

Hasina wants reforms deeper

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politicians, which she dubbed as an attempt to smear her and party's image.

During the hour-long interview, Hasina also talked about the attempts to float new political parties, the caretaker government, the graft charges against her and her future which seems bleaker than ever.

The Daily Star correspondent had to negotiate through a number of security barriers to reach Hasina at her Sudha Sadan residence. At the entrance, he had to face multiple questioning sessions by the law enforcers.

The lounge of her residence that once used to be teeming with party leaders and workers has now virtually become an office of plain-clothesmen. Only a few low-key leaders and personal staff were seen inside the house.

About the 21-point proposal reportedly drafted by the senior party leaders who had hailed her wherever she went in the last 26 years but have kept aloof for the past two months, Hasina smilingly said she does not know who actually has drawn up the proposals.

She added that when indoor politics is prohibited, it would be quite interesting to know who prepared those and how.

"Anyway, I have got the proposals and feel that a number of changes should be made to those," said the AL president with a mix of scorn and resolve in her voice. If one cannot be in the post of party president twice then the same should be applicable to other posts, she added.

"Again, if the party chief cannot become the head of the government then no one—from a presidium member to the general secretary—should be allowed to be in the cabinet. Earlier, a similar system was there when Bangabandhu left his ministerial portfolio and got back to the general secretary's post," she said without a trace of hesitancy.

The former prime minister said one group would run the party and the other would run the government. That's how it all had been in the party constitution. "But we had to amend the constitution as no other political party had such provisions in theirs," said Hasina, a former student leader.

"The BNP constitution gives its party chief the right to head the government. By seeing these, our leaders wanted to change our constitution to adjust to others," she said.

VIEWS ON INTRA-PARTY REFORMS

Hasina said if the ban on politics goes then we will obviously bring reforms in the party. It is time to resume not only the indoor politics but politics in general as lots of time have already gone by.

Reform is a process that calls for councils to be held with leaders and workers from across the country. "The government must allow political activities or else how will we carry out reforms?" she asked.

She said, "I have already collected constitutions of major political parties from various countries and commissioned a team comprising Syed Ashraful Islam, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan, Abdul Mannan Khan, and Dr Dipu Moni, among others to examine those and prepare a draft.

"Usually, we form different committees ahead of every council and they come up with proposals for reforms in the party constitution, manifesto, and the economic policies. Those recommendations are placed before the AL Central Working Committee and implemented depending on the leaders' opinion."

Moreover, she said, reforms are not to be confined to political parties only. It was the AL that had placed detailed proposals for electoral reforms for the first time in the history of Bangladesh.

"The onus is on the caretaker government to implement the 31-point proposal [submitted by the AL] for electoral reforms. We want to see how many of those have been realised.

"If our proposals were executed to the letter, it would obviate the need for further reforms," she said.

About some of her party colleagues meeting without her, she said, "Well, the government should answer to this question. When there's a ban on indoor politics, how come those meetings took place? Isn't it contradictory?"

"I have heard that they meet at luxurious restaurants. I wonder who pays for those."

She argues, "The government says it will not lift the ban soon but at the same time it allows some people room for intrigue and betrayal, and instigate attempts to split the political parties. Aren't these political activities? And don't they expose the double standards that this government applies?"

She added that the law should be allowed to take its own course. The government must not pursue the policy of differential treatment.

ABOUT EFFORTS TOWARDS NEW PARTIES

Asked for her reaction about the subterranean move to float new political parties, she said, "It seems like the intelligence agencies are out to form a new political party by

whatever means it takes. They might use force, torture or entice the politicians into the fold."

Besides, a group of politicians with questionable track records are already there to jump on the bandwagon. Now what about their wealth statements?

"I'm afraid if a new outfit is formed with them the election would surely be rigged. Those who will be in power through a stage-managed election will waste no time in plundering the national wealth."

If becomes that easy to make it to the parliament then how those to be elected shall be held accountable, she questioned.

Queried what she believes has led to the current situation, Hasina said the "unbridled corruption and misrule of the BNP-Jamaat coalition have brought the country to a point where it now risks losing democracy".

"Their lust for power and fortune, and patronage of crime and militancy—all have disgraced the political fraternity. Even those who have long been working to entrench democracy and the rule of law are now being subjected to a wholesale character assassination."

"The corruption charges levelled against me and my fellow partymen are baseless."

"The motive behind filing false cases against us is to belittle the politicians. On the one hand, they are backing a bunch of crooked political leaders but on the other, they are harassing the ones they don't like," observed Hasina.

ON CORRUPTION CHARGES

Sheikh Hasina flatly denies ever having been involved in any corruption. She said the charges brought against her are false. "I have heard that 30 similar cases will be filed against me. They will probably file cases for every development work we have done between 1996 and 2001," she said jokingly.

"If cases are filed for my contribution to the country's development, then one day cases will be filed against the caretaker government as well for everything they are doing now ... cases will be filed for every purchase they are making for civil, military, police or other sectors," said the former premier.

People are being coerced into bringing charges against her, she claims adding that some are being lured into filing extortion cases against her.

"I just don't understand what makes the government take such an attitude towards me. Earlier, when an extortion case was filed to me, I got back to the country. Because I knew it was utterly false and the almighty Allah and the people are with me. I always have a strong confidence in my people and they won't believe the falsehood being spread," she said.

"Why should it be extortion when individuals having allegiance to Awami League contribute funds for running the party?" questioned the AL chief.

It's a bad precedent and it will backfire on those who are doing this, she said adding that no one can say for sure that they won't be charged similarly in future.

"The BNP-Jamaat alliance too failed to heed the lessons of history while in power. Did they ever know that such an irony awaited them?" she asked.

Hasina warned that overdoing is never good for anyone. Those who do excesses always risk sliding into the pit they dig themselves.

"I want to say it loud and clear that filing false cases to harass me and disgrace me and my family in the public eye is not right. Those who [government] are doing this might have to face the similar fate someday," said Hasina, once a student leader.

"I can say unequivocally that I never demanded money from anyone. It's beyond my nature. Even in my childhood I would not ask my mother to buy anything for me," she continued.

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Arafat's home looted

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returned to the streets, as residents ventured out to take stock of the new reality on the ground.

No police could be seen in their headquarters in Gaza City, with only members of Hamas's paramilitary force milling around the building.

The West Bank-based chief of police -- a Fatah loyalist -- banned officers in Gaza from cooperating with Hamas, saying those who did so would be treated as mutineers.

"General Kamal al-Sheikh has ordered all police in the Gaza Strip to cease work and not to cooperate with the interior minister and the sacked government," a statement said.

"All those who disobey these orders will have to assume their responsibilities before the law and will be considered as mutineers who refuse direct orders from their hierarchy."

Another police officer Said Osama, who like his colleagues asked that his full name be withheld, told AFP that he had no intention of working under Hamas.

"I cannot work now with this illegal government. Ezzedine al-Qassam are taking our arms as members of Fatah. But as a police officer, I am under the law and I do not violate the law," he said.

Abu Khalil, a 35-year-old police captain, echoed the sentiment.

"I will not go back to work, no matter what it costs me," he told AFP. "Not after what we have seen in the past few days. We don't trust them, they are killers. I am not Fatah and I am not Hamas. I'm a Palestinian policeman, I am here to protect my people, not kill them."

Over the past few days, offices and stores linked with the Hamas targets across the West Bank have been torched and ransacked across the occupied West Bank.

The assault on parliament was one of a rash attacks on Hamas targets across the West Bank carried out in apparent retaliation for the ransacking of Fatah offices and homes in the Gaza Strip since the Islamists seized the territory on Thursday night.

Militants of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades destroyed offices at an Islamic school, a cultural centre, charities, local television and local radio in the city of Nablus, witnesses and Hamas said.

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