

## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

## 'From Hasina and Khaleda's speeches it seems they will try to correct themselves'

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**What are the advancements since 1/11?**

The caretaker government pledged reforms and a free and fair election. Some achievements have been done very well, including institutional reforms of EC, PSC, ACC and local government commission set up. Political leaders tried to resist at the beginning, but ultimately brought reforms to their parties, and have sought party registration with the EC. Earlier they weren't agreeing to register at all.

**Parties blamed the government for trying to impose reforms on them...**

They won't do it willingly. The EC requested them to register many times earlier but they didn't. Though not fully, the attempt to turn the political parties into accountable organisations has succeeded to some extent. Changing their constitution, they have brought internal democracy to their parties, accepted the proposal for accountability and transparency regarding funding and expenditure, the proposal for initiating the nomination process from the grassroots, ensuring the participation of women members in each unit of the party by 2020, and election code of conduct. The rest depends on the mentality of the political parties.

In different countries, political parties bring reform themselves. As they didn't do that, the CTG tried to. But if it doesn't come from within, it becomes cosmetic. If the parties haven't done the reforms in their constitution meaning it, they'll not practice it in the future. You said earlier the government should sit with the parties...

That could be the realistic approach. When the CTG started the anti-corruption drive, they started arresting the politicians and didn't bother to sit with the parties. It happened because some advisers misguided the government. The parties also had negative attitude towards the CTG, thinking that the government is after them. There was a gap between them. However, the government later realised it, changed its stance, and started taking steps to gain the confidence of the parties. Through dialogues, both sides moved away from their rigid stance.

It is true that democracy is not possible without political parties, but political leaders shouldn't think that it is not possible to do without them. Somebody will fill the vacuum, but that may not be in the interest of the people and the country.

**Do you think 1/11 has changed their mentality?**

We presently do not have any scale to measure that. It can be seen after the election when they will form the government and rule the country.

**Has the anti-corruption drive succeeded to instil some ideas about corruption in people?**

Yes. People already know about it and want punishment for it, don't want to see the corrupt in election again. But they may vote for such people again because they think these elected representatives as patrons, their friends during their bad times. They think that it doesn't matter whether they are corrupt.

The EC has to ensure that no questionable person can take part in the elections through legal loopholes. The parties have to understand that they have to serve people and need honest and patriotic leaders, and give nomination accordingly. They will have to give nominations to people who will serve people, not become their patrons. Parties are the main actor, the EC's role is secondary.

**Do you think the EC played its due role during the city and municipal elections?**

No. They showed negligence in scrutinising the information during the polls. So many questionable people got nomination. The EC will have to remain cautious to stop repetition of it. **Do you think there is any realisation among parties to move**

**beyond criminalisation and violence in politics?**

We'll see. People have already said in different interviews that they do not want the corrupt people leading them any more and take us back to previous situation. It shows people lost their trust in political parties and supported this unelected government.

If there is public support for a civilian government, military or any force cannot intervene, people come out on the street. But this time it didn't happen, people rather chastised the parties. If they want to be in business, political parties must bring back that confidence. They will have to do it by returning to true democratic practice and sticking to the rules of the game.

**Why did the government go for the Minus-2 formula?**

I'll not only blame the government for it. Earlier, I spoke with many donors who said all the problems will be solved if the two ladies disappear. Many people also said this out of frustration. Coming to power, the government also thought that's the popular perception. But people are now saying we cannot do away with them. When their policy fails, the leaders quit willingly in other countries. But if they don't reject them, it will be impossible to remove them using force.

**Cannot they use this popularity to break away from the existing political culture?**

They can bring changes if they want. The confrontational politics can go totally if the two ladies can reach basic understanding on some national issues like making the parliament functional. They can at least start a beginning and we can take it ahead and get a fully functional parliament. And if they don't reach understanding, they

can at least introduce democratic practice inside their parties. From Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's speeches, it seems to me that they will try to correct themselves. I don't think they'll act totally like before. It can be seen when they begin election campaign.

**Evaluate the anti-corruption drive.**

I won't say it has totally failed. It has shaken people who thought they were untouchable to go to jail. People have come to know the real faces of the politicians. However, to fight corruption properly, we need the right institutions like ACC, an ombudsman, and an independent judiciary. Politicians can't do corruption without the help of bureaucrats. Until everyone gets the message that they can get caught for any minor incident of corruption, corruption can't be stopped. But it depends on the political government. People will be able to do nothing in between the two elections unless there is institutional channel to put pressure on the government and parties.

**Can the recall system after passing half the tenure of the government be an instrument?**

It can be like double-edged sword. It is true that the MPs will remain alert for fear of recalling, but their opponents may take this chance to harass them.

**What do you think about Article 70?**

Political parties want it to remain there to keep the MPs in line. It needs to be changed, at least relaxed. The constitution experts can sit with the parties to find a solution where they can reach a decision that the MPs can vote against the party, excepting some cases like no-confidence and budget.

**Do you support bringing a balance**

between the power of the president and the prime minister?

I do not support giving power to an indirectly elected president. If we want to give the president some power, he has to be elected. His electoral college needs to be expanded or he can be directly elected by the people.

**Is there any confusion about election?**

I think there will be election. But I



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don't see election environment, and it'll not come until emergency is gone. There was also confusion till a few days ago as people were not sure about the participation of the two major parties. The barriers for freedom of expression and assembly need to go. Not only the candidates, the voters will also not feel at ease as long as emergency is in force -- they will not be able to listen to the candidates.

Another individual said he was advised to lace his dairy with melamine to increase the proportion of protein and help the milk pass the Sanlu test: a test, which is clearly below standard and flawed.

An additional five arrests were made in the wake of China's dairy crisis, though details have not been made public. China has tightened its policies on media freedom, to essentially curtail the public from the "truth" and curb the world's outrage over tainted milk products.

Many parents in China's one child per family government policy have crossed the border to Hong Kong to purchase dairy based baby food. Meanwhile, the ever "business minded" China has turned wet-nursing into a profitable enterprise, where mothers from poor families (for a price) feed rich babies.

The head of China's quality watchdog, Li Changjiang, resigned in the wake of the tainted milk products fiasco. China's food quality watchdog revealed finding melamine in products made by Mengniu Dairy Co, the Inner Mongolia Yili Industrial Group and the Bright Group.

Meanwhile, more Chinese made dairy product imports have been recalled/banned because they contained melamine. They are: Unilever's Lipton-brand milk tea powder (from Hong Kong and Macau), walnut and coconut cakes (from Hong Kong), Koala brand cookies (from the Netherlands), Nabisco Ritz cracker cheese sandwiches and rice crackers (from Korea), among others.

This melamine tainted dairy scandal, which follows last year's debacle over contaminated sea-food, toothpaste and tainted pet food, has stirred doubts and questions over the credibility of the "Made in China" label once again.

Many attribute the problem not just to a few corrupt officials/businesses but rather to China's quick transformation from being a communist style economy to an unrestricted participant in market economy, eager to etch a solid economic presence in the world; an image now tainted with infamy.

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## The classroom environment

Learning takes place, for the most part, in the classroom. Partly because of this and partly because this is where PEDP II has stumbled, let us focus on some aspects of the learning environment and teaching learning in the classroom.

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**T**HE problems in primary education are broadly two-fold: that children do not learn in schools and that a large number of them drop out. Findings suggest that only about 20% of the learners are able to read, write and tackle math with any confidence on completion of their primary cycle; and that the drop-out rate could be as high as 47%. I'm inclined to believe that the latter may not be as bad as that.

One argument, frequently favoured by the decision makers and the donors, is that it is because children drop out that they do not learn. The converse, that it is because children do not learn and get bored, and often intimidated, sitting in the classroom doing little, that they drop out, is not seen by authorities as a convincing argument.

The first argument presupposes that the key elements of learning, i.e., curriculum, trained teachers, learning materials, learning environment, teaching learning in the classroom, assessment and supervision are all in place. Therefore, completion would in itself lead to acquisition of the defined competencies.

Consequently, packages of incentives are thrown in to attract children of primary age group to stay on and complete school. This is similar to the argument advanced in the '90s, that as long as there was a school in the neighbourhood and children enrolled, they would learn.

The reason the second argument is not addressed may have a lot to do with not understanding quality, or not being able to distinguish it from rote learning.

Quality is all about learning. Learning is, in fact, the rationale for attending school. Enrolment, equity, attendance, drop-out and completion are meaningful only in the context of learning. If children do not learn, all these activities will be wasteful.

Learning, however, has little to do with rote learning. Learning refers to the acquisition of skill,

ability and knowledge that help acquire higher levels of competencies. "Learning by doing" allows one to experience abstract concepts in the concrete, making learning relevant and interesting. Assessment of learning, therefore, is best captured by what the learner knows and is able to do as opposed to what s/he can recall from memory.

Learning takes place, for the most part, in the classroom. Partly because of this and partly because this is where PEDP II has stumbled, let us focus on some aspects of the learning environment and teaching learning in the classroom.

## Teaching learning in the classroom

The frequently used concept "child-centred" basically means organising the classroom around the key characteristics of children. For example, children learn by talking to and sharing experiences with one another, they cannot concentrate for long on any one thing, each child is unique in her/his aptitude, interest and abilities, and children like being appreciated and acknowledged.

It makes more sense, therefore, to let children sit across or around a table so that they can interact with one another, and to have a wide selection of activities -- ensuring that each activity is linked to acquisition of one or more of the competencies -- creating the opportunity for each learner to engage her/himself actively in her/his choice of activities every minute.

Typical activities would include reading in "Book Corner," playing with number cards and blocks, shapes and sizes, weights and measures, and money in the "Math Corner," working with earth, water, seeds, or insects, or magnet, wires and cables and bulbs and batteries in a "Science/Project Corner," along with a "Play/Home Corner."

It is meaningful to create the opportunity for children to display their drawings, creative writings and projects on display boards. This would give them a

sense of accomplishment!

In a conventional classroom situation, on the other hand, children learn passively as teachers follow poor quality textbooks for about 40 minutes. Naturally, children get bored and often feel intimidated, and eventually drop out.

## Teacher training

A teacher has to put an active learning environment in place, facilitate activities ensuring that each learner was actively engaged every minute, and create an opportunity for learners to work in small and large groups as well as individually. This means that the teachers have to be trained hands-on in classrooms that meet standards of active teaching and learning fully.

While the teachers in the mainstream government primary schools are required to have a Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed), the one year course includes some teaching practice in a so-called "demonstration school" attached to each PTI. We say "so-called" because these schools are in no way different from conventional schools.

Secondly, the instructors them-

selves do not have any experience in primary teaching nor have they ever seen an active learning classroom. The instructor and the teacher, understandably, are unable to create what they have never seen. As a result, training in the form of conventional C-in-Ed yields little, and reproduction of the conventional model becomes unavoidable.

## Textbooks

As for the textbooks, especially for the early readers, it is difficult to see how these would help achieve the competencies defined in the curriculum. Let's take, for example, the Bangla textbooks. They are seen as the key material for language development.

In language development, the key competencies are the ability to read fluently with comprehension and enjoyment, and the ability to express oneself and communicate in writing. Only if a learner enjoyed reading would s/he want to read more. The purpose of textbooks, therefore, must be to help children acquire reading skill and to enjoy reading.

Children learn in a context. They enjoy reading storybooks with colourful, interesting, and often self-explanatory illustrations because these create a context. Having to learn the alphabets, spelling, and the formation of the conjunctive words is neither meaningful nor enjoyable. These

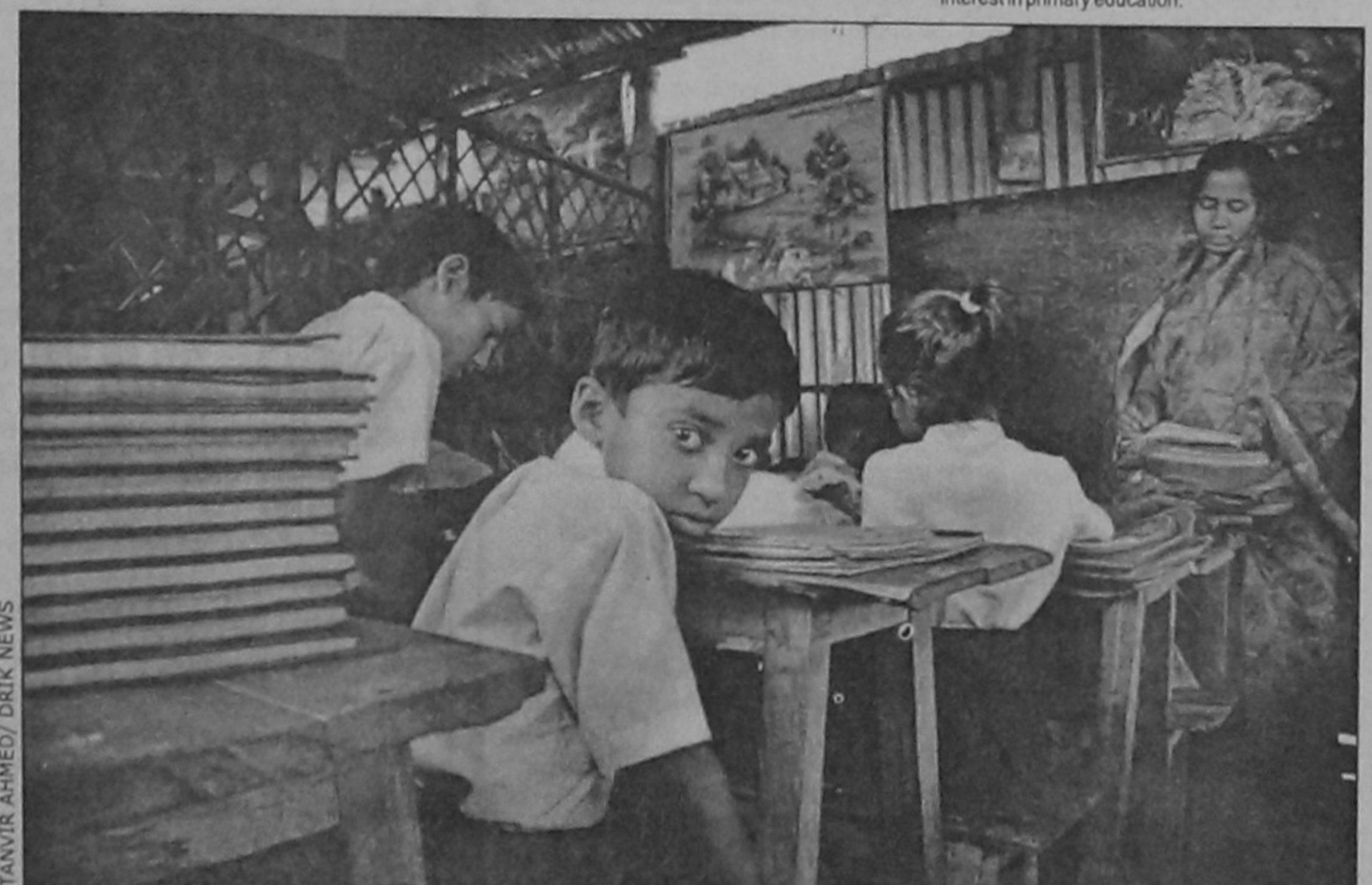
exercises discourage children from reading, let alone enjoy reading. This, therefore, cannot be the definitive route to learning to read.

Second, children need books that they can finish in a single session, so that they can get a sense of accomplishment! This encourages them to go on to the next book. Third, children need a wide selection of books so that they can read what they like, stretching their imagination and exploring the world beyond. Fourth, books must be made available in the classroom so that they can read as often as they like.

Lastly, books for the early readers need to be free from messages, allowing them to enjoy reading without being influenced in any way. There is a time for everything, and awareness of nationalism and religious values can wait until children are ready to appreciate them.

PEDP II, incidentally, has published a series of 18 supplementary reading materials out of a total of 60 planned. The books include instructions on the inside back cover which sadly aims to protect the books from the grips of children! As for textbooks, a breakthrough seems to have been achieved by the "Hard to Reach" curriculum team in the past two years.

Dr. Mahmood Hasan is an educator with special interest in primary education.



How can his interest be aroused?