

Exit strategies

Rehman Sobhan ponders some lessons from history for the caretaker government and its backers

THE exit strategy for the caretaker government (CTG) may turn out to be its most challenging task because the full agenda of the forces behind such a government have yet to be made explicit. In exploring the options of the CTG and its backers it may be well to take some lessons from the entry and exit of previous militarised regimes in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

If we look back at the history of military interventions in Pakistan/Bangladesh, all of these have followed a common path and all have ended badly. The special feature of the latest such venture in Bangladesh is so far unique and thus holds the promise that they may end up standing by their commitment to the people of Bangladesh. The preceding military regimes all came into public life promising to clean up politics and eradicate corruption but ended up embracing the very vices which they sought to eliminate from public life. This reversal of fortunes was inherent in their act of self-betrayal and should be heeded as a lesson for all the current players in Bangladesh's unfolding political drama.

The present intervention by the

armed forces retains several distinguishing features. It has so far not come in behind a martial law decree but within the framework of the Constitution, though with the passage of time this framework is being severely stretched. Because this intervention has remained within the Constitution, the armed forces have not had to present a visible face. Nor has the institutional head of the armed forces proclaimed a personal mission to rule the country. So far the armed force have remained committed to help the CTG to hold a free and fair general election and to then withdraw.

However, as the tenure of the CTG lengthens and its reach increasingly intrudes into the political area due to the actions of its backers, the exit strategy for the armed forces is becoming increasingly problematic. At the end of 2008 there is no reason why a free and fair election cannot be held, given the credibility of the CTG and the Election Commission as well as the time and resources invested in the electoral process.

The goal of the CTG, which is presumably underwritten by the armed forces, is to eradicate corruption and to prevent such corrupt elements from contesting the elections. These goals are widely

shared but are not necessarily the same. Ensuring that few corrupt people contest elections in December 2008 is entirely feasible, given the determination of the EC, the firm actions of the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the full support of the CTG. Eradicating corruption, is, however, a systemic issue which demands that the regime elected to power in December 2008 shares this vision and remains committed to sustain the mission of the CTG. Such a systemic commitment will depend, in considerable measure, on who is elected to power in 2008 and the institutional safeguards put in place by the CTG which can be built into the system no matter who is elected. Building such safeguards is a challenge for the CTG and also to the ingenuity of its advisors in civil society. But however clearly crafted be these interventions by the CTG, it will require another five years of political support by a freely elected government to consolidate such reforms.

It is this problem of sustaining the reform process which provides the real challenge to the exit strategy of the armed forces at the end of 2008. No doubt much hope had been invested in a person such as

Muhammad Yunus, to build a new political party wedded to ended corruption and institutionalising good governance. Now that Yunus has withdrawn from the political arena, some new political formations are surfacing (though it is not clear if they enjoy any extra-political patronage). It is here that the armed forces will really have to take account of the lessons from the experience of their predecessors in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The principal lesson for our armed forces is to avoid, at all costs, the task of fabricating or even sponsoring a political party or force made up of the same unelectable political figures. This involvement proved the undoing of Ayub, Yahya, Ziaul Haq, Pervez Musharraf, Ziaur Rahman, and Ershad. To depend on elements who cannot politically sustain themselves and can only be elected through patronage from the cantonment will take Bangladesh down the same road of corruption and malgovernance which proved the undoing of previous military-backed regimes. Such an involvement would not only erode the institutional credibility of the armed forces but compromise their future participation in international peace-

keeping operations.

There is thus no alternative for the CTG and their backers but to let the political process in Bangladesh take its own course. This means that our major political parties must be given the freedom to reform themselves. Whether this opportunity will be frustrated by the ongoing presence of the two netris is not for me to say. The parties themselves have to work this out. Attempts by the CTG to somehow eliminate the netris by incarcerating them is likely to become counter-productive and could indeed compromise the credibility of the "reformers" within their respective parties.

In this context, the recent arrest of Sheikh Hasina has already put the "reformers" in the Awami League on the defensive. This is not to argue that the netris should enjoy immunity for any wrong-doing. If there are genuine cases of corruption which can be established against the netris then let the evidence be produced up front and validated in a court of law. It would obviously not be to the advantage of either party to be led by leaders whose integrity is open to public question. But if little

hard evidence can be generated and cases have to be fabricated against the netris so that they have to be ousted from their leadership through some extra-legal measures, then the netris will continue to retain their authority in the party whatever may be their formal status or geographical location, whether in a sub-jail in Dhaka or in exile in Miami. One need only witness the political resilience enjoyed by both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in spite of each having demonstrated their corruption and malgovernance over two successive regimes. Today, both leaders continue to call the shots in their respective parties from their exile abroad and one day hope to once again lead their country.

If the two netris can neither be ousted from effective leadership of their parties or are unwilling to bring about meaningful reform in their parties, then the only credible option is to look to the emergence of a third political force. But as we have observed, such a force cannot be fabricated inside or outside the cantonment because this will condemn Bangladesh to move back on the same cycle of fraudulent democracy and malgovernance which



originated under Ayub in Pakistan and was continued by Ziaur Rahman and Ershad in Bangladesh. It is these synthetic exercises in party formation which have corrupted the political culture of both Pakistan and Bangladesh and made it all the more difficult to build a sustainable democratic system.

If a third political force is to emerge to challenge the hegemony of the two political parties, with or without their netris, it must emerge from the political soil of Bangladesh and win a free and fair election in December 2008. All that can be ensured by the CTG and their backers is that in the December 2008 election

both money and muscle power, the staple of the old political order, will be completely neutralised. If a third party cannot survive in such a genuinely competitive political market place then we will have to take our chances with whatever forces will be elected to power. This may leave us with an uncertain and possibly dangerous future but that is the price we must continue to pay, if we hope to preserve a democratic system. This may hardly be worse than the Pakistan model which led to the disintegration of the country and may fragment it even further.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Editorial Board, Forum.

What should have been in the budget

We need to focus on jobs and leave the rest in the hands of the people, argues K. Siddique-e-Rabbani

POVERTY alleviation needs enhancement of the purchasing power of the masses, and that needs mass-employment generation. This simply cannot happen through direct government initiated programs like earth cutting for road and food for work, or through grants or through setting up of a few large industries with foreign investment, as suggested in our national budget.

Every year, about 3 million new individuals join the work force in Bangladesh. The sheer dimension of the problem is beyond the realm of any direct action or program of the government, and those in policy-making need to understand and appreciate this fact well.

While making policies, we tend



to think of the masses only as pairs of hands -- cheap labour to be

exploited -- but we fail to appreciate the fact that each of them is an individual human being, having an innovative brain, who can find his/her way out even from a deep crisis, if we do not impose man-made obstacles deliberately or inadvertently.

The government machinery, however brilliant it may be, can never match the brilliance of the millions of people. One should also appreciate that people are ready to face many challenges with their ingenuity; they can surmount many obstacles, but any obstacle coming in the form of a government policy, or obstacles created by its corrupt administrators, are simply insurmountable for them. This is particularly so since we still have not been able to come out of a

top-down system of government administration.

Poverty alleviation and mass employment can work for the millions of people only when the brain and the hands of each individual are allowed to blossom in a free and fair environment, and this should have been the basis of the policies in the budget which is called pro-poor. Unfortunately, it has not been that way, neither was it ever in the past.

No cost

As mentioned above, poverty alleviation can only come from mass employment, and that can come from two major sectors -- agriculture and small industry -- in both of which the people can exercise their ingenuity and skills.

So the policies to look for in the budget are those that help creation of a suitable environment for enhancing the spontaneous activities of people in these two sectors.

Such a policy demands very little, almost nothing, from the government exchequer in the short term. The long-term requirements are education, research, and training of the people, which are already in place. Therefore, in the immediate time frame, such policies demand only some inhibition-free vision (free from vested interest groups -- local and international), and brainstorming on the part of the policymakers, and a stroke of a pen, nothing much.

Because of some favourable policies in the field of agriculture,

and new technologies offered by the local agriculture scientists, our intelligent farmers could feed a population that has doubled in the last 30 years. Moreover, they achieved this success with age-old tools, and even with inadequate and irregular supply of necessary inputs like seed, fertiliser, electricity and/or diesel for irrigation, etc. by the government. Although much more needs to be done in this sector, the other sector mentioned above is a complete tragedy, and is a classic example not only of government failure but also of the government itself posing as the greatest obstacle.

Dr. K. Siddique-e-Rabbani is Professor of Physics, Dhaka University, and Member, National SME Taskforce.

A cloud of silence in Bangla Town

Naeem Mohaiemen journeys to the heart of the Bombay Bangladeshi community

BOMBAY. Mumbai. Contested name, conflicted ethnography. Some friends (Indian leftists) still hold on to the old name, a solitary act of defiance against soft Hindutva.

Bombay, "Maximum city" that leaves me craving, by comparison, the "cleaner" air of Dhaka. It was towards the end of the BJP's horrific tenure (their shock defeat still a pipe dream for Indian progressives), and I was visiting a friend who was in Bombay writing his novel. After days of bemoaning the specter of militant Shiv Sena workers, I decided to explore the town.

Bombay's Bangla Town was on my radar. I had been hearing about floating Bengali populations. Some called them Bangali, some said Bangladeshi. Invisible, unwanted, and yet essential to the city's smooth functioning. Same as migrants anywhere.

At Raey railway station, I started asking for Bangali-para. A few shop inquiries, and I was sent down a road with hundreds of shanty shacks. The men were all away at work -- women and the jobless sprawled on roadside mats. Also visible were barber shops, where work kept them near home. Tomato, begun, cauliflower, chilis and deformed miniature potatoes in symmetric rows on a blue sheet. A stack of

fish fry on a plate: glistening with oil. It looked like it was being prepared for a restaurant, but the lady firmly and sternly informed me she was cooking it for mahalla people. In one corner, a floppy yellow object was being dipped repeatedly into boiling water, it looked like fish but it was chicken skin. On another sheet, a stack of dried, smelly, shutki fish.

Fish everywhere, the trail was getting warmer.

In between cooking areas, girls crouched on the ground, washing themselves with minimal soap and even more minimal disrobing. On more blue sheets, a man was rubbing his head affectionately on a baby's stomach. A crazy jumble of shacks. One-two-three-four, all on top of each other.

When I first approach people, the conversation that breaks off is in Bangla. But when I ask questions, the replies are always in Hindi. No one admits to being Bangali. Dr Choudhary is a Bangali name, the only doctor in the area. But his tiny shop is closed. There are only a few other shops where I can try my search. Trail growing cold again. I step into the last barbershop on the row.

The man sitting in the chair has a thinly shaved pencil moustache and black kohl around his eyes.

Naeem Mohaiemen is a Forum contributor.

Where Deshantori ends, Phiriye Ano Bangladesh begins

Mridul Chowdhury reflects upon making the film

ONE boat, 42 lives; 17 dead, 25 waiting to die -- they have been floating on the sea for about 10 days without food or water. One looks at another as potential "food" and wonders which part of a dead-body may be easier to swallow, while another uses his last breath to look for something sharp enough to cut up a dead-body.

This was the experience that a group of young Bangladeshis had to go through as they undertook an illegal journey in early 2005 to reach Spain. They trailed through the Sahara Desert -- sometimes by a jeep, sometimes on foot -- with hardly enough to eat or drink, and always afraid of being shot at by border patrols. After barely surviving the desert, and spending weeks in jails in horrendous conditions, the group had to take a small rubber boat to cross the mighty

Mediterranean Sea. The boat's engine stopped after a few hours and they were stranded on the boat for about 10 days until the Algerian authorities rescued them. Some survived to tell the heart-wrenching story of the entire journey -- the inhuman suffering in having to drink one's own urine, the pain of watching a brother or a friend slowly starve to death, and the horror of making the cruel choice between death and eating up body parts of a dead friend.

The making

It was in March 2006 that we started interviewing the survivors of that harrowing journey. What unfolded was a picture that we did not quite expect -- almost none of the 26 people who went on that journey came from families suffering abject poverty. Most had TV in their houses and many had other family mem-

bers sending money from abroad; two even came from a middle class family with own apartment in the heart of Dhaka. Clearly poverty was not a major factor behind these people taking such life-and-death risks in trying to emigrate to a developed country. But then, what was?

Our quest to find the answer to this is what forms the underlying basis of Deshantori. In the process of making the film, we roamed across the nation interviewing the youth from various walks of life asking their views on Bangladesh's future, their possible role in it, and their reasons for wanting to migrate so desperately. What we found was a deep-rooted frustration caused by the endemic injustice that in their minds was almost a permanent phenomenon. Widespread corruption, extortion by politicians and their allies, unpunished crimes, armed politics in university campuses -- these are

only parts of why they felt that they do not see any future in Bangladesh. One interviewee summarised the widespread psyche of many young people in Bangladesh: "With my qualifications, I cannot do anything worthwhile in Bangladesh; if I can go abroad, I know I can."

Even those who came from relatively well-off families and had the ability to gather some decent amount of money did not seem to have the confidence to use it for any investment in the country. Rabiul, one of the survivors of the journey, had borrowed a substantial sum of money from his relatives. He said during the interview: "If I were to ask my relatives money for starting a business in Bangladesh, none of them would give me money, not even my parents. If I tell them that I will use the money to go abroad, only then will they give me money." We found



that the thought that "Bangladesh is not a country worth living in if there is a way out" is quite deeply embedded in the psyche of much of the young generation.

However, that was not all that

we found.

Mridul Chowdhury is currently a graduate student at Harvard University. Updates on upcoming Deshantori screenings can be obtained from: www.deshantori.com.

Let's get political

It is time for the NRB community to flex its political muscle, suggests Asif Saleh

WITH the expatriates getting direct voting rights for the next election, the time is ripe for them to exert more direct influence in policy making. Now that they can have a say on who gets to run for office in their own local constituencies, it will be a good chance for people to get involved on more hands on local issues. The key impediment in this case has been lack of information flow. While we are now getting up to the news on the national scene via internet and the electronic media, it is more or less impossible to get news on the local level for people who want to be more involved. A more fundamental question to ask is whether someone who has decided to migrate from their home constituency would have had enough engagement with the community to run for office to represent them.

As evidenced from



Bangladeshis forming their region-oriented Bangladesh

organisations in the foreign land, their appetite for getting involved

with local issues is limitless. They have been working to help build schools, mosques and hospitals in their villages. However, to change politics as we know it, there is no better way than to get directly involved. Expatriates who have lived under matured democracies and who have followed the democratic practices in the foreign land can lead by example by planting new ideas in Bangladesh's political scene by getting involved in politics. For that, however, a key logistical impediment remains in place as Bangladesh still bars dual passport holders to run for office. In this era of global migration, such discriminatory rules are counter-productive indeed.

For those who are not ready to get directly involved, the best way still is to get involved with the change makers in the local community and empowering them and partnering with them via the

expatriate organisations. At the end of the day, expatriates have the geographical and financial independence which gives them a lot of leverage in pushing through their ideas.

Hopefully, after years of aimless bickering, NRBs will be able to follow the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) example of contributing in key issues by becoming powerful and cohesive stakeholders. Until that happens, the global conversation that is now taking place between Bangladeshis worldwide on national issues through media outlets and internet is bound to open up new doors of opportunities and help shed the negative label that we have been associating with being political in Bangladesh.

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