

Elephant in the room

S. I. ZAMAN

ADMITTEDLY, the task that lay ahead for the CTG in the post 1/11 was not an easy one. The messianic and evangelical zeal with which the present government went about cleaning up the "garbage" that accumulated over the last 16 years was indeed refreshing to see -- people from all strata of society welcomed it like a breath of fresh air.

However, there have been some questionable moves, which inevitably invite doubts as to where exactly this government is heading.

- Indoor politics is banned, is it not? And yet the newly formed Progressive Democratic Party gets launched (perhaps unofficially) in full view on national TV. The party bigwigs (who are mostly the renegades of the other major parties) are going about (business as usual) with their usual press conferences and dialogues. Sadly, CTG is seemingly turning a blind eye to

this phenomenon.

- Be that as it may, we haven't as yet found anything new in their party visions; in fact they haven't been as yet forthcoming with new ideas or new radically far-reaching policies which might perhaps get Bangladesh on the road to sustainable economic and indeed political progress. It seems as though they have formed a new "football club" with a new name and a new "governing body," and this new club doesn't at all seem any better than the other existing "football clubs" which are already feeling the heat of the ACC.
- A fair number of BNP high profiles (including Begum Zia's son) are right now languishing in jail or in police custody awaiting trial. The charges are grave. And even Begum Zia's other son was implicated, arrested and charged, and yet for reasons beyond our comprehension, he was released. However, the charges against him still stand.



AMRUL RAJIV

Whilst the charges are staring him in the face, how does a felon get to stay at large in cushy homey surroundings?

- Recently, it has come to light that our former PM Begum Zia has a considerable sum of "black money" (and "black" is black).

And let's not pretend that our former PM has been busy naively stashing up these funds at the time, while the people and the nation were going through a dire condition. Is it not a shame for us as a nation or indeed for her? And she was elected to run

the country? And now she wants to "whiten" those illegal funds? Rest assured, the fund is "pitch-black" and I do not know of any conceivable (legal) detergent that turns these blacks into whites -- even if it does, do we turn away and pretend that they never were black? Call it what you like, but this is a money-laundering of colossal proportion! Also, it's been suggested that there are numerous funds (locally and globally) allegedly opened in her name by her so-called fans -- and without her knowledge? Are we going to buy this story? Or indeed the ACC? How does one open an account (overseas) without the account holder's ID and signature, do tell! And yet, the CTG is seemingly turning a blind eye.

- As far as Jamaat-e-Islami is concerned, apparently ACC doesn't have sufficient evidence to file any charge against the Jamaat high profiles. This is like not noticing the elephant in the

room! Several of the Jamaat high profiles have been known and reported (in the newspapers) to be involved in extortion, embezzlement, and murder by proxy (august 2004), and yet the ACC does not find any evidence to charge them.

- Finally, the price hike! How is it that over the last seven months the prices of the basic commodities galloped to an all-time high? It's mind boggling! And it is inconceivable that the CTG (or indeed the military authority) has failed to find the cause of the hike. If proper steps are not taken soon and if this price-hike persists then most probably the CTG might be heading towards an ignominy, which would indeed be counter-productive for all that this they stood for.

The case of Begum Zia sticks out like a sore thumb. Her immediate family has been indicted with serious charges of corruption, extortion, duplicity and other forms of profiteering, and yet she is

perceived to be apparently innocent! Sadly, the government does not see the elephant in the room.

If indeed the government has no case against her, why then, only a few months back, serious allegations (of all sorts) against her were being reported in the mainstream newspapers and why the drama which was enacted on the issue of exiling Begum Zia? Let's not pretend that she was being sent into exile merely to collect her air miles (and perform Umra on the side).

Far from it! Nevertheless, the nation certainly felt, at the time, that government must have in their possession sufficient evidence to indict her and was simply being compassionate (questionable, perhaps) by sending her into exile to spare her total disgrace (being a former PM). But of course, the elusive exile was never to be!

And now we see her leading a very comfortable life (with the ghost of "exile" apparently gone), making statements and

teleconferences, which are certainly damaging and divisive for the party, and moreover, it transpires that she has no intention of abandoning the idea of "famiocracy." Where is this going, as far as "reform" is concerned? Can't the government at least contain her for the sake of a true reform in the party?

These apparent inconsistencies in the CTG/ACC moves are indeed inviting a whole lot of questions in the public mind -- these questions, if left unanswered, could very well lead to mass distrust, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Needless to say, the people of this nation have a lot of stake in this government. If this government fails, then so would the nation.

Dr. S. I. Zaman is a university professor.

We have a job in hand

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

I do not know who coined the phrase --"minus two" -- implying the ouster of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina from politics, but this is a much talked about issue these days. Both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, as the party chiefs of BNP and AL respectively, have occupied center stage of our politics for three long decades. In a democracy, they would have withered away in the political wilderness, and would have been forgotten long ago.

But here, in Bangladesh, where the ghosts of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan seem to have cast a spell on our political leaders, these ladies are still hanging around and are still reckoned with, although what was a whisper yesterday is now very much a voice heard loud and clear, saying that these two ladies are the least wanted in our politics and that the sooner they call it a day the better for them, for their parties, and for the country.

True, it makes sense to many a well meaning man or woman who wants to see Bangladesh on the map of the world, not as country

perennially afflicted by poverty, disease, and natural calamities but as a vibrant nation trying to hold its head high and working steadfastly towards being a truly self reliant, democratic and progressive country. One very important factor in favour of the "minus two theory" is that both of these politically superannuated ladies are tainted in one way or the other.

Both have presided over political governments, which earned a bad name at home and abroad for the added dimension and fillip they provided to corruption and criminalization of politics, or politics geared to crime and violence. There is definitely a tinge of corruption and criminal involvement attached to both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, as is being borne out by startling revelations made by their business associates and some political bigwigs of their own parties.

How come that when they were in power the ministers and the law makers and their henchmen were steeped in corruption and criminal activities on a scale never seen before, and they as prime minister and party chief had no clue about it?

Either they winked at these sordid wrong doings, or they themselves were in the thick of it. Either way, they are culpable.

Both of these ladies had the wonderful opportunity to usher in democratic rule, and a corruption free and people's welfare oriented administration in this country when they came to power following the ignominious down fall of General Ershad, the dictator, in December 1990. But what they gave the nation was sham democracy and crass authoritarian rule. They just drove Ershad out of power and ruled the country like he did, with utter disdain for democracy.

They both reneged on their pre-election pledges of establishing democracy and fighting poverty and corruption. During the fifteen years of so-called democratic rule by the Awami and the Jatiyatabadi rulers, the country drifted deeper into corruption, poverty, crime, and violence, the likes of which had not been seen before. They have literally turned this beautiful country of ours into a land of beggars, criminals, and liars. Yes this is their

achievement.

Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have, over the years, demonstrated their penchant for authoritarian rule. They have shown scant respect for the rule of law and democratic norms. Both of them, while in power, had let loose a reign of terror on the political opposition, the civil society, the human rights activists, the media, and all those who differed with and criticized them.

The entire post-Ershad period of our exercise in parliamentary democracy was essentially an extension of the autocratic rule of Ershad, minus the fallen dictator. Seen from this point of view, both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina are the biggest obstacles to reforms needed in the whole range of the ongoing exercise in politics, starting from the political parties. Their present stance vis-a-vis reforms needed in their political parties will bear this out.

Both the ladies have been around for an unusually long period of time. They are old and aging, with a tarnished image. Almost spent forces, they have virtually nothing to

give to this country. In fact, they have never given anything good to this country. They have done more harm than good to this country and the people, regardless of whether they were in power or in the opposition.

On the contrary, this country has given them more than they could legitimately claim in terms of wealth, name and fame. They had none of these when they made their maiden appearance in politics. The most ungrateful lot, they had better leave politics now to spare the country from going further down the hill.

But will the ship of this country have smooth sailing and reach the shore of democracy and development, which we have been yearning for, once these two ladies have been off-loaded, unless all the rotten political eggs have also been thrown overboard? You have to clean up the whole mess and sanitize the entire political arena. You just cannot afford to punish the Babars and the Mamuns and let off the Tariques and the Falus.

The whole bunch of looters and plunderers and criminals and

crooks who had been on board the ship with these two ladies needs to be brought to justice. No one with a shred of incriminating evidence against him should get a reprieve just because he or she is now talking of reforms and singing in praise of the interim government. It is not just minus two but, perhaps, minus over a hundred or so, which ought to be the target for political cleansing. This is going to be a long haul.

Dear countrymen and women, we have a job on hand as a nation. The country is now on a war footing. We are waging a war on the corruption, crime, and incompetence indulged in by our rulers. How we come out of this war will shape our destiny and define us as a nation.

If the perpetrators of wanton loot and plunder of our wealth and property, and the killers of innocent men and women in the name of politics and in the name of Islam, our sacred religion of peace and harmony, are not brought to justice now, our progeny will curse us and condemn us to the dust bin of history for having failed the nation when it was our duty to rise to the occasion

and punish the rogues who masqueraded as our leaders only to rob the nation of its wealth.

This government and the armed forces alone cannot fight this war. The entire nation has to come forward to strengthen the hands of this government. Our learned judges, the lawyers community, the police, the anti-corruption agencies, the media, the intelligentsia, and the civil society, have a special role to play in this war. We all have to rise above our party affiliations and regard the offender of law as an offender, no matter who the offender is.

Nothing is more important than the interest of this country and the wellbeing of the people. No single individual is indispensable for the country. Individuals will come and go. What is indispensable, and what must sustain us as a nation, is our resolve as individuals and as a nation to stand our ground and fight to establish truth and justice in our social and national life.

We all must learn to subordinate our individual interest and group interest to the interest of the country.

Let us strive to establish genuine democracy in this country. And genuine democracy means the rule of law.

Let us not demean ourselves by declaring that nobody is above the law and decrying, at the same time and in the same breath, the arrest of an offender of law just because the offender happens to be a person of very high political and social standing.

Let all of us unite on one issue: we shall not allow this land of ours, which has been hallowed by the martyrs' blood, to be a haven for those political thugs and criminals who have looted and plundered our wealth and stained their hands with the blood of innocent men and women in the name of politics and religion.

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An appeal to all NRBs

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

AS per the request of the prime minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, and having great feelings for the country, all non-resident Indians across the world came forward to help the victims of tsunami that killed over 280,000 people in towns and villages along the coasts of the Indian Ocean on or after December 26, 2004.

Over 3 million survivors had their livelihoods destroyed. India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Somalia were affected.

Although Bangladesh survived the effects of the tsunami on December 26 because of the natural barrier of its continental shelf stretching 200 km into the Bay of Bengal, the present floods across Bangladesh are no less a natural disaster, and have already taken at least 164 lives (till August 7). Millions have been marooned or made homeless, and remain in abject misery for dearth of bare necessities and the outbreak of diseases.

According to the government estimation, floods have marooned over 9.7 million people of 1.9 million families in 239 upazilas in 40 districts, where at least 89,048 houses were completely, and about 600,000, partially damaged. More than 1.5 million acres of land were fully or partially destroyed, and a total of 317 educational institutions were completely, and 4,628 partially, demolished. Some 58,092 km flood-protection embankments were completely washed away, while 1,475 km were partially affected.

In this devastating situation, chief adviser (CA) to the interim government, Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed, appealed to everyone in his address to the nation on Sunday 5 to come forward and join in relief and rehabilitation operations for helping out the flood-stricken people.

Imbued with the spirit of human welfare and patriotism, the CA further called on everyone to stand beside the helpless flood-affected people hand in hand.

Like many other times, non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB)

across the world can help the help-less flood-affected people in a broader way, as they always keep Bangladesh in their hearts wherever they are.

From 1976 to April 2007, around 4.751 million Bangladeshis went across the globe, and their remitted money is now the main earning source for Bangladesh. With a continuous growth in remittance, Bangladesh's inflow reached \$561.92 million in May. The NRBs send roughly \$7 billion every year, but a significant amount still comes through "Hundi."

During the liberation war, the Proclamation of Independence was formally announced by the Bangladesh government-in-exile on April 17, 1971, in Kolkata, India. The Proclamation, in effect, provided the fundamental instrument of law as well as an interim constitution of the Mujibnagar government, and that of the government in liberated Bangladesh, until the adoption of the Constitution from December 16, 1972. They organised guerrilla groups with the help of India to continue the war against Pakistan.

It was a great achievement on the part of Bangladesh, thanks to some NRBs' steps. Probably nothing equally great has been achieved after the Independence War. The International Mother Language Day is not only for Bangladesh; rather it is for all speakers of all languages all over the world. In spite of that, Bangladesh cannot but feel proud that February 21st has been chosen as International Mother Language Day.

Like all the general people, international organisations, well wishers of Bangladesh's democracy, and even the political parties in Bangladesh, NRBs played an important role in the last political turmoil by campaigning and upholding their views across the globe through media and different international organisations.

Wherever they are, NRBs always talk about the government, opposition, politics, administrations, constitution, democracy, fundamentalism, parliament or elections of Bangladesh. They believe that everything will become meaningless if they can't help the general



JESSICA LIM REAL PICTURE

people of Bangladesh when help is needed.

Bangladesh is in now facing a big natural disaster. The water has

started receding in flood-hit areas but the sufferings of the people have been compounded, with thousands getting infected with water-borne

diseases, and facing shortage of drinking water, food and shelter, and farmers facing challenges for future production. Waterborne diseases

Shaken caretaker government

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AT last the CTG has realised that though its capability to govern may be better than any government's elected during the last 15 years (1991-2006) its capacity is not extraordinary. Due to increasing pressure created by major political parties as a result of the strong drive against corruption, more attention on improving law and order situation, galloping inflation (rate more than 9%) and the present deluge, the confidence of the CTG appears to be little shaken. The advisers give the impression that they are exhausted.

At the initial stage of its rule, the CTG failed to understand clearly the limit and limitation of its capability because of lack of adequate knowledge about the present condition of

the Bangladesh administration, a highly politicized, corrupt, and inefficient one.

If the implementation is not of the required level excellent plans do not mean much. Whatever good name has been earned by the government so far has been possible because of the good work done by a few dedicated civilian officials, strong and sincere assistance of army, moral support of civil society, and positive role of media.

Barrister Mainul has rightly, and in time, admitted that nobody was infallible, and asked for more cooperation from intellectuals and the media because the present government did not have any effective mechanism to reach the common people. In the serious crisis situation created by the deluge, the people's

cooperation has become essential.

Without the people's support, and because of the inexperience of a majority of the advisers, there is a strong possibility of creation of a messy situation, and the people's confidence in the government may decrease. The chief adviser and the chief of the army have both appealed to the people to come forward with whatever assistance they can extend.

Mere appeal is not enough. For obtaining the people's support, the existence of the two major parties who have profound influence on them cannot be ignored. It is to be seen how the CTG comes to some sort of understanding with the parties to enable them to assist the government in this hour of crisis.

It is inspiring to note that the

chiefs of the two major parties have directed their activists to assist the government. This is a very positive attitude of the parties.

In a highly poverty ridden country like Bangladesh, money or wealth has tremendous power. The poor are disorganised and, as such, their big number is of little significance in the political arena. They are also politically divided.

Despite the best of intentions, the CTG is not finding it easy to make progress now. We must realize that there is no magic wand for changing the politicised and corrupt bureaucracy into a neutral and committed one overnight.

The politicians will cooperate only if they are assured that there will be no unnecessary harassment by the government. The business-

men may come forward if they are sure that there will be no unnecessary harassment by customs or tax officials. Moreover, there should be no military interference, because it will make things messy.

The CTG has failed to contain the price-hike of essential commodities. It is not very clear why BDR has been asked to assist in controlling prices of essentials instead of the TCB. It is time that our finance adviser stops copying the ex-finance minister Mr Saifur Rahman by repeatedly stating that the price spiral is due to increase in income of the people.

The chief of ACC is gradually waking up to reality. He knows that even if he is given the required number of personnel to dispose of the graft cases (more than 42000)

he has no ready reply as to how much time may be needed to dispose of even the cases he has inherited from his predecessors. He may have to categorise the cases and concentrate only on those whose disposal may have tremendous impact on our corrupt politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats.

Once he is successful in giving fair treatment to the prominent personalities, he may be able to influence the people to go against corruption. Containing corruption is a continuous process, and he has to trudge a long uneven road.

Recently, we have seen that there is not much of unity among the advisers. Even on the questions of lifting of emergency, increase in number of advisers to cope with the

growing pressure of work, and strategy for disaster management, there have been differences of opinions. The chief will have to work hard to reach consensus on such important issues.

We accept that a major disaster like a deluge cannot be successfully handled alone by government. The AL government (1996-2001) tackled the longest flood since independence, in 1998, due to the right approach taken by them to mobilise the people's support. We understand that the emergency cannot be lifted and political activity will have to be withheld for some time more. However, we are glad to know that some major parties have agreed to support the government effort without using banners.

Barrister Mainul, instead of soul

searching, has again blamed the intellectuals and media people for their lack of consciousness. It is indeed regrettable that so many articles by columnists and editors of most of the credible dailies have escaped the notice of our CTG advisers.

In fact, the media not only remained positive right from the beginning, they also assisted the government in clarifying some sensitive issues. The intellectuals and the media have always tried to point out the actual position in the country during any crisis (even against pressure). We are certain that both the civil society and the media will continue to cooperate with the CTG in this hour of need.

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