campaign Jukto Front brought serious allegations of corruption against the Muslim League leaders, who were in power at that time.

Nurul Amin, the then chief minister of East Bengal and a leader of the Muslim League, started telling people in public meetings: "Please vote for us, as we have been in power for the last few years; and according to the Jukto Front we have made money through corruption misusing our power. So if you elect us again we will work for you,

as we already have enough money, we don't need that any more. But if you elect Jukto Front people, who don't have much money, they will start making money through corruption while in power, so they will not work for your well beings."

The fundamental mistake that Nurul Amin made, about human character, is that the lust for wealth is like drinking seawater, the more one drinks seawater the thirstier he becomes.

In Bangladesh, where 35% of the population live under the poverty line, where it is hard for many people to manage two square meals a day, where thousands of people live inhuman lives in slums, when some political leaders, so loved and respected by the people, come to power, they simply start plundering the country to smuggle money out to foreign countries. They think that to be loved and respected by the people, and to exploit them, is their hereditary right. To them sending the cream gathered by churning the people to foreign bank accounts is a game.

How much is enough? How much money does one need to lead the most luxurious life? 50 crore taka? 100 crore or 200 crore taka? These people have more than that, still they want to plunder more. Who will doubt their mental illness?

A human being may fall physically or

mentally sick at any time. There is no shame in falling sick. Those who have an unbridled desire to get involved in unlimited corruption may secretly call on a psychiatrist to get rid of the mental disease, if they have a little love for their country.

The deep relationship between power and corruption in Bangladesh is responsible for all the dire problems we have been facing till now. Some of these problems are: our failure in eradicating poverty even in 36 years after achieving independence; tinkering now and then with the constitution of the country; making the lives of the general mass hell and, at the same time, sacrificing hundreds of human lives in the name of political movement.

"The goddess of politics" in Bangladesh has become so blood-thirsty that in the last political conflict at least 50 lives had to be sacrificed to appease her for the time being.

Corruption in Bangladesh has reached 150 to 200%. In our country, a hundred crore-taka projects becomes a 250 to 300 crore-taka project. If we can pull or push down the percentage of corruption from the present level to 20/25%, then to achieve an annual economic growth rate to the tune of 12 to 14% will be as easy as anything; and after ten to fifteen years none will be available in the country to receive Zakaat (religious dole money).

Enacting tough laws to free Bangladesh from corruption will not be enough for the purpose; because a big number of honest officials, and the determination to combat corruption on the part of the political leaders in power, will be needed to implement those laws. Where will we get so many of them, and that determination?

So, side by side with enacting tough anti-corruption laws, we need to put the truth to the conscience of the dishonest political leaders that, internationally, it is more prestigious and at the same time more self-satisfying to be a well-to-do prime minister or minister of a rich nation, than to be a fabulously wealthy prime minister or minister of a poor nation. And they should know that corruption is a mental disease, whether corruption charges can be proved or not in the court of law. Let them look into their private mirrors.

We want none but political leaders, elected in a free and fair election, to run our country. Political leaders who run the government have enormous power. By using this power they can transform a poor nation into a solvent nation in five to ten years.

The politician who uses his power for the wellbeing of his nation turns from a simple politician into a statesman. It may work if we beseech our political leaders incessantly, putting our knees on the ground: "You who have uncon-



trollable weakness for money and wealth, please have some compassion for your country and people and reduce your spree for corruption."

We bow to the politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, educationists and

intellectuals, who never succumb to corruption, and keep their heads always high.

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Making the reforms stick

JYOTI RAHMAN

AS the roar of reforms gets stronger, the Election Commission is about to make some sweeping changes in the electoral laws that can have far reaching positive impact in our country. But this is only possible if the reform proposals are actually implemented on the ground rather than just being on paper.

In order for us to do that, we need to get the grass-roots on board with this reform proposal. The Election Commission needs to conduct grass-roots consultation on the proposed reform package it published in its website on April 5, and to this end we need a concerted mass awareness campaign on the necessities of the reforms.

Influential members of the government have noted that if elections are held without major reforms to the process, there is no guarantee that the political impasse of late 2006 will not return.

According to the EC, it is likely to

take about 18 months to implement these reforms. Against this, there are already calls for elections as soon as possible. Are these reforms necessary? Could we do without them? Or, to argue the other side, are these reforms sufficient to avoid another political impasse in the future? Are 18 months necessary, or are they sufficient? Or are the reforms and the proposed time to implement about right?

These questions are already being debated. Suppose the proposed reforms are indeed justified, and suppose that they will really take about 18 months to implement. If this is the case, then the EC needs to communicate it clearly.

This calls for consultation with stakeholders. Such consultation can also improve the reform package, both in terms of its content and implementation.

The EC appears to be aware of this. It started discussions with 60 eminent citizens on April 26. It has also announced that as soon as the ban on indoor politics is lifted, there

will be talks with major political parties -- no reforms will be enacted against the wishes of major parties.

All this is very well, but there is a glaring gap in the EC consultation process: it does not seem to be consulting various grass-roots stakeholders. And these stakeholders are absolutely vital if the reforms are to stick. With their support, the reforms will be successful otherwise they will fail.

These grass-roots stakeholders include teachers, bank workers and clerical and support staff of various government and semi-government agencies at the union, upazila and zila levels. These people are usually appointed as the polling officers during elections.

They, and the law enforcement officers at those levels, are the people who will have to implement the reforms. Surely their views on the proposed reforms need to be taken into account. If they view a particular reform as impractical then that reform will have to be reconsidered.

If the local public servants act as umpires during the election process, then activists and workers of the political parties are the players. These are the people who organise meetings and rallies, knock on voters' doors and generally campaign for the candidates at the constituency level. If the proposed reforms are to succeed, then these political foot soldiers will have to be convinced of their merits. And this can only happen if they are consulted.

In addition to the field-level public servants and political activists, the EC should consult the rural and semi-rural "eminent citizens." In the social context of rural and semi-rural Bangladesh, the views of such non-partisan but politically aware citizens carry a lot of weight. Reforms will be much easier to implement if these citizens are fully on board.

It's important to stress that the election process does not include casting of the votes only. The process runs from the voter list prepa-

ration through the campaigning to possible post-election arbitration and conflict resolution.

The grass-roots stakeholders can play a vital part in ensuring that these parts of the process run smoothly. For example, involving both the local parishad member and their political opponents in the voter list preparation will result in a more accurate voter list. Similarly post election issues can be settled in local polling centre level involving local elders, political activists and government officers.

The mountain did not come to the Prophet; the Prophet went to the mountain. Similarly, the EC should seek out the stakeholders. The EC should hold a series of workshops and seminars at district towns, inviting all administration and law enforcement officers, teachers, bank employees, members of local government bodies, and representatives of local NGOs, media and trade bodies and other interested parties.

Yes, this will be a major logistical

exercise. But it is not entirely unprecedented. Firstly, administration and law enforcement officials usually need to attend election training anyway. Secondly, the newly constituted Anti-Corruption Commission has already started similar meetings at the district level, albeit at a smaller scale.

And who are the intended beneficiaries of these reforms? The answer obviously is, the voters. But how many of the millions of voters can access the proposed reforms at the EC website? Surely there is a need for a concerted awareness campaign.

One possibility is to arrange regular prime time radio and TV broadcasts of the contents and details of the proposed reforms. Public awareness campaigns on family planning by successive governments since the Pakistan days can serve as an example in this regard.

The print media should also play a major role in this campaign. The proposed reforms should be vigor-

ously debated by the opinion makers. But the Commission should begin the process with elaborate special supplements outlining the reforms and their justifications.

Proper grass-roots consultations will mean that the stakeholders and the larger population will be able form their own "informed opinion" on the reforms. As a result, there will be a sense of participation and ownership among the stakeholders. This sense of ownership is very important for the success of the reforms.

As is widely noted, unless political parties reform themselves, it will be very difficult to move beyond the confrontational politics of the past 15 years. If the election reforms are "owned" by the grass-roots stakeholders, reform-minded politicians will have stronger support bases within the parties.

Indeed, a genuine national consensus for reforms is more likely to come from convincing the grass root stakeholders of their merits than through parleys with national

politicians whose track record of agreeing on issues are not all that bright or through essentially anti democratic strong arm tactics.

If the reforms do indeed take as long as 18 months to implement, then there is an even larger imperative to explain to ordinary voters the benefits of and the difficulties in implementing these reforms. Nothing is of more paramount interest than holding a credible election with long-term reforms in place.

In this national interest, it is a responsibility of all to come forward and work in tandem so that we can put a system in place that is practical, acceptable and meaningful towards the long-term health of our democracy. If we want the reform to stick, it is important that we reach out outside our conference rooms towards the people who will directly be impacted by these changes.

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Malaysia's favourite son back in the fray

Anwar Ibrahim -- once Malaysia's deputy prime minister and favourite son before he was arrested in 1998 and jailed following a flawed trial -- is back in the fray. Since his release from prison he's carved out a niche for himself advocating greater dialogue between the Islamic world and the West and pushing for democratic reform inside Malaysia. Now he's on the campaign trail for the opposition Keadilan (People's Justice) party led by his wife, which contested a key by-election last Saturday -- a test of both Anwar's popularity and the government's. Shortly before the vote, Newsweek's Jonathan Kent spoke with Anwar about his agenda at home and abroad.

NEWSWEEK: Why is this election so important?

ANWAR: The government's campaign is being led by the deputy prime minister himself. It is the first time

Keadilan, a multiracial, multi-religious party, (has received) endorsements from the largely (ethnic) Chinese Democratic Action Party on one side and the Islamic party on the other.



Q: It's been a decade since we've seen you out on the stump.

A: Yes, I was resting in a cell in Sungei Buloh prison.

Q: How does it feel to be back?

A: I'm enjoying myself immensely. I've seen this vast positive response, even (from) local supporters of the

ruling party.

Q: At times there seems to be a greater welcome for you abroad. Can you make a comeback?

A: I am here for good. But some (Malaysians) are not even aware of me, because there's a complete blackout in the national media.

Q: What would you do as prime minister?

A: The agenda is very clear. We have incompetent judges, and the integrity of the police is very much in question. The economy is sluggish, partly because of our obsolete economic policies. In 1970 we introduced affirmative action (favoring ethnic Malays). I supported that, but we have to move on. Supporting the poor cannot be (done) on the basis of race.

Q: Some have speculated that you might rejoin the ruling party.

A: The party has lost its ideals. Have you heard anyone (in the party) talking seriously about corruption, the separation of powers or the ideals of the independence fighters? No. What do they talk about? Rushing to get a piece of the cake.

Q: Outside Malaysia you're seen as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West. You can ring up Paul Wolfowitz or speak to conservative Muslims in Pakistan. What's that like?

A: It is tough, but it's precisely what we need. If I take an extreme position condemning Jews or Islamists, then there is no possibility of an exchange. Paul (Wolfowitz) can be my good friend, but if he asks me what to do in Iraq, I say "immediate US withdrawal." That does not make me (his) enemy. My friendship with Al Gore is known. So is my friendship with many Islamists ranging from Egypt to here to Pakistan. Not that I share all their ideals, but if you want to solve serious problems, we have to engage.

Q: How difficult is it to get leaders in Washington and Asia to listen?

A: It is more difficult to get the Washington crowd, particularly the (Bush) administration to appreciate (the need to listen) than the Islamists. When I go to Pakistan and tell the Islamists that America is not monolithic, there are those who are prepared to listen.

Q: And the Bush administration isn't?

A: They think they have all the answers. It's very difficult to get them to appreciate that (Muslim) people are not inherently anti-American.

Q: Why are governments with poor democratic credentials so entrenched in the Islamic world?

A: It's partly due to the connivance of the West. This is an issue that has to be dealt with by these countries, but the international community could use some moral suasion. The bottom line is money. All is tolerated as long as (repressive regimes) can do business.

Q: Does Islam lend itself to democracy?

A: It's a very loaded question. Do you consider an Islamic state to be one controlled by religious scholars? I don't. It is a question of going back to the essence of Islam. Its higher objectives must be spelled out: freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, the sanctity of life and of property and respect for the dignity of men and women. That doesn't seem to be in

contravention of Western ideals.

Q: There seems to be a strong sense of victimhood in the Muslim world. Do you agree?

A: The vast majority of Muslims feel that they're victims of the international order, from Palestine to Iraq to Afghanistan. (But) look at the whole discourse on the war on terror, the whole suspension of civil liberties, the way Muslims are treated at airports (in the West). And then you go back to your own country and there are draconian laws against you if you don't happen to share the views of the government. The repressions abound, and they're condoned by the Western powers. As I said when I went to Pakistan, protest by all means, but (remember that) the sanctity of life and property is a fundamental principle of Sharia (Islamic law).

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