

Six months of caretaker government

Some bright spots, but the real test is timely elections

THE caretaker administration headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed completes six months in office today. The time is therefore right to make an assessment of how it has performed during this period. Where the Bangladesh case takes on a particularity is in the critical nature of the issues the Fakhruddin government has had to deal with since it took charge in January.

The purposeful strides made towards recasting such vital state institutions as the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Election Commission and the Public Service Commission have certainly earned the appreciation of the nation. Efforts have also been made to re-energise the University Grants Commission. In general, the caretaker government has succeeded in convincing people that an impartial, non-partisan administration is at work. Nevertheless, where governance is concerned, apart from taking the opinion of the Law Commission vis-à-vis a possible expansion of the council of advisers, no tangible step has been taken in this respect.

To be sure, there have been quite a few stumbles, as in the move to prevent a political leader from returning home and evicting hawkers from public places without thoughts being given to their rehabilitation. But those blunders were quickly sought to be corrected through a stepping back, somewhat to the relief of the country. By far the biggest positive impact of the last six months has been felt in the anti-corruption drive. But the same cannot truly be said of the economy, which continues to cause headaches not only to the administration but also to citizens. On the one hand, the price situation in the market continues to worry the poor and middle classes despite a package of measures taken. On the other, a tough stance through a streamlining of businesses has generated a pronounced degree of apprehension among the trading community. The law adviser has himself acknowledged the worrying state of investment in the country.

The Election Commission has in these months made little headway, save for a pilot project in Sreepur, in getting down to the job of preparing a credible voter list. Indeed, it is an area that ought to have been the foremost priority for the EC and the government as a whole. Political party reforms as well as electoral reforms could not be taken forward by the EC owing to a suspension of indoor political activities. The suspended animation in which the EC finds itself is a sign that the objectives the nation looked forward to being attained now appears to have stalled. In the coming days, the government should therefore focus on a lifting of the ban on indoor politics, a preparation of a voter list and, overall, a roadmap outlining the steps to be taken toward holding elections by the end of the year 2008 as promised.

Manoranjan's release

Social safety net needed for the poor

THE release of Manoranjan Roy, the 85-year old man from Nilphamari, who was jailed for failing to pay back a small amount of agricultural loan, certainly assuaged the feeling of discomfort that people had when they heard about the agony that the octogenarian had been subjected to. We are happy to learn that the army chief touched by the plight of the man himself paid the money that made the court set Manoranjan free. We praise the army chief for the initiative he took.

Obviously, it was a case of the law taking its course and Manoranjan had indeed been found on the wrong side of the law for not having paid back the loan. But a deeper look into the wretchedness of this poor man's existence would reveal that he was not a willful defaulter; rather a mere victim of tragic circumstances which were beyond his control. The man committed the 'sin' of spending the money he had taken from Krishi Bank to buy cattlehead on his wife's treatment. It was a sin that perhaps couldn't be compared with the huge number of legally and morally untenable cases of defaulters failing to repay thousands of crores of taka taken as industrial loans. We don't object to the strict enforcement of the law; rather we endorse it, but justice must be tempered with mercy in appropriate cases. Obviously, we are talking about the poor farmers and self-employed women who have a very good record of paying back loans, despite the grinding poverty that they have to grapple with almost round the year. They certainly do not deserve to be included in the same category as the loan defaulters responsible for emptying bank coffers in the name of setting up industries.

Manoranjan's plight left a deep impression on our collective psyche as it once more raised a pertinent question: is the law unduly harsh on the poor? There is, of course, no way to encourage the default culture, but there should be some sort of social safety net for people like Manoranjan who, unfortunately, form the bulk of the population in rural Bangladesh.

History is not a patchwork of compromises



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

A nation content to have its history trifled with is one that is low on self-esteem. Men who see little reason to respect individuals for their contributions to the making of history, their own contributions and not a bit more nor less, and instead blur everything in their attempts to make everyone happy, only help the growth of festering sores on the national body politic. It is time to disregard them.

not to be a puzzle. When you think back on the long, concerted story of the growth of Bengali nationalism, you realise only too well that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the man behind it all. Deny it and you deny your own place in the sun.

But what Qureshi and his friends have now done in their wisdom is to offer the suggestion that the images of six men, among whom happens to be the Father of the Nation, should be displayed in government offices throughout the country. The sentiment is certainly well taken. The problem, though, lies with our collective understanding of history. Or theirs.

Again, we will not argue the case for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman being the founding father of the country, for it is a place he has already earned despite the reservations some elements may have on the question. To argue again and again that Mujib is the single most important individual in the growth and sustenance of the Bengali nationalist movement would be to state, repeatedly, the obvious. To suggest, however, that there are other men who must be permitted to share that glory with him runs counter to political morality.

The new party Qureshi and his

associates plan to launch at the end of this year will quite conceivably propagate the idea of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, General Ziaur Rahman and General M.A.G. Osmany sharing the pinnacle of history with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. That would be a fallacy, for reasons we have cited over the years, for reasons that we still need to uphold in the times to be. Take the matter of Suhrawardy's contribution to our history. He was one of the foremost politicians in the movement for Pakistan back in the 1940s.

Suhrawardy's role in the communal riots of 1946 has, despite all the admiration some people have regularly showered on him for his political sagacity, remained open to question. And do not forget that his insistence, post-1956, that Bengalis had come by ninety eight percent autonomy in the state of Pakistan clearly spoke of his devotion to the cause of the state Mohammad Ali Jinnah forked out of a colonised India in 1947.

To suggest, therefore, that Suhrawardy is a Bengali icon would not only be to undermine the flow of history but would also do deep disservice to a man who remained steadfast to his own

political principles all his life. His loyalty to Pakistan was total.

If Suhrawardy cannot find a place beside Bangabandhu in Bangladesh's history, A.K. Fazlul Huq can only be placed in his own unique category. There was the thoroughness of everything Bengali in Sher-e-Bangla. But we will be shooting arrows at his memory once we begin telling ourselves that he had a hand in the making of a free Bangladesh.

Huq moved the Pakistan Resolution in 1940; and when he took charge as chief minister of East Bengal in 1954, at the head of a Jugto Front administration, he did so not as a Bengali nationalist but as part of a team engaged in the noble, necessary job of sending the communal Muslim League dispensation packing.

Huq later became Pakistan's interior minister, before taking charge as governor of East Pakistan. Nothing in his entire career suggests that he dreamed of a sovereign Bangladesh supplanting East Pakistan someday. Must it be our job to give him a place he did not work for, and would surely not have wanted? To convince ourselves that Huq was a forerunner of Bengali political freedom would be launching a grave assault on his political

beliefs.

But let us move on. A good deal has been made of Bhashani's role in the making of Bangladesh. There certainly were fireworks in his personality. When he told us, three days before the general elections of December 1970, that East Pakistan should declare itself an independent country, quite a few people felt exuberance re-igniting their spirits.

A very bad flaw in the compromise formula worked out by Qureshi and his band of politicians -- and they all have walked out of the Awami League, the BNP and the Jatiyo Party -- is that it ignores absolutely the pivotal role played in the liberation of Bangladesh by the Mujibnagar provisional government.

When, therefore, these future leaders of a future political party suggest that Osmany and Zia share the limelight with Bangabandhu in the national hall of fame, they perhaps do not realise that there is a kind of bankruptcy in upholding people who simply happened to function under the moral and political authority of men greater than they.

If you have no place for Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, M. Mansur Ali and A.H.M. Quamruzzaman in your assessment of national history, everything else you do is rendered meaningless. There is no need any more for any discussion, none at all.

A nation content to have its history trifled with is one that is low on self-esteem. Men who see little reason to respect individuals for their contributions to the making of history, their own contributions and not a bit more nor less, and instead blur everything in their attempts to make everyone happy, only help the growth of festering sores on the national body politic. It is time to disregard them.

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The *bhodroloke* revolution and its discontents

One hopes that the advisors and their supporters do not take this *bhodroloke* packaging seriously, that is, it is only ideological wrapping or rhetoric. But some people will definitely take this packaging seriously as the ideological basis of the government. And an elitist ideological packaging like this will inevitably draw strong opposition.

ASIF YOUSUF and JYOTI RAHMAN

Abhodroloke revolution is said to have taken place in Bangladesh. At least that is how the events of January 11 were advertised to an international audience by the foreign affairs advisor Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury at the Australian National University on June 13.

Dr. Chowdhury started his talk, titled "Evolving Challenges for Bangladesh in South Asia," with the history of Bengal and South Asia. He noted the 19th century Bengal renaissance and the rise of the *bhodroloke* class.

He noted the intellectual accomplishments of the *bhodroloke* from Tagore to Dr. Yunus. Then he stated that the current government is the result of today's *bhodroloke* class -- composed of professionals and academics, the large NGO sector, and an army that is thoroughly imbued with the "UN values" -- asserting its power to save the nation from imminent collapse after an extended period of political impasse.

What happened on January 11 is a lot more complicated than the simplified picture put forward by the foreign advisor. But that simple picture by itself is highly important. Politics is manipulation of symbols, and in politics, as in marketing, packaging and image matter.

What is so worrying about the *bhodroloke* ideological package?

Let's start with the definition of the *bhodroloke*. Dr. Chowdhury quoted J.H. Broomfield, an American academic, for his definition of the term. Broomfield discussed the *bhodroloke* in his 1968 book titled "Elite conflict in a plural society: twentieth-century Bengal." His study spanned the first half of the last century, focusing on the 1910s and the 1920s. Here is how he depicted the *bhodroloke*:

"...a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a

pride in its language, its literate culture, and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure..."

Broomfield's thesis was that the Calcutta-based, predominantly Hindu, *bhodrolokes* were opposed to democracy in pre-partition Bengal, and this opposition to majority rule contributed greatly to Muslim separatism and partition.

Whatever the intellectual accomplishments of individual *bhodrolokes* were, the *bhodroloke* class was portrayed as an anti-democratic force in Broomfield's narrative. Was Dr. Chowdhury aware of the irony in choosing the intellectual roots of his government?

Therefore, while it is true that the *bhodrolokes* were seen as high achieving, benign elite who brought welcome innovations and reforms to Bengal, it is also true that they were simultaneously perceived as beneficiaries of colonialism, a much-despised enterprise precisely because of its exclusion, racism, and dehumanization of the majority.

Indeed, these evils of colonial-

ism are highlighted in the schools of Bangladesh and passed down the generations through socialization, thus raising serious questions about the effectiveness of the advisor's choice of packaging.

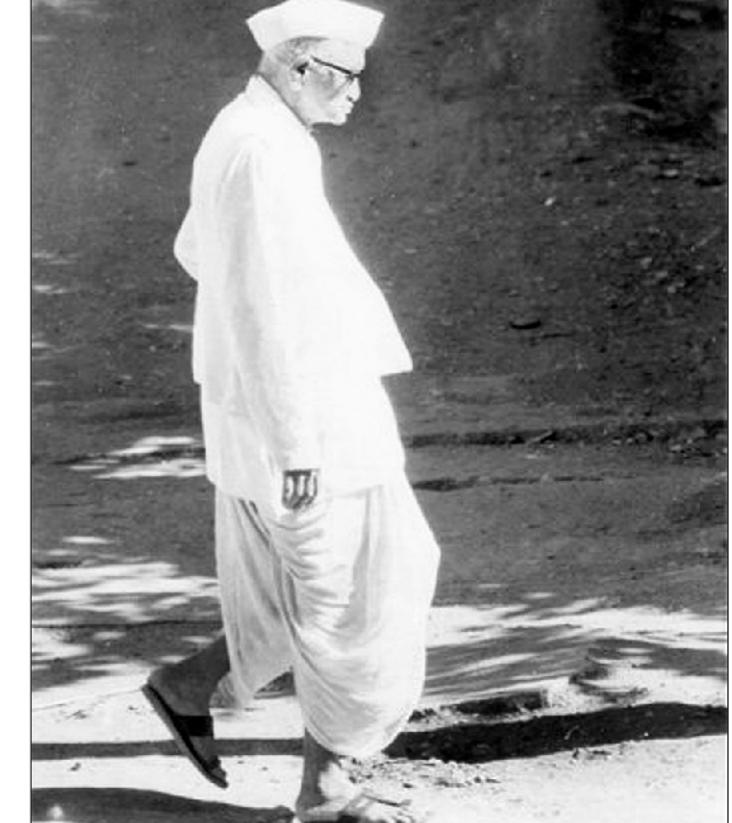
One hopes that the advisors and their supporters do not take this *bhodroloke* packaging seriously, that is, it is only ideological wrapping or rhetoric. But some people will definitely take this packaging seriously as the ideological basis of the government. And an elitist ideological packaging like this will inevitably draw strong opposition.

Charges of neo-colonialism and cultural inauthenticity will be leveled. What's worse, opposing forces will not need to prove to the populace the worth of their policies. Rather, they will simply have to prove that they themselves are not "elite," or that they are "culturally authentic."

What form might this opposition take?

"Nationalists" will question the government's loyalties to the nation. Populists will question its "popular mandate." Marxists will trace the government's links to the international capitalist system. And Islam-inspired politicians will question the government's cultural roots.

In other words, the *bhodroloke* packaging will have made the government an easy target for all, with justifications readily found in the historical memory of the Bangladeshi nation. It is, thus, highly ironic that the



advisor delved back into our history for this analogy.

If the government does actually take this package seriously, then we should indeed be very worried. Elitist politics of the top-down variety not only leads to bad governments, but more importantly, it could lead to populist backlashes that produce equally bad -- if not worse -- govern-

ments, since succeeding regimes have popular mandates but few institutions where the information flows from the bottom to the top. That is, we feel, a good description of the kind of governments we had for the last 16 years.

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Pensioning off the politicians

NO NONSENSE

An optimal age for politicians is being talked about in India and nearly all other democracies of the world. However, setting an age limit for politicians would be hard to implement for the obvious reason that politicians in all nations have one common trait -- it is that they rarely vote to circumscribe their own self interest.

the army is raised and sustained by the tax payer's money, as are the police, BDR, Rab, and the civil servants. Should the country then reserve quota for other retired officials in the parliament and ministerial portfolios of the government? My immediate reaction was: This man and those in his age group must retire from politics before their diminished faculties taint any future policy recommendations.

If a politician has to spend three consecutive months in Singapore (e.g. Amir Hossain Amu) for medical treatment what good will he be in law making and governance of the country? Awami League's Abdul Jalil has been suffering from multiple

health-related complications, and announced retirement from politics while in confinement. Should aging politicians wait for the situation that Jalil is now confronted with before they retire?

I believe that a country should be under the leadership of young, qualified, and competent people rather than that of aging and ideologically bankrupt career politicians. Why? For five reasons:

- Most people may not be able to work as effectively as they do during their 30s to their 50s. We should not forget that life expectancy in Bangladesh is less than 60 years.
- Placing younger politicians in responsible party committees
- (e.g. the standing committee), would help inspire and empower future leaders.
- Having compulsory retirement will facilitate the injection of new ideas. Without age limits, however arbitrary, politicians will keep doing what they were doing without admitting that their time is over.
- Any disability or chronic ill health is an automatic case for discharge from the armed forces, no matter how good he/she is. Shouldn't such a policy be applicable for politicians, given that their schedules are no less arduous than those kept by other professionals?
- Since every public office has a

mandatory retirement age of 57, why should politicians be any exception? They are just as vulnerable to age-related mental degeneration and other debilitating illnesses as any one else.

Hasina's proposed age limit of 60

years seems a reasonable, albeit arbitrary, cut-off point. But this might create a barrier for contesting elections by retired public servants. The current retirement age of 57 for civil and military personnel, plus the Election Commission's proposed three years probationary period for political orientation before qualifying to contest in elections, makes the age of 60 years unacceptable.

However, the cut-off age for contesting in national elections could be somewhere between 60 and 65 years. According to this proposition, no political party should nominate any candidate when he/she crosses 65. With a five year term in the parliament, winning election at 65 means that the lawmaker would have to serve in the parliament until age

70 -- too old for many of the reasons listed above, but should be an acceptable compromise.

It is the law of nature that after a certain age we begin experiencing a diminution of our cognitive abilities and intellectual agility. Politicians of wisdom, experience, and good health beyond age 65 can still contribute to their party and the country through their advice and guidance.

In a June 26 piece, "Polling Young Adults on a President's Age," in New York Times Political Blogging, Megan Thee asked: "What's the optimum age for the US president?" A survey conducted by The New York Times and CBS News with MTV revealed that the answer depends on who is asked.

According to a poll of those aged 17-29, it was found that young respondents prefer a young president. They, as a group, viewed the presidency as an office best represented by someone (relatively) young. 44% of those polled preferred a president in his/her 40s, 33% responded 50s, and 14% considered 30s. Only 5% said 60s and

nearly all other democracies of the world. However, setting an age limit for politicians would be hard to implement for the obvious reason that politicians in all nations have one common trait -- it is that they rarely vote to circumscribe their own self interest.

As we're witnessing in Bangladesh, this class of people is mostly privilege seeking, and, by extension, the most corrupt. The longer we keep them in politics the more they will indulge their appetite for wrongdoing. Unfortunately, some of the politicians and public officials indicted for criminal misconduct may not even live long enough to serve out their jail sentences, if found guilty.

Politicians don't have the probity to retire voluntary from the glamour and comfort they become accustomed to, unless circumstances compel them. All political parties, therefore, should trash out a cut off age for contesting in national elections.

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