

Turning over a new leaf

We may have begun with a lot of expectations, but all of the nearly two years of work of a non-partisan government cannot disappear into a black hole. Some new institutions have been built, some have been strengthened, and some reforms have been set in motion. Traditional politics may dominate the country for the near future, but hopefully there will be some change of heart.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

I returned recently from Bangladesh after a month's stay, following a hiatus of nearly three years. Much has changed in the country in these three years, the most obvious of which is running of the country by a non-partisan government. It was a pleasant experience of not encountering hartals, or being stopped on the roads for political demonstrations that not only thwarted traffic, but also posed serious threats to life and property.

The trips through Dhaka streets were not exactly hazard free; there were long queues of cars, buses and other means of transports that defied description, and made an otherwise ten minute trip last over an hour. But these were welcome hazards compared with what I had witnessed three years before. There was relative safety of life and property in the streets, even deep into the night. Even the strongest critic of the current state of affairs in the country agrees that there has been an overall improvement of public safety in the streets. But this is not all that I wanted to see or hear in my visit.

There were three areas that I wanted some validation of my observations from abroad on the expectations since January 2007. The first was the direction and achievement of the anti-corruption drive. The second was the attempt at change in traditional political leadership anchored to two leaders. The third was the incipient foreign impression of a hidden growth of religious fundamental-

ism in the country.

The January 2007 political change (popularly referred to as 1/11) in the country had brought along with it relief as well as a sense of euphoria in us all. The relief was from the danger of political disasters and the crisis that loomed because of the intransigence of the parties involved. The euphoria was due to the expectations of good riddance from the evils that had resulted from the political shenanigans of the last decade.

Everything began rather well. In no time, we had cleansing of the institutions of unwelcome personalities who had irked the political parties, and jump-starting of those with a clean slate. The nation saw with awe a line-up of a new gallery of rogues that was filled with former ministers, parliamentarians, their lackeys, and business tycoons. An ambitious war against corruption was launched, with arrest and prosecution of political and business celebrities, and civil servants. We read with awe in our newspapers the stories of shameless greed, blatant violations of laws, and amassing of huge wealth by the arrested celebrities. We were aghast, but we were pleased that finally the long arm of the law had roped them in.

On the political front, we witnessed with bated breath the saga of trials and tribulations of the top leadership of our two major political parties. Our expectations reached new heights when there were wide speculations surrounding the imminent departure of the two much talked about leaders from their anointed positions, and from the politi-

cal scene. Some of us began to wait for a new political dawn sans these leaders, whom we blamed for most of our woes in the past.

We watched with great attention government actions on the religious extremists, who had launched the series of murderous attacks on civilians in the previous regime. Our expectations that religious bigotry and use of religion for political purposes would be a foreign concept went one notch higher when these bigots received the punishment they deserved, unfettered by any political manipulation. We came to the view that these would be examples, and that religious extremism would no longer be tolerated in Bangladesh. We became more hopeful that the incipient image of a hidden surge in religious fundamentalism would be firmly put to rest.

Twenty-two months later, after the January 2007 changeover, I was looking for answers to our expectations. Were they fulfilled? Or, more precisely, do people care?

In my travels over four districts, and speaking to countless people over a period of one month, I found that they do care. They care about politics and politicians, about corruption, and about growth of religious extremism. Yes, they had their hopes high; they wanted to see the corrupt nailed, and thrown in jails. They wanted politics to be rid of criminals; but they would like to weed them out in a political process. It may sound strange to some of us -- urban, middle class intellectuals -- that the people in the street identify the political parties only by the top two leaders. Call it stranglehold, but no attempt at ridding the parties of this iron grip will succeed. For the majority of the people I talked to, they could work with the system as it was. All they would like is to have the opportunity to choose their representatives, and now. In other words, they want elections.

How did we do on our war against corruption? Did it bother people when the much-vaunted war against corruption ran into legal snags? Did they care when public officials arraigned for graft, grand larceny of state

offers, and earning illegal commissions from the public exchequer, were let out by the courts? Yes they did. But they also thought that the net was cast too wide, the focus was too broad. Did any good come out of this at all? Yes, by all consensus we now have an institution -- the Anti-Corruption Commission. At least people know where to turn to when they see corruption. Will it run as an independent body when old politics takes over? It depends on how we guarantee its operation in our constitutional framework.

Now to religion and politics. *Madrasas* and politics do not go together; at least that is what a rickshaw puller told me. He would not like to have the local *mullah* to be his union chairman, let alone his MP. How does he explain the aggressive actions by so-called *madrasa* students who pulled down a statue recently? This happened because there was no one there to stop them.

He called it vandalism, similar to what one would witness when a group of determined goons break any government property. We are a tolerant people, he further said. Look how we had the *pujas* in the city? Did anybody break any icon? I had no immediate answer to the rickshaw puller; but I did realise that, fundamentally, we are far removed from any religious fundamentalism.

One month of travel in Bangladesh is not enough to validate or confirm my observations. We may have begun with a lot of expectations, but all of the nearly two years of work of a non-partisan government cannot disappear into a black hole. Some new institutions have been built, some have been strengthened, and some reforms have been set in motion. Traditional politics may dominate the country for the near future, but hopefully there will be some change of heart. Let us hope our future elected leaders nurture the new institutions, continue with the reforms, and cut their links with the old and much reviled practices.

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TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND 'Yes, I think a jolt like 1/11 was necessary'

President of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), Barrister Shafique Ahmed was born on July 16, 1937, in Comilla. He obtained his Honours and MA in geography from Dhaka University in 1958 and 1959. He obtained LLB from Dhaka University in 1963 and later completed Bar-at law in 1967 and LLM in the same year. He taught in Dhaka University from 1969 to 1973. He was also a teacher of Principal City Law College. He was enrolled in the High Court as an advocate in 1967 and in the Appellate Division in 1989 as a senior advocate. He was elected as the president of SCBA twice. Wasim Bin Habib and Ashutosh Sarkar took the interview.

How do you evaluate the existing situation?

The present government has prepared a fair and acceptable voter list with identity cards, and also did necessary delimitation of different constituencies which, was the constitutional obligation of the Election Commission (EC). The schedule of the election has already been announced and the government has almost completed the preparations for the polls slated for December 18. The entire nation is expecting elections in the scheduled time, so it should not be deferred. We will have more complications if it is deferred. Any move to defer the election will not be acceptable to the nation.

A major political party is yet to announce specifically whether it will participate in the polls...

It would be regrettable if any political party does not take part in the election and the election is shifted because of that. It will push the country towards another uncertainty. The elections cannot depend on any party's wish. The EC should take a strong stand to remove uncertainty about the election.

Political parties are demanding lifting of emergency ahead of polls. Do you see need for emergency anymore?

I think election should not be held keeping the emergency in place. There will be some restrictions if the emergency remains in force during the election. The law enforcing agencies may misuse their power, which may prevent the voters from casting their votes freely and independently. Moreover, the candidates and political parties will not be able to do the necessary campaigning due to the restrictions, and it will not be termed as free, fair, neutral and acceptable.

Do you think political parties will resume the "blame game" and reject the election results if they lose in the polls?

I don't think there will be "blame game" or accusation of vote rigging this year. Since the neutrality of the election commissioners was under question "blame game" and accusation of rigging happened in the past. But this time the election commissioners were not appointed by the political parties and they did not have any political agenda. So, we hope the upcoming elections will be acceptable both nationally and internationally.

Political parties are demanding deferral of upazila elections. Should they be deferred?

I don't consider it logical to hold the upazila and parliamentary elections almost simultaneously. A national election is a great event for a nation. Upazila election is also a big election. The candidates need similar campaigning for both the elections. So there will be some difficulties in holding both the elections at almost the same time. I think the upazila election should be deferred and held separately.

How long it should be deferred?

There will not be any problem if the upazila elections are held two to three months after the parliamentary election.

How do you evaluate the proposed meeting between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?

I don't think there will be any success in the meeting without any agenda. What would they discuss if they do not have any agenda; it would be fruitless. There must be some goals. The leaders can discuss about the previous mistakes they have made, or they can discuss about the elections or the economy of the country. Many concrete and acceptable solutions may come out if the meeting is held on the basis of an agenda, and the government should set the agenda.

Do you think the politicians learned any lesson from 1/11?

Yes, I think a jolt like 1/11 was necessary. I believe the politicians will now do politics for the welfare and betterment of the people and for governing the country properly, not for making their own fortune. We have witnessed that the past governments ran the country according to their will. A particular Bhaban was seen running the country as a parallel government. So there is a lesson for the politicians that they cannot do whatever they want. I'm very much hopeful that there will be some changes in the attitudes of the politicians and in the relations between the politicians.

How do you evaluate the reform measures undertaken by the caretaker government in the last 20 months?

Some steps of this government are praiseworthy, like formation of EC, finalising of voter list, and delimitation. But they overdid some things, like formation of Supreme Judicial Commission. It is a good initiative but the exec-



Barrister Shafique Ahmed

utive is still taking the decisions in this regard. Moreover, formation of Truth and Accountability Commission (Tac), which the High Court declared illegal, was also a bad step.

What should the political parties do to bring changes in the political culture?

Political parties should develop a culture that accepts multiparty system running the country democratically. Everyone has the right to express his opinion and bring out processions and rallies, but this should be within the limits of the law.

Do you think a congenial atmosphere for election is prevailing in the country?

The activities of the election have already started. The political parties are busy in selecting their candidates, and when they complete the nomination process they will start the electoral activities in full swing.

Should political parties nominate the convicts?

No. The political parties should not give nominations to those who have been convicted for corruption or for moral turpitude.

What is your comment about Article 70 of the constitution?

It is not proper for democracy. It should be removed. Do you support the caretaker government system?

There will be no necessity of caretaker government if there is a strong, impartial and independent EC. The EC should be given executive power. The law enforcing forces should be under the command of EC. If these things are ensured there will be no need for a caretaker government.

Please comment about the anti-corruption drive.

The drive is good but the government has extended it too much, so it has become difficult for them to control. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is an independent commission, and the trial of corruption cases may take place any time. It is not that all the trials have to be completed at one time. The haste weakened the trials.

Comment about the one-year of the separation of the judiciary?

It was a constitutional mandate, which no government undertook during its tenure. But there are still some defects. We are receiving allegations that the subordinate judges are doing whatever they want in the name of separation. An independent secretariat is necessary to investigate these things.

What measures are required to eliminate conflict, doubt and abhorrence from politics?

We cannot move towards confrontational politics anymore. We cannot afford it. Election is necessary for the sake of democracy, and the EC will have to take a strong stand to remove all kinds of obstacles in the way of elections. Forgetting all the confrontations, the political parties should participate in the polls to restore democracy. The party that loses in the election should accept defeat. Both the government and the opposition have to play constructive roles to give the democracy an institutional shape. They should realise that an extra-constitutional force may be compelled to take power if the political parties create an anarchical situation in the country once again.

Winds of change

Change is not a favour to be granted, it is a verdict of time. There are changes that have a fitful start, but they have taken root. They will slowly raise their heads for time will nurture them. The verdict cannot and will not be reversed.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

CHANGE has come to America, intoned Barack Obama with the messianic zeal of a preacher and eloquence reminiscent of John F. Kennedy. He was responding to the exultant jubilation of one hundred fifty thousand cheering supporters who have put their trust in the change that Obama promised.

Obama is a befitting successor to Martin Luther King. Dr. King's dream has been fulfilled. At 47 years of age this first term senator from Illinois is among the youngest presidents of United States. After eight years of sabre rattling, time has produced its own answer.

George W. Bush's presidency was born in controversy unprecedented in the history of United States. He was destined to become a lame duck president, indeed he became one, but it took eight years. He scripted his own undoing. It was an ill-conceived war with deceit as its logic.

Obama most correctly said: "You don't defeat a terrorist network that operates in eighty countries by occupying Iraq." America badly wanted to end the Bush era. Change was a matter of time. It has to come and it came.

Barack Obama only articulated it with the consummate skills of a brilliant public leader. The winds of change are blowing through America, and it has spread to the far corners of the world.

It may be America's election but the message is for mankind. Change is mankind's response to prejudice and injustice. The ways may be different but the hopes are common. Everything is possible in democracy.

An African-American can become president in a predominantly white society with a slave owning past. An apartheid society with a record of deprivation of the black major-

ity's right submits to the rule of the black majority, and Nelson Mandela is born.

When America was making history, Bhutan was also making its own history in orderly change of its ruler. Fifty-two year old King Jigme Singye Wangchuk stepped down in favour of his 28-year old eldest son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk. The coronation was held in Tashingcho Dzong, a 17th century fortress.

King Jigme Khesar received his education in United States and finally graduated from Oxford. His father Jigme Singye is a familiar figure in Bangladesh. Away from international media, twenty thousand Bhutanese gathered to greet the new King.

The fourth king, Jigme Singye, had retired from the duties of monarch in 2006 to allow democratic institutions to take firm roots. Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley was also a notable presence in the coronation.

The winds of change are blowing over the Maldives. The 30-year old rule of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has ended in the first democratically held election in the Maldives. Mohammed "Anni" Nasheed, the newly elected president an indefatigable opponent of President Gayoom's despotic rule, suffered imprisonment on more than twelve occasions.

The winds of change, have they reached the shores of Bangladesh? It looks the winds have died down. A lull has settled in its place. More than any other country, Bangladesh needs a change. National hopes suffered when the two leading parties, the Awami League and the BNP, were outdoing one another in brazen chicanery and medieval slyness. Even that was not enough. The constitutional process was put on a doomsday locomotive that was running towards the brink.

When those who should have treated the country with utmost consideration threw



Can we feel the wind?

discretion to the winds the country could not but welcome 1/11. To even the most diehard doubter it appeared as a glimmer of hope.

To a woe-ridden country the caretaker government was a respite, a break with the venality of the past. But it has faltered on a number of occasions and its credibility has lost its lustre. The infirmity of purpose or the erratic nature of its decisions gradually eroded the felicity/goodwill. Its functionaries are not helping it either.

The chief Election commissioner is an expansive person given to talking, but he chooses the wrong similes. There are good reasons for him to tread carefully for he is open to sniper attack. Besides, he has a splendid example in the person of former Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Sayeed and also in the impeccable personality of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

The two exalted Begums are back in limelight after long incarceration. Before their release it appeared that they would have to say goodbye to electoral politics. Meantime, their fortunes have soared. They are in greater favour with the people. The enigmatic and circuitous nature of the treatment they received from the caretaker government has made the people more inclined to believe that there might have been wrongdoing.

The government looks vulnerable. The

most disturbing part is that people's faith in the government is under siege. There is a pervasive sense of doubt about the future. The prospect of change looks so remote.

Much has been said about reforms within the parties. The issue has been buried unceremoniously, with the reformists returning to the fold meekly and obsequiously while the hapless ones are suffering banishment that may mark the end of their political careers. The winds of change have died down into a whimper.

A lawmaker from Narsingdi, who was in the vanguard of the reformists has met a tragic fate in the BNR, being left in the lurch by his fellow reformists. It now appears that he has become a pariah on the ground that he rebelled against his chief.

It's a pity that a few months back he was courted by the Election Commission. The mea culpa of the Awami League general secretary has served him well. He has successfully clawed back to the favour of his leader.

Change is not a favour to be granted, it is a verdict of time. There are changes that have a fitful start, but they have taken root. They will slowly raise their heads for time will nurture them. The verdict cannot and will not be reversed.

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How many jokers needed to change a light bulb joke?

CORRUPTION investigators in Bangladesh recently uncovered a case in which 122 workers were paid to fix a single toilet.

That is a remarkable figure, I thought. Only 122? Things must be improving. There have always been dramatic over-employment problems in Asia. Every restaurant has scores of waiters. And I STILL never get served.

I remember telling a joke to a group in Suzhou, a city in China.

Q: How many Indian civil servants does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Forty five. One to change the

bulb, and 44 to do the paperwork. Nobody laughed.

They couldn't see the joke. I tried another one.

Q: How many Taliban fighters does it take to change a light bulb?

A: A million and one. One to change the bulb and a million to rebuild civilisation to the point where they need light bulbs again.

Again nobody laughed.

I realised that the whole 'How many people does it take to change a light bulb' joke genre doesn't work in Asia. The humour is built on the fact that the listener expects the answer to be one. But in Asia, no one does.

Light bulb jokes in this region should not be presented as attempts at humour, but as civil service entrance exam questions. So here is a special collection of Not Funny light bulb jokes.

Q: How many Chinese government workers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: That's an official secret.

Q: How many Thai Prime Ministers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Nobody knows. Thai Prime Ministers don't last as long as light bulbs.

Q: How many North Korean reactor-builders does it take to

change a light bulb?

A: None. People who glow in the dark don't need light bulbs.

Q: How many Dhaka government workers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: A hundred and eighty-five. It's in the contract.

Q: How many Zen masters does it take to change a light bulb?

A: A leaf falling from a tree.

Q: How many Singaporean free-thinkers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Both of them.

Q: How many Hong Kong accountants does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Ahem. What kind of answer did you have in mind?

Q: How many Filipino premiers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Two. One to screw it in and one to screw it up.

Q: How many Sri Lankan waiters does it take to change a light bulb?

A: None. You think a burned out bulb will catch a waiter's eye?

Q: How many paranoid Singaporean leaders does it take to change a light bulb?

A: JUST EXACTLY WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT? HUH? HUH?

Q: How many Australians does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Two. One to say: 'She'll be

right mate' and the other to fetch the tinnies.

Q: How many Japanese Buddhist philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Two: one to change the bulb and one to not change it.

Q: How many dyslexics does it take to bulb a light change?

A: Eno.

Q: How many dumb Asian TV interviewers who ask stupid questions does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Change it to what?