

Bangladesh on higher ground

We have a huge commonality of interests. We are friends and fans of Bangladesh and its people. And so I am unapologetic about our honest and openly stated desire to see Bangladesh "shore up" its democratic foundations. Democracy is everyone's responsibility. I share the enthusiasm of the Bangladeshi people to see an enduring democracy and I commit the UK to helping where it can. When it comes to building "plinths," Bangladesh can expect Britain to lend a hand.

DAVID MILIBAND

DESCENDING in a helicopter, through rain and mist, onto a crowded but remote *char* island, the enormous and immediate dangers of climate change suddenly, ominously, seemed very real. The island, in the middle of the massive Jamuna River, is a hostage to erosion, threatened by rising sea levels, and no stranger to severe flooding. On these shifting sands live some two million of Bangladesh's poorest and most vulnerable people; people for whom climate change is not a theory but a fact of daily life.

The people I spoke to there appreciated the assistance being given by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). More than just livelihood, they believed that the DFID project had given them dignity and hope. Through "asset transfers" of, for example, livestock, they have developed more secure and lasting means of income generation.

And DFID's project has helped to protect these livelihoods from the threat of climate change. Thousands of vulnerable homes have been raised on solid plinths above flood levels. As they have been adapted, improved and lifted up, uncertainty has been replaced with hope for the future.

I was rather taken with this idea

and, as I reflected on the main aims of my visit, concerning the forthcoming elections, I was struck by the powerful metaphor for Bangladesh as a whole.

Can Bangladesh build "plinths" of another kind?

How can Bangladesh lift itself above the "shifting sands" of a "winner-takes-all" political culture, deep-rooted corruption and poor governance?

If Bangladesh is to stand a chance of fulfilling the remarkable potential of its people, it must succeed in creating higher, stronger, foundations for democracy that can endure beyond the elections.

Credible and fair elections will be vital to the success of democratic renaissance in Bangladesh -- the first and fundamental pillar of new foundations. The popular desire for a democratic voice is strong.

I visited a voter registration centre in Gazipur and was touched by the genuine enthusiasm and determination of the queues of men and women waiting to have their photos, signatures and fingerprints registered, and to collect national voter ID cards. And I was impressed by the efficiency with which the Election Commission and the army is handling the project for an accurate and inclusive voter list; a project to which the UK has contributed \$20 million. There

was a palpable sense that the process was creating a lasting democratic base.

During my visit, I emphasised the UK's view of the importance of the electoral roadmap and a commitment from the caretaker government to hold elections at the earliest feasible opportunity before the end of 2008. I was struck by the sincerity of the caretaker government and Election Commission in striving to fulfil this ambition.

Of course, elections need political parties; they are the beating heart of a vibrant democratic culture. That's why we encourage a dialogue between the caretaker government and political parties. A mood of understanding can help achieve inclusive elections and foster consensus over the kind of reforms, which will sustain democracy in Bangladesh.

Political parties need to meet the government half-way -- agreeing to conduct themselves in a responsible, mature fashion; helping to take money and muscle out of politics; introducing fresh blood and capacity that sustains and strengthens democracy and democratic leadership; putting national interests first.

The impression I took away from a fascinating discussion with young Bangladeshi leaders is that the people want to see the parties change -- not because they are told to, but because they accept they

have to and want to.

After all, individual personalities will come and go, but political parties and systems need to endure -- including between elections. Democracy is a long game.

A further foundation of democracy is also respect for the rule of law and the principle of basic individual rights. Naturally, it's not for me to assess the charges laid against individuals. But just as it is right that anyone charged with a crime be judged without deference or discrimination, so it is important that all accused, including Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, receive a fair trial consistent with Bangladesh's international human rights obligations.

Strong democracies also need sound institutions and processes. It's crucial for Bangladesh's own development, too. Members of the British-Bangladeshi diaspora that I met during my visit were very clear that Bangladesh has substantial investment potential. But businesses and trade cannot thrive on uncertainty and instability.

A stable business climate needs firm foundations of accountability. And people need to be able to trust that public life is not manipulated by a few individuals to satisfy selfish greed for money and power. The caretaker government can point to clear achievements; an overhaul of the country's institutions including the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, the separation of the judiciary that has eluded past governments for over 35 years, and a drive to combat corruption. The government which is elected in 2008 will have a responsibility to nurture these gains.

Of course, it is not for the UK to determine the shape and composition of the next government. Our interest in Bangladesh is as a close friend; our encouragement for building democratic systems is made without conditions, without preference or favour for any particular party or personality.

Indeed, at the end of my visit I spoke about the great depth of our common interests, and how the UK's special relationship with Bangladesh is broader and stronger than ever, on a range of vital issues.

On climate change, we want to support Bangladesh's vocal leadership in pushing for a comprehensive international agreement on cutting carbon emissions; Bangladesh has a unique authority in the debate, able to demonstrate the urgency of the issue and the need for engagement from all sides, including poorer nations who might be tempted to dismiss climate change as a "rich man's problem." The UK, as I have seen for myself, is supporting adaptation measures in Bangladesh, and £30 million of new funding was announced in December 2007.

On development, the UK is the largest bilateral donor in Bangladesh -- contributing close to a quarter of a billion dollars annually -- and we will continue to support Bangladesh's progress on the Millennium Development Goals. In a globalised world, tackling the roots of poverty and inequality is in everyone's interests.

The strong people-to-people link is manifested by the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK, numbering close to half a million people, and embodied by the personal and familial ties at the heart of our countries' relationship. The diaspora members I met



David Miliband talking to a family about the DFID-funded Chars Livelihood program, during his visit to Ballapara of Belkuchi in Sirajganj on February 9.

and spoke to during my visit were positive that there is no contradiction in being British and being of Bangladeshi origin, in a multicultural and multi-faith society.

They are rightly proud of their roots and proud to be British, recognising the contribution they have made in every sphere of UK society and willing to put something back into Bangladesh too. A confident, successful and outward-looking diaspora, at ease with multiple identities and connected to mainstream British life, can make an even greater contribution

to Britain and to Bangladesh.

Britain and Bangladesh, sadly, have both known the horrors of indiscriminate terrorist violence against innocent people. The reality is that the roots of extremism have not gone away.

We will continue to work together with Bangladesh to counter the threat of those who seek to profit from division, suspicion and violence, and to address the root causes of extremism both here and around the world. We express our solidarity and recognise the values we share.

We have a huge commonality of

interests. We are friends and fans of Bangladesh and its people. And so I am unapologetic about our honest and openly stated desire to see Bangladesh "shore up" its democratic foundations.

Democracy is everyone's responsibility. I share the enthusiasm of the Bangladeshi people to see an enduring democracy and I commit the UK to helping where it can. When it comes to building "plinths," Bangladesh can expect Britain to lend a hand.

The Rt Hon David Miliband, MP, is Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, UK.

Sorting out destiny

The burden of becoming a middle-income nation within the next 20 years is certainly huge. It is not only the politicians who need reforming, they must also cultivate reforms in all the affairs of the society in order to modernise and bring changes without surrendering to the alien forces under the present day exploitation-ridden globalisation.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

DR Mahatir Mohamad, the former PM of Malaysia, had a vision. He converted his vision into reality in his lifetime. In the 1960s and 1970s Malaysia was a developing nation, and its destiny, becoming a middle-income nation, was achieved through the 20 year development plan of Mahatir's government.

Bangladesh is also aspiring to get there by 2020, immediately before its golden jubilee of independence. For example, Sheikh Hasina's government in the late 1990s had such a goal. Recently, Professor Yunus declared that he would make poverty history by 2030.

More recently, celebrating its 17th anniversary, *The Daily Star* dedicated three supplements to

the vision of becoming a middle-income nation. There is, of course, debate at home and abroad on the time it will take to make this goal a reality. While pessimists brand this as rhetoric, optimists certainly see this as a reality, and even possible by 2030.

Working in the area of development research for the last 20 years, and particularly researching the development activities of South and South-East, I consider myself an optimist, however, with some caveats. The caveats are well known. If the last 35 years are any guide, it is not impossible to make a short list of such caveats.

Unfortunately, it is sad that after more than three decades of gaining independence we are still engaged in sorting out our destiny. What does it mean? Does it mean that the last quarter of a century was a waste? The answer is both

yes and no.

In the case of the former, the politics, for that matter practicing election-based democracy over the last 15 years, was a failure, to say the least. It is not that we have a short supply of talent in politics. But, we have seen in the past how some extremely talented politicians eventually become thoroughly corrupt, both in money and moral terms, after winning elections. This, as a result, hurt the reputation of all the politicians. Also, the nation does not want to revisit the pre-1/11 political environment under any circumstances.

In the case of the latter, the last quarter of a century was not a waste in terms of the successes achieved in the economic and social fronts. In both these areas, a sound foundation has been laid for strong growth in the years to come. What were the sources of such a

foundation? First, the NGO movement can be seen as a major driving force, for example, Asa, Grameen Bank, Brac, and so on.

Second, to a lesser extent, the political governments made some progress in bringing changes in the economic and social fronts. For example, Motia Chowdhury, as minister for agriculture (1996-2001), showed the potential of this nation's agriculture if right policies were taken at the right time.

The AL government's introduction of VGF cards and old age pension for the vulnerable groups was certainly not a small initiative. Moreover, the BNP's step towards tax reform, and bringing the rich into the folds of the income tax net, is also worthy of mention.

Unfortunately, thriving corruption during the political governments between 1991 and 2006 took away whatever progress had been made in the economic front during political governments.

Coming back to my point on the short list of caveats for developing a practical roadmap to becoming a middle-income nation, meaning-

ful reform is needed in at least three areas:

Reform in politics

"Political reform" has become a catchword in present day Bangladesh. This was very aptly demonstrated by the senior assistant editor of *The Daily Star*, Shahnoor Wahid, in the February 19 editorial page. If Shahnoor's list (no nomination banija, profile of candidates published up front, avoid mass meeting in the capital, election of bipartisan speaker etc, etc.) can be agreed upon by the political parties a meaningful reform certainly will be in sight.

Having said that, some political scientists are of the view that "democratic governments rarely survive in countries with per capita income of less than \$1,500 a year: Kenyans and Pakistanis live under \$1,000 per year. The same research finds that democracy rarely fails once per capita income rises to \$6,000 a year (see Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, February 12)." In other words, it is unlikely that democracy will fail in Malaysia, which is now a middle-

income nation.

Economic and administrative reform

Unlike other developing nations, we have a land prone to sustained natural disasters. The frequency of such hazards will increase in the years to come due mainly to the effect of global climate change. In almost all the world forums on climate change and its aftermath, the name of Bangladesh appears in the forefront.

With this global scenario in hand, it will be simply a huge undertaking to drag such a huge nation (more than 200 million people by 2030) to middle-income status. This does not mean that the goal is unachievable and the hurdle of climate change cannot be overcome. Indeed, what this means is that economic reform agendas must be carefully delineated by the future political governments.

The most important areas of reforms that need immediate attention are: Establishing effective local governments, making the economy competitive both in micro and macroeconomic terms,

creating opportunities for more and more technical hands, creating more jobs, and making the service sector more creative and competitive -- the list goes on.

To attain all these, there must also be reform in administration and bureaucracy. The colonial bureaucracy is certainly now outdated. Moreover, the centralised and cadre-based recruitments over the last 30 years, unlike the recruitment process of CSPs, provided a pool of politicised and half-qualified officials who are not likely to be helpful in the future for taking the nation to its middle-income destiny.

Social change

To bring a meaningful change in the society/community, with a view to achieving middle-income status, is going to be the hardest task of all. We are the world's most densely populated nation, packed in a small land. There will be a great need for reclaiming land from the sea/bay, as has been seen in some European nations (Holland immediately comes to mind).

In order to follow these nations, the very fabric of the society needs

changing. Such a change may be possible if the economic reforms closely follow social reforms. In other words, we cannot afford to take reform measures which will make the rich richer, and the poor poorer.

We need to go for a high taxing society, unlike Malaysia or South Korea but like Scandinavia. This may, in turn, make the citizens accumulate less individual wealth relatively, and may encourage national wealth accumulation through super and relevant investment schemes. The culture of saving must be encouraged both in the public and private sectors, big or small.

The burden of becoming a middle-income nation within the next 20 years is certainly huge. It is not only the politicians who need reforming, they must also cultivate reforms in all the affairs of the society in order to modernise and bring changes without surrendering to the alien forces under the present day exploitation-ridden globalisation.

Moazzem Hossain is a freelance contributor to *The Daily Star*.

Democracy in Pakistan might bring tension with Washington

An elected Pakistani government might be less amenable, say, to requests for rendition of Pakistani citizens. But it would almost certainly be interested in rooting out Al Qaeda and stopping cross-border Taliban terrorism in Afghanistan. The civilians would also seek a clearer strategy against militant Talibanisation within Pakistan, particularly because they have a popular mandate in the form of electoral rejection of Islamists.

HUSSAIN HAQQANI

THE decision by the opposition parties that won Pakistan's February 18 parliamentary election to work together offers the hope of bringing democratic stability to a dysfunctional nuclear state.

The army has dominated Pakistan's politics for most of its 60-year existence as an independent country. In the past, coup-making generals, like President Pervez Musharraf, have taken advantage of differences among politicians instead of allowing politicians with popular support to negotiate compromises and run the country according to its constitution.

The priority of Pakistan's military rulers has been to create a centralised state, focused on the perceived threat from India, with the help of the United States. US

assistance is obtained by allying with Washington's strategic concern of the day, which in turn has led to over-engagement by the military on several fronts.

Many of Pakistan's problems, such as the influence of jihadi extremists and difficult relations with Afghanistan and India can be traced to the ascendancy of strategic military doctrine at the expense of domestic stability and democratic decision-making. All that could now change if the army stays its new course of disengagement from politics and the politicians can work together rather than against each other.

In a clear signal that Pakistan's military recognises its over-engagement as part of the country's dysfunction, the new commander of the Pakistan army General Ashfaq Kayani ordered his officers to stand aside in the elec-

tion process. The army's refusal to stuff ballot boxes in favor of Musharraf's political allies led to the two major opposition parties -- the center-left Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) led by Benazir Bhutto's widow Asif Zardari and the center-right Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif -- emerging as the two largest parties in the new parliament.

The Islamist parties were swept aside in a resurgence of the secular center, including the re-emergence of the nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) as the major political force in the Pashtun areas along the Afghan border.

Even after the humiliating defeat of his political allies, whom he supported in every fair or foul way possible until Election Day, Musharraf refuses to step down as president. The opposition, on the

other hand, has agreed on a common minimum platform that aims at restoring the Pakistani constitution, rehabilitating its judiciary and moving towards national reconciliation.

Pakistan is a nation in need of healing. The last year has highlighted the many fissures that have festered below the surface for years. Musharraf's rule, and the constant machinations of Pakistan's security services in every aspect of the nation's life, has proved to be divisive. For example, opinion polls show that a clear majority of Pakistanis suspects the security services or Musharraf's political allies, not Al Qaeda or the Taliban, for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

An elected government that functions in a transparent manner could help lessen widespread mistrust between Pakistan's state and society.

In the recent elections, Pakistan's politicians scored a major victory against what is euphemistically called "the establishment" in Pakistan. But the battle between "the establishment" and the politicians is far from over. "The establishment," made up of politicised generals, intelligence officials and Pakistan's

managerial class -- bankers, civil servants, some overseas businessmen, beneficiaries of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund -- will not give up easily.

Soon there could be rumors of corruption and mismanagement would discredit the elected leadership and a concerted effort to create rifts among them.

A future government of national unity led by elected politicians would almost certainly try and end the political role of intelligence services. For too long, an all-powerful intelligence community has run -- and most observers would agree, ruined -- Pakistan by fixing elections, dividing parties and buying off politicians.

If the politicians prevail, the war against terrorism would be fought to eliminate out-of-control jihadi groups previously nurtured or tolerated by the Pakistani state, not to secure additional funding from the US. Zardari and Sharif have different levels of commitment to eliminating the jihadis.

Having lost his wife to terrorism, Zardari understands that terrorism is a threat to Pakistan whereas Sharif still considers the war against terrorism as an American project. But no one in Pakistan's

new political center wants to continue running the risk of calibrating extremist groups for the sake of enhancing the country's global strategic significance, as Musharraf has continuously done since 9/11.

An elected Pakistani government might be less amenable, say, to requests for rendition of Pakistani citizens. But it would almost certainly be interested in rooting out Al Qaeda and stopping cross-border Taliban terrorism in Afghanistan. The civilians would also seek a clearer strategy against militant Talibanisation within Pakistan, particularly because they have a popular mandate in the form of electoral rejection of Islamists.

The PPP's Zardari has repeatedly stated in interviews that he considers normalisation of relations with India a priority because "Pakistan cannot move on without normal ties with India." As prime minister, Sharif had initiated the peace process with India after both countries' nuclear tests in 1998, yet that came to an abrupt halt when army commander Musharraf started the Kargil war over Jammu and Kashmir.

After initial confrontation, Musharraf as president has come around to managing a relatively

quiet relationship with Pakistan's larger South Asian neighbor.

During the run-up to the recent elections, none of the major political parties highlighted Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir. That raises expectations of a political consensus on developing normal relations with India without insisting on prior resolution of the Kashmir issue. In the past, any politician seeking friendly ties with India has faced criticism from rivals seeking to tap into anti-India sentiment within Pakistan.

The need of the hour in Pakistan is a "grand national compromise" that brings to an end the vilification and demonisation of some politicians, restores the military's prestige and ends its political role, limits the intelligence agencies to external security functions and results in a government that unites the Pakistani nation against terrorism and disintegration.

Pakistan's foreign policy also needs to be re-oriented towards friendlier relations with Pakistan immediate neighbors instead of being centered merely on scoring points in distant major world capitals. For this to happen, politicians and the permanent state apparatus must become partners, bringing to an end the subordinate

relationship that Musharraf had created with handpicked politicians.

If the anti-Musharraf parties can work together and the army's neutrality keeps Musharraf from rocking the boat by undermining the system again, Pakistan could be run according to its constitution. An independent judiciary and a free media would then become the guardians against abuse of power by elected officials.

Corruption would probably continue as it has for years, but would be dealt with by the courts and the voters, not by coups d'état. Musharraf has a few days to decide whether he wants to become part of the Grand National Compromise, salvage some respect, and voluntarily give up power. Or he could remain the major wound that must be dealt with before the healing of Pakistan can begin.

Hussain Haqqani is director of Boston University's Center for International Relations and co-chair of the Hudson Institute's Project on Islam and Democracy. He is the author of the Carnegie Endowment book *Pakistan between mosque and military* (2005) and served as an adviser to former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto.

© Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.