

# Bangladesh at crossroads

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**B**ANGLADESH is at crossroads; lessons learnt since 1/11 could unite us towards a better future or a failed one if they are ignored. This government came at a time when the BNP and the AL, in pursuing their respective self-interests, had set Bangladesh on course to becoming a failed state. The BNP was scheming to return to power.

The Caretaker Government (CG) headed by the President led the public to believe that the BNP would come back to power through unfair means. The AL was determined not to let that happen and did whatever was necessary towards that end. In the seesaw battle that emerged, governance had become impossible. 1/11 put an end to the politics of disorder and destruction and brought back sanity to governance and public life.

The CG started off well tackling corruption fairly and in a transparent way after AL (one time) and then BNP (three times) had earned for Bangladesh Transparency International's title as the most corrupt nation on earth. People's hopes were raised when the CG incarcerated Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina together with some top leaders of AL and BNP in their drive against corruption, including Tareq Zia who had become a widely talked about person in that context.

Leading businessmen and bureaucrats who were perceived to be corrupt were also arrested. The government's steps for reform of important institutions like the Election Commission, the Anti Corruption Commission, etc. to make the fight against corruption sustainable were widely welcomed by the people. The so-called reformists within the BNP and the AL were also encouraged to openly call for reform in their parties, acknowledging that neither practiced democracy in their internal affairs. Somewhere during taking these good measures, the CG lost

its sense of proportion. The ACC and the NBR openly and the Joint Task Force silently went after far too many people than they could handle, forgetting that perception of guilt and proving it in a court of law are not the same thing. They also perceived wrongly that corruption could be weeded out completely by a CG with a limited tenure where such a responsibility has not been entrusted upon it by the constitution. There was another fundamental mistake they made believing that in a country where the relationship between income and prices in the market is irrational and illogical public servants could be totally honest.

The CG's popularity nosedived with Sidr that created havoc in the economy. Around then, prices of essentials that Bangladesh needed to import like rice and edible oil rose sharply in the international market. The price hike that occurred as a consequence hit the majority of the people very badly, particularly the fixed income group. The government's explanation about the international market did not convince anybody because when prices in the international market fell, there was no impact on the domestic market. Prices of essentials produced locally also rose. In Bangladesh's history prices of essentials never rose so quickly and so steeply and the average people never suffered (and are still suffering) as much as they have under the CG. The business community that could have eased the market did little because this government had summarily dismissed them as corrupt.

This government's attempts to manage politics also failed. First, it failed with its minus-two formula when the two former Prime Ministers refused to leave the country. Then it failed to create a new political grouping by trying to break the two main parties. Then it encouraged the main parties to break from within which too failed. Its attempt to form national government was

also just an idea that never took wings.

The CG, which explained emergency as a civilian government with military in the wings to aid it when necessary, did not leave anyone in doubt that it was the military exercising real power as the latter openly talked about their "vision" of democracy and foreign policy. The government also never resolved whether it was a CG or an interim government and behaved like either to suit its purposes. The Chief Adviser seldom came across in public imagination as one in control.

Advisers chose the media to show that they are in charge and, without realizing their folly, even informed the public through the TV about "negotiations" to release political leaders whose cases are in court! Fear of falling prey to the anti-corruption dragnet paralyzed the economy and civil bureaucracy. The CG realized the mistake but took too long to create the Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) to jump-start the economy and to give the bureaucracy confidence. The TAC now languishes without work. Those the TAC could have given relieve to revive the economy are facing court cases and thus cannot come before it; others, including the bureaucracy, see more logic to wait it out.

People who supported this government wholeheartedly started losing confidence in it by the time Sheikh Hasina was granted bail. The manner of her release gave a wrong signal to the public; that its fight against corruption was weakening and that it was seeking a "safe exit" from the mess it made with governance. When Sheikh Hasina was arrested, she was not even shown common civility as a woman and former Prime Minister. When she was released on bail, she was treated as a presumptive Prime Minister with four Advisers calling on her within hours of her release and the CA making a courtesy phone call to her. Sheikh Hasina's release was followed by speculation in the media that Khaleda would also be



released. While this remains pending.

Tareq Zia has been granted bail despite ACC's unsuccessful efforts with the High Court, giving the impression that it alone wants to pursue the anti-corruption agenda - a feeling that has been strengthened with most of the high-profile politicians and businessmen arrested in the drive against corruption now free on bail.

The people's disappointment notwithstanding, the CG has achieved notable successes. First,

it has exposed the corrupt face of politics and politicians, creating conditions for reform from within. Second, it has exposed corruption in a large number of politicians in both BNP and the AL that will convict many of them, making them ineligible to contest in the next elections. This will give the political parties the opportunity to nominate honest people for the next election. Third, because of the awareness it created among the public on the corruption issue, political parties will feel discouraged to nominate

people with image problem. Fourth, The ACC has established itself as an institution that will weaken the nexus of corruption among the politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats. Finally, the EC has made changes in the electoral laws that will make future elections fair and more transparent.

The nation stands at crossroads; its politics, whether one likes it or not, back in Hasina and Khaleda's hands as a result of the mess that the CG has made by stepping on every section of the

society, minus the armed forces, with its anti-corruption agenda and failure to control the market. The AL and BNP have not broken apart. The so-called reformists are now trying their best to be forgiven for daring to oppose their leaders. The electoral alliances are shaping up exactly in the same manner as in the pre 1/11 days. The CG has no other alternative but to allow the new dynamics in politics to develop and let the elections decide the future of Bangladesh for people's patience, and also that of major

donors, will not last if for any reason the elections are delayed.

Within that prospect, there is reason to hope that Khaleda and Hasina will not conduct politics in their old style, which was doing pretty much what they pleased. The public awareness the CG has created will put pressure on the next government for good governance. Reforms in the EC will make the next elections more transparent. The strengthened ACC will be a better watchdog on all types of corruption, including those in the election process. Both parties will find it difficult to agitate over election results because they are now aware that mindless agitation benefits no one, is fatal for the country, and the public is against it.

The new faces expected to enter the next parliament in place of many old ones who would not be able to contest for legal reasons will give the Parliament a much better chance to work so that political parties could deal with their conflicts there, making way for hartal and vandalism in the streets much less frequent. Such politics could even encourage bipartisanship on national issues like economic development, fight against corruption and terrorism and foreign policy. Finally, the so-called reformists could also feel encouraged to tell their leaders when they go wrong and not when they are incarcerated so that politics could be free of sycophancy and Hasina and Khaleda could see reality better although their recent behaviour does not make one optimistic on this count.

The time under the CG may thus not be wasted time. It has created possibilities for the nation to hope. It now depends on Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina and their parties to let the nation achieve these possibilities. Otherwise, the day when Bangladesh becomes a failed state and a hot bed for Islamic fundamentalism may not be that distant.

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# For Bangladesh decentralisation is the answer

BRIG GEN (RETD.) JAHANGIR KABIR, *naic, psc*

**B**ARELY hundred days are left for the parliament election; the sheen of the CTG is fading as a reminder of its imminent departure. It is a defining moment how would it like to be judged. The sword of emergency is dangling on our heads. Suggesting the right course when the authority

tralise the administration. People voted thrice under the British, as they had three-tier governments, central, provincial and district governments. There is one vote now in five years for a single, central government. If people of erstwhile East Pakistan could be trusted with trade and commerce, industries, law and order, border affairs, land management, just about everything of the middle

Dhaka; democracy Dhaka style not only has no connection with the people, it is fundamentally anti-people. If a head office of a bank covering the entire Bangladesh with hundreds of branches decides to serve all clients from one window in Dhaka it will be sheer madness and total chaos. One government in Dhaka cannot take all the responsibilities of 150 million people. It is not fair to say there are not good people in politics; it is bad management that is retarding both politics and the politicians. Democracy is not the culprit nor must it be said that all politicians are suspects; the real flaw is in the unitary form of government.

How many times can Bangladesh slip into the dark hole of uncertainty? What is frightening is that people are losing confidence in politics and the parties mistrust one another, which produced the CTG and its extended life. Some elites think we are unfit for democracy and speak loudly against it. Such comments can come only from those with colonial mindset, who might have been physically freed but do not understand freedom from slavery. They are like the slaves who cried for the loss of masters after Abraham Lincoln freed them from slavery.

In the style of the great Mogul Emperor Akbar and his 'Nava Ratnas' (nine jewels), the legacy continues that all wisdom is near the hub of the ruler. The imperial arrogance blurs that only 'bangals' (unfortunately an abuse in Bengali culture) meaning illiterate and uncultured brutes live in the villages. Living in the rural area of Europe and America symbolizes aristocracy and respect. Farmers are the most powerful and respected people in America. Cowboys, their jeans and wild looks have captured the fashion world. Sadly in our case, a fully urbanite young lady once asked me how 'dhan gach' (paddy plant) looks like, to prove her ignorance.

When 'zamindari' (feudalism) was abolished from East Pakistan in 1954 most of the landlords and their families moved to urban areas for a living. It suddenly created a void in the rural leadership. It was the beginning of the absentee

leadership that harmed the representative character of democracy, where leaders no longer lived with the voters. Almost none of the elected members of parliament live with the people in their constituencies. The vacuum can only be met if we have three-tier government and residency enforced on the governments below the central one.

Education, communication, expanding economic activities and media have created a fair amount of leadership material in the rural areas. Only tons of money needed to buy election could not be accumulated in the rural areas, as no such cheap source exists outside Dhaka. Nobel Laureate Dr. Yunus empowered many 'collateral-less' poor; it is time to empower rural Bangladesh to break away from the shackles of absentee leadership. Foreign policy does not noticeably convert into daily morsel for an average citizen; national defence is least understood till the threat develops. Let all such affairs be remotely managed by the central government; responsibility of immediate needs of the people must be off the back of the government in Dhaka.

It is ridiculous to even conceive, much less practice, unelected bureaucratic administration in divisions and districts between elected government in Dhaka and the moribund upajilla council. The people should be allowed to have their day-to-day needs met by elected governments in divisions and upajillas. Health, education, trade, commerce, industry, law and order, border affairs, electricity, water, communication etc. must be with divisional governments in Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong - as is done in other democracies. Responsibilities of the districts should be divided between divisional and Upajilla council. It would be best to name upajilla as Jilla council, empowering them as fully functional county government to meet the needs of the people from nearest to home. It would be the real decentralisation and democratisation of Bangladesh. Birth and death, marriage and

divorce, immunization and family planning, primary education, irrigation, seeds and insecticides and fertilizers, local roads, any other important activities like bazaars and traditional arbitration to resolve local disputes should be looked after by the Union council to maintain the tradition of social justice.

Earlier the diagnosis is completed, better it will be for stabilising politics in Bangladesh. Everything has a nebulous beginning; without a start we shall never learn to perfect. The governments even in the most advanced democracies are never perfect. There will be people of the governments above and below in the three-tier system for corrective measures. The watchdog institutions like intelligence agencies, commissions, Ombudsman, opposition parties, judiciary are there to guard the interest of the people. My association tells me, the press and media is the real bulldog of the people. Lastly, people will opine every four to five years over their governments - either to retain or fire it. Communism had much charisma for hungry minds but eventually came round to tell humanity that democracy has no real alternative. Delaying the treatment is to prolong the suffering. Let us jettison the fault of the constitution to salvage democracy through three tier governments for the welfare all.

The question is who is going to tie the bell to the cat. Ershad's upajilla council continues despite all kinds of abuses hurled at him. He could not complete the job of decentralisation as he had his own agenda, which forced him to make compromises. A doctor opens the womb to save the distressed mother and the child. At this crucial time of our nation surgery has no real alternative to save the people and democracy. The caretakers have failed to deliver and time is ticking away. The three-layer elected government should be approved by the people through a referendum to set the controversies at rest.

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# The nuclear deal and India's emergence

MAJ. GEN. (RETD.) DIPANKAR BANERJEE

**W**HEN the history of modern India is written, the nuclear deal with the US in 2008 will be considered at par with India's economic liberalization of 1991. The first liberated India from the self imposed shackles of a socialist economy. The second frees India from the bonds of technological isolation. The process also acknowledged India's emergence as an emerging nation with potential and capabilities. Yet, objections by the 'naysayers' raises questions whether India's polity is indeed 'free' and empowered enough to decide what is good for the nation. Nothing else could be expected from the Left parties with their outdated ideologies and extra territorial loyalties, determined to keep India poor and weak. China's ultimately showing its hand at the NSG on 5 September 2008 after all the back door manipulations had failed to stop the deal, made this abundantly clear. But, the more surprising stand was that of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Its leaders had initiated the process of legitimization through Jaswant Singh's and Brajesh Mishra's untiring efforts. Yet, when the deal led to an outcome even beyond their expectation, they acted as spoil sports. Serious doubts will now be cast on the BJP's ability to lead the country forward in the future.

The achievements in the deal have to be assessed in the backdrop of the past - India's non-nuclear status under the NPT and its isolation from nuclear commerce after the ill conceived nuclear tests at Pokharan in 1974. The non-availability of high grade uranium as a consequence was the principal cause why the existing nuclear energy reactors are today operating at 40 per cent

capacity, instead of 90. This also impedes India's move towards the third stage of thorium based reactors, which promises to assure India both autonomy and security in the energy sector sometime in the future.

India's own emergence as a world power depends on maintaining rapid economic growth, which is impossible without access to adequate energy from every commercially and ecologically viable source. In the next two to three decades at least, energy security for India will have to come substantially from nuclear energy. It is also a "clean" form of energy and therefore, both acceptable and cost effective. Yet, India was unable to do this with all the restrictions imposed on it by the discriminatory nuclear non-proliferation regime. Presently nuclear energy constitutes merely 3 per cent of India's total energy mix. Provided follow up measures are taken in domestic legislation and others, the deal is likely to change this to 8 per cent by 2020 and to 20 per cent by 2030.

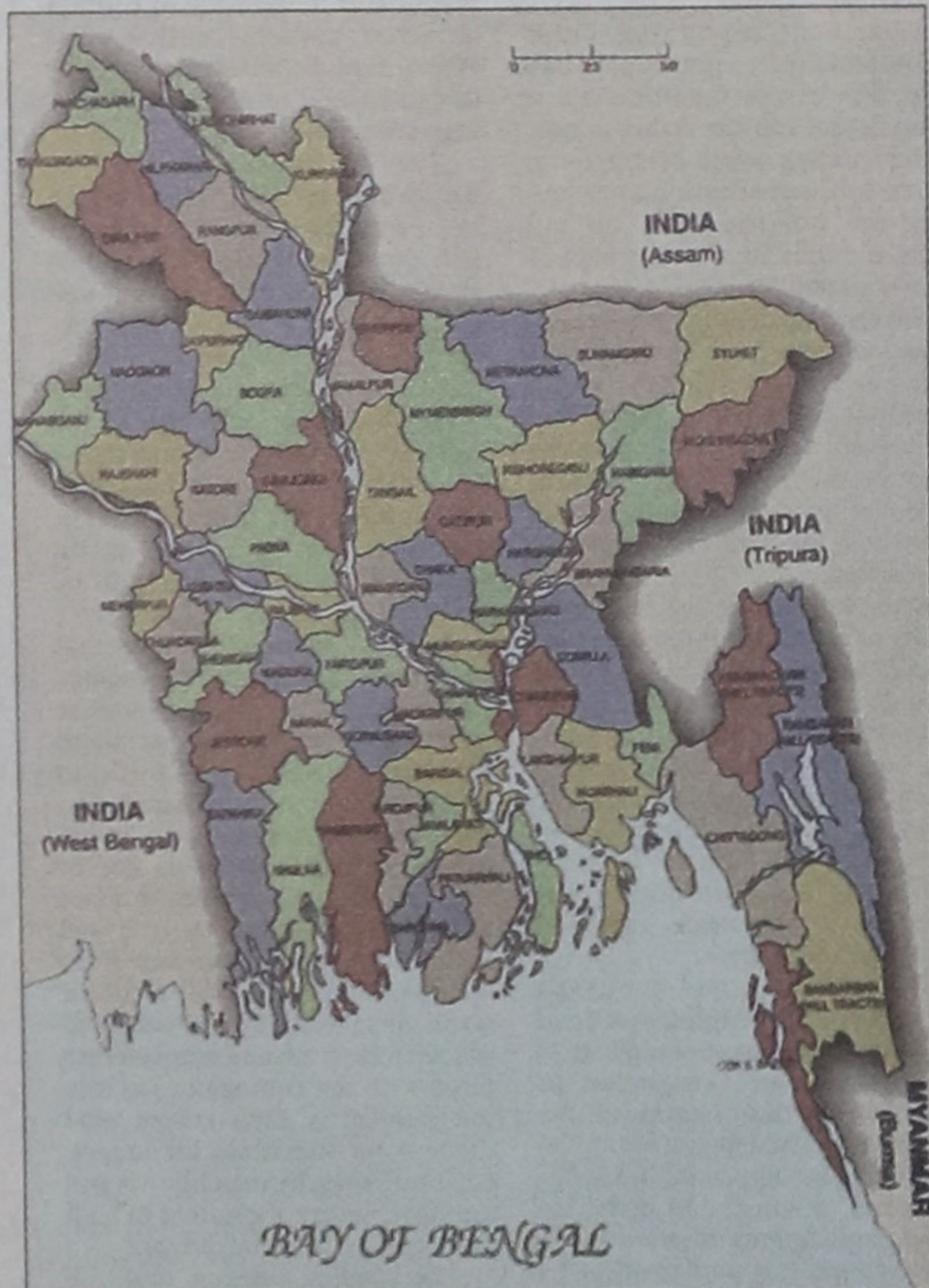
The deal tacitly recognizes India's position as a nuclear weapon power and lifts nearly all curbs imposed on it under the discriminatory NPT regime and does not require signing or adhering to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. It liberates Indian nuclear technology and promises Indian scientists, long suffering under sanctions, an opportunity to emerge as leading players in the world. It also promises to empower major Indian power companies, to imbibe new technologies and compete in tomorrow's nuclear power production and make huge profits both at home and abroad. No wonder that their shares surged by about 8 per cent in the Mumbai Sensex on the first working day.

But, what about the objections voiced at different quarters? The question of nuclear testing is

patently a non-issue. Indeed Brajesh Misra, the interlocutor of the BJP with the US after the nuclear tests strongly supports the deal. It was his hard work that laid the foundations for this offer from the US, through cooperation in space, 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' (NSSP) and other strategic issues. In truth the deal has gone beyond what was envisaged under the earlier dialogue. The reality is that nuclear testing today is beyond the pale of international norm and no country, even the US, can ignore this reality. Within the deal India has given no guarantee and is in no way prevented from testing. Should India need to test in supreme national interests, India will do so, no matter the consequences. In reality such a situation is only in the realm of conjecture. India's nuclear arsenal is well tested and guaranteed by our scientists and we need to have confidence in them. This deal in no way circumscribes India's strategic weapons potential. All the fissile material that may conceivably be required lies outside of IAEA safeguards. Our 'minimum credible nuclear deterrence' doctrine can be well served with the uranium and fissile material that we already possess and can produce indigenously.

The final touches to the deal require US Congressional approval, but the current reality is likely to pose no major difficulty. What this deal provides is very substantive. It has given India supreme confidence. Its diplomats have delivered in spite of enormous odds. The world has recognized and accepted, even if reluctantly by some, India's right to emerge at par with other countries and assume its rightful position in the comity of leading nations of the world. If internal political bickering can be addressed, this deal may well become the precursor of a resurgent India.

By arrangement with IPCS, New Delhi.



goes wrong is dangerous in an environment of suspended democracy. Yet the country belongs to the people, in the spirit of '71 cowardice must not be cultivated in the face of fear or danger. We are on a cross road, the controversies might endanger the stability of Bangladesh. Nothing substantial has been done to clean politics and decen-

government, the government in Dhaka must trust the people of Rajshahi or any other division with responsibilities of the middle government. It is deprivation of this right that had broken Pakistan and made democracy unstable in Bangladesh. From the management of a primary school to improvement of a village road need sanction from