

The cry for political reform



NURUL ISLAM ANU

PEOPLE'S craving for reforms of the polity has grown manifold following the events of one/eleven.

An insight into the areas where we as a nation erred, could be an appropriate stepping stone to arriving at the set of reforms we need. The interest of the nation for the realisation of the dream of an institutional democracy implied a philosophical commitment characterised by certain fundamental ingredients which ensured its working in all successful democratic experiments all over the world. The ingredients are:

a. Respect for the sovereign status of the common man and his unfettered freedom to choose the government he likes, is the most fundamental characteristic of any democratic adherence. This right of the sovereign is sacred and inviolable. Any attempt to intimidate the sovereign in the free exercise of the right to choose, through an abuse of state authority or money and muscle power is immoral and must be abhorred.

b. Democracy is a culture of practicing dissent - dissenting views ultimately converging in the form of a rich democratic consensus. Trading dissent with the sovereign each party presenting its product to the sovereign is an exciting component of a democratic culture. Intolerance to dissent, any attempt to suppress it through use of instruments of oppression or any other manipulative device is simply "implied fascism".

c. It implies subjugation

of the crude pursuit of class interest to the loftier ideals of the common good; the element of human greed to be responsive to the sensibility of social accountability.

d. It demands the imperceptible absolutism of the state to be responsive to the dictates of justiciability implying a respect for the rule of law and the absolute freedom of the judicial system.

e. It demands management of National Resources to be a collective endeavour with a sense of accountability to the Republic's owner The People. It calls for use of the factors of production and its management to ensure distributive justice of economic benefits.

f. It has an universal message of equality latent in its contents rejecting any form of discrimination in the name of religion, caste or sex. Its nondiscriminatory character makes it inherently secular.

The list is not exhaustive.

The democratic experiment is in a relentless endeavour to achieve the above and in that sense it is a most complex of social experiments. Can a system with such a daunting challenge before itself achieve a degree of absolute success without the system conforming to 'certain norms'? To put it simply, can it be "Productive" in the pursuit of its objective without being "Principled"? In our case our pursuit for success has remained elusive and failures have been appalling and an atmosphere of disappointing abandonment prevails. The common man is seized by a terrible

sense of betrayal, helplessly witnessing the agonizing spectacle of erosion of the basic values which he deeply adores; he finds his sacred right of franchise violated by the use of manipulative power of the state and the instruments of oppression; he finds ruthless use of black money and muscle power to abuse the electoral process unacceptable; he finds lack of intellectual honesty in the

Electron Conducting Machine and the structural inadequacies an affront to his conscience; he finds a half vacant parliament for 15 years frustrating. He finds corrupt management of the economy and the national resources a sad abandonment of the concept of trusteeship and a mechanism to distribute economic benefits to economic cronies created through a corrupt practice of state power, as an act of betrayal; he finds emergence of a corrupt culture devoid of political or financial accountability a monster that threatens the moral base of the society; he finds denial of good governance by a politicized and insensitive bureaucracy oppressive; he finds himself brutalized by the same bureaucracy continuously violating his sacred rights with impunity; he finds the constitution to be an ineffective safeguard against repressive abuse of section 54 of the criminal procedure code; he finds denial of access to capital, educational and health the denial of promised economic opportunity immoral; he finds himself imprisoned by a terror culture patronized by the political establishment he

has chosen to elect; he finds political power as an instrument of self enrichment with marginal use for the good of the common man and all state services being sold at the open market with price tag he cannot afford; above all he witnesses a vicious fundamentalist force emerging as a threat to the cherished secular democratic culture.

The list is expandable to demonstrate the level to which the overall political order has been allowed to degenerate. Degeneration has its own momentum and an ominous speed with which it engulfs every institution with which it interacts. Degenerative trends once set in by neglecting fundamental values becomes difficult to reverse since reversal is rendered complicated by the determined opposition of the vested interests the process helped to create.

Politics has been recognized tool of social management and centuries of experiment came to the inescapable conclusion that statecraft needs to be managed as an organized endeavour where the rulers and the ruled interact through a process which is inherently political. The system evolves around a process of exercise participated by organised groups called political parties. In our conduct of this social management aberrations, distortions, and abandonment of ideals has been enormous and there is a clear need for this management game to be "Principled". There must be a profound realization of return to the pristine purity of the ideals of the War of Liberation and unflinching devotion to the principles of democratic

adherence. The society was crying loud for reform structural fundamental and philosophical for a long period of time. The political establishment was indifferent and it is one of the regrettable aspect of Bangladesh's political history that the demand for Reform have to be tutored & doctored by events of one eleven. The dictates of history is often weird and the bell for change has rung. The demand is too compelling and loud to be ignored, and the Reforms to be creative and sustainable, must draw its strength from a set of principles which the political process has spontaneously identified.

It calls for a religious recognition of the respect for the common man's right to a free franchise. A recognition by the entire political establishment about the sacred and inviolable nature of that right and need for political engineering about the protection of that right. Let there be a National Conference where political establishment will salute the sovereign with a promise that there will be no resort to intimidation or any form of allurements to compromise its sacred character. That declaration will assure the Election Commission to design regulations because they will see the threat of violation eliminated.

Accountability as a precious component of political management has been a significant victim of the degenerative process. It holds true of the prime minister, the cabinet or economic managers and bureaucracy, law enforces there is a pervasive absence

of this precious virtue - there must be a new level of consciousness to make accountability an indispensable component of political and overall social management. It will ensure responsiveness to the sovereign. Absence of accountability breeds arbitrariness and an alluring temptation to be sold to expediency. Power of a Prime Minister or the head of political party must be subjected to an application of constitutional limitations, party obligation and above all accountability to the society. The slogan of accountability must engulf the whole nation and its innate virtue reflected around all spheres of national activity.

Good Governance and institutional safeguards of individuals right have been a treasured component of any democratic society. The concept of an anonymous and impartial bureaucracy and an impartial judiciary must be accepted by the political establishment. Any attempt to use servants of the Republic for partisan consideration should be made a criminal offence in a reformed Bangladesh. The quality of judicial appointments should be ensured and its independence respected. The separation of the judiciary from the executive is a welcome step and the procedural formalities must be competed without delay to make it a credible exercise.

Emergence of black money and terror have vitiated the political and economic process. These twin enemies owe their existence and subsequent prosperity to political patronage. The political establishment must make a philosophical

commitment not to use these instruments as tools for conduct of politics. Party reform, membership procedure should eliminate association of these elements in the party membership or hierarchy. Politics is a practicing art and the actors are the political parties. The need for a philosophical reorientation about an unflinching commitment to democratic values along with reform of the party super structure is overwhelming. One cannot play the game without knowing the rules of a very complex game and there is a clear need for the rule to be rewritten and the players made aware of it.

In our case the game has been played without respect for rules of the game and the result has been less than satisfactory. And the call for a change has been pervasive, too urgent to be shelved. And it must be undertaken as a shared concern by the political establishment. It will be criminal to let this opportunity go waste.

The enthusiasm generated by post-one/eleven developments must not be lost in the whirlpool of pro and anti-reformist fiascos. It is too precious an opportunity to be lost to petty minded indulgences and unacceptable shortsightedness.

Let a national consensus order imbued with the highest ideals of service to the people and the Republic become the sustained basis for realisation of the dream for reforms.

The author is a columnist and former civil servant.

The enthusiasm generated by post-one/eleven developments must not be lost in the whirlpool of pro and anti-reformist fiascos. It is too precious an opportunity to be lost to petty minded indulgences and unacceptable shortsightedness.