

We wait for the denouement

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

AS startling revelations of corruption, and actions amounting to criminal offence, of former ministers and law makers of both Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are flashed in the front pages of newspapers and on TV screens, we are suddenly and rudely awakened to the reality that these are not merely the shenanigans of a few misguided political leaders of AL and BNP.

In fact, these revelations, coming as they do from the mouths of people who have been very close to the highest leadership of their parties, reveal only an insignificant part of the tale of how both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia had not only misgoverned this country but also destroyed the very soul of this nation of 150 million people over the last sixteen years under the guise of democracy.

All these years they had posed as good Samaritans, as leaders of the oppressed people, and as champions of democracy and development and women empowerment, while the people knew in their hearts that there was not an iota of truth in what they said, and that they were no better than the man they had contemptuously removed from power -- Hussain Mohammad Ershad, the dictator. Curiously enough, they ruled like Ershad did, and lied, and still keep lying, like he did without batting an eyelid.

The entire post-Ershad era, from 1991 to 2006, can be summed up as a tale of how ruthlessly these

two ladies ruled this country, and tore asunder the moral fabric of the nation. Both became supreme leaders of their parties, their credentials being that one was the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the legendary leader and architect of this country, and the other was the widow of General Zia ur Rahman, the valiant freedom fighter who declared our independence on behalf of Bangabandhu, and informed the world of our resolve to fight for liberating the country from Pakistani occupation.

Both promised to give us democracy, root out corruption, and alleviate poverty, but what they left behind after their stints in power is the badly bruised and battered Bangladesh that we see today. Together, they systematically destroyed all democratic institutions, and democratic norms and culture. They looted and plundered state wealth and property for themselves, their families, their party leaders and their cronies.

Whatever Lutfuzzaman Babar, Abdul Jalil, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Abdul Awal Mintoo, Tarique Rahman, Ghiasuddin Mamun and others have confessed to so far is but a tip of the iceberg of the macabre acts of loot and plunder, extortion, kidnapping, rape and murder that the so-called elected governments of these two ladies had indulged in. The full story has not been told. Nor will it ever be, unless these two ladies decide some day to spill the beans themselves, as their minions have done.

Some people say of the two ladies that one is better than the other. To me, they are just two

sides of the same coin if you have followed the pattern of their rule. They most zealously kept in place all those things which Ershad did in his nine years of ignominious rule to undo democracy and foster corruption and crime in this country.

They sat majestically where Ershad used to sit as a dictator, and ruled the country like he did, with utter disdain for democracy and all moral and ethical values. Just to perpetuate their power, they literally vied with one another in politicizing in varying degrees all the national institutions -- the Election Commission (EC), the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the Public Service Commission (PSC), the bureaucracy, the police, and even the judiciary.

They have done the greatest disservice to this nation by politicizing the bureaucracy, the police and the judiciary. It will take years to repair the damage done, and to restore dignity and trust in these institutions. They have demonstrated an unquenchable thirst for power, and an insatiable greed for wealth and property.

As the heads of elected governments, the first thing they did was to allocate important portfolios to those cronies who were the closest and most crooked so that they could foul up things better than others. Then they would increase their own, and those of all other ministers and lawmakers, pay and allowances and perks and privileges, as if they all virtually lived on this subsistence. And this they would do more than once, in one term.

They would have the most luxurious fleet of cars to ride, the largest retinues and, of course, many armed guards in front of their offices and residences -- a sine qua non of power and privilege in an impoverished country. Then would begin the real game -- the grabbing spree.

You grab whatever you can lay your hands on -- government land, the land of a widow or an orphan, houses, flats, ponds, footpaths, and even graveyards. Collect money in whatever way you can, if possible with both hands. Award government contracts and enter into business deals. Give licenses to TV channels, private banks and insurance companies. Procure transport and various electronic gadgets.

It is the money you get through under-hand methods which decides all the deals. Laid-down standards and specifications, the actual user's needs, and price rationale, are not the deciding factors. Then import duty free luxurious cars, sell them to businessmen and industrialists and make quick money practically without any investment. And then, send out party activists and armed thugs to extort money from rich businessmen, shopkeepers, bus terminals, and ferry-ghats.

This is how politics has been criminalized in this country. This is how the nouveau riche have sprouted in Bangladesh, as they have in most other third world countries. These two ladies considered this country to be a plateful of cake, to be nibbled at and finished before others had a

chance to partake of it. They thought that this country was nothing but a personal fief or at best, a private limited company, for the rulers to rule and govern it the way they wished to.

Please do not get me wrong. There is not the slightest intention here to belittle or malign anybody. In fact, this is how these two ladies treated the people and the country. Look at them when they first entered the political arena and now, after they ruled this country. People knew what they had then, decades ago, but they do not know what they have now because there is no transparency and accountability in our system of governance.

Maybe the government intelligence agencies and ACC are privy to what these ladies have in terms of wealth and property. This interim non-elected government is trying to bring about reforms to enforce accountability and transparency in our elected political government system.

If the revelations made by some of our political and social elite, and the indictment of detainees so far, are any guide, then we can safely assume that the assets and properties of the two ladies would be astronomical in value. Till now all we know of them is how elegantly they dressed up, how frequently they undertook trips abroad for pilgrimage and for visiting their sons and daughters, and for treatment and convalescence.

Make no mistake. They are as brazen faced today as they were yesterday. Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia dismiss corruption



charges levelled against their party leaders as false and baseless. What about the 200 million Taka recovered from Babar and deposited in the government treasury? What about over 3 billion Taka siphoned abroad, and recovered later by this government?

If these two ladies are correct, then what Babar and Tareque and Jaill and the rest of the pack have confessed is not true, which ought to lead us to conclude that the report of the ill gotten money recovered from these golden men of BNP variety, and deposited with the government treasury, is false, which most certainly is not the case.

Imagine a minister responsible for upholding the rule of law shel-

tering a murderer and allowing him to flee the country in exchange for a bribe of 200 million Taka. The same minister also confessed to negotiating a 10 million dollar fast-track frequency allocation deal for a telecom company, the money being shared by Khaleda Zia's son Koko and BNP lawmaker Ali Asgar Lobi. And Khaleda Zia dismisses it as rubbish!

Would anyone believe that Khaleda Zia as prime minister had no knowledge of it? About AL leader Wakiluddin admitting that Bashundhara used to pay 25 lac Taka on monthly basis to AL, Sheikh Hasina comes up with the defence that there was nothing wrong in receiving donations like

this. So this is how she would justify receiving bribe in exchange for doing a favour to some businessman or group.

It is a pity that neither of these two ladies has any sense of guilt, or remorse for the myriad wrongs and injustices they inflicted on the people of this country.

Meanwhile, the people of this country wait with bated breath for the day when these two ladies would be asked by the concerned government agency to tell their version of the untold story, or rather, the saga, of their deeds and misdeeds, and account for the same. After all, where there is a beginning there is a denouement as well.

Biman -- does it have a future?

RAFIQUL ISLAM

BIMAN is the flag carrier airline of Bangladesh, and has been in existence for 35 years. For most of these years it has posted a loss. Occasionally, it did make profit, but only marginally. Once Biman's advertisements would proudly proclaim that the world was getting smaller; today it is downsizing its network in a bid for survival, and the caretaker government has decided to make it a Public Limited Company (PLC).

It is a major decision for Biman but, surprisingly, there was muted response in the press and from critics who usually are quite vocal. There can be two explanations for this; they either consider Biman beyond salvation, or the government is not serious and this exercise will not be successful.

In any case, no one felt any interest in the future of Biman. Perhaps they were unable to appreciate, or were not convinced about, how a PLC fully owned by the state was any different from the current status, and how it would turn Biman around. I would humbly request the government to provide details of how they planned to make Biman more efficient and competitive to increase sales and turn a profit.

When one compares Biman with other airlines, the common parameters are the balance sheet, manage-



ment, skill level of the workforce, remuneration, safety record and image. Biman does not score high on any of these, and its image has taken a battering.

All previous attempts to bring about changes did not bear fruit because of resistance from within the organization. Everyone in Biman, starting from the leaders to the union bosses and senior executives, had a partial remedy for Biman's woes, but nothing worthwhile ever materialized.

A previous effort made with World Bank support felt victim to the unions' "know-all attitude" that it would not be in the best interest of

Biman and the country. A case of misplaced patriotism! Several years on, they are older and wiser, but Biman is no better; it has slipped further into debt and crisis.

The recent effort by Biman to downsize its workforce was a courageous step, and the management deserves applause. I hope that this was worked out rationally, and not because of other considerations.

Reduction of flights would make some of the workforce redundant. Rationalization of Biman's destinations and number of flights, in keeping with the size of the current fleet, has to some extent brought discipline in Biman's schedule. Is this

enough? Are these isolated steps, or are they a part of a grand plan?

An airline's biggest asset is its image. It is in the motivation and morale, which are now on the low side. Opinions vary widely about the reasons for this, but all agree that they were never sufficiently addressed.

Motivation without comparative remuneration does not stay at a high level for long. Biman's employees' remuneration, in comparison with other airlines, is fairly low, and as soon as the job becomes permanent, the work force in general lapses into mediocrity. The skill level in Biman is comparable to other established airlines, but some malpractices which adversely affect the performance have developed over the years.

Moreover, airlines all over the world are largely software dependent but Biman has lagged behind, and the flow of information is slow and not always easily accessible to all. The most common complaint about Biman is that potential passengers are told that the flight is full, but after getting on board one finds many seats empty.

Even on a full flight, it is possible to get a seat if you know the right people or the right art. The trade unions of Biman have grown along political lines, and try to influence decisions, postings and promotions. They have also given Biman a bad

image.

Most of Biman's operations are beyond the national boundaries, and a major part of its revenue earnings are from its international operations. The domestic operations form a small part of overall operations. With increasing number of airlines coming to Bangladesh, and with competition increasing, Biman does not enjoy home turf advantage any more.

Passengers have choice, they are increasingly more discerning, and Biman is usually not the first or even the second choice. The quality of service has suffered at all levels, on the ground and in the air. Because Biman has been a losing concern for most of its life, it does not even generate enough interest among the board members, with the exception of a few. They have little time for a full, detailed review of Biman's activities.

The Biman Board takes a lot of decisions, but it has to follow the government rules for major purchases like aircraft and engines. Often, decisions referred to the government linger, and individuals who understand little about airlines and the urgency make these.

The delay is not deliberate, and oftentimes with good intention, but the process is lengthy and costly, and sometimes creates problems later. Biman is a corporation, but that is not enough to make it com-

petitive. It still bears all the trappings of a government controlled entity, which is hardly suitable for an airline.

Here, a lot of delegation of responsibility has to be done, but with delegation comes the possibility of misuse, so there has to be a set of checks and balances. In Biman, these set of checks and balances are not oriented toward maintaining a dynamic business environment. They are bureaucratic in nature, and often discourage initiative. This culture permeates the entire organization.

For Biman to be profitable, there has to be a suitable strategy to compete with other airlines, and an overhauling of the top management. The management must have the freedom to plan and execute and, if Biman has to remain in the public sector, the board members should be carefully chosen so that they are committed and spare enough time to give policy guidelines, oversee the affairs and hold the management accountable.

To be an efficient and dynamic airline, Biman has to reinvent itself. It has to take advantage of IT to create a modern workplace conducive to efficient management and availability of real-time information. A system of accountability and flow of information throughout the organization is crucial for its wellbeing,

and Biman is lacking in this regard.

Ironically, anybody and everybody, whether in Biman or not, has a solution for Biman's problems. Sometimes influential individuals who are late for a flight call up to delay it till their arrival, and people in Biman oblige lest their promotion or posting is affected. The unions have developed political lines and patronage, and this has always done more bad than good.

The total culture at the workplace needs a drastic change. The private sector airlines have profited from Biman's ineptness, and they and the foreign airlines have increased frequencies and cut deep into Biman's market share.

Everybody agrees that something has to be done about Biman. Offloading shares in the local market is an option, but is hardly expected to be a solution as it is unlikely to guarantee an efficient management. Hiring outside management could be a solution if there is strong backing from the government.

As a short-term measure it may succeed, but Biman needs something for the long term. Offloading shares to a reputed airline that would have management control is also an option, but it would be difficult to find interested parties unless a team of well-connected and reputed individuals gets strong backing from the government.

Reforms and restructuring have become a crying need, and Biman today is possibly more receptive to reforms than at any other time in the past. Some may say that it is already late but, hopefully, not too late.

In the current circumstances, this caretaker government is possibly best placed to tackle the issue. They have shown considerable determination, and should now turn their attention to Biman. There are parts of Biman which are profitable, but overall it is suffering loss. Making Biman a public limited company is not going to be easy, and it can only succeed if the caretaker government is serious and committed, and stays long enough to see it through.

What happens after the caretaker government is gone is a question we can leave for later. For now, let us save Biman, once the proud flag bearer of Bangladesh in three continents.

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The new war on Hillary

JONATHAN DARMAN AND MARK HOSENBALL

SOME grudges just don't die. In the 1990s, David Bossie worked tirelessly as an investigator for Rep. Dan Burton's government-reform committee. Burton was a top-echelon antagonist to Bill and Hillary Clinton, leading wide-ranging investigations of Whitewater and campaign finance.

All the digging didn't amount to much: six years after the Clintons left the White House, Burton is a little-known member of the minority party and Hillary Clinton is the front runner to be the Democrats' nominee for president in 2008.

But Bossie is still working away. In recent months, he has returned to investigating the Clintons, this time for a tough documentary scheduled for release in theaters this fall. One of the documentary's key potential audiences: a new generation of voters who don't remember the old Clinton wars.

He points out that someone who is 18 today was "4 years old when the travel-office scandal broke." These young voters, he predicts, will be hungry for Hillary dirt, new and old. "There's an enormous market for Hillary Clinton information," he tells NEWSWEEK.

Other inveterate Hillary hounders agree. R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr., the editor of The

American Spectator who has authored multiple books on what he sees as the Clintons' sins, says there are "active research teams" looking into the New York senator. "They're out there," Tyrrell tells NEWSWEEK. "I get calls all the time."

If Clinton is worried about the new dirt-digging efforts, she isn't showing it. When two much-anticipated biographies dropped into bookstores last week, her campaign dismissed them as "old news" and "cash for rehearsal."

Indeed, while the books provide detailed, often harsh, accounts of Clinton's White House and Senate career, they lack sexy details about Hillary, her husband and their marriage.

For all the charges through the years, none has ever stuck. Arguably the most-investigated woman in contemporary American life moved from tabloid target in the White House to winning a Senate seat in one of the nation's most contentious states. It's her resilience and capacity to survive and thrive against all comers that partly fuels the haters' fury.

But there is some evidence to suggest that even old news can still hurt. The Hillary detractors' image of the candidate -- secretive, controlling and paranoid -- springs from the way she acted while under attack in the '90s. In a Gallup poll released last week, 50 percent

said their opinion of the former First Lady was unfavorable. (Forty-six percent said they had a favorable view.)

The "negative" is unprecedented for a non-incumbent presidential candidate -- neither John Kerry nor Al Gore got such a high unfavorable rating in the Gallup poll at any point in their unsuccessful presidential bids. Clinton's camp notes that other recent polls have not shown unfavorables as high as the Gallup number and says it is confident her favorables will increase as the campaign goes on.

But the real problem many Democratic voters have with Clinton is the sneaking suspicion that with so much of the country against her, she can never win a general election. Clinton's fate may well come down to her ability to deal with a vexing question: what is it about me that so many people don't like?

The answer has eluded both Clinton and her husband throughout their three decades in the arena. They began their national political lives with a miscalculation -- the idea that America was ready for a new kind of empowered, ambitious political spouse who would be "two for the price of one," in Bill's phrase.

The country, however, didn't take to Hillary, especially after she bragged that she'd pursued a

career when she could have "stayed home to bake cookies and have teas."

Installed in Washington, Hillary morphed into a comic-book villain for her detractors -- a man-eating feminist, they claimed, who allegedly threw lamps at her husband, communed psychically with Eleanor Roosevelt and lit a White House Christmas tree adorned with sex toys.

The narrative of depravity -- a tissue of inventions by conserva-

tives -- was often hard to follow. Was she, as they imagined her, a secret lesbian who fostered a West Wing culture of rampant homosexuality? Or was she the duplicitous adulteress who slept with former law partner Vincent Foster, ordered his death and then made it look like a suicide?

Disoriented as they may have been, Hillary horror tales soon became big business on talk radio -- "That's Why the First Lady Is a Tramp" was a Clinton-



era hit from Don Imus. In the 1996 election, a direct-mail company sold a Hillary Haters list with close to 30,000 names to groups advocating conservative causes.

Still, the anti-Hillary industry has never managed to bring down Hillary herself -- in fact, the more they have attacked, the higher she has risen. In the 2000 New York Senate race, her Republican opponent, Rep. Rick Lazio, sent out six-word fund-raising letters: "I am running against Hillary Clinton."

It seemed like a smart strategy -- Hillary's policy positions were largely in sync with Blue New York, but her unfavorable ratings in early Senate polls were sky high. By logging long hours in each of the state's 62 counties, however, Clinton essentially managed to say, "Enough about me," so frequently that New Yorkers -- particularly independent women -- were willing to change the subject. She won with 55 percent of the vote.

Now, Clinton's campaign is working to adapt the New York model for a national audience. Mark Penn, Clinton's chief strategist, says he is confident Clinton's negatives will decrease as voters get to know her for more than just her White House-era caricature. "I take people all the time and say, 'How many of you know where she was born?'" Penn says. "Almost

nobody does."

Following a template they designed in her two Senate races, Clinton's aides have launched teams of women in key early states who approach her skeptics with tailored talking points. First, they underscore that Hillary would be prepared to serve as commander in chief on day one of her presidency.

Next, they talk up her record in the Senate. Then they switch to something personal -- if their target has a child with autism, they underscore Hillary's leadership in the Senate on the issue.

But Clinton's problems go beyond perfecting her personal touch. In polls, she lags significantly with independents, a group that mistrusts establishment candidates. Independents could prove crucial in early-primary states with open contests like California and South Carolina.

In New Hampshire, where independent crossover voters have historically helped fresh-faced candidates upset front runners, Barack Obama could compete with John McCain and Rudy Giuliani for anti-establishment votes. "You're out there trying to create a sense of electability and your negatives are 52 percent," says one Democratic consultant, who asked not to be named questioning Clinton's strengths. "That's a tough case to make."

It may get tougher now that Republicans are tuning back in to the Bill and Hillary show. In recent weeks, McCain, Giuliani and Mitt Romney have each amped up their attacks on Clinton, mindful that nothing riles up the Republican base like Clinton-bashing.

Even Richard Land, the president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Convention, who has decried the lack of socially conservative candidates in the Republican primary field, acknowledges that the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency would "unite social conservatives around a candidate who might not be totally acceptable to them." After 12 divisive years, Hillary may at last be a uniter, though perhaps not the kind she'd imagined.

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