In rethinking its mission, the Awami League needs to reach out to its old constituencies and to seek out new social forces, which have, in recent years, contributed to what is positive in the country. Its old support bases, long abandoned by the Awami League, include the class of small entrepreneurs, who remain neglected by every government, the working class who were always a source of strength for Bangabandhu, but are now an abandoned constituency, and the small farmers who have tripled our food production, but under donor pressure been starved of resources and victimized by policy.

New forces which remain ignored by all parties and demand attention include the youth, most of whom remain undereducated and unprepared for the market so they are now a fertile recruiting ground for criminal gangs and mastaan politics. Bangladesh today has bred a class of creative, honest, non-defaulting, tax paying entrepreneurs who have led our export boom and could provide a new generation of entrepreneurs to accelerate our growth. This class desperately needs a political home which the Awami League can provide. New constituencies are to be found among women of all classes but particularly the micro-credit borrowers and garment workers who have demonstrated their worth to the economy. Similarly, large numbers of workers scattered across the country remain an important resource along with the educated professional classes who need to be better utilized.

If such constituencies are to be mobilized, the Awami League will have to fashion concrete policies and programs which are responsive to the needs of these constituencies and beyond them to the voters. These commitments cannot be perceived as electoral slogans but must be made credible through well-thought out time bound programs. To develop such a forward-looking agenda, the Awami League should initiate its own reform process in consultation with civil society, drawing upon the services of various think tanks and professional organizations such as the Bangladesh Economic Association. To do so the party will have to move beyond its core of party faithful and broaden its reach.

If the Awami League fails to visibly engage itself in such a process of regeneration, can a new third force emerge in response to the hunger for political change? I personally see no real prospect in the next two years for such a force, capable of actually organizing itself and winning an election in 2008, emerging in the political arena. I could be wrong. After all, nature abhors a vacuum and so there will always be some attempt to respond to the popular demand for reform.

Without a third force or credible move for reform in the mainstream political parties which can respond to this universally felt need for change, Bangladesh could move into a period of deep uncertainty. All the effort to structure a free and fair election, eradicate corruption, and overhaul the administration, could all unravel during the post-electoral period without a credible commitment from all contesting parties to sustain these reforms.

This could set up another round of confrontational politics, which will take us back to where we started from at the beginning of this year. They say history repeats itself, first as tragedy then as farce. My fear is that the next phase of tragedy may be too protracted and painful for us to enjoy the farce.

Rehman Sobhan *is Chairman, Editorial Board, Forum.*

Relative economics in marriage

MARRIAGES between close biological relatives, such as first and second cousins, may primarily be the result of economic factors, rather than social, cultural or religious preferences, as has been claimed in the past. In particular, such consanguineous marriages may be closely related to the practice of dowry, according to current research being carried out using data from Bangladesh.

In a paper entitled The Economics of Consanguineous Marriages the authors, Quy Toan Do, Sriya Iyer and Shareen Joshi, point out that two features are commonly observed with regard to marriages in South Asia: marriage celebrations are often associated with monetary transfers between families and consanguineous marriages are widespread in many communities.

Moreover, although consanguineous marriage has been common throughout human history, the negative effects -- such as increased genetic disorders among children and overall decline in health of a population -- has long been known. This prompted the authors to question what the benefits of marrying close relatives might still be in certain societies that would outweigh such effects.

Studying data from 4,364 households in 141 villages in Bangladesh, they discovered certain correlations between the wealth of families, consanguineous marriage and dowries. Their main findings have been that close-kin marriages tend to take place among poorer families, where dowries are smaller or non-existent. As wealth increases, dowries also increase. However, at the upper reaches of wealth, dowries decrease or become non-existent again and incidence of consanguineous marriage increases again.

These results, combined with existing literature, has led the authors to conclude that in order for "contracts" to exist in a "marriage market" some kind of security has to be pledged. As families get wealthier, they are able to secure a husband for their daughter outside the family by offering higher dowries. Among poorer families, marrying a close relative allows the marriage contract to be enforced through family ties without the necessity for paying a high dowry. However, very rich families may not necessarily wish to transfer large amounts of wealth outside the family in the form of dowries, and therefore the practice of consanguineous families is observed again.

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