

## Political parties thinking of reforms

Some interesting ideas being floated

Despite the fact that there is no politics in the country today, the most talked about subject happens to be the issue of reforms of politics in Bangladesh, particularly of the political parties. A wave of public opinion, expressed through different media, has unequivocally called for the political parties to bring in changes in the manner in which they were being run, as well as the manner in which they had acquitted themselves in the public eye, which left much to be desired.

And the political parties have taken the cue, as political parties composed of politicians sensitive to public opinion must, and have started to come out with various ideas on how and what reforms are needed within the parties. We would hope that the parties are motivated to reform as a result of inner conviction as much as public opinion. We take this as a positive development and a good sign that the demands for reforms have produced some very good ideas in the minds of the party leadership, in keeping with the need to live up to the changed circumstances, although there are differences within the parties as to the means and mechanism of effecting the changes.

That notwithstanding, we are pleased to note that there is an acknowledgement, in the two major political parties, of the need to bring in more democratisation within. The travails that the two parties are facing currently have been due to the decision making process dependent entirely on the judgment of, primarily, one single individual. The leadership of these parties, we hope, are convinced that there is merit in collective decision making which makes the chances of going wrong less. This is a universal truth that those still unconvinced about must quickly internalise. The cult of personality, which the servile mentality of some of the senior politicians has helped partly in stimulating, must be eschewed; leadership must never be thrust upon but acquired through merit and hard work.

One also sees a very positive disposition in senior party leaders when one gets to hear about doing away with the practice of holding both government and party positions simultaneously. There is plenty of sense in de-linking government responsibility from that of the party, without which both suffer. There is also the need, we feel, for the parties to make their accounts subject to scrutiny and all major donations maintained according to the proper procedure of accounting.

The time is to reform or perish.

## Hamas and Fatah at war

Such a situation bodes ill for Palestine

At this point, the future of a state for Palestinians looks rather hazy. The reason for that is very much obvious. In the last few days, the interneccine battles that Fatah and Hamas have waged against each other have proved conclusively that the struggle for power between the two dominant groups has now reached an explosive stage. The very clear demonstration of armed might that the two sides have engaged in has resulted in the broad Palestinian movement unravelling, with consequences that can only be imagined.

In a broader sense, though, such a situation should have been predictable months ago. With much of the West refusing to recognise the electoral triumph of Hamas at the Palestinian elections (because Hamas was determined, on its part, not to jettison its policy of an obliteration of the state of Israel), conditions soon led to a point where it was the people of Palestine who were put into a state of siege. The economic aid that ought to have flowed to the Palestinian Authority from donors was briskly suspended because of the Hamas triumph. Despite the fact that Hamas gave out signs of a *de facto* recognition of the Israeli state, the doggedness with which the West went after it made it clear that the situation was not about to improve. The line-up against Hamas in a way boosted the morale of many in the defeated Fatah, who saw in the beleaguered state of the government of Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh a chance to reclaim their lost turf. Not even the fact that Hamas agreed to dissolve its administration and go into a government of national unity with Fatah as a partner satisfied the West and Israel. They insisted that they would not deal with the new government unless Hamas was thrown out.

Now that the crisis, precipitated by President Mahmoud Abbas' dismissal of the Haniyeh government, is upon them, Palestinians everywhere will be asking themselves if their long-standing dream of a sovereign state has receded even further. With Hamas in control of Gaza and Fatah trying to run the show in Ramallah, the dream is in a badly fractured state. It just shows how terrible the consequences of undermining a popularly elected government can be.

## Man-induced disasters



ANM NURUL HAQUE

**BY THE NUMBERS**

We had very bitter experiences with our Ministry of Disaster Management, which was utterly helpless in the rescue operation after the collapse of the nine-storied Spectrum Sweater building at Savar in April 2005. It took seven days to finish the rescue work, resulting in the death of many trapped workers. Their inability was again exposed in the fire incident at BSEC building. The country must have enough equipment and trained personnel to handle post-disaster situations.

This disaster, because incessant torrential rains triggered the landslides.

Yes, landslides may sometimes occur purely because of natural causes. But it is not really nature that is to blame for the Chittagong disaster. Some greedy and corrupt people have forcibly invited the catastrophe.

Mindless hill cutting and felling of trees are causing environmental hazards and increasing the incidence of landslides in Chittagong. There is no record of such disastrous landslides in the past decades and centuries. The experts attribute such landslides mainly to widespread hill cutting.

Most of the hills in Chittagong faced rampant cutting until recently. According to the people working with the issue of hill cutting, influential political leaders, truck owners' associations, real estate developers, contractors, brick field owners and local goons used to conduct the hill cutting business through managing the concerned government officials.

The Ministry of Environment and Forest and the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA), in view of widespread destruction of hills in the district, issued a circular in 2005 prohibiting hill cutting.

Since several political bigwigs operated the hill cutting business from behind the scene, no effective measure was taken to stop the practice. Eventually, it put the lives of the people living in the hilly localities in real danger.

It is indeed surprising that there are no laws in the country to deal with hill cutting offences. The hill cutters could be so reckless because the existing hill cutting act 1988 has some ambiguous laws that facilitated their activities.

There are quite a number of cases filed against the hill cutters, but the offenders could not be punished because of legal loopholes. The hill cutting act 1988 should be amended to punish the real culprits behind this catastrophe, and also to stop such suicidal practices.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin

Ahmed sounded a strong warning against illegal hill cutting. Communication and Disaster Management Adviser Major General (Retd) M.A. Matin has directed the local administration to take tougher action against the culprits involved in hill cutting. "If necessary, crush them under steam-rollers with the help of military-led joint forces," said M.A. Matin, firmly blaming the people involved in hill cutting for the causalities.

Unnatural deaths have become a part of life in Bangladesh. There is perhaps no other country where human life is as unsafe in as ours. The people of this country have witnessed increasing number of devastating man-induced disasters, that return with irritable regularity, over the last one and a half decades.

If there are no accidents like fire, or collapse of factory buildings or landslides, then there will be launch disasters or fatal road accidents. Two major launch disasters occurred in a single week in May, 2005, killing over 300 people. About 12000 people lose their lives every year in road accidents in our country. Over 450 garment workers, mostly women and children, died in some 25 fire-related incidents in garment factories since 1990.

It has been learnt that the latest move to formulate a National Disaster Management Plan came after the fire incident in BSEC building at Karwan Bazar in February. The draft plan now awaits approval of the council of advisers.

The caretaker government should take proper steps to formulate the National Disaster Management Plan for apportioning of the responsibilities of different ministries and agencies regarding disaster management.

The government took a five-year project titled, "Comprehensive Disaster Management Project" (CDMP), with December-2008 deadline, to reduce risks of natural calamities, with special focus on creating awareness about the earthquakes. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MDMR) was assigned the task of implementing the project, jointly financed by UNDP and DFID.

We can blame nature's fury for the deaths in natural disasters. But whom should we blame for the deaths in man-induced disasters? We should bring into cognizance the fact that the regular accidents in garment factories, roads, rivers and hills are not mere accidents, as they fall in a totally different category. The owners of garment factories, launches and buses, and the hill-cutters, should be made to realize that such "accidental" death is tantamount to murder.

Unfortunately, the government is yet to formulate any regulatory framework for coordinated disaster management. The government only wakes up just after a disaster occurs, and flounces a few days without any outcome. The government agencies responsible for disaster management have become lethargic in the absence of a disaster management policy.

The government took a five-year project titled, "Comprehensive Disaster Management Project" (CDMP), with December-2008 deadline, to reduce risks of natural calamities, with special focus on creating awareness about the earthquakes. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MDMR) was assigned the task of implementing the project, jointly financed by UNDP and DFID.

We had very bitter experiences with our Ministry of Disaster Management, which was utterly helpless in the rescue operation after the collapse of the nine-storied Spectrum Sweater building at Savar in April 2005. It took seven days to finish the rescue work, resulting in the death of many trapped workers. Their inability was again exposed in the fire incident at BSEC building. The country must have enough equipment and trained personnel to handle post-disaster situations.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## An emaciated Awami League

After 2001 electoral defeat, AL was in such a mess that it could not dare take part in election due in 2007 unless it entered into an alliance with other parties which came to be known as the Grand Alliance. The AL that we see now is an emaciated AL which needs a massive dose of democratisation therapy to make it a healthy political party capable of regaining its lost glory.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

At the 2001 election, AL was the most popular and the largest political party of this country in the sixties and the early seventies, is now virtually tottering under pressure of corruption and various anti-people activities of its leaders including Sheikh Hasina, the party chief. But it is not just because of corruption that the party is in such a mess.

It is largely because of the fact that AL has over the years moved away from its original ideological moorings. It has, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, conveniently shied away from people's fundamental democratic rights, communal harmony, rule of law, and truth and justice, which were the shibboleths of AL when it galvanised the people for independence in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

AL has ceased to be a pro-people party that it used to be under the enlightened leadership of Sheikh Mujib. A party organised at the grass-roots level throughout the length and breadth of the country has lost touch with the people. It has become so not because there is dearth of good and able men and women in the party but because the leadership based purely on politics of dynasty has been thrust upon it most undemocratically. Sheikh Hasina has been at the

helm of AL for three decades now. Leave aside the Gen Ershad era. From 1991 till 2006, AL contested parliamentary election thrice and won only once. In democracy how a political party fares in election is the true measure of the party leadership. And the party leadership resigns quickly after the party has suffered electoral reverse. Despite such colossal reversal, Sheikh Hasina is still the president of AL. This is the democracy the AL chief believes in.

Besides, there is no denying that there has been a steep climb down from Sheikh Mujib to Sheikh Hasina in terms of leadership of AL. Bangabandhu was a natural leader of the masses. He moved from village to village and from house to house to identify himself with their hopes and sufferings. People's sufferings moved him as his very sight and presence inspired people. He wielded power and authority but remained above corruption. He is now a party chief. But it is not just because of corruption that the party is in such a mess.

It is largely because of the fact that AL has over the years moved away from its original ideological moorings. It has, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, conveniently shied away from people's fundamental democratic rights, communal harmony, rule of law, and truth and justice, which were the shibboleths of AL when it galvanised the people for independence in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

AL has ceased to be a pro-people party that it used to be under the enlightened leadership of Sheikh Mujib. A party organised at the grass-roots level throughout the length and breadth of the country has lost touch with the people. It has become so not because there is dearth of good and able men and women in the party but because the leadership based purely on politics of dynasty has been thrust upon it most undemocratically. Sheikh Hasina has been at the

helm of AL for three decades now. Leave aside the Gen Ershad era. From 1991 till 2006, AL contested parliamentary election thrice and won only once. In democracy how a political party fares in election is the true measure of the party leadership. And the party leadership resigns quickly after the party has suffered electoral reverse. Despite such colossal reversal, Sheikh Hasina is still the president of AL. This is the democracy the AL chief believes in.

She has clearly distanced herself from the masses. She seldom moves about among the people and hardly cares to know the village elders and their sufferings. She loves pomp and grandeur. Big and luxurious cars and palatial houses attract her. While Sheikh Hasina

has hardly any leadership qualities, let alone the rare qualities of head and heart and the charisma of her illustrious father, she thinks that being the daughter of the great man who led us to freedom in 1971 alone entitles her to claim the AL leadership and the premiership of this country as well. She is downright haughty and imperious in her behaviour. It is not only the autocratic manner in which she has been running the affairs of AL but also her very poor and inept leadership coupled with her insatiable greed for power and wealth which has brought the party to such a pass.

If you go by the number of seats AL has won in the parliamentary elections since 1991 the graph shows a pathetic continuous downward curve. In 1996 when Sheikh Hasina formed the AL government for the first and last time in the last sixteen years. She succeeded in doing so only with the support of Gen. Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) the symbol of autocracy in this country because AL did not have absolute majority to form government.

She felt no qualms in going to the fallen dictator for his support in the parliament. She induced Anwar Hussain Manju of JP in her cabinet and called it cleverly "okkya motor" (meaning consensus) government. She even asked BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) to join her government. It was most certainly not a

gesture of magnanimity. Most of her critics and detractors and even sympathisers of AL would attribute the waning support of the electorate for AL to Sheikh Hasina's rather imperious and haughty temperament and intemperate words. She very often offends people in authority by remarks unbecoming of her position as a party chief and a former prime minister.

In 1991 election the general mood of the people was by and large in favour of AL until at the last moment it swung away as Sheikh Hasina in her TV and radio address to the nation instead of being humble and appealing to the people for vote spoke and conducted herself as if she had already become the prime minister of Bangladesh. Humility is something abundantly missing in her.

If my memory serves me well, some time towards the end of last AL rule while addressing the people at the national parade square as prime minister she made some very disparaging remarks about Khaleda Zia, then the opposition leader, which left even many sympathisers and supporters of AL ruining it.

Again, when Justice Latifur Rahman was the chief advisor of the caretaker government, she for reasons best known to her made a provocative remark about him, saying that being the chief advisor of a caretaker government was not the equivalent of being the prime minister of an elected government. Of late she has suddenly become a very vocal critic of the present caretaker government as it has hauled up some tainted AL leaders and some more are likely to be caught in the anti-corruption drag-

net. But she and her AL leaders looked most jubilant at the swearing ceremony of this interim government at Bangabhaban. She has accused the government of "wasting time in the name of reforms." Now she has expressed her reservation about the legitimacy of the national budget announced by the government in the absence of a parliament. She said that no tax could be levied on the people without their elected representatives. She also found nothing in the budget to end people's woes.

Clearly, Sheikh Hasina is on a collision course with this military-backed caretaker government, which is committed to holding a credible election before the end of 2008 after the due process of essential reforms and accountability of the political bigwigs involved in plundering and looting and corruption on a monstrous scale has been completed.

Her clear stance against this government is most ill-advised and ill-motivated, as it will certainly not help either her or the AL, but rather will only harden the attitude of this government towards AL insofar as coming down hard on those involved in making personal fortunes by misuse of power and authority is concerned. Besides Sheikh Hasina as AL chief and former prime minister may also face a probe as startling revelations are coming to light through interrogation of detainees now in government custody.

There is a monumental case of abuse and misuse of state power and authority by her because towards the fag end of her AL rule,

she enacted a law called Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act by which she sought to grab the sprawling Ganobhaban Complex, the then prime minister's official residence for her and another house for her sister and to enjoy together with her sister lavish state facilities of personal security, transportation, protocol, etc for as long as they would live, almost like members of a royal family, all at the expense of the state.

Incidentally this act of grabbing the Ganobhaban by Sheikh Hasina on the eve of election perhaps cost AL the 2001 parliamentary election because people soon got disenchanted with her and AL. Although she quickly moved out of the Ganobhaban to her husband's house to allay peoples misgivings, it was of no consequence because by then the damage had already been done.

Sheikh Hasina had a golden opportunity to rebuild AL after the setback it suffered first at the hands of Ziaur Rahman and then Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad. But it was not to be. It is largely because of her poor leadership that a luminary like Dr. Kamal Hossain, a close confidante of Bangabandhu, had to leave AL.

After 2001 electoral defeat, AL was in such a mess that it could not dare take part in election due in 2007 unless it entered into an alliance with other parties which came to be known as the Grand Alliance. The AL that we see now is an emaciated AL which needs a massive dose of democratisation therapy to make it a healthy political party capable of regaining its lost glory.

Brigadier General Shamsuddin Ahmed is a freedom fighter and former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

## The right to rule

Where does Bangladesh stand as a country in this regard? The scenario is lamentable. It is a ravenous brotherhood of convenience among errant politicians, wily businessmen, corrupt officials, thuggish community representatives, pilfering parasites and scavenging lowly scum of the society. Evidently, the trust has been abused, and the degree of abuse leaves little for building enduring hope.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

EVERY nation gets its deserved way of governance, either by choice or by being subjected to it. Bangladesh has settled for representational democracy as a sensible option after it had been traumatised by spasms of madness.

There have been trials and tribulations, and it is presently going through another trial. The goal has, however, not changed. It is to return the country to the elected representatives. But, honestly, the road to it has become labyrinthine, because the politicians who exercise the right to rule stand so reviled.

The situation offers little option. It is either Harry or Henry. Our politi-

cal landscape is overwhelmingly bipartisan in its composition, and the two major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP, are like bees with two queen bees in the centre. Take them out and the structure becomes fragile. Woe to the times!

The charges that have come out against the two ladies look like the forests have started moving. Rationally charges do not make facts unless the judicial process is completed. The charges are however so colossal that at best the forest can turn out to be a bush. But can it turn out into a rose garden? Little hope. Even the bottom line is morally repugnant.

The country, irrespective of political colour, laments over the

not left behind endearing track records. Should we deal with the recent times? Let us begin by asking "who done it", although it has become so boring an exercise. Who brought in the present CTG? Plainly it is the failure of the two alliances, the 14-party alliance and the four-party alliance led by AL and BNP, respectively, to come to terms for making the national polls possible during the constitutionally stipulated period of 90 days. They knowingly imperilled the constitutional option.

The AL led 14-party alliance, by its medieval bellicosity and capricious conduct, forced a breakdown in sensible deliberation. The 4-party alliance led by the BNP subverted the electoral process by its perfidious plans of election engineering, and by pulling the strings from behind and making the president a muddled stooge.

The country was taken hostage by the merchants of terror, and it waited for an apocalyptic showdown with great trepidation. A constitutional breakdown, with unknown implications, was threatening the state.

The country was stabilized by the declaration of the state of emergency. The new CTG came to the rescue of the country. It was a political contest lost, and a national call redeemed. Sanity returned. The supporters of a showdown made a point of owning it as their victory.

For a time the 14-party alliance flaunted it as their own victory, and an ignominious debacle for the 4-party alliance to lament. Its leader even declared that they would grant legitimacy to all the actions and decisions of the CTG. The mood soured soon, when AL leaders were being picked up in the CTG's anti-corruption drive.

It did not take much time for the sour mood to cause a tirade of words, when dark clouds were hovering over the AL leader's return home. In a outburst of anger