

Government's scorecard a mixed bag

The changes should invigorate the Advisory Council

At the end of the incumbent government's first year, we would like to evaluate its performance under four specific heads: holding a free, fair and credible election, institution building, political reforms and managing the economy.

As for the first criterion, progress has been impressive and tangible belying the skeptics. The work on preparation of voter list and hand-over of national identity cards is moving apace. And if the task is completed with a minimal margin of error it will go down as a magnificent achievement.

On the institutional front, separation of the judiciary is a giant step forward given the foot-dragging of the elected governments on it. But, of course, it entails a huge implementation-related follow-up on which its ultimate success will depend. The reconstituted ACC has set in motion an anti-corruption drive that was bold and unprecedented in its impact. It touched the untouchable and created an environment in which nobody could feel he/she is above law. There were unforeseen side effects though in the shape of business and investment shying away. About the EC many steps were taken to strengthen it, including manning it properly, except for the fact that it has yet to get an independent secretariat. As for the Public Service Commission and University Grants Commission two very laudable appointments were made at the helms but no institutional reforms have been carried out.

It is in the area of political reforms that the caretaker government drew a blank. In fact, the search for reforms looked stronger months ago, the main cause of its tapering being the fiasco attended upon by the abortive pursuit of the minus-two formula.

Regrettably, in managing the economy, the government invited the harshest of comments, especially because of its failure to contain the food prices within some reasonable limits that cast a shadow over other gains made by it.

However, we continue to repose our faith in the present caretaker government in the clear and unalterable understanding that election will be held by the end of December. For that goal to be achieved, we hope that the reconstituted advisory council will work with determination, focus and untiring zeal devoted to holding an election that will be participated by all.

CA's call to the law enforcers

A professional police force underscores good governance

THE call by Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed to the police to discharge their duties in the best interests of society is certainly of the kind that needs to be sounded insistently because of what our police force have been unable to do so far for citizens.

We cannot obviously ignore the many factors which have prevented the police all these years from operating in a fully professional manner. Note among these the political influence brought to bear on them by successive governments, with the result that they have generally felt helpless and consequently have not delivered the services expected of them. That said, there are other compelling reasons why the police force as a major law enforcing body has been perceived to be insensitive to public concerns. It is such insensitivity that the CA was clearly addressing the other day. His call for the police to avoid harassing people who approach them for assistance is one which resonates with a very large body of citizens. Despite all the exhortations that have been sounded so long about the police and the public establishing or maintaining friendly links, the fact remains that ordinary citizens are still wary when it comes to dealing with the police or soliciting their help in matters of grave concern to them individually or collectively. Obviously, such barriers must be removed, in the larger, enlightened interest of a good, stable and working social order.

The observance of a police week should therefore be a time for policemen, from the top ranks to the bottom ones, to take stock of their performance. Honesty and dedication to public service are ideas that can be made tangible once the police take it upon themselves to investigate crime thoroughly and conclusively. There is too the danger that militancy has thrown up, a peril that only the presence of a purposeful police force can roll back. Overall, the lesson that ought to be learnt anew in the on-going police week is that a strong, professional police force promotes rule of law and contributes to good governance in the country.

The caretaker government, a year on

This administration can cut a path through the dense woods, strew that path with stones and bricks and mortar for people to walk on in the times to be. It cannot fail, not in its second year, for the year which lies beyond this second year should, by any term of logic, belong to a new, enlightened, elected dispensation made possible by an administration that began as a caretaker, released a little stream of reforms and made it possible for you to rekindle your respect for politics.

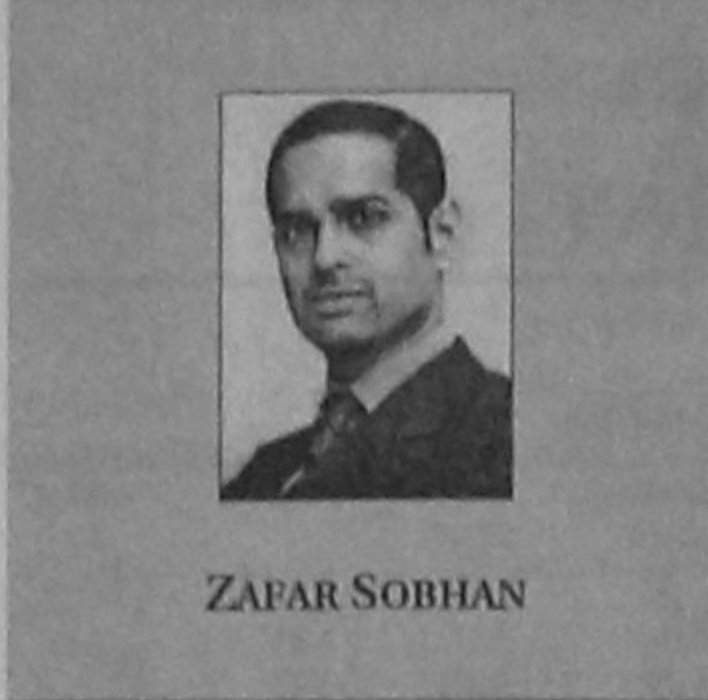
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE arrival of a new government, at least in our part of the world, is generally a dramatic affair. When you add to that the little sub-plots, all of which keep coming in at fairly regular intervals, you have the very spice of excitement coming into life.

The recent departure of four advisers, only days before the first anniversary of the government they were part of, epitomised that excitement. And do not forget that before them there was their colleague who walked away over the artefacts affair. And if you go further back in time, there is the riveting tale of the four illustrious

men, all advisers, who turned their backs on a government, led by no less an individual than Bangladesh's president, all because they thought its moral base was fast eroding.

Having said that, it now becomes somewhat necessary to recapitulate all that has happened, or could have happened, on the watch of the Fakhruddin Ahmed caretaker administration. Begin with the truth that this government has had the solid support of the nation's military, which has been its mainstay. There is, too, the matter of the state of emergency, a detail that has extended the government's period in office to one that does



ZAFAR SOBHAN

SO here we are, January 11, 2008. Exactly one year since the military-backed caretaker government took over, and a good time to take stock of the last twelve months and to look ahead to the coming twelve.

One thing, which many seem to have forgotten with the passage of time (or wilfully wish to obscure), is the precipitous situation the country was in on January 10, 2007. At that point, the country was under the administration of a nakedly partisan caretaker government, which was moving towards fraudulent elections on January 22.

For its part, the main opposition had announced that it would not only boycott the upcoming elections but also make sure that they were not held; it had promised a program of street agitation, beginning on January 14, that threatened to reduce the country to total chaos.

The only thing which was certain, as I have written before, is that as a nation that we had run out of good options.

Today, there will be no shortage of revisionists who will argue that there was no need for the Iajuddin-led caretaker government to be dismissed, and that the takeover by the current caretaker government was an unqualified wrong.

STRAIGHT TALK

Make no mistake about it, if this government were to fail, it would be a disaster for the country. No one knows where it would lead, but you can take it to the bank that it would be nowhere good. The very best case scenario would be that we would revert to where we were pre-1/11. And that is the best-case scenario. Much worse is likely to befall us.



MINIR UZ ZAMAN/NEWS

But there were very few who were prepared to argue this one year ago. Then, the nation heaved a sigh of relief that we had been delivered from fraudulent elections and the massive violence that would have preceded and followed such elections.

Make no mistake, when you now hear people talk about how 1/11 was a terrible thing for the country, and that what we need is "democratic continuity" -- you are listening to the voice of shills for Hawa Bhaban, which would have been the principal (perhaps only) beneficiary of the stolen elections. The January 22, 2007 elections would not have pro-

vided anything like democratic continuity for the simple reason that fraudulent elections have nothing to do with democracy.

These same people would have argued, following the fraudulent elections, that the incoming government was constitutional and that we had a duty to accept its legitimacy. These are the same people who had little to say about either the deeply undemocratic actions of the last elected government, and even less to say about the fiasco of the Iajuddin-led caretaker government.

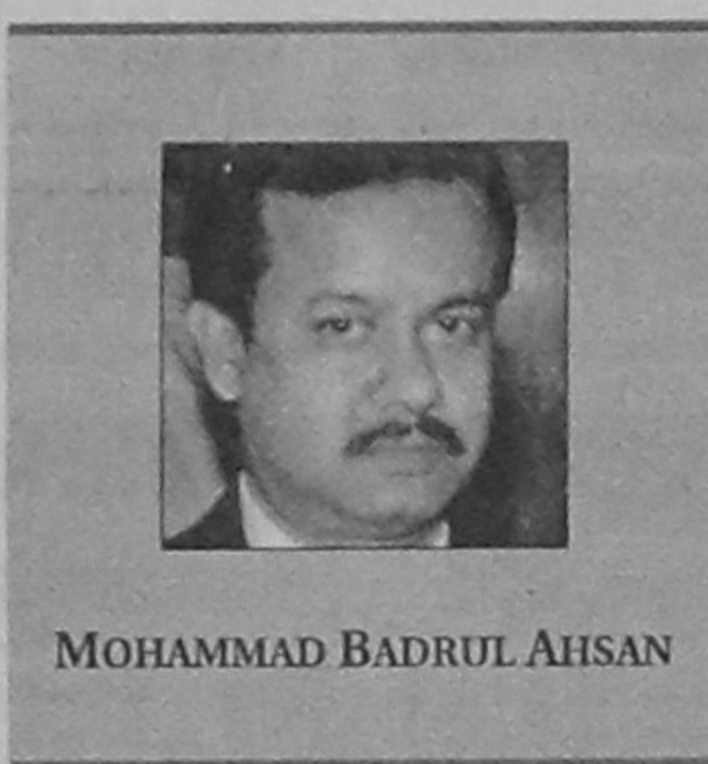
The last twelve months have had their ups and downs, and things have gone both right and

wrong, but there is no scope for arguing that we are worse off than we were a year ago.

Yes, there is a state of emergency, and, yes, I would like to see the emergency lifted as soon as possible. But at least we are not headed towards fraudulent elections and bloodshed. There can be little doubt that had the Hawa Bhaban blueprint to steal the elections come to fruition the incoming government would have been repressive.

The best news of the new year is that we now have five freshly-minted new advisers of unimpeachable reputation and ability. This is good news on a number of

Anniversary at crossroads



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TODAY, right on the dot is the first anniversary of 1/11. The first thing that comes to mind isn't where we have finished but where we had started. One year ago, around this time, we had come dangerously close to what I would call the Rumpelstiltskin moment. Rumpelstiltskin is a dwarf character from a fairy tale. In a flight of rage, he tore himself into two with his own hand.

One year ago, we were about to do the same thing. A nation seething with rage was on the verge of tearing itself apart. First round of applause to the army; they didn't let it happen.

There are now many criticisms of what was then the last resort. The army could still remain in the barracks. The

CROSS TALK

For its remaining days in power, this government is going to face testing times. It will be lucky to finish what it has started and hold on to what it has done. If it can try and convict all those who have been accused of corruption, if the elections are held and the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the separation of judiciary survive future political convulsions, I would save my third round of applause for this government until then.

country could still roil with hatred and violence. Many more people could get killed, properties could get damaged, and we could live in a gangland turmoil. Many things may have gone wrong since then, but one year ago there were not too many right options. The country was rapidly sinking into chaos.

But one year later, where do we stand? Two days ago, four advisers of the caretaker government turned in their resignations. Roughly a week before them another advisor had stepped down. Are these indications of instability? No it is, rather, making up for the loss of face caused by the performance and utterances of those advisers.

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party candidate for

the US presidency, told voters last Sunday: "You campaign in poetry, but you govern in prose." If we evaluate the first one year of this caretaker government, it tried to govern like a campaign. It was already popular, yet it tried to win the hearts and minds of people. It ruled with an iron fist but a feather touch.

On this 1/11, we must look back and take stock. What has this government tried to accomplish? Has it tried to right the wrongs? Has it tried to put a derailed train back on track? As a matter of fact, it's not clear what it has tried to accomplish. It had the overwhelming support of the people, yet it couldn't uncouple itself from the perception that it was a mili-

tary-backed establishment.

It's possible that the bane of its existence was seeded in its creation. There is something called observer effect in science, which refers to changes that the act of observing will make on the phenomenon being observed. May be the way we looked at this government is the way it has taken shape. It, perhaps, failed to rise above that perception.

Henry David Thoreau writes in Civil Disobedience that a government has the choice of being expedient or inexpedient. He argues that men would fain to succeed in letting one another alone and, when the government is most expedient, the governed are mostly let alone. In case of this particular

counts. The first is that it demonstrates that the government is listening to the people. The public wanted a change and wanted to see the back of certain advisers. The government has heeded to this call.

The second is that it can improve the governance situation. The five new advisers are, to a man (and woman), good choices, who can be expected to really shake things up and perform.

Not to mention any names, but some of the advisers who have been replaced were conspicuous in their apparent inability to deliver, and one, in particular, was a train-wreck who diminished the standing of the government every time he (all too frequently) opened his mouth.

The third point, not to be overlooked, is that the fact that individuals of such stature were willing to join the government, is an extremely positive sign. There has been talk for a long time of new advisers, but part of the problem was finding people willing to accept the challenges. Maybe what we will now see is the entire nation pulling together to try to make this government work.

I am the first to concede that the current situation is not what we wanted. Of course, a lengthy interregnum of an un-elected government is no one's first choice, and the quicker we can hold elections the better.

But, by the same token, there are many reforms that need to be put in place to ensure that the upcoming elections are free and fair and deliver a government committed to the public interest, and that we don't revert back to the unsustainable and dysfunction-

nal situation that we were in prior to 1/11.

Surely, it is in everyone's interest that the current government succeed. Success would mean that it is able to stabilise the economy, accomplish the reforms needed to make democracy functional, and move towards elections at the earliest. This is what we all want.

Make no mistake about it, if this government were to fail, it would be a disaster for the country. No one knows where it would lead, but you can take it to the bank that it would be nowhere good. The very best case scenario would be that we would revert to where we were pre-1/11. And that is the best-case scenario. Much worse is likely to befall us.

When you hear people wishing for this government to fail, you can be sure that they do not have the best interests of the country at heart. The guise of a "committed" democrat is a particularly hollow one. No true democrat can hope for such a thing.

If one really is a true democrat, then one ought to get behind this government and hope that it succeeds and to do everything in one's power to help it succeed. This government's success is the only way we will move towards democracy any time soon. It would be good to keep this in mind.

We all need to put the country before self-interest. This is a new year, and maybe, together, the nation can turn the corner. With any luck, the worst is behind us, there will be no floods or cyclones this year, prices can be brought under control, the reform process will go smoothly, and free and fair elections will be held as soon as possible.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

government, people weren't so much worried if it let them alone as people. They were more worried if it was let alone as government, like in the past.

Thoreau further explains that government is only the mode, which the people have chosen to execute their will, and that the character inherent in the American people had done all that had been accomplished. In an ideal democracy, government should be a reflection of the people.

But nobody was expecting that to happen in the last one year. Everybody knew the country was under emergency rule. People were willing to become a reflection of the government. Second round of applause to them because, in spite of two floods, one cyclone and then the tremors of price spirals, half-fed or hungry, they steadfastly stood behind this government with patience.

With five new advisers, will the government function better? I would like to be optimistic, but not bet my bottom dollar. It's being tugged in many directions. Political reforms, natural disasters, economic debacles, trial of war criminals, crusade against

corruption, urban-renewal of institutions -- many preponderant tasks have been heaped upon the government.

For its remaining days in power, this government is going to face testing times. It will be lucky to finish what it has started and hold on to what it has done. If it can try and convict all those who have been accused of corruption, if the elections are held and the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the separation of judiciary survive future political convulsions, I would save my third round of applause for this government until then.

On this anniversary of 1/11, the country stands at a crossroads. There is an element of a polygon in us. We are a nation with as many angles as we have sides. There is the American side, then the European side, Indian side, Chinese side, Saudi side, and even Pakistani side. But what are the angles in our minds? Are we going to run the country? Or leave it to a cabal of foreign interests?

Looking for an answer.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

symbol of hope, for millions of Bengalis have been enthused by the crusade the ACC has undertaken in dealing with the corrupt and evil men whose stranglehold on society, till January 10 last year, had been total.

To be sure, the ACC has made mistakes, has stumbled along the way. Overall, though, it has introduced a new dimension into societal life. Men and women, those whose reputations have not quite been above board, remain in fear of it. That is a good thing, for it enables the un-empowered and, therefore, weak to speak up for their cause after a long, long time.

And then there is the Election Commission. The good thing is that it is no more the cabal it used to be under men who almost turned the idea of pluralism into a joke. In this past one year, the EC has often been accused of slowness, of lethargy in doing its job. And where inviting a faction of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is the question, it has shown

that it, too, is not above slipping up.

The bigger picture, though, is one of the present team at the Election Commission remaining focused on the goal, that of leading the country into a foolproof general election come December, or perhaps earlier than that.

The Public Service Commission gives you reason to hope that meritocracy will once again be the underpinning on which future civil servants will arise to add substance to administration. And through effecting a separation of the judiciary from the executive branch of government, the caretakers have done what earlier elected administrations could have done but did not.

No, this question of people coming by justice has not been fully answered by that move toward freeing the lower judiciary of its ancient fetters. But a beginning has been made. Someday, sooner rather than later, governments in this country will realise that they cannot tamper with the

courts and expect to stay in office.

Good deeds apart, there are issues that the caretaker government has not quite transformed into tangibles. The price of rice, of other items of daily consumption, has kept the nation in a sour mood, and quite naturally too. It did not help that an adviser spoke flippancy of the inevitability of price rises, but then, he is gone now.

Between now and the elections, therefore, a miracle ought to descend on the market, enough to enable the poor and the middle classes to survive till the next dawn, and the next and the next. A happily fed populace is a government's strongest bulwark against adversity.

The ruckus over the university affair remains a scar on the soul. An application of cooling balm is called for. The closure of several jute mills, an act once described by a now departed adviser as gangrene on the economy that had to be done away with, was a statement ill-considered. And hardly anyone was enthused by

all this talk of a Truth Commission, given that it threatened to undermine the nation's new-found faith in the rule of law.

The commission might yet come to be, might yet let felons go free. It ought not to. But what surely needs a firm place in this country is an independent human rights commission that will add some very real meat to democratic governance in Bangladesh.

But are we not asking for too much here? Obviously, one should not expect that the detritus of the past so many years will be cleared away by an administration that is unselected and that has as its fundamental responsibility the holding of credible elections. Yet, it is the mandate that the caretaker government has taken upon itself, by slow degrees, that leads you into asking that it do more.

Have all the trials relating to the corruption of the mighty and fallen be undertaken in all openness in order to convince people

that a new dawn is possible. Go after the war criminals, for they have defiled anew the purity of our history.

No, this government is not the end. It is not perfect, for the world we inhabit is a flawed one. But it is one, which gives hope to millions across this country. It is one chance, provided it does not lose its way, for this nation to redeem some of the fundamental promises it once made to itself.

This administration can cut a path through the dense woods, strew that path with stones and bricks and mortar for people to walk on in the times to be. It cannot fail, not in its second year, for the year which lies beyond this second year should, by any term of logic, belong to a new, enlightened, elected dispensation made possible by an administration that began as a caretaker, released a little stream of reforms and made it possible for you to rekindle your respect for politics.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.