

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'CTG has done as much as it thought realistic given the ground realities'

Chairman of Transparency International Bangladesh (also serving as chairman of Bangladesh Environment Movement and Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik), Prof. Muzaffer Ahmad obtained BA (Honours) and MA in Economics from Dhaka University in 1955 and 1956. He received MA and PhD in Economics from University of Chicago in 1964 and 1965. Prof. Muzaffer joined department of economics at Dhaka University as in October 1957. He served as chief of industries division of the first planning commission of Bangladesh government from July 1972 to September 1974. He joined IBA in 1974 as its first professor. He was a member of the council of advisers to the president of Bangladesh in 1977-78. The best known of his publications include "Public Enterprise in an Intermediate Regime" and "State and Development." Shamim Ashraf took the interview.

How much reform has been done, how long will it last? We can't say all our demands for reforms have been fulfilled. The CTG has done as much as it thought realistic given the ground realities. As a result there is a mismatch between reforms done and demands of the citizens. How much of these will last depends on political commitment of the parties. Thus, it depends on whoever comes to power. The ordinances passed in connection with several reforms during the CTG tenure will require approval of the parliament. If those do not like these win in the election, some of the reforms may face demise.

How much has the country advanced since 1/11? Bangladesh had some economic shocks like the rise in fuel and rice prices. The government had to spend much for importing fuel and rice. Despite that, foreign currency sent by Bangladeshis working abroad helped us much. Besides, we're yet to fully recover from the destruction caused by flooding and Cyclone Sidr. We can see this as failure of the government or as natural calamities or disaster which are results of many years of environmental destruction and climate change. If the government could be more coordinated, and conducted the anti-corruption drives in a more selective way by setting priorities instead of being so hasty, it could have achieved the target it had set at the outset. The counsels had some

failure in case preparation, presentation and court defence. Laymen like us are not informed enough to say whether it is the result of large number of alleged political appointments in the judiciary in the past years or due to legal procedures involving delays. Not granting bail in the beginning and then granting so many bails in one day makes people wonder how the court performs.

Do you see any conclusive result of the reform moves?

One of the main pledges of the government was holding election within two years. In that regard, it has prepared a new voter list and a amended electoral laws. Experimentally, it held the municipality elections and amended the candidates' conduct rules. The government has made progress towards holding the parliamentary elections and also said it would hold the local government elections. It is going to achieve this target in 24 months, which it had said at the very beginning, though it would have been better if it could have done it in a shorter time.

The second pledge was that of fighting corruption. Once cases were filed, there were many convictions in the special courts. When the CTG came to power, there were many expectations. Many people asked the government to do certain things while some others said that the CTG didn't need to do anything else than hold the elections. The CTG initiated some tasks which

are yet to be completed, and maybe those had less priority in their agenda. Administrative reform is among those which were not in their agenda. Political governments kept many things half done, in comparison with that, the caretaker government has done many things in many sectors in a short time.

Has the government succeeded in what it wanted to accomplish? I would say they are 90 percent successful in their task to hold the elections and 50 percent in fighting corruption.

The debate of imposing reforms on political parties...

No question of imposition would have arisen if the political parties had practiced democratisation in their parties. You cannot term it as imposition if you see it in the light of Sheikh Hasina's 31-point demand she placed in the parliament which formed the basis of Abdul Jalil and Mannan Bhuiyan's dialogue. Neither can it be termed imposition if we recall the demands of the citizens. Taking all these into consideration, the government tried to implement the suggestions. It is imposition on the political parties which did not agree to entertain change to a democratic culture in the approach towards running the organisation.

Has the EC delayed in processing the RPO? The EC went through a process. They first held primary discussions, then prepared a draft and discussed it with the government, which

approved some and asked for changes in some others. The EC later sat for the second phase discussion where some more changes came, and then revised the draft. They held third phase discussion at the demand of some parties. If we want it to be done quickly we can't ensure this participatory process. The EC could have acted fast if the participatory process could be shortened.

Would you term relaxing of the RPO as compromise or failure?

The EC wants participation of all the political parties, and is trying to create an environment for this. The EC wants to hold a free and fair election where there will be no allegation of biasness. So, they are trying to ensure their neutrality amidst different debates. However, in terms of demands from citizens, the changes in RPO fall short of their expectations.

What's the political situation at the moment?

It is normal that the political arena will get heated as the elections come near. Those who think they have advantage in the elections take this as positive while those who think they don't have the advantage, which they had in the past, are maybe looking for some excuses. Those who don't give much value to people's aspiration of returning to democracy are trying to delay the elections on different pretexts. I think these attempts will stop after announcement of schedule. Then intra-party feuds will come up, and those who will not be able to manage this may face a critical situation.

How to ensure democracy in political parties? What can be the proper mechanism?

The parties have changed their constitutions. We can't evaluate those because we haven't seen them yet. We've just read in newspapers that AL and BNP chiefs' powers have not been decreased. If that's the case, I would say democracy in the parties has not come to the extent it should. The political culture in the parties is still feudal. Having it written in the constitution is one thing, while giving it a true democratic shape is a different one. Since the feudal mentality in our politics is very strong, I don't think

the political culture can easily be changed. Changes come with practice and allowing the support base a voice for change within.

How do you see the EC attempts to bring reform to political culture?

Citizens' demand was ensuring a democratic political culture, proper evaluation of grassroots political organisations, and cutting the influence of violence and black money. The EC's change in law and rule may not go very fast. The impact can be seen after the elections, not now. I do not think the political culture has changed much. The EC has tried its best through setting conditions for party registration and candidate conduct rules. Rest of it depends on emergency law. Some scope for violating the conduct rules will be created if emergency is relaxed or withdrawn. The whole of the EC's work may not last in that case. We should not forget the pre- and post-election violence in 2001.

How to ensure transparent financial dealings of political parties?

In all democratic countries, there is a system of auditing political party expenditures. Since there are questions about the conduct of audit firms in our country, there is a proposal for checking party accounts by an independent auditor. I think we should do it immediately. During the 2001 elections, many MPs and candidates did not submit the account of expenditure to the EC, but the EC didn't take any punitive steps. The EC was so weak that it failed to take proper actions. If there is arrangement for independent auditing and the provisions of the RPO can be executed, we can hope to get a beginning in the accountable management of political parties.

How to make the parties break away from the past political culture?

I do not like feudal politics. In the past, there were many attempts to stop feudal culture in the party operation. Did they succeed? It will have to be integral part of political culture, and there should be commitment at all levels of political parties. The two leaders can make a beginning. However, unless the social culture becomes less feudal,

Do you differ with parties' demand of withdrawing emergency?

such change in political culture is difficult.

Was the Minus-2 formula the right approach?

It is not the duty of the government to minus someone. The government wanted them to leave the country, which hadn't worked in Pakistan. We see the intervention of some foreign powers. So, such thought of minus came from sympathy for giving respectable exit. If we stick to democratic system and the leaders are found to have any fault, it needs to be resolved through democratic process. We can minus them only through a proper process. Otherwise, it is the responsibility of the political parties itself to minus any of their leaders. In different countries, the top leaders quit after any mistake, corruption, or defeat in elections; but we don't see this practice in our country. It is because we're confined in a family system of leadership, as is normal in feudal culture.

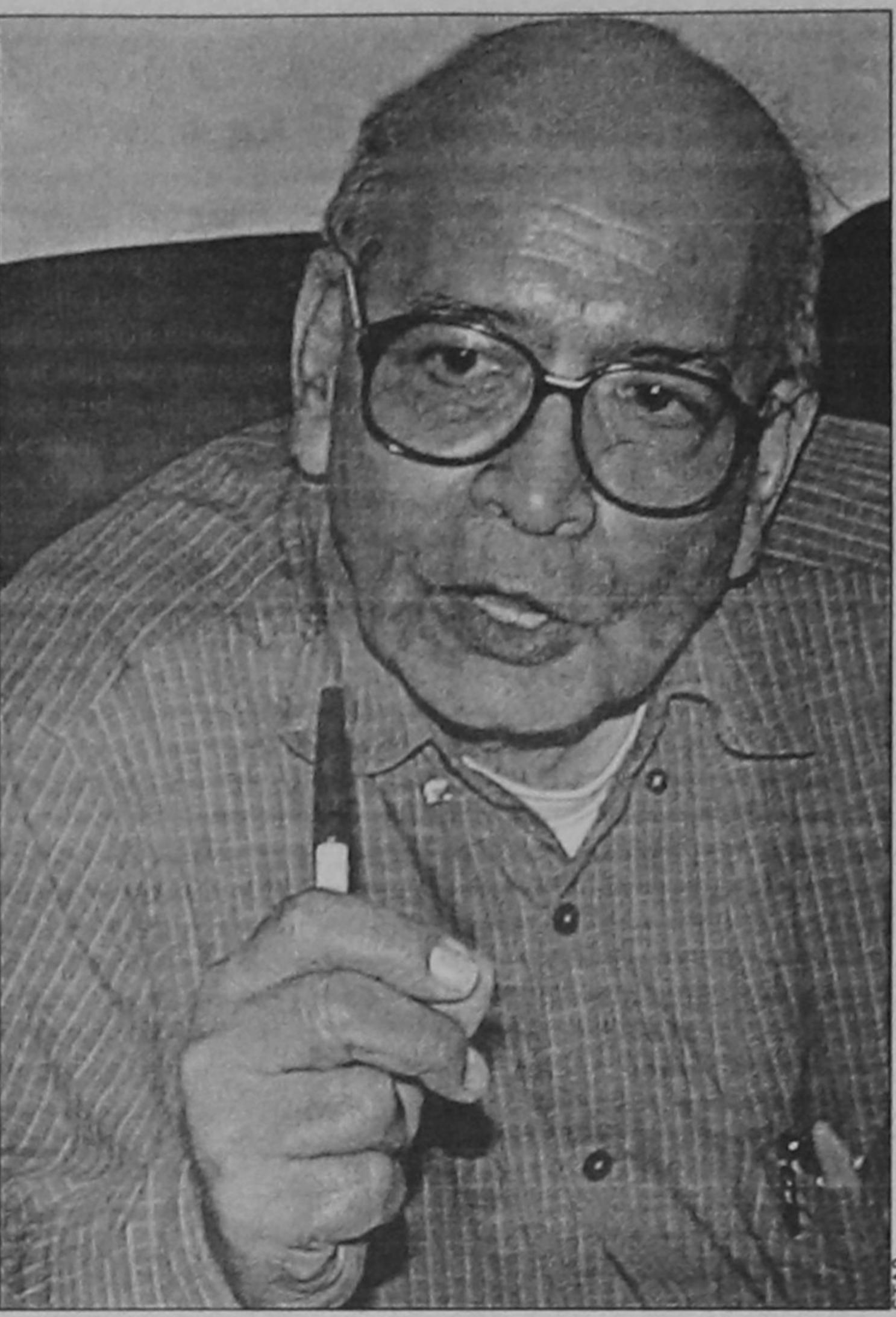
Some people facing corruption allegations won in city and municipal elections...

Political parties did not give direct nomination during the local elections; the candidates competed as individuals. The information the candidates provided were not transparent, and the returning officers of the EC did not scrutinise them properly. Now they have to correct themselves, which they are doing now. Making some corrections, they are seeking help from the taxation office and CAG, appoint scrutineer and register the monitoring bodies during the upcoming parliamentary elections. The EC is now appointing two scrutineers in each constituency. I hope the information will be put on website soonest, as it has been done in India.

Can we hope for cleaner candidates if the laws can be applied properly?

Good governance does not come depending only on the government and the EC. It depends on the citizens. If the citizens does not stand up against the accused and guilty people and challenge their untrue statements, our duties will not end by just saying that the government didn't do its duties.

Do you differ with parties' demand of withdrawing emergency?



Prof. Muzaffer Ahmad

If we recall the pre- and post-election violence in 2001, we will understand that a lame duck government failed to protect the minorities of our country. We need such a law which will let the government play a role even when it is quitting. We can recall that no political party stood beside the minorities during the post-election violence then. How do you see the anti-corruption drive?

The commissioners in the ACC have tried in their way. They needed help from different departments which they did not always get. They did not have trained and experienced manpower needed. Many of their works faced obstacle for this. And I guess that the government asked them to go slow when it started the dialogue pro-

cess; it might also have obstructed their work. The job they have done with the junior legal team is not ignorable. People wanted to see some big fishes punished and have some frustration regarding that. But we should keep in mind that the democratic governments did not finish the corruption cases filed against Ershad, and he is now coming out clean by getting acquitted from all charges. So, we want to get rid of this posture of the judiciary and the tendency of deferring justice. We hope the judiciary would be more accountable to people. I also hope ACC will remain active within the law and uphold the people's demand for containing corruption and the political parties will make a commitment to that end.

Pushing the country towards a crisis?

It is preposterous to think that the government which must work relentlessly to uphold the rule of law and the cause of truth and justice would agree to withdraw cases of corruption against high profile political leaders already indicted on massive corruption and wrong doings just to facilitate participation of one or two political parties in the election.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

JUDGED by sudden and frequent change in the attitude and the stance adopted by the two major political parties vis-à-vis election scheduled to be held in December, it is really difficult to say that we are well on the road to a reasonably participatory election.

While it did raise our hope and optimism to see that as many as 107 political parties including AL and BNP-JI alliance applied dutifully for the first time for registration with the EC as per the amended RPO, immediately there was a pall of gloom over the politi-

cal horizon when we heard that neither AL nor BNP and its allies would take part in the election unless their demands are met.

AL insisted on its "Jono Netri" (People's Leader) Sheikh Hasina being freed from all charges of corruption brought against her, and on lifting of emergency from the country as preconditions for taking part in the election. AL also made it clear that the party would not take part in the election without Sheikh Hasina.

The positive thing about AL is that the party has no serious objections to the amended RPO, which

essentially seeks to democratise the political parties and enforce compliance with the relevant constitutional provision on war of independence and ban on religion-based politics.

BNP-JI alliance on the other hand demanded scrapping of the amended RPO, reversion back to the old RPO, withdrawal of all corruption cases against the alliance leaders, and lifting of emergency as preconditions for taking part in the December election. BNP also threatened to boycott election without its "Desh Netri" (Leader of the Country) Begum Khaleda Zia.

While there are misgivings in the mind of the people that this caretaker government, having already softened its stand on corruption, may well be more accommodative and conciliatory in its efforts to ensure that the major political parties participate in the election, it would be wise on the part of the government to take a principled stand on these demands.

The amended RPO is definitely an improved version of the old RPO insofar as democratisation and democratic culture of the political parties are concerned. Jamaat's opposition to the amended RPO is understandable because its constitution and its declared shibboleth clearly militate against fundamental provisions of our constitution in that while Jamaat refused to recognise the glorious war of our liberation, the constitution of our country upholds it. It is the amended RPO which forced Jamaat to recognise our war of liberation after 37

years of independence. It had to swallow a bitter pill just to remain in the mainstream national politics.

Scraping of the amended RPO, if allowed, will mean doing away with the need for a political party being registered with the EC before it can take part in any election. It will also mean that the draft amended party constitutions already submitted to the EC by various political parties for registration will be of no consequence.

Should the government decide to scrap the amended RPO or strip it of provisions objected to by BNP-JI alliance, it will do so at the cost of its avowed policy to introduce genuine democracy and secular politics in the country.

It is preposterous to think that the government which must work relentlessly to uphold the rule of law and the cause of truth and justice would agree to withdraw cases of corruption against high profile political leaders already indicted on massive corruption and wrong doings just to facilitate participation of one or two political parties in the election.

It will take lot of guts and wisdom and good will on the part of the major political parties to agree to disagree that complete withdrawal of emergency is not in the interest of holding a free, fair and genuinely credible election. Given good will on the part of the government and the participating political parties, a credible election can hardly be discounted.

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On October 22 the government sent five of its advisers, led by Mr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, to talk to Begum Khaleda Zia at her cantonment house, possibly on the BNP-JI demands, and explain the government stand. It is encouraging to hear that the second round of talks held between the government and the two major political parties the following day went off well. Both AL and BNP seemed to be happy with the outcome. Advisor Hossain Zillur Rahman said after the talks that the government had differences only on the issue of holding upazila election. This is good news. But we do not know who prevailed upon whom. We do not know if wisdom and good sense have prevailed in the long run.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (retd) is a Freedom Fighter and former Military Secretary to the President.

The writing on the wall

The government forgot to protect the sculpture when bigots marched down the streets near ZIA airport roundabout, defying state of emergency, but it made sure on October 22 that police take away two effigies of Amini from the protesting cultural activists so that those were not burnt to ashes.

REAZ AHMAD

WE are not living in a theocracy, are we? But, then again, neither are we in a democracy, at least, at this at this particular juncture of time. Our democratic rights have been put on hold by the imposition of a state of emergency with a promise of holding a free and fair poll that the country has been longing for quite sometime now.

The reason why the question of "living in a theocracy" crept into our mind is the recent phenomenon of discreet intrusion of religious

extremism into our statehood. As the basic secular democratic fabric of our society is being compromised due to prolonged absence of democracy in the country, pseudo-religious forces are now becoming brave enough to unmask their ugly face with renewed vigour.

They are now preaching and propagating their band of misguided religion in such a spirited fashion that a retreating unelected government appears, at times, to be skidding from the right track. The track of democracy, the track of secularity, and the track of 1971 that the Bengalis, irrespective of

their creed, caste, age, and religious beliefs have cherished all along.

In fact, the overnight dismantling of under-construction sculptures from the ZIA airport roundabout at the behest of pseudo-religious thugs is the ugliest manifestation of fanaticism in recent memory. This is a kind of barbaric act that Bangladesh can never stand for, because its people -- having an unparalleled passion for democracy, yearning for aesthetic sense, and love for peace -- never deserved it in the first place.

This act of putting the brakes on our democratic, secular adherence

really put our tolerance to the test. The overwhelming majority of Bangladesh, sans an unresponsive government, is feeling utterly enraged, defiled and deprived. Time is ticking fast for people to identify the phantom behind the diktat that, many suspect, is sitting in the hallways of this military-controlled unelected government.

In this instance, the very first mistake the government committed was to hurriedly dismantle the baul sculpture, which was near completion, at the behest of pseudo-religious bigots. But, as if that stupidity was not enough, the government decided to fool the ever-conscious citizenry of the country by giving the lame excuse of design flaws.

How could it be? Who is to be blamed -- the Roads and Highway Division or the Civil Aviation Authority? In fact, it was a cruel joke played to belittle the collective public wisdom of Bangladesh.

It's a travesty of justice that, in bygone years, independence-spirited people were charged with treason just for seeking trial of war criminals, whereas people of the repute of Mufti Amini are touting for demolition of all sculptures and art-works. It's to our utter surprise that people like Amini could make such incendiary remarks when there is such a government, though not elected by the people, in power.

The government forgot to protect the sculpture when bigots marched down the streets near ZIA airport roundabout, defying state of emergency, but it made sure on October 22 that police take away two effigies of Amini from the protesting cultural activists so that those were not burnt to ashes.

Before the pool of newsmen by claiming that he was nowhere in sight -- what better we can expect from this administration.

But then again, whoever governs

should never fail to read the writing



In solidarity.

on the wall -- this time the writing is: "Who does this country belong to -- Lalon or Amini?"

Reaz Ahmad is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.