

Positive development in the political arena

The leading two parties must seize the opportunity

WITH the release of Khaleda Zia the two leaders are back in the centre stage of our political arena. Nothing could be more positive than a situation where the two major parties, shorn of their party chiefs for so long, can now move definitively forward and work towards a well participated, free and fair election.

This development had put aside any thoughts of the ill-conceived formula of 'minus two' that eventually became 'manage two' with the same result.

The protagonists of such a concept will have by now seen the fallacy of the scheme as being not only inopportune but inapplicable, given the popular base of the two ladies which the recent events have shown. One must admit that the plan was a major blunder, which put back the reform process many months. We stand wiser by this folly, fully cognizant of the reality that interference in the political process or imprudent intrusion into its realm is bound to throw up more problems than is likely to solve.

With their popularity vindicated and power base proven, the two leaders must seize the opportunity to recast the shape of our politics and the character of the polity. And towards that end the most important matter that the two must grasp is the issue of political reform.

In spite of, and notwithstanding, all that have happened since January of 2007, the issue of political reform still remains as relevant as ever. If anything, the developments of the past eighteen months validate the popular demand of reform of politics and political parties. It is an issue that must be addressed without further delay, and nothing can be a bigger blunder than to think that it will be business as usual in politics and we can proceed overlooking the reform issue. The nation cannot countenance repeat of the events that led to 11.

A redeeming feature of the recent developments is that the focus is now on parliamentary elections, with the demand for honest and good candidates as strong as ever. And if the character of the post election governance has to change for the better then reform is the most essential precondition that must be fulfilled. It is abundantly clear that changes cannot be imposed from outside but be internally motivated. And this is where the role of the major parties, particularly the two leaders assume great significance, because it is they who must initiate the changes within the party.

It is also a popular expectation that the two leaders meet, and we had always supported such an idea in the past. This time we do so with double emphasis since without consonance of thoughts of the two leaders the reform agenda will remain an unfulfilled aspiration of the people.

Polybag back in business?

The ban has lost its teeth

WITHOUT perhaps realising it, we are losing our battle with polythene shopping bags. We had discarded it six years ago under a nationwide ban. We carved a good name among the developing countries by the move but now the reputation is wearing thin. The almost ubiquitous reappearance of the non-biodegradable material poses a great threat to environment, particularly by choking the already dysfunctional sewerage system, not to speak of its insidious effect on soil quality and public health.

Part of the success of the earlier ban was attributable to public consciousness of the need to do away with it and a change of habit switching over to substitutes. But this no longer holds true. The issue is not so much though of habit as it is of unrestricted availability. Our City page investigation reveals the sources of supply being recycling from the discarded polybags and its unbridled manufacturing in old part of Dhaka with its wholesale networks.

The question of government's monitoring slack and the problem with operating mobile court in this area following separation of the judiciary from the executive will have to be addressed to ameliorate the situation. The law ministry needs to incorporate Environment Conservation Act under the Mobile Court Ordinance to enable mobile court drives against offenders of the ban. Previously, the environmental lawyers could request the DC office for a magistrate to operate a mobile court but this job is no longer under DC's office. The dividend of a law is best derived from application through a court. Law enforcers can hardly deliver the goods.

Six years is a long time to have had alternative packaging materials in place. This has not obviously happened. So long as that is the case the recalcitrant manufacturers will find ways to circumvent the law. The administration should get a move on to provide fiscal benefits to entrepreneurs intending to generate safe alternative packaging materials.

Making Dhaka more liveable



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

A few days ago I met someone who had come to Bangladesh on a brief consultancy assignment. He had been in Dhaka for about a week and was on his way home the next day via Bangkok. I asked him about his impressions about our capital. The question came after his query about the historical past of the city and the current efforts by some institutions to celebrate its 400th anniversary. Being a European by origin, he hesitated at first and then asked me if I would mind some straight comments. I assured him that candour was not a virtue but nevertheless, was welcome as far as I was concerned.

He was forthright in his description of our city. I must admit that I had to agree with nearly everything he said.

He had lived throughout in a hotel, centrally located next to the BIRDEM Hospital. He had made only a few forays into various parts of the city and his experience from that point of view was rather limited. Despite that, his observations were spot-on and based on his also being a tourist.

The gentleman pointed out that Dhaka had still a long way to go before we could expect a rush of foreign visitors. The city, according to him was over-populated and had little in terms of facilities or points of historical interest.

A sightseer, he also pointed out, does not want to be harassed the moment he steps out of the hotel. He was referring in this context to the scores of beggars who pester

pedestrians, particularly, anyone who looks like a foreigner at important cross-sections of the capital, even if they are inside cars (by banging on the windows). The presence of disabled panhandlers, standing in the rain, clutching malnourished children is not something that leaves a happy taste in the mouth for visitors. Instead, it evokes sympathy and a guilt complex among those going out for shopping. I could not but

friends, a lady, had been mugged very near her five star hotel in Karwan Bazar and the passers by and the police personnel on duty had just stood and watched. Lastly, he referred to the atrocious traffic jams and how Dhaka lacked an efficient mass transit system.

I could not rebut his critical comments. It however set me thinking.

For the last few weeks we have had many seminars and work-

shops about re-branding Bangladesh. We have watched spontaneous enthusiasm in this regard specially from our non-resident and expatriate Bangladeshis. These sessions have stressed on the need for a positive construction and the need to rid our natural disaster prone country of some associated pathetic epithets -- poverty, corruption, lack of governance and accountability, political partisanship and absence of due process of law.

On the one hand we have these aspirations and on the other, hard reality. This is particularly galling when you compare it with the write-up and the spectacular photograph of our city and its skyline as available in the Wikipedia Encyclopaedia.

Yes, we are trying to improve the image of Dhaka. Those associated with the voluntary organization 'Dhaka bashi' are particularly involved. On a regular basis they celebrate and observe special cultural occasions associated with the Bangalee ethos. Most of us enjoy their colourful efforts -- be

living conditions in our capital-city. I seek the reader's indulgence by starting with the rivers that act as thoroughfares and surround the capital. Of them, the Buriganga has probably become the biggest open-sewerage in the world. The open discharge of effluents and toxic materials from different industrial units has resulted in the death of this river. It is now devoid of fish and stinks to high heaven. Even thirty years ago, many availed of leisurely boat rides in this river and enjoyed its serenity in the late afternoon. Today, that is impossible. The Hazaribagh area has in fact been identified as one of the 30 most polluted spots in our blue planet. There is a very simple reason for that -- the absence of a functional regulatory mechanism. Let us create it as soon as possible.

In addition, we need to improve the quality of life by reducing the brown-outs that regularly affect our daily lives. I can understand the inefficiency of past political

governments in this regard, but what about our present sanitized Administration? They seem to have failed as well in resolving this issue. We are facing a crisis and there has really been no solution. Probably, we are caught up celebrating the 400th anniversary of Dhaka by replicating what the city was four centuries ago -- devoid of any reliable energy supply for each day and night. Can we not start thinking of using our own

We also need to spruce up our image by ridding the potential tourist sites of beggars and pushy vendors. For example, it is really a problem for anybody to visit the Curzon Hall, the Lalbagh Fort or the Sankhari Bazaar. The surrounding area, almost always, is filled with drug addicts and muggers. Law enforcement is negligible to say the least. Why should this happen?

Another aspect that needs attention is the quality of food served in roadside restaurants. As has been proved time and again, over the last few years, most restaurants provide stale and unhygienic items that induce illness and diarrhoea. Tourists normally rely on fast food which they consider as cheap and reliable. That is true in almost all the cities in our region other than in Dhaka. I fail to understand why health inspectors do not perform their jobs efficiently. It is probably due to petty corruption and lack of legal prosecution for damages against restaurants that provide adulterated or bad food.

The last facet is that of the absence of a proper mass transit system and the consequent traffic jams at all times. It is a sad commentary that even on this account, this Administration as well as the past political government failed to provide a functional response. Decision-makers have dithered over possible alternatives and nothing meaningful has emerged in the last seven years. It might be useful to consider dividing the week into odd and even numbered registration plate days. The last digit could then determine which days a motorised vehicle could be on the streets.

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Dhaka can still be salvaged for its residents. Let us take the first determined step in this regard right now.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

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agree with him. The enjoyment of being in a new city, the desire to unravel its mystery, vanishes away.

He asked me why the police authorities and the city regulators allow this to go on. In this regard, he mentioned that he was horrified to see some beggars who should rightly be inside institutions receiving care, rather than being on street corners. He argued that everyone knew we were a poor country seeking to rebrand our image, but having beggars, a few hundred, out of a city population of more than 12 million was really killing our efforts. He also added that this reflected badly on the manner in which those responsible for social welfare were carrying out their responsibilities.

We then talked of lack of clean pavements for those who wanted to walk around, muddy water-logged streets filled with potholes, poorly lit areas, the overflowing garbage and sewage in most roads and the atrocious quality of the air (filled with exhaust fumes). He also indicated the absence of law and order. Apparently, one of his

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Politics and polemics: A South African parallel

HEMAYETUDDIN AHMED

DO the current developments in the political scene look as though the country is moving ahead along a well-charted way towards reconciliation and a return to democracy? Though some of the roadblocks seem to have been averted, internal strife in the parties and inter-party bickering to gain or retain power circumventing the political and electoral reforms once agreed to in principle, still seem to pose a threat. Mere acquiescence to the adoption of forms of reform rather than its spirit and substance, more as measure of expediency than anything else, cannot help return to desired democracy. For this, a change of heart is required perhaps on the part of both the administration and the political parties.

People are therefore looking forward to the outcome of the talks between the EC and the parties. And frankly, a spirit of give and take and a strategic shift in their tactics can make a U-turn in our politics as had been done in South Africa by De Klerk and Mandela uniting the black and the white national parties

together to form the Republic of South Africa. How had this been done there in South Africa and why? South Africa is inhabited by a large number of tribes in different regions with their distinctive culture and tradition. Fighting for a cause is their passion. Their tribal interests often conflict with one another. Mandela himself had been in prison for 27 years. Even then, the skillful politician that Mandela is, he achieved his goal with an unprecedented peace initiative without any remorse or rancour. Mandela explained this in an interview with the Time magazine on the occasion of his 90th birthday. This needs to be closely studied by two of our estranged political parties and their leaders and, if possible, emulated. The interview was given to the managing director of the Time magazine who helped Mandela a couple of years ago in writing his best-seller autobiography.

Mandela, in this report, reminisced about his long imprisonment when he shifted from his previous stance of uncompromising rigidity on the ANC's resolve for no negotiation with the government from within the prison cell. But with a change in the government that replaced apartheid supporting Botha by liberal De Klerk (who released Mandela unconditionally) it necessitated a certain amount of flexibility in strategy to achieve his goal. To wipe out the barrier of the apartheid by struggle alone would have taken a long time and may be a great deal of bloodshed and suffering.

Most of his compatriots were not happy with this shift initially, but Mandela, by his tact and skill, managed to convince them of its need. And, ultimately it did pay off. What happened later was far beyond anybody's imagination. The black and the white combined

themselves to form a united Republic of South Africa with Mandela as the President and the former President De Klerk as his Deputy with the ANC controlling the National Assembly.

Clearly, the secret of his success is his honesty and sincerity of purpose combined with a sense of humility. After he chose to stand down after completion of his five-year term from power, when many people in the country and abroad started pampering him as the closest thing to a secular saint, an embarrassed Mandela said, -- far from it, he was merely a politician, and a pedestrian-politician for that matter. He learnt quite a few other lessons in his long struggle for freedom and democracy, which he applied prudently and discretely in difficult situation and found an acceptable solution for each thereby earning the title of a master politician, and winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 along with De

Klerk. In contrast, politicians in the subcontinent traditionally were always obsessed with polemics instead of exercising political wisdom and manoeuvring. During the entire period of apprenticeship, first for self-rule, and then, for full freedom, politicians of the sub-continent -- of which Bangladesh is a microcosm -- of every shade, colour and ideology played on polemics excessively. Politics is generally to steer the affairs of a polity along the path of progress and prosperity, maintaining peace and order in the society and also uplifting its social and economic condition, whereas polemics is an unholy means of usurping political power indulging in verbiage, mudslinging and nitpicking using the political clout for self-aggrandizement, that leads to corruption in various forms at all levels of the society.

Unlike Mandela et al, politicians here seem to find it hard to remain content with the epithet of a politician. With large followings among the half-literate, credulous and gullible voters in rural areas, using money and muscle power most of our politicians are prone to think that they have become leaders overnight with their mandate and try to portray a larger-than-life image. Quite often, they find polemics very rewarding.

Ever since one-eleven, in the miasma of political currents and crosscurrents, none of the two major parties or even the lesser parties seems to be keen to accommodate each other. The caretaker government is committed to create a level-playing field for holding a free and credible election according to the road map announced on July 15 last year, but it is grid-logged almost at every stage. At this point of time South Africa seems to offer a close parallel to the Bangladesh situation. One would only wish that the two major parties had studied Mandela and learnt a few of his lessons.

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Liberties and limits of democracy

ANAM A CHOUDHURY

IT'S one thing to throw out a bad government it's another to install something better. The caretaker government's attempt to clean up a corrupt political system and adopt economic reforms to help rebuild a ramshackle economy may have failed to a certain extent, but when politicians offer only crowd-pleasing rhetoric instead of sound and proven ideas, the result is not a promise of hope. Unsurprisingly, the caretaker government aroused public expectation of change, but couldn't achieve much. It is always difficult to defeat ghosts of the past. Some sociologists jokingly commented that corruption has entered the DNA of our national culture and has naturally reproduced itself there. Political corruption is widespread throughout the country. Unscrupulous politicians see their main job as to harvesting money.

People try to pin blame on Anti-Corruption Commission for the wholesale release of jailbirds, accused of corruption and scandals. There must be some misun-

derstanding about the role and jurisdiction of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The officials of this commission can only expose corruption and bring those responsible to justice. It is up to the court to decide whether someone is guilty. Lord Radcliffe, a Law Lord from 1949 to 1964, in the United Kingdom, once said that the judges undertake their task with an eye to securing the public interest. The judicial conception of the public interest includes, firstly, the interests of the state, its moral welfare, secondly, preservation of law and order and thirdly, the protection of property rights and finally judges' views on social and political issues of the day.

Another Law Lord, Lord Hailsham used to exercise discretion and gave direction to society. A highly respected Lord Chancellor and the Master of the Rolls, Lord Denning once went on so far as to say that keeping some innocent people to prison was preferable to undermining the confidence in the legal system. This country badly needs a Judicial Ombudsman to handle public grievances.

Often political actors do not hesitate to crush opponents, emasculate the courts and Parliament, eliminate independent broadcast media and scrap the independence of the national institutions, guaranteed by the constitution. They know it full well that the West has only limited influence over today's increasingly hostile Third World countries. We do not have to go beyond Zimbabwe to comprehend the corrupt realities of such politics.

Perhaps once again we are going to get usual politicians who'll mouth the usual platitudes about the glories of democracy and cynically practice antithesis of such values and principles. At this point in time, this country badly needs wise and visionary leader, who can uplift the lot of the poor and the socially deprived. That again needs more schools, more teachers, more colleges, and more vocational training institutes to create employability and more growth to generate greater employment.

Does democracy always produce fresh blood? I am afraid, the answer is perhaps no. Bangladeshis, are steaming mad at some of the corrupt politicians but can't seem to avoid re-electing them in the elections. In Russia, when Mr. Medvedev became president, a flurry of hopes surfaced, because he happened to be

young, modern and loved American rock music and thought to be more moderate in his views. When ex-president and king-maker Mr. Vladimir Putin appointed himself as his prime minister, in effect the virtual ruler of the country, all hopes were dashed immediately.

Many people died in the aftermath of the election in Pakistan. Pakistan fell victim to political infighting and the furies of religious division now sweep the country. If there is a winner so far from recent parliamentary election in Pakistan, it's seemingly the clerics who helped make Waziristan, the tribal region of the country, the most resilient havens of Al-Qaeda.

There is, of course, a loser, too: Pakistani democracy. Election failed to produce a modern and dynamic leader to pull the country

out of the political quagmire and break free from the ugly cycle of violence and political crisis.

The onset of democracy will not be any smoother there. One does not have to be antidemocratic to acknowledge that the transition to democracy can be pretty ragged in countries like Pakistan.

Politicians like Asif Ali Zardari will be the unwanted hero and Nawaz Sharif the villain. Mr Sharif met his political end during the second of his two terms as prime minister, when he tried to sack Mr Musharraf, who was then the powerful army chief of staff. Musharraf quickly overthrew Sharif and sent him into exile. But while Mr Sharif was in power he tried to force Parliament to make Sharia the law of the land to appease Islamic fundamentalists.

Appalled by the mess next door, many Arabs may prefer dictator-

ship to the 'anarchy' of supposedly democratic Iraq.

Does democracy build national cohesion? Answer is not a straight 'yes'. India's democratic political system seems utterly incapable of addressing the problem of Jammu and Kashmir. After more than 50 odd years of independence, still India keeps an estimated 600,000 troops in the state to fight insurgency. Not to speak of the problem of the Palestinians in Israel and Tamil speaking people in Sri Lanka.

Democracy often puts limits on central authority, can sometimes also diminish it. Many Third World countries have their own problems of democratic government. However, the United States and the Western powers firmly believe that democracy is a kind of political panacea, a patent medicine for whatever ailed your country or society. Bothered by an

entrenched corrupt government? Take a free and fair election. Got a command economy? Just free up the system. Our development partners should realize that the voice of the people is often found alarmingly hostile to such utopian ideas.

The American diplomat, Richard Boucher, the assistant secretary of state for South Asia, in his recent trip to Dhaka stated that free and fair elections were far more important to Bangladesh's development than all other issues. I hope he will appreciate that process of democracy may be very slow and even messy in our country and may also cause set back in political and economic reform. Politicians of many Third World countries literally change the very concept of democracy beyond all recognition. They move to snuff out even the faintest flickers of liberal democracy.

These political actors do not hesitate to crush opponents, emasculate the courts and Parliament, eliminate independent broadcast media and scrap the independence of the national

institutions, guaranteed by the constitution. They know it full well that the West has only limited influence over today's increasingly hostile Third World countries. We do not have to go beyond Zimbabwe to comprehend the corrupt realities of such politics. Perhaps these maverick leaders have developed resistance against nice democracy pills, but ordinary people suffer badly by its side effects.

A lot of East European countries held open elections. To the surprise of many, that were won by so-called ex-communists and democrats were so offended that they took to the streets to denounce newly elected governments.

It is true that democracy has many great virtues; no system has ever been proved superior. It needs to be grown and nurtured; we should not cram it down people's throat. It is probably a healthy thing that we learn these lessons on the limitations of democracy, for the cherished growth of the system.

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