

Has BNP learnt from 1/11?

The BNP's present excuses are no doubt parallel to that of the excuses that they put forward between October 2006 and January 2007. In order to rescue the party from its present condition (recent factional infighting in front of BSMMU and at Bagerhat), there is no alternative to re-shaping the party.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

It appears that the BNP and its alliance members learnt little from the nation's predicament over the last two years. Since the fall of HM Ershad's autocratic regime, the nation voted the BNP to power twice out of three genuine elections -- in 1991, 1996 and 2001. The AL had a mandate once in 1996. In all new democracies, election year is always a year of political turmoil or brinkmanship. Needless to say, Bangladesh is not an exception.

In 1996 the nation witnessed a drama played by the BNP-led government, when they did not want to give in to the demand of the then combined opposition for continuing with the independent caretaker government (CTG), like 1991, for conducting future general

elections. In order to counter this demand the BNP even staged a voter-free election in February 1996.

In contrast to this, the AL, in 2001, handed over power to justice Latifur Rahman (CTG chief), without any hitch or controversy after ruling the nation for five years. Once again, BNP's turn came in 2007 to relinquish and hand over power to a CTG.

Needless to say, the BNP's misadventure and refusal to conduct the 2007 general election in a free and fair environment brought about the emergency on January 11, 2007.

While the CTG and the EC are committed to hold the suspended 9th parliamentary election on December 18, the BNP has once again started playing games with the CTG and the EC allegedly with a

view to having the election held after December 18.

It appears that the BNP is challenging the CTG and the EC so that the election roadmap currently in place cannot be achieved. The latest challenge is on the issue of the registration of the political parties by October 15. This deadline was put forward by the EC months ago.

Now, the BNP wants to defer this while all other parties, big and small, are ready to adhere to the EC's ruling. Thus, one may ask, is the BNP genuinely interested in participating in the next general election?

The informal straw polls conducted by the media presently suggest that the BNP-alliance has little chance of winning the election due to the lack of credible candidates in a majority of the

seats. The alliance's leading party, BNP, is in disarray now, with multiple factions and weak leadership in the absence of Mannan Bhuiyan and Tarique Rahman.

Thus, it is not difficult to understand the BNP's desire to delay the forthcoming election as much as possible, so that they can re-group and have enough time to repair the damage done between 2001 and 2006.

Having said this, one may ask, how far will the CTG and the EC go to appease BNP? With this delaying tactic the BNP is trying to push the ball to the court of the AL-led 14-party coalition. Since the AL and its coalition partners are now ready to go to the polls, there is no room for changing this date.

God forbid, if any such thing happens, it would simply push the nation into another catastrophe. If the people sense a deal between the CTG and the opposing forces, one can imagine the consequences. The nation is ready now to vote, and the EC is fully prepared to hold a free and fair election. Nothing else will do.

It seems that the BNP has learnt very little from the emergency

during the last 20 months. This party must look back and think whether it was worth making the president the CA, or Justice Aziz the CEC?

Both of them had been holding two constitutional positions simultaneously. These moves had never been seen even during the autocratic regimes, let alone in a democracy. In turn, the nation suffered economically and the BNP self-destructed politically.

The BNP's present excuses are no doubt parallel to that of the excuses that they put forward between October 2006 and January 2007. In order to rescue the party from its present condition (recent factional infighting in front of BSMMU and at Bagerhat), there is no alternative to re-shaping the party.

If democracy survives, there is always a chance that the BNP will win again in the future, providing it comes to terms with reality and throws out the rhetoric. If they do not recognise this, the leaders will simply be abandoning the grassroots supporters who are suffering from hopelessness and political fatigue because of the corruption



Has the lesson been learnt?

of its elected and non-elected leaders during the last term.

For democracy to flourish, every nation needs a strong oppo-

sition, to say the least. The politicians of all persuasions must come to terms with this. The sooner it is done, the better it will

be for the nation and for our ailing democracy.

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The success of failure

Under certain conditions, due to forces and events beyond our control, we cannot achieve the best or ideal solution; therefore, we often need to settle for the second best. That we often settle for something less than ideal is part of our everyday experience. Headed by a Princeton-trained economist, the caretaker government has many economists within its ranks, so such an option for the second best is not a surprise.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THOUGH somewhat paradoxical, in the mysterious real world, often successes of failures are as real as failures of successes. This is not a rehash of some philosophical discourses where philosophers speak, paradoxically, and ironically, of "closeness of distance" or "distance of closeness," a la Heidegger. The purpose here is simply to reflect on the alleged failure of the interim government of Bangladesh that took office in January 2007.

I digress to make my point. I met Piotr Sztompka in the World Sociology Congress in New Delhi in August 1986 when we were fellow panelists in a session on social movements chaired by P.N. Haksar, then in charge of the Indian Statistical Institute. This was a side event of the World Congress, and was held at the Nehru Memorial Library.

Professor Sztompka, a distinguished Polish sociologist, was reviewing the failure of the Solidarity movement in Poland. As is well known, the movement began with the shipyard workers in the port city of Gdansk.

It was ironic that the movement was a working class movement against a socialist government, a movement that began as a protest against rising prices, lower wages and the rights of the workers. It had roots in the general disillusionment with socialism.

The movement, which was to play an historic role in the subsequent collapse of socialism, was met with crackdown and came to a halt following the declaration of Martial Law in 1981. In 1986, Poland was in the grip of General Jaruzelski. Things appeared stable, and many people thought Solidarity was

finished and a new phase of authoritarianism would follow.

Sztompka's main argument in 1986 was that there were successes of failed movements. No movements fail completely, and we need to see the gains and not lose hope. Four years later, I caught up with Piotr Sztompka at the 1990 World Sociology Congress in Bielefeld, Germany.

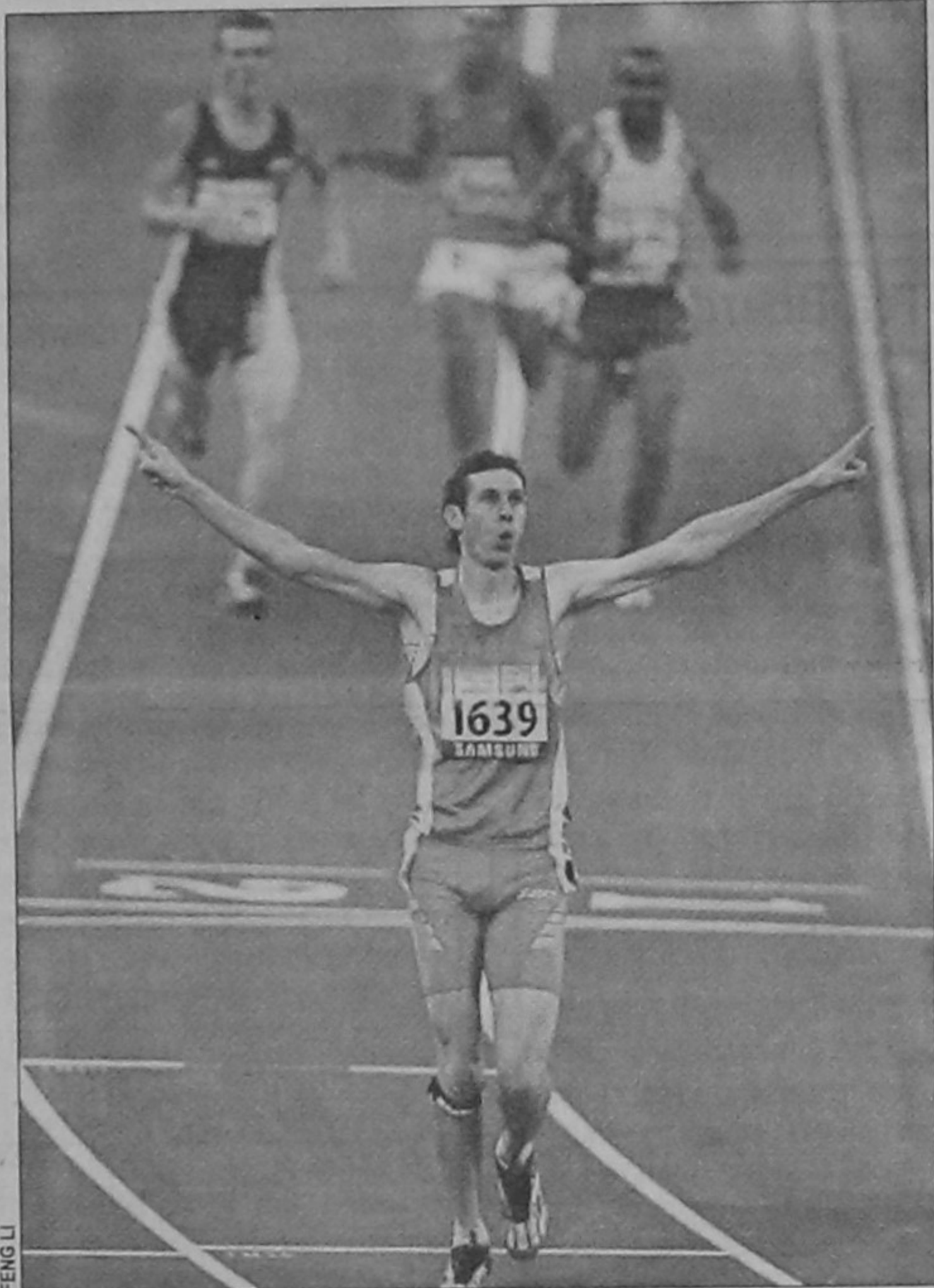
I reminded him of his paper and his analysis of the success of the failed movements. In 1990, General Jaruzelski was out following the national election of 1989, which brought Solidarity, under the leadership of Lech Walesa, to power. Poland went through reforms and dismantled the authoritarian system.

I recall this story to make a point, in an effort to mollify and reassure those (including the present author) who are disturbed and disenchanted by what appears to be a U-turn of the caretaker government in Bangladesh. The apparent failures will have many successes in the future of Bangladesh.

What looks like a failure or, more appropriately, capitulation, has sown important seeds of change for the future. Apart from exposing the corruption and lies of a number of politicians, the actions of the government have debunked many of the myths of the invincibility of the powerful politicians.

Although political pundits in Dhaka are debating whether, following the proposed December 18 elections, Bangladesh will return to the chaotic days of the pre 1/11 or not, it is important to take stock of the gains and failures of the interim government.

Several writers have pointed out that the government was too ambitious to achieve all its goals. It was a hybrid government, a military regime with a civilian face, and so on. Sure, the government lacked



First is success but second is not failure.

mandate but not good intentions.

The government is credited with setting up a string of highly efficient commissions manned by capable and honest people, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission, Election Commission, the Public Service Commission, and the ostensible separation of the judiciary from the executive branch of the government.

Although there are lingering doubts in the minds of many about the neutrality of the judiciary, it is a bold move that deserves kudos. The most important contribution, however, was the return of hope.

The credibility of the interim government was vindicated by the fact that people were asking too many things from the government, from initiating the trial of the war criminals to cleaning the mess in the civil service and banning student politics. If it is a failed government why demand so much from it? Of course, with time such demands declined, reflecting the diminished expectations of the people.

What some analysts consider as inconsistency, change of mind, and U-turn can be seen as flexibility. The theory of second best is an important idea, a genuine contribution of the field of economics.

Under certain conditions, due to the forces and events beyond our control, we cannot achieve the best or ideal solution; therefore, we often need to settle for the second best. That we often settle for something less than ideal is part of our everyday experience.

Headed by a Princeton-trained economist, the caretaker government has many economists within its ranks, so such an option for the second best is not a surprise.

Many in Bangladesh continue to grumble and complain about the failures of the interim government. And, of course, the government has its share of failures, which no one can deny -- but all I want to suggest is: please do not neglect the success of failures.

The author is a Professor of Sociology at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Making a difference in South Asia

AUW works with in-country representatives to identify young women who demonstrate exceptional potential, talent and intellect and would benefit from additional coursework prior to commencing their undergraduate studies. For these students, successful completion of the Access Academy coursework will lead to admission to the Asian University for Women undergraduate program.

MARYANN BYLANDER

WHEN I first heard of the Asian University for Women, I immediately identified with its mission and dream. I had seen too many bright young women in Phnom Penh complain about the low quality of their education, and seen too many girls in rural areas drop out of high school because they didn't see opportunities for higher education even if they graduated. I knew that I wanted to see Cambodian women have access to the kinds of opportunities that I saw possible through AUW.

I have been working with an organization supporting educational development in rural Cambodia since 2005. The NGO I work with supports 8 schools, 11 villages, and over 1,000 students. Still, in many ways, I feel that the biggest impact I have had in Cambodia thus far has been my small role in helping to recruit and support the 8 Khmer young women who are now part of AUW's first Access Academy.

Opportunities for higher education are limited in Cambodia, and women make up only a small percentage of university graduates. Though private universities are growing in number, these are costly and nearly all are located in Phnom Penh. Limited government scholarships provide support for the brightest students from high schools nationwide, but even these do not cover the costs of housing and meals. In a culture where girls traditionally do not move far from their families, young women often have an added cultural barrier to education. Even those who attend university do not necessarily receive quality education.

Teachers are inadequately trained, and students report widespread practices of cheating, buying grades, and high rates of absenteeism among educators from primary school through graduate programs.

Before becoming AUW's country coordinator for Cambodia, I spoke to several friends and co-workers about the university, trying to gauge if there would be enough interest, ability, and motivation to recruit students for the Access Academy's first class. In part, I realised I was also gauging whether I was passionate and confident enough about the program to become its recruiting face in Cambodia. I also wasn't sure how many women would be interested in giving up their university scholarships, family networks, and stable lives to study at such a new university in a foreign country they hardly knew.

I met a bright young friend in university and asked her to tell me what she thought of the opportunity to go study in Bangladesh at an international women's university. I reminded her of some of my own concerns for the potential applicants: that she would be far from home, removed from her social networks, living in a developing country where she would have trouble communicating, and in an academically challenging environment that would be mentally difficult. She nodded thoughtfully, considered my arguments, and told me that she thought Cambodia, and young women like her, needed more opportunities like AUW. "You know," she told me, "here we are like a frog in a well. We can only see the small circle above us, and there are so few ways to get out and get a view of the things which are outside the well. I'm not sure how we can move forward

without knowing these things. These girls that go, maybe they can break open the well."

Less than a year later, I was accompanying the brightest young women I have met in Cambodia on their first plane flight out of their country, watching their eyes widen in the terminal, on the airplane, in Bangkok, in Dhaka, and finally in the recognition of similar talent and motivation among their new peers at the Access Academy. I know this was only the beginning of their personal growth, as well as the new experiences and knowledge that they will bring back to their home country. It continues to be a privilege to be part of that growth.

About the university

The Asian University for Women (AUW) located in Chittagong, Bangladesh, is the first international institution of its kind in South Asia -- a private, regional institution of the highest quality, dedicated solely to women's education and leadership development. AUW seeks to enable its students to become skilled and innovative professionals, service-oriented leaders, and promoters of tolerance and understanding. With an innovative curriculum focused on critical thinking skills and entrepreneurship, communication, and problem solving, AUW aspires to produce graduates prepared to become leaders both in their fields of study and in their future societies.

The university is currently offering eligible students the option to enroll at its Access Academy, a year-long, pre-collegiate bridge program that

provides a critical foundation in English language studies, mathematics and quantitative reasoning, and computer skills. The academy is designed to help students develop the academic skills they need to pursue a rigorous university education which is international in scope.

The first Access Academy class of about 130 students was welcomed in March 2008, and will graduate the program in time to join the first class of undergraduates of the Asian University for Women in September 2009. The Academy addresses the various needs of students in terms of academic preparation, social and cultural adjustment, youth mentorship, counseling, technological skills, and recreation. Through these comprehensive efforts, the Access Academy encourages young women to be assertive, confident, and culturally sensitive.

The inaugural Access Academy class is a representation of talented women from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. AUW works with in-country representatives to identify young women who demonstrate exceptional potential, talent and intellect and would benefit from additional coursework prior to commencing their undergraduate studies. For these students, successful completion of the Access Academy coursework will lead to admission to the Asian University for Women undergraduate program.

Maryann Bylander is Country Co-ordinator, Cambodia, for AUW.



Producing complete individuals.

Now only kids can understand derivatives

Vittiachi

ONLY IN ASIA

by Nury Vittachi

MUMS and dads, today I sound an urgent alarm about a creeping danger which is growing unnoticed within our very homes. I am talking about our children's brains.

Now I'm quite sure you gaze lovingly at your child and think to yourself say out loud, depending on how obnoxious you are, "Wow, my child is just SO incredibly intelligent."

I have news for you. Your friends think the same about their children. I think the same about mine.

The obvious answer is that I am right while the rest of you are wrong. But new evidence suggests that your

kids may also be pretty smart.

An alert reader informs me that scientists have discovered that IQ scores have been climbing at a steady three points a decade for at least half a century and the rate of increase may be accelerating.

Three points multiplied by umpteen decades may not seem like much, but a small number of points make a big difference. Fifteen points would turn George W. Bush (whose IQ is 125) into Hillary Clinton (whose IQ is 140).

In other words, the real reason you have to get your child to sort through the menus on your mobile

phone and fix your ring tone is that she's actually smarter than you are.

Already, in my house, the only people who can operate the cable TV box are the children. The only people who can write SMS messages using predictive text are the children. The only people who can get to level nine in Nintendo Wii games are the children.

The only people who can disable the "net nanny" filter on the computer to watch uncensored stuff are the children. The only people who can use communications technology to sell index-linked derivative hedge fund securities to unsus-

pecting high street banks are the children. The only people who can create fictitious nominee shell companies in the Cayman Islands to launder vast amounts of drug money are the children.

According to my calculations, the joint brainpower of my three children will exceed that of their parents by the beginning of next year. Or last year.

Why are kids getting smarter? According to a book called The Scientist in the Crib, children are born smart and by the age of three have 15,000 synapses (connections) per neuron. Their brains are

twice as active as mine (even without taking Friday nights into consideration).

Kids then go through a process called education, which dumbs them down. Before teachers fire-bomb my offices, the rest of the theory says children are getting smarter because today's educators are doing better work than their predecessors.

When I was young, the poster child for junior intelligence was Kim Ung-yong, a Korean kid who solved differential calculus problems live on TV aged four. Today's equivalent is Akrit

Jaswal, born in India in 1993. He became a practicing surgeon at the age of seven, operating on another child. He's now at Punjab University in Chandigarh, working on a cure for cancer.

It is not inconceivable that our own kids may turn out to be like him. If any of mine want to try being an under-age practicing surgeon, I will certainly not stand in their way. Indeed, I will stand as far away as I can.

I may be an adult, but I'm not stupid, you know.

Smart kids can abuse our columnist via www.vittachi.com.