

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Where are the people now?'

Human rights activist **Sultana Kamal** obtained masters degree in English literature from Dhaka University in 1971 and in development studies from Holland, in 1981. Presently the executive director of Ain o Salish Kendra, she was appointed an adviser to the caretaker government in 2006 but resigned with three other cabinet colleagues in December the same year. She received Ananya Top Ten award in 1995 and John Humphrey Freedom Award 1996. **Shamim Ashraf** took the interview.

How much has the country advanced since 1/11?

In terms of the democratic system, we're stuck in one place and waiting to get it back. When the caretaker government took over, it pledged creating an even-playing field for a free and fair election. It reformed the EC and ACC, reconstituted PSC, and separated the judiciary from executive. However, while bringing the corrupts to trial, they didn't do the proper things in many cases. Under the emergency, the government kept huge power in its hand and used it recklessly and selectively, failing to show adequate sign of judgement.

How do you see the anti-corruption drive?

There were many examples of corruption and people have an idea about those behind these. It was the responsibility of the government and the institutions to bring those into a process through a transparent way before starting the investigation and trial process. But the CTG arrested the suspects before collecting adequate evidence.

Why do you think it happened?

Maybe due to want of skill of the people working in the institutions or maybe there is still some party allegiance. Corruption was so deep-rooted that even those involved in these fields might have benefited from the acts of corruption and so might have frustrated the process from within, and as a result, though cores of taka have been looted and we've seen many people turning rich overnight, we cannot dig out how it happened and take punitive action.

For example, while the ACC was very much there, the government formed the NCC and there was clash of authority between them: who would file the case, who would arrest, whose decision is final, etc. Not only that there was no coordination, but also that one obstructed the other's works. The institutions seriously failed to follow the due process. But the whole process has succeeded to shake some true corrupts. It appeared to us to be true for at least a time that no one is above law.

Would you explain selectivity in the CTG's using its power?

In some cases those who should have been arrested were not. And to avoid arrest in the future, these people are resorting to many kinds of pretension and unjust pre-emptive activities. If any legal move against them is initiated, they would say the government is doing so as retribution.

Some who came out from jail are posing as if they are clean...

They are posing, but all of them are out either on bail or on health grounds. The cases have not been withdrawn. We can recall how these people earlier turned the judiciary ineffective and used it for their benefit. People are frustrated by how they can use the judiciary this way and they do not consider all of them as clean.

What will happen if charges against them cannot be proved?

If the charges cannot be proved ultimately for different reasons including weak investigation, they will take the chance to say they never had done any corruption or any crime. And they can even come out victorious in the election, as we've seen in the local government elections.

How much public awareness about corruption was created by the anti-corruption exercises?

A lot. People now know that these corruption incidents are true and have an idea as to who are behind these. It would be better if these elements could be proved guilty in a transparent way through legal procedures. That would be very difficult had the institutions followed the due process from the beginning.

How much has been done regarding political reforms?

It is impossible for the army or CTG government to bring political forces into discipline because their power base is people. It is true that people supported the government for reforms. The state can bring institutional reforms, but the pressure should come from people. The government came as a caretaker of the nation but didn't set up communication with people. There was clear division: the government being on one side with the army (sometimes with the army separate), and the political parties being their opponent. People were totally left out. Politics now stands at the same confrontational and antagonistic state which we strongly opposed. Now antagonism and confrontation is between government plus army and the political forces. Where are the people now?

What could be the proper approach?

Had the government taken people into confidence at the beginning and did everything after consulting with people, such situation wouldn't have arisen. How many times has the government sat in consultation with the people since coming to power? It only sits with the businessmen sometimes and with political parties. Has it seriously sat with the civil society and sought their advice?

What could political parties do?

When we sit with party members on talk shows and point out any mistake, the political leaders blame us, saying we've united with the government and are talking in support of depoliticisation. The parties didn't ask people even once to point out what mistakes they have made. It is very disappointing and frustrating. They never for once said let us sit and address our mistakes together. Have they given any manifesto and asked people what they want? Their only worry is how to participate in election and what condition they would go by.

It is high time for the political parties to interact with the people and get some clue from the people what they want. Let them announce their manifesto. Let the political parties realise their own dignity. Politicians are people whom people trust and give the responsibility of looking after their lives. I hope they'll realise the nobility of this profession and act accordingly.

What are the weaknesses of the CTG?

People could not take any role excepting for the fact that it gave support to the government initially. Besides



Sultana Kamal

the incident at Dhaka University, the government tried to bring a balance in political arena and took some unexplainable steps like weighing Hasina and Khaleda as the same, which is not right.

It is true that both of them had many faults, but Awami League was a child in comparison with what the BNP-led alliance government did during its tenure. Trying to bring a balance, the government arrested Hasina as it needed to arrest Khaleda.

As the fundamentalists have a major influence in bureaucracy and army, I think the government could not touch any of the fundamentalist forces. But the Jamaat was a party in the four-party alliance. After warrant of arrest was issued against the Jamaat secretary general, police couldn't find him though he was having meeting with none other than the chief adviser. These created a doubt among people as to whether to support the government any more and what is its intention; they don't consider the government safe anymore. People can neither trust the AL nor the BNP, and now they can't even trust the CTG.

How do you see the Minus-2 formula?

Influenced by different quarters, the government tried to adopt the policy, and it failed because people didn't let it succeed. People were very much against any such policy. The government, at the very beginning, should have tried to understand people's sentiment. People always wanted the people who were responsible for corruption, degeneration, absence of morality in politics to be brought to book and punished. So, people didn't say anything against Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina's arrest. They wanted all politicians including these two to go through due trial process. Without realising that sentiment, the government tried to implement the Minus-2 formula, tried for balance among parties, coaxing the fundamentalists, and distancing both the people and the political parties.

Do you think the government is moving away from its position after realising this?

Yes. I strongly say negotiation and understanding are welcome. But it is dangerous when someone compromises with ethics and principles, which we've seen in the cases of women policy and demolition of sculptures in front of airport. Changes were brought twice to the RPO.

Does that mean the CTG has failed in doing what is aimed at?

I won't say the government has totally failed, but I would say the CTG has failed to work with prudence in many cases. For this, their intentions have been terribly misunderstood. No-one else can be blamed for this.

How would you see no bails to the arrestees for a long time and procession of bails later?

This makes us say that we don't see transparency, independence, and efficiency in the judiciary. It is clear like daylight that these are happening under executive orders, which is again unfortunate. When the government wanted to start dialogue with the parties, we started seeing a tilt in court decisions to that end.

Do you support president-PM power balance?

In the present system, all the powers are kept in the hands of the chief executive. I think there is a need for balance. Though the president is not elected by the people, he is elected by representatives elected by the people. It would be better if the president could be elected by MPs both from the treasury and the opposition. Another option can be direct presidential election.

Will RPO be able to bring expected change in political parties' culture?

It may not bring expected result, but would definitely ensure some advancement. It will force the political parties for democratic practice inside the party in many cases.

Should emergency be there during election?

We don't think there is a condition in the country which needs emergency, and it is not desirable to run the country always under emergency. If the situation in the country needs emergency, it is the failure of the government, which needs to look at itself to find the reason for it. If the government thinks the criminals would come back once emergency is withdrawn, we would say it has failed to deal with the criminals.

No more political 'movement' please

I believe the nation does not need any movement at this point in time. What the country really needs is a transformational change in the way political activities have been conducted in the past.

ABDUL QUADER

PARLIAMENTARY elections in Bangladesh are scheduled to be held on December 18, and political parties are gearing up to contest the elections as usual.

At a recent meeting with journalists at her Gulshan office, BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia indicated that her party was ready for the national elections as well as for a "movement" (The Daily Star, October 28). However, she did not elaborate on the details of the so-called "movement."

People may ask why another movement, and what for? Who will benefit from the movement? Hasn't the country gone through enough movements and violent politics in recent years that caused untold harm to the social and serious damage to the country's social and economic development?

I believe the nation does not need any movement at this point in time. What the country really needs is a transformational change in the way political activities have been conducted in the past.

This change should focus on a vision about how we would like to see the country, say, in twenty years' time from now, and on the expectations of the people.

Smash Palace

We write and film and photograph and protest, not to stop an "Islamist threat" but to take control of the terms of the debate. To bring the focus back to real political issues: the asphyxiated democracy project, an end to security panic, and to the brutal daily absence of roti-kapra-makan.

NAEEM MOHAIEEM

A cycle of outrage over *baul* statues has created many surprising and dissonant coalitions: youngblood (Charu Kala protests), musicians (*bauls* and fusion bands), signifiers (wear a *gamcha* in support), and *shushil* (umbrellas at National Museum). And diverse editorial tactics: cowardly capitulation (Afsan Chowdhury, *New Age*, 20/10/08), stop it before it's too late (Kamal Lohani, *Janakantha*, 21/10/08), king's men (Hana Shams, *Daily Star*, 21/10/08), core heritage (Inam Ahmed, *Prothom Alo*, 28/10/08), middle ages (Audity Falguny, *Shamokal*, 29/10/08), Islam's tolerance tradition (Humayun Ahmed, *Prothom Alo*, 27/10/08).

Humayun Ahmed is worth studying, because the novelist presumes exhaustive theology research is needed to settle the issue. Invoke Byzantine painting of Mother Mary spared by the Prophet, Sheikh Sadi's *mazaar* statue, paintings of animals preserved by Hazrat Omar, and IOJ will retreat to their barracks. It is what Jeesh Bagchi described in the context of debates about Kashmiri Pandits as "the mistaken belief that if you just keep piling up enough facts, the other side will be stunned into silence." Theological debates, important as they are, will not be sufficient to navigate a political conflict.

A few writers move to a quiet space and outline other elephants in the room. Badruddin Umar (*Shamokal*, 28/10/08) asks why elder intellectuals focus on a pawn and

tations of the people. A political leader should think about how this vision can be achieved and how the expectations of the people can be met.

If any movement is required, it should be a different type of movement -- a movement different from the common understanding of this term of many political leaders. It is about their political psyche. Politicians should "move" (change) their attitude to politics and how they approach it, and this is the "movement" sensible people in the society desire, I reckon.

The leaders of political parties such as BNP, Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami should change the operating models of their politics if they truly want to serve the people. Professional politicians should approach politics in a professional way, and should not treat it as a self-serving mechanism.

They need to restructure the current framework of their thinking, directions, beliefs and values that shape their respective political positions and guide them in political activities.

Under the new circumstances, a political leader or a party should be forward-thinking, and should not waste time, energy and

avoid naming state machinery. Rahnuma Ahmed (*New Age*, 29/10/08) highlights how political forces have been targeted for twenty months, with the exception of Jamaat-e-Islami and allied "Islamist" forces. Finally, Faruq Wasif (*Prothom Alo*, 29/10/08) talks about the convenient timing, providing maximum distraction from the spider web of election '08.

Return for a moment to Audity Falguny's rhetoric of "middle ages" -- it gets the outrage adrenalin pumping, but gets lost in the distraction maze. Study closely Amini's press conference after the statues were removed. Threatening destruction of "Awami League era" statues and railing against cantonment "Shikha Onirbaan", he plays the role of charlatan. Even his use of the vernacular, "*Heida ami dekhi nai*" (about BNP-era statues), seems designed to tickle perceptions. A man who talks like the Dhakaia of jokes ("*Korta aitasen najaitasen?*"), how can he be a serious threat, right? How easy to ridicule, and forget the real beneficiaries and puppet-masters.

In 2003, similar protests were the excuse for a willing government to ban Ahmadiyya Muslim books. While filming that confrontation for my project "Muslims or Heretics: My Camera Can Lie," I had a moment of camera schizophrenia. In the rough cut of that film, there was grainy, blurred footage of Khatme Nabuwat rallies, filmed from distant rooftops. The impression was (on-screen and in my head) of ravenous mobs that could only be filmed from a safe distance. Outside the cage, as it were.

Surge of Islamist extremism

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SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

WHAT the civil society and democracy loving people of this country are blissfully unaware of, or are not paying much attention to, is the surge in Islamist extremism in this country. The reason for this is that the overwhelming majority of our people are Muslims, and illiterate both in liberal education and true religious education. This gives the politically motivated clerics extra space and mileage over others because nothing else appeals to and inflames the mind of the people so passionately and instantly as religion does.

There is no denying that the BNP-JI alliance government did the greatest harm to this country by spawning corruption and Islamist extremism, and patronising these two hydra-headed evils.

This does not mean that these evils did not exist here before. Corruption raised its ugly head from the very day we became an independent nation. But Islamic fanaticism as such was not there until late Ziaur Rahman started Islamising the country, with the former political rightists and defeated religious forces getting a new lease of life in politics.

But never before had we witnessed such pervasive corruption and Islamic fanaticism as we did during the last alliance government. Just think of the spate of well coordinated bomb blasts at public meetings, cultural functions, Bengali New Year festivals and cinema halls, all aimed at whipping up Islamic jingoism and destroying the fabric of secular Bengali culture and our image as a moderate Muslim country

wedded to peace and communal harmony.

This caretaker government has mainly focused on combating corruption and bringing qualitative changes in our politics. It went about reconstituting and rejuvenating the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC), the Election Commission (EC) and the Public Service Commission, all praise-worthy initiatives aimed at rooting out corruption and conducting a credible election. It also began a hunt for the most corrupt political and social elites over and above the committed resolve of the ACC.

But, regrettably, it has done nothing whatsoever to face the growing menace of Islamist militarism head on. As a caretaker government in power for two years it could at least focus on containing the surge in Islamist extremism.

Look at the orchestrated vehement protests the religious zealots mounted against whatever little was promised to our women folk by this government in the shape of Women Development Policy 2008. Pitifully, the government caved in without any fight and abandoned its declared progressive policy on women. The civil society and democracy loving progressive people expected that the government would stand its ground. But this was not to be.

One might as well say that it goes to the credit of this government that it carried out the death sentence awarded to Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai, the notorious JMB fanatics who killed scores of people, including judges, in the name of religion. It was widely believed that their death sentence would have been commuted, ending in their release, once the BNP-JI alliance came to power again, which

resources to go back to unnecessary movement oragational politics of the past.

In recent weeks, the country has seen student violence at various educational institutions, including the University of Dhaka. In most cases, these students are reported to be affiliated with student wings of major political parties.

The focus of politics should be futuristic. This requires leaders to move forward by setting new directions for the country in order to achieve a range of goals and targets which are compatible with the needs and aspirations of the people.

Khaleda Zia has the reputation of being an "uncompromising leader." "Non-compromise" is an undesirable attribute for a national political leader. Life is about compromise and adaptability. Even at family level, a husband compromises with his wife, and vice-versa, in order to maintain peace and stability in the family.

An uncompromising attitude on the part of a political leader boils down to the thinking that "I am right and you are wrong, and you must agree with me." This can lead to unreasonable demands by the "uncompromising leader," and can sometimes be detrimental to the greater interest of the society these leaders claim to serve.

In essence, an uncompromising position aims to make the other party hostage and does not generally bring about a win-win outcome. It is about a win-loss situation in which "I will always win and you will always lose."

The upcoming general elections will pro-

vide new opportunities to the country's political leaders and their parties. It is now up to them to exploit these opportunities to reshape their thinking, policies and practices to improve their image, and change their modus operandi to serve the country better. Nobody wants to see another one-eleven happening in the future because this harms natural democratic process.

The events of one-eleven should act as an eye-opener to politicians from all shades of philosophy and opinion. They now need to work cooperatively with each other and agree on certain national goals on a bi-partisan or multi-partisan basis so that national unity is fostered. After the elections, parliament needs to be allowed to work effectively by the elected politicians, both in government and in opposition.

Differences of opinion are a dynamic feature of any democracy. However, these differences should not stand in the way of politicians working together to achieve common goals in and outside parliament. A cooperative parliamentarianism is what the country needs at this juncture of national history. National interest must prevail over leaders' egos or party interest at all costs.

In this context, we can recall John F. Kennedy, who once said: "If we cannot know our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." Therefore, for the sake of safety, security, and prosperity of the nation, no more political "movement" please.

Abdul Quader writes from Canberra.

Returning to the project after a six-month gap, I started directly filming rallies and found a jarring reality. "*Shangbadik bhaya ashche*" they would shout, and part ways so I got the best vantage point for my video. During one "death to..." speech, I found my crowd shots obstructed by ten press photographers, all gunning for the best angle of angry faces before their filing deadlines. A BBC cameraman reached up on stage and moved the microphone away from the mufti's face, to get an unobstructed shot. No one blinked at this intervention by a representative of the "imperialists" being masticated on stage. The "fiery Islamist rally" is now a form of performance art, it needs that BBC camera as oxygen. The audience is inside and outside borders, and the international eye is often more critical -- without getting on an "Enemies List," this politics cannot survive.

What we have is a two steps forward one step back, catch-and-release "Islamist" project. These periodic fracas push the political debate away from our real crisis of hyper-capitalist over-development twinned with basic needs under-development. We move instead to a space of polarised battles between the yin and yang of "Islam in danger" and "the Islamists are coming." Every few months, a new bogey: *Madrassa* students, Khatme Nabuwat, Hizbut Tahrir, Islami Oikto Jote, Jagrata Muslim Janata. Somewhere in an overseas think tank, yet another "next Afghanistan" report.

All this can lead to the highly artificial "consensus" opinion, inside government and among international players, that some Islamist representative must be brought to the national negotiating table. What a convenient setup: specter of "radical Islamists" drives a fear-debate, and then the largest Islamist party steps forward as "moderate Islamic" voice. Give us enough seats, and we will control the Aminis.

December 2008 approaches with the denouement of "level playing field" electoral math. Cartoons, statues, women's bill, everything can feed into that equation. The myth of the "Islamist bloc" or "religious sentiment" was used by state apparatus in 1977 and 1982 to bleed secularism's body parts. 2008 is trying for a replay of that tired script.

Perception brutalises reality, and the dominant trope the state pushes is of "Islamists" as ferocious warriors who can bring any government to a standstill. Or that "militant Islamic" groups are about to take over this country. This allows governments to maintain power and security agencies to expand surveillance into every sector of citizen life (Dhanmondi barbed wire barricades and body checks of young men at 11 pm). But where does the perception of a powerful "Islamic bloc" come from? In history, the groups that actually posed strongest street-based challenge to state power were Awami League in 1968-70, JSD and Sarbahara Party in 1973-74, and university student led bipartisan *moha-jote* of 1988-90.

Jeesh Bagchi proposes a hard reboot: "In most cases the terms these days are being set by people with extreme performative position and acts. In India now, Modi has set the term around two axes -- "state terror as security" and "development without dissent." Now, how do you work through these axes? We need to think hard as to how to bypass or steal away these conceptual frameworks.

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was guaranteed if the January 22 election had gone ahead. But detractors of this government maintain that behind the swift execution of the JMB leaders there was a clear intention to suppress the truth regarding those big bosses under whose guidance and shelter JMB was carrying out its atrocities.

It was not for nothing that Moulana Matiur Rahman Nizami had accused the media of creating the myth of Bangla Bhai because, according to him, nobody by the name of Bangla Bhai existed. The condemned JMB leaders had clearly expressed their desire to share the truth with the media before they walked to the gallows. Had they divulged the names of the bosses it would have been embarrassing for the leaders and their parties.

It was during the tenure of this government that a freedom fighter, Abul Kalam, was attacked by Islamist extremist elements in full view of the media just because he was a freedom fighter. No action was taken against the culprits, although a video footage of the incident clearly shows the attackers' identity. Why this inaction and hypocrisy of neutrality?

The removal of *baul* sculptures from in front of ZIA, in the face of protests from Islamist extremists is clearly an act of capitulation by the government. *Baul* folk songs and *baul* culture epitomise religious tolerance and communal harmony, which is the cornerstone of the spirit of our liberation war.

Baul sculptures are the symbols of this heritage of Bengali culture of religious tolerance. Anything Bengali, including Bengali language, is viewed by the anti-liberation forces as anti-Islamic. The holy Quran or the Sunna of the holy Prophet of Islam do not say anywhere that erecting sculptures in public places is sacrilegious. What Islam prohibits is worshipping of sculptures and statues. In fact, Islam prohibits worshipping of anything or any object or any person other than Allah.

Moulana Fazlul Haq Amini has threatened

to pull down all sculptures and erect Hajj Minars. What is a Hajj Minar? There is nothing called Hajj Minar in Islam. The religious fanatics are getting away with spitting hatred and venom against secular politics and the spirit of the war of liberation. Clearly, this government is giving undue mileage to the anti-liberation forces.

Finally, let us take the case of Mr. Mojahid, the JI secretary general an alleged collaborator and war criminal of our war of liberation. This gentleman has been playing hide and seek with the police. He is running about with a warrant of arrest hanging over his head, but police cannot arrest him or, more appropriately, does not want to arrest him. It is really incredible that a man on the run goes to the office of the chief advisor to attend a meeting as a member of the JI delegation and comes back home after the meeting, with the police standing as silent spectators.

As against this, the late General Mustafizur Rahman, a decorated war hero, a freedom fighter and a former army chief, lying gravely ill (with heart disease and cancer) and unable to move without wheelchair, was shown arrested with police force deployed in strength surrounding the hospital. What can we make of this government?

Those who are shouting against sculptures, Shahid Minar, Eternal Flame, celebration of February 21, Bengali New Year Festival, and, more pointedly, against communal harmony and secular politics, are ideologically the same people who had opposed our independence in the name of Islam. These are the people who had paraded the streets and chanted slogans: "We shall become Talebans. Bagladesh will become Afghanistan." The then government of the day took no notice of it. Let us wake up before it is too late and before this tiny little country becomes the playground of war on terror like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Reid) is a former Military Secretary to the President.