

Paradigm shift or are we missing something?

S. I. ZAMAN

THIS piece is not intended as a criticism of the present CTG. Certainly, this CTG has done a smashing job of salvaging the country from utter ruin -- managed to do what no other government (elected or otherwise) thus far could even begin to contemplate doing -- this government has without a shred of doubt begun a new phase in the socio-political culture of this country. Nevertheless, some developments thus far have managed to raise eyebrows:

- Why was Tarique Rahman provided with a division, as he does not qualify under any category?
- What legal "loophole" has prompted the political arch-crooks, who are languishing in jails, to make a petition to the government to allow them to travel abroad for their treatment?
- And, indeed, why does the government need to mull over it? The petition should get dismissed by default. There's no precedent, in any civilised democracy, of allowing arch-criminals (who are facing justice) to leave country on health issue, however compelling it is!
- Why are the two leaders (AL and BNP) still enjoying the homely comfort and the latitude (as

extended by the government) despite a catalogue of grave allegations staring in their face? This is becoming counter-productive to the government. One does not need to delve into archives of law and political sciences to appreciate the adage "no one is above the law." Indeed, it is enshrined in constitutions of any civilised sovereign nation. Sadly, Bangladesh society has failed comprehensively to rise above the class cognizant and elitist mind-set (a vile legacy of colonialism), which are the very causes of all depravity and regression (read corruption) in our socio-political structures. It is appalling that Tareque Rahman should receive "special" treatment when it comes to "division" in jail? The man has ruthlessly devoured public money and national assets like a plague of locusts. This man is no better than the other criminals (small time or big time) who are now languishing in jails all over the country -- at least; the other thieves (compulsive or not) didn't carry out their vile crimes under the shadow of some benign social status. He neither held any public office nor any elected office -- he simply made millions and millions of dollars by extortion, in league with his other equally felonious buddies by simply

conducting a campaign of terror and intimidation under the very shadow of his mother, the ex-PM. Had it not been for the crimes of Tarique et al, thousands of crores of taka would now be well utilised for some worthwhile national cause. DIG (Prisons) Major Siddique told The Daily Star (March 13): "We did not provide division facilities to Tarique as he does not qualify under any category to get the facilities." However, today, the authority finds now in their infinite wisdom that this criminal deserves a higher division befitting his "social standing." What social standing? This notorious criminal, who made a career out of stealing crores of taka from public fund, can have only one social standing that which belongs in the filth of gutters and cesspool of any society. Could this be a paradigm shift for the government's position? Without a shred of doubt, the people of this country have invested a lot in this government -- the people are anxiously waiting to see an end to the tyranny, which is better known as thievery by virtue of democracy. This government was supposed to uphold the principle that no one is above the law; however, they have made it abundantly clear that the criminal Tarique still ranks among the higher echelon of our society.



What compelling findings prompted this shift in posture, no one would ever know! Also, the former ministers and some top brass who are now languishing in jail on charges of corruptions and extortion are beginning to get a taste of the "heat" of their jail.

And it was only a matter of time before they cook up a pitiable ploy to get away with their crimes and to get away from the mess they are in. Lately, S.Q. Chowdhury et al have made an application to the CTG for allowing them to travel abroad for their treatment, because the local

health care is deemed to be unreliable and unworthy of their stature! But why such disdainful attitude towards the very health care system they themselves neglected in their 16 years of tenure? Didn't these same leaders (if we are not amnesia) use to scream (like a broken

record) at the top of their voice at every political rally, what great achievements they had brought about in all sectors! How much Bangladesh is progressing! How the people are so happy and grateful for bringing such fictitious prosperity in their life! If the government succumbs to their ill-design and allows them to travel abroad, then I am afraid these criminals are as good as having got away with their crimes. Let's not forget, these criminals have amassed a phenomenal illegitimate wealth (in terms of cash and kind) most of which are stashed away safely in several countries. Not only will the government be unable to bring them back in Bangladesh to face justice, but rest assured these criminals would try every sneaky and vile method to stall their return, and, moreover, they would trump up government opinion in the host country to discredit Bangladesh government. So if the government does yield to their so-called request, then this would be another total blunder and a slap on the face of the people. The longer the two leaders (AL and BNP chairpersons) are kept in the seemingly comfortable positions the worse shape the so-called reform process would take. They are becoming the very bottlenecks in a permanent, healthy and a feasible reform in the parties. Ironically, these leaders are clutching on the very aspects such as "grass-roots level supporters," "council members," "working committee," etc which were conveniently neglected when they were in power. Isn't it high time we shunned this putrid culture of always giving leeway to our societal former elites even when they are languishing in jail on criminal charges? How many trillions of cusecs of water need to flow along Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna before we change our mindset for good? How many more political disasters, mayhems and devastations do the people of this nation need to endure before the government wakes up? How much more the people of this country have to endure a life full of sham and drudgery? When will the politicians (most of whom are inept, short-sighted, and plunderers of public money) let go of their bite on people's welfare? And indeed, how many billions of taka (from public fund) these so called "representatives of the people" need to devour before they choke and wither away into extinction?

S. I. Zaman is a university professor .

Morality in politics and society

FARUQUE HASAN

THE security of the people of a country depends more on the morality of the people who run the government than on its law and the constitution. If the country is governed by immoral people, its laws and the constitution turn into a toothless tiger; and the people fall victims to insecurity. This security does not only mean the security of life; it includes the security of leading a day-to-day normal life, the security of work, the security of the freedom of expression, etc. All these together may be called human security. The people in power are there to implement the law. So if these people lack morality the misuse of law makes the security of the citizen fragile, because no law is fool-proof in itself and cannot prevent misuse by its enforcers. The morality of the law enforcers may restrain them from misusing the law. A law enforcer who lacks morality may destroy, by misusing the law, the peace of an innocent citizen; and may even snatch away a few years from his life. The secret court of morality is within a person, in the core of his heart. In that court of morality, a person himself is the accuser and the accused; he himself is the

prosecution as well as the defense lawyer; and at the same time, he is the judge. In this court, the law is the universal moral code of conduct, and the punishment is the sting of one's own conscience. If morality has no room in a person, then he/she loses his/her conscience. A person lacking conscience is like a beast, no matter how smartly he or she behaves. Due to the lack of morality in many political leaders in Bangladesh, notorious gangsters and out and out corrupt people have become the mainstay of our politics. Now "famous" gangsters and highly corrupt people contest in our national and local elections, and they get elected. When someone in this country becomes a gangster of high stature, he amasses a huge amount of black money; he starts to think that he is eligible to become an honourable member of parliament. When someone possesses these two "noble" qualities, he thinks that it is shameful of the nation not to elect him as MP. As politics has turned into an extremely lucrative business in Bangladesh, gangsters and corrupt people are in a mad rush to join it. For a long time the gangsters have been riding happily on our politics. As a result, the politics-

addicted people of Bangladesh cannot think of politics without them. By building up a strong law and order maintaining force imbued with morality, the political party running the government may easily get rid of its dependence on gangsters and party cadres to stay in power. At present, Bangladesh has one policeman for every 1,300 people. According to the United Nations, there should be one policeman for every 500 people. The police to people ratio in the UK is 1:430, in the US, 1:410, and in Malaysia, 1:283. There is no alternative to a strong law and order maintaining force for providing security to the people. The police are the friends of the citizens, and if they (the police) are used as a repressive force by the politicians in power, it is the politicians' fault, and the police are not to blame. The faith in religion takes roots in the mind during childhood, so it does not usually waver while a person grows up. In the same way, if morality is implanted in the core of a person's mind during his childhood or student life, the possibility of its faltering during his later life is reduced greatly. We have to introduce morality as a subject to be taught at all levels in our educational institutions. In politics sans morality, let alone the caretaker government, even if

the angels come down from heaven to conduct the elections, it will not be free and fair. If morality reigns over politics, free and fair elections can be held under a party government; a caretaker government will not be needed for that purpose. Without infusing morality into our politics, all the political reforms we are now talking about will go in vain. To make the country socially habitable we need to install in the country, through a drastic reform of our mentality, the rule of law replacing the rule of person(s). In Bangladesh, a big number of "election engineers" is always available to rig the election results on behalf of the big political parties. These immoral people always remain absorbed in the thought of making money or getting some undue advantages by being in or around the power when their party wins the elections. Voter ID card may play a great role in stopping election engineering. It seems, at this moment, that we are going to get the voter ID card. Perhaps research has already been started on how to frustrate, through adopting a new state-of-the-art method of election engineering, the effectiveness of ID card in holding free and fair elections in the future. Corruption has an iron grip all over our society. Except for a few,

we all indulge in corruption; we shout against corruption; and we all want that except me and my friends and relatives, and my dear political leaders, all the corrupt persons must be severely punished. If punishment can be ensured for all the corrupt people, friends and foes included, the fear of punishment will act as the panacea against corruption. Due to lack of morality we could not make the elections free and fair, but we have been able to make them extremely expensive. The candidates go to the Election Commission office with a huge procession, beating drums and chanting slogans, just to file their nomination papers, as if they were going in a bridal procession. They spend a lot of money only to arrange the procession to the Election Commission office; let alone the price they pay to buy the party nomination from some immoral leaders of the parties, and the money they spend to run the election campaign. We have laid the path for our elected representatives to indulge in corruption to get back the money, with "interest," that they had spent for the elections. To make elections inexpensive we must understand that they are not festivals, but a solemn duty to the state.

Politicians are to play the leading role in the politics of a country. If national interest loses ground to the affection for the children of the politicians, or patriotism loses its appeal to their greed for wealth, then the people lose their security; and the country will fall gradually deeper into a bottomless hole. If the "party cadre" system can be eradicated from politics, and corruption can be reduced from 100/150 per cent to 10/15 per cent; then after fifteen years nobody will be available in Bangladesh to receive dole money. The people of Bangladesh are among the most intelligent people of the world; we are not supposed to lag behind other nations. Only if we can use this high level of intelligence, not for bad purposes, but to build a country based on morality, then the people of this country will enjoy all sorts of security; and the country will become habitable for us and for the future generations. To leave behind a civilised country for the coming generations is our moral duty and obligation.

Faruque Hasan is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

July 14 and the French Revolution

M. MUFAKHARUL ISLAM

EVERY year since 1790, July 14 has been celebrated in France as the National Day. Given the extraordinary importance attached to this day, it will be worth recalling what really happened on that date and indicate why the event is considered so significant. The ground for the French Revolution of 1789 had been under preparation for several decades, and the actual drama unfolded with the transformation of the feudal parliament of France (the Estate General) into the National Assembly in the last week of June. By the first week of July, the stage seemed set for introduction of fundamental reforms in different spheres of life. But before the National Assembly could proceed with the task of reconstruction it faced a challenge from King Louis XVI. Early in July, he ordered gradual transfer of the royal troops from the eastern frontier to the vicinity of Paris and Versailles, with the obvious intention of using them in case the National Assembly proved too revolutionary. Moreover, there was widespread rumour that foreign invasion in favour of the Bourbon monarch was imminent. The revolution, it seemed, was going to be nipped in the bud. At this critical moment the Parisian populace (the sans-culottes) -- the artisans, shopkeepers, small merchants, domestic servants, vagabonds and industrial labour -- took to the streets on July 12. Soon, the processions of demonstrators reached the Boulevards, raised barricades, pillaged the grain stores, plundered the house of the police chief and broke into the debtors' prisons. As the municipal administration collapsed the next day electors from Paris appointed a permanent com-

mittee (the Commune) to look after the administration of the capital city and set up a militia (the National Guards). To arm themselves, the insurgents took 32000 guns from the Invalides on the day after (July 14) and surged to the east end of Paris, where stood the fortress and the prison of Bastille built in the eleventh century by William the Conqueror. Although, since the accession of Louis XVI, the Bastille no longer harboured political prisoners (there were only seven on July 14) it was still regarded as the symbol of monarchical despotism. However, the primary motive of the insurgents was to appropriate its arms and ammunition for use in the defense of the National Assembly. After a fierce fight, in which the French Guards and the National Guards took part, the Bastille surrendered. Its contents were scattered to the winds and every stone of the building itself was torn down. But the victory was achieved at a huge price -- the insurgents lost 98 men and 75 were wounded. As against this, less than ten perished on the other side. Meanwhile, the provincial towns soon witnessed similar developments. The Paris revolution had even greater impact in the rural areas, which were already in ferment. The peasants attacked the monasteries and the establishments of the members of the nobility, and burned manorial rolls and records of feudal obligations. The royal administration ceased to function. Why did the Parisian populace take to the streets? Firstly, there was acute food crisis due to crop failure in 1788, and prices increased sharply, reaching the highest point in the middle of July. Consequently, there were food riots in Paris and elsewhere in the

country in the early months of 1789. In particular, the sans-culottes resented the dismissal of Necker who was planning to import food grains and distribute them at affordable price. Secondly, as the populace was convinced that the city, surrounded by royal troops and brigands, would first be bombarded from Montmartre and the Bastille and then pillaged, it was worried about security. Thirdly, it was not only economic distress and panic situation, which drove the Parisian populace to the streets; they felt instinctively that their own interests and those of the National Assembly were the same. Because, in the revolutionary situation in 1789, they dreamt of a better future. As pointed out by socialist historian, Georges Lefevre, this vision united the common men and women with the other groups belonging to the Third Estate, and they became a dynamic source of revolutionary idealism. The Fall of Bastille, and the events that followed in other parts of the country were such that even the king did not fail to perceive their meaning. He instantly withdrew the troops, recalled Necker, visited Paris, recognised the new government of Paris, and confirmed the appointment of Lafayette as the Commander of the National Guards. The Bastille had always been looked upon as a symbol of Bourbon despotism. Now its fall was taken to mean the end of absolute monarchy in France. The Patriots (members of the Patriotic party formed in the early days of the Revolution) dated their letters from July 14 as "the first day of the first year of liberty." However, its significance goes far deeper than this. It provoked, or rather strengthened, a series of mini-revolutions throughout France, and effective power passed from the supporters



of the Old Regime (the king and the aristocracy) to the Patriots. The National Assembly followed up this victory of the sans-culottes by passing, on August 11, a legislation, which abolished special privileges of the clergy and nobility. At about the same time, it issued a document under the title: "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen," which announced the principles of equality, popular sovereignty, freedom of association,

religious tolerance, and the sanctity of private property. Now it seemed as though radical reform was going to proceed without further interruption. But the king decided to strike again. Under the excessive influence of his wife Marie Antoinette and goaded by his advisers, he brought in royal troops early in October to take action against the Deputies and their allies -- the Parisian populace. The latter was still starving, and

they stepped in for the second time. On October 5, the starving women (and some males dressed as women) of Paris, armed with sticks and clubs, marched to Versailles. The next day the king and the queen were compelled to head the procession back to Paris. From then on the king became a prisoner in the hands of the revolutionaries. Thus, the October days completed the work of July 14, and made Paris the center of the revolution. The fall of the Bastille and march of the women saved the Revolution. However, the former event was obviously considered more important, and on July 14, 1790, there was a huge celebration on the occasion of its first anniversary. Some 50,000 delegates from different parts of the country (including 14,000 National Guardsmen), the members of National Assembly, the king and the queen, vast multitude of Parisians, 200 priests and 1200 musicians, took oath of supreme loyalty and devotion to the nation. At this time, and thereafter, it became fashionable for every city and village throughout France to erect an altar to the fatherland, with the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" engraved upon it, and conduct patriotic rites in front of it. This was the beginning of the annual celebration, which continues even today. True, the state that emerged from the first revolution and the whole revolutionary era (1789-99) was, for all practical purposes, a bourgeoisie state, and the common men and women, including the Parisian populace, gained very little. They were even denied the right to vote. But that is a much longer story.

M. Mufakharul Islam is a teacher of History, Dhaka University.

Reforms: A citizen's view

MANZOOR AHMED

REFORM is in the air. The hesitant dribblets about political reforms, originating initially from the civil society after the fateful 1/11, have been picked up with gusto by politicians of all hues. Leaders of the interim government and the armed forces as well as intellectuals and ordinary citizens have a view about it. It has become a deluge of words that is liable to submerge necessary consideration of what is real reform and what may be a mere façade and false promises. Let's get some facts straight. Politicians from the two principal parties began to talk about reforms only when they were placed under great pressure for reform from public opinion. A more potent pressure on them was the expressed intention of the caretaker government to change the rules of the political game. It is becoming evident that the rules and conditions which the Election Commission would put in place for public representation might make many individual politicians, and even political parties, ineligible for election unless the organisations shape up. A citizen cannot but wonder if reforms under nobody's pressure and reforms only through the party constitution and through council meeting, etc and such declaration of loyalty to procedures by most politicians is not patent political posturing. After all, if the constitution and the councils of the parties functioned, they and the country would not be in the present mess. The top honchos of the parties bent the party rules at will to their own benefit. And are not many of the council members and "grassroots workers" actually local henchmen of the party bosses and members of parliament? A citizen cannot but ask what assurance there is that the reform promises will not face the same fate of the broken election promises and manifestos of both the major parties? Especially the reform promises of the politicians who are pushing the interim government very hard to stage the election promptly and let them return to their accustomed role without too much of a respite? An ordinary citizen wonders who the "people" are, when politicians and pundits invoke the name of the people to pronounce that "people want the parliamentary election within the shortest possible time and a return to democracy." A return to what we had in the name of democracy before 1/11! The ordinary citizen does know in his/her guts that the present interregnum is almost too good to be true. Who could have imagined six months ago that the mighty and powerful who saw the state as their

personal fiefdom would be behind bars in droves, hiding as fugitives from the law enforcers, or abjectly pleading forgiveness for their "mistakes"? The citizen knows that the present ad hoc dispensation cannot by definition be a permanent order. The citizen applauds many government actions of past six months which were not carried out in decades. Examples: starting the process of separation of judiciary and the executive, putting able and honourable people in statutory institutions -- the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Election Commission, and the Public Service Commission, ridding public service of partisan loyalty, and making the police somewhat more cognizant of their public duties (much more to be done about this). The ordinary citizen also senses that there have been false steps by the interim rulers. The overzealous move to evict poor slum dwellers, continuation of the habit of extra-legal killing by law enforcers (though at a reduced level), not exercising sufficient care about some ACC appointments (and about the plan to form local committees), not going after Jamaat politicians in the anti-criminality drive (what's the mystery?), prevarication about fertiliser supply to farmers (too reminiscent of past practices), failure to curb prices of essentials, not yet demolishing the Rangs building (will it remain standing as a supreme icon of venality?) -- are a few cases in point. The ordinary citizen is caught between a rock and a hard place. He/she knows that the interregnum has to come to an end at some point, not too far in the future, and political and institutional reforms have to happen, including probably substantial constitutional changes eventually. But the reforms are not worth anything unless they bring about change in political norms, culture and behaviour pattern. The citizen is apprehensive that haste and rhetoric will not get us there and that it cannot be left to the politicians' own devices. Too much is at stake. The pressure from the citizenry and the interim government has to be kept on for the politicians to prove at every step that they would keep their words this time. The citizen wants that political parties make their reform an open process for all citizens to see, hear and participate in it. The initiatives of the government for reform and change of other institutions of governance also should be carried out with the same kind of openness and participation.

The write is Director of BRAC University Institute of Educational Development. The above are his personal views.