

Beyond reforms ... towards a functional political process

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SABER H. CHOWDHURY

FOR those who view being engaged in politics as a means to an end -- that being a better future for the country and its people -- these are indeed challenging times. For such people, across the spectrum, who are committed to the vision of a progressive, prosperous and democratic Bangladesh, this is also the appropriate moment to wrest the initiative and, in so doing, be a part of a possible solution in taking the country forward.

The unacceptable alternative

come, necessary and legitimate. Almost all of these reforms that the caretaker government and Election Commission are now advocating were, in fact, put forward by the Awami League-led 14 party alliance as far back as July 2005 and, thereafter, also tabled in Parliament in February 2006. An election, free of violence and the influence of black money, so that the people are really able to choose representatives of their choice, is what we all seek. The Awami League has also, in the interim, raised the issue of state funding of political parties, an idea

the polls thereafter are technically proper and acceptable (I acknowledge that this in itself is a big ask), the question still remains -- will we be able to develop a functional political process thereafter? There is, and has been for a while now, an overwhelming and unexceptional focus on the electoral process itself, but there has hardly been any discourse on what should happen in the period between the elections; I consider this to be equally, if not more, important. Just as having a constitution which allows full and unhindered practice of democracy within a

even at the periphery of the agenda. Parliament too, in this context, understandably wilted and failed to deliver. The boundary lines of state, government and political party simply vanished, resulting in there being no barriers, divisions or differentiation between them. Criticism of the government was thus construed as being anti-state and seditious, and the opposition was persecuted accordingly. Side by side, ruling party activists considered government assets as their personal wealth, as evidenced by the large scale, grass-root level plundering and looting of relief materials ranging from tins to clothing and food. Even if a policy of encouraging democracy within the principal political party actors through voluntary reform initiatives from within and strict enforcement of provisions as may be articulated in Political Party Registration-related legislation were successful, they will not by themselves avoid repetition of a paralysis in the political process as witnessed in the events leading to "one eleven" about five months back. How to make politics work, and have in place a functional process in between elections in a consistent way to facilitate pursuing of a strong development agenda in taking the country forward, is the challenge that we need to rise to. The way forward involves creating a facilitating environment for a functional political process, and in this regard the following three areas merit specific consideration. Too much energy is spent on battling with what each party would like to think happened in the past. History has never been, and cannot be, a matter of wish, imagination or fancy, neither should it be used as a political football for narrow, partisan and selfish motives. South Africa, a country torn by bitter conflicts and divisions, set up in 1995 a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to heal wounds and move forward. Similarly, Germany came to terms with its past through Vergangenheitsbewältigung -- a composite German word that describes the process of dealing with the past (Vergangenheit = past; Bewältigung = management, coming to terms with), which is perhaps best rendered in English as "struggle to come to terms with the past." Our glorious freedom struggle, culminating in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, should be a matter of pride, inspiration, convergence and unity, and not a source of, or

origin point for, divergence, disagreement and disunity. We need to come together as a nation, agree and honour the past and move forward, and for this a reconciliation has to take place. Bangabandhu, as Father of the Nation, and all our national leaders, irrespective of party affiliation, should be duly recognised. It is a matter of shame and deep concern that 36 years on from liberation we have not even been able to agree on a list of freedom fighters, and the issue of who were war criminals, let alone bringing them to justice, has also not been without controversy. A truth and reconciliation initiative in Bangladesh's case should, therefore, be seriously considered to enable us have a closure on such issues once for all. Having done so, we can look to the future, but a forward-looking development and growth agenda will only be realised if and when our dream of the future is mightier than our bitter memories of the past, and this is the second point for consideration. As with India and China in recent times, in Bangladesh too, economics has to take the driver's seat and politics needs to move back and occupy the rear passenger seats. Now is the hour to focus on, and take full advantage of, our political independence, and use it as a stepping-stone for our economic advancement. To do so and attain double-digit growth rates, we need to reach across the political divide and build consensus across the political spectrum on a national agenda -- strengthening and capacity building of institutions, upholding rule of law, human rights, dignity and religious freedom for all, and ensuring a significant improvement in governance. As pointed out by CPD, it is possible to have a two percent increase in growth rates even at existing levels of investment by getting our act together on the governance aspect alone, and if we can manage to win the battle against corruption, a few more percentage points can be added to this. Within the framework of a bipartisan approach, certain sectors ought to be identified and ring-fenced so that, regardless of a change in government, there is a focus and continuity in policies relating to sectors such as national security, local government, health, education, investment, regional connectivity and optimal use of our natural resources. There must be a consensus that the country urgently needs to



move from A to D in terms of growth imperatives, but how we get to that point in terms of strategies and routes can then be alternatives and options that political parties can present to the people to decide. Rather than trying to marginalize the opposition, and even forcing it towards extinction, the government of the day must take it into confidence and, yes, empower it. It has to be given the space and protection to operate and contribute in Parliament and beyond. For instance, making some free airtime available to the opposition parties on Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar would be an effective way to ensure their ownership, participation and stake in the system and, consequently, encourage these parties to engage in the process constructively, rather than disengage from it. The agreement signed in 1998 between the Awami League in government and BNP in opposition, and witnessed by the UNDP, on making Parliament effective, functional and focal point of all activity and initiatives could have been a huge step forward had it been implemented during the tenure of the previous government -- yet another missed opportunity. Hopefully, the next Parliament will see a full and complete implementation of this agreement in letter and spirit, and we will at last have a worthy Parliament. I recall when Narashima Rao was prime minister of India, he had invited the then leader of the opposition, Mr. Vajpayee, to lead the Indian delegation to the UN General Assembly. Why should such a practice be so remote and

distant for us? On the other hand, in Bangladesh we have the instance of the August 21 grenade attacks on the leader of the opposition as well as a number of MPs which was, despite filing of numerous notices, not even allowed to be discussed in our Parliament. When the Geneva based Inter Parliamentary Union tried to take up the issue, the speaker of our Parliament tried his best to dissuade them from doing so! The right to dissent and have a different view point from that of the government is fundamental to democracy, and this should be upheld at all times. In this regard, I have always believed that peaceful, mass-mobilisation oriented programs rather than disrupting hartals should be the order of the day, and besides drawing mass support and appreciation such initiatives also serve as powerful signals. It is interesting to note that the recent changes in three critical national institutions -- Public Service Commission, Election Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission -- have not generated any protests from the political parties, and the individuals appointed thereof have been on the whole acceptable to all. Will this, however, be the case when in future an elected government appoints replacements to these positions upon expiry of their terms? I fear not. However, if an arrangement could be institutionalised wherein a National Committee comprising of the president, prime minister and the leader of the opposition, amongst others, discusses and reviews such potential appointments, then there is some hope. With neither of the major political forces currently in government, this is the most opportune moment to review, discuss and have resolution of some of these pressing issues. Once the framework for a dialogue is in place, other items such as a possible code of conduct for the political parties can be introduced in the agenda and agreed upon. Much, thus, needs and remains to be done. The current election focused reforms agenda by itself will not ensure that a repeat of the political paralysis leading to the current crisis can indeed be avoided in the future. Its success, however, will importantly provide a platform and a basis to take the democratic process forward by forging consensus on national imperatives and restoring some of the lost faith and confidence of the citizens on the political system. Speaking from our respective platforms with one voice on all of these pressing priorities of the national agenda will, I hope, pave the way for a culture of democratic dialogue. Unity of thought will then, hopefully translate into unity of action and, through a participatory and functional political process, ensure Bangladesh's march forward towards a prosperous future. Elections will then be an integral part of a dynamic and functional political process and will, in essence, be merely a means to a broader objective, that of growth and development, rather than being an isolated technical process and an end in itself. Let this be the legacy we leave behind for our next generation. Saber H. Chowdhury is Political Secretary to the President of the Awami League.

Reinventing shame

I would like to propose a long-term project. How can we reinvent a sense of shame -- lojja -- in our national character and in our social life? How can we shame -- in non-legislative, non-judicial ways -- those who recklessly indulge in illegal pursuit of money and power? We must also create alternate, socially driven systems of shaming, embarrassing, mocking, humiliating, isolating, and confronting those nirlojjo who amass wealth illegally at the expense of the people and the nation.

ADNAN MURSHED

THE recent stories of pillaging, racketeering, and bribery in Bangladesh would have inspired the American author, Mario Puzo, if he were alive, to write the grand finale of Godfather right here in Dhaka. Illegal accumulation of wealth by exploiting government offices and by engaging in shady businesses, or using bribery as a clever mechanism to slip away from punishment or to get work done and to expedite business deals, are nothing new in Bangladesh. These tactics have always existed in various forms and shades. Therefore, it is quite easy to see the recent revelations of the ill-gotten wealth of, among others, Lutfuzzaman Babar, Sheikh Selim, and Osman Gani, as another chapter in the Bangladeshi history of plundering

and bribery. But there are radical departures from earlier trends in these exposés of mind-boggling looting of national wealth. As late as the 1990s, the magical denomination for illegal wealth was the lakh (roughly fifteen hundred American dollars at the current market rate): One lakh to a police commissioner to derail a murder case; five lakhs to a government bureaucrat to secure a construction deal, bypassing the lowest bidder; or ten lakhs to buy the party nomination for parliamentary elections. If a bit of cynicism is permitted, these amounts, when converted into dollars, are actually not that spectacular in the global perspective! But now, the grand Bangladeshi denomination for illicit business or transaction has risen to a mind-paralysing height: the crore (or roughly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars),

assuming that the monthly salary of a mid-level government official is in the vicinity of ten-fifteen thousand taka (roughly two hundred dollars). According to media sources, the former state minister, Babar, with the blessing of his Don, Tarique Rahman, originally demanded one hundred crore taka from the tycoon father of an alleged killer in exchange for his (the son's) flight from justice. That is fifteen million US dollars! Forget Bangladesh, this is a stunning bribe even in a super-rich country! As part of a larger deal, three million dollars were delivered to Babar, and the murderer found his refuge in London. Puzo, wherever you are, take notes. The disgraced Chief Conservator of Forests Osman Gani's loot from devouring the forests, and the strategic positioning of his cronies, also pierced

through the gilded ceiling of crores. The chart of lakhs is simply inadequate to map his evil empire that fed on the very forest he was appointed to protect. The enormity of Gani's appetite can only be measured in crores. Crore is hip, lakh is old-fashioned! The next aspect, debatable perhaps, in the crime spree is the sheer psychological detachment of the perpetrators from their criminal acts. The scale of their political or economic exploitation is so massive, and the flow of illegal wealth is so automatic and effortless, that they can barely understand the nature of their illegality. When your cronies, with a few threatening phone calls and macho visits, can generate three million dollars on your behalf, you neither have the time to be morally introspective nor have the desire for it. The easiness of incessant flow of cash can, and will, desensitise you to the crimes that you so nonchalantly commit and the sufferings you perpetuate. Psychoanalysis: One continues the crime, without at all understanding the severe negative effects of that crime, while relishing the bounties the crime produces and systematising the

illegal act as natural right. This is why Babar burst into tears in the court after hearing the order for his second four-day remand. If he had any grasp of reality, he would have expected, even if remotely, his deserved legal troubles which tears could not mitigate. Babar's tears are not the result of his guilty conscience, but of his complete and convenient self-removal from the reality of his tyranny. Same was with Tarique Rahman, whose tears in the court revealed his total inability to foresee the possibility of his end! The slightest fall from their megalomaniacal perch reduces them to crying children. I am sure Osman Gani was also teary-eyed when arrested. Another new trend in the criminal underworld is the complete familial complicity in the plunder. The wife of the corrupt government bureaucrat, the marauding politician, or the crooked businessman is now a protagonist in the crime stories. In classic Bengali films and literature, the unsuspecting wife's ethical advice was the last chance for the corrupt official to redeem himself. Gone are those golden days of naïveté! In fact these days, in many cases none

other than the wife meticulously oversees the nitty-gritty of the criminal syndicate. Osman Gani's wife pulled the strings that held Gani's forest-gobbling empire neatly in place. A large number of shrewd, money-grabbing wives have recently violently shattered the myth of passive housewives on the sideline. They are now master puppeteers themselves, balancing their husbands' puppets and ensuring their show's unchallenged continuation and profitability. The sons and brothers are not to be outdone either. Saifur Rahman's son, Hannan Shah's son, and many other sons are key players in the clandestine money games that haunt Bangladesh. Apocalyptic as it may sound to the dogged optimist, it appears as if criminality has plagued the entire body of Bangladesh. The veins, the blood, and the mind are all polluted. Shafi Sami's recent futile attempt to sideline the CRP's valiant founder, Valerie Taylor, and her fight against paralysis among common folk, bordered on insanity. Just as cancer requires lengthy treatment, Bangladesh's social disease

needs a similar, arduous cleansing process. Simultaneous reform in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the state is a must, so that the basic democratic concept of nobody being above the law is guaranteed. But I would like to propose a long-term project. How can we reinvent a sense of shame -- lojja -- in our national character and in our social life? How can we shame -- in non-legislative, non-judicial ways -- those who recklessly indulge in illegal pursuit of money and power? We must also create alternate, socially driven systems of shaming, embarrassing, mocking, humiliating, isolating, and confronting those nirlojjo who amass wealth illegally at the expense of the people and the nation. The journalists in Bangladesh have taken a great stride toward this goal of banishing the shameless from public life. But the news media alone will not be sufficient for shaming the shameless. In our educational curricula at all levels, in literature, poetry, films, drama, music, photography, design, and all sorts of public fora, we have to be relentless in waging a war against the corrupt, as we

also champion our honest and dedicated heroes. But, more importantly, we also need to buttress our national consciousness with a psychology of shame, not just by throwing it at the corrupt person as a humiliating tactic when his criminal deviance is exposed, but also by internalising it as a self-regulatory impulse. From Freud to modern psychologists, shame has been discussed as a premier component of social management, and a nation's self-civilising process. We all know the classic (alas, rarely experienced these days) Bangla expression for this psychology -- bibeker dangshon, or the sting of the conscience. Ironically, of all the people, it was Osman Gani's hapless mother who epitomised the sting of the conscience. Upon hearing of her son's monumental crime-fest, Gani's ashamed mother uttered: "O mother earth, split apart and let me in!" Dr. Adnan Morshed is Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and Planning, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.