

The BNP's ultimatum to government

All parties have a responsibility to ensure a return to democracy

THE chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has served notice on the caretaker government that it must meet its four demands within 48 hours if it wants the party to participate in the elections. The notice, which is really an ultimatum, comes as an unfortunate surprise at a time when the country is in the mood for elections and other political parties are busy finalising their preparations for the elections. More importantly, when the government has been taking steps to accommodate the demands and desires of the political parties, especially of BNP, it makes little sense for any party now to issue ultimatum to have their way. The Election Commission, in order to ensure the participation of all parties, agreed to reschedule the date for submission of nomination papers. It also made changes in the timetable of the upazilla polls. The government has also engaged in serious, concerted dialogue with the parties. In other words, to date the government and the EC have been even-handed in the way they have gone about planning the general elections.

The fact of the matter is that today the nation and all political parties, except the BNP, are ready for a democratic exercise that will lead to the return of popular government in Bangladesh. The question that one can now logically put before Begum Zia and her party colleagues is whether they are ready to help the process of a return to meaningful democracy. The demands that the BNP leader made on Monday are those that have largely been echoed by other parties, major and otherwise. But those parties have not made a meeting of their demands a precondition for participation at the polls. Moreover, even the caretaker government has been giving out positive indications regarding its attitude to the difficulties involved, such as a lifting of the emergency, et cetera. Such being the objective reality, it should now be for all political parties and especially the BNP to avoid indulging in a blame game. Besides, even before the polls have commenced, it is politically wrong and morally unfair to apprehend an election result that might not be to the liking of a particular group or party.

No party should hold the electoral process, or for that matter, transition to an elected government hostage to its demands taking advantage of the accommodative spirit of the caretaker government and EC and the people's yearning for participation of all political parties in the election. Of course, the BNP has scaled down its number of demands from seven to four which we commend, but this does not go with the attitude of issuing an ultimatum. We believe there should be flexibility on both sides for the sake of not only ensuring an election participated by all parties but also for smooth post-election governance.

CA's exhortations on DCs and SPs

Need for neutrality can't be overemphasised

THERE is hardly any need to stress the importance of the role played by the deputy commissioners and the superintendents of police in any election -- more so in the forthcoming one. The nation, having waited for the last two years, cannot afford to have the election tainted through any inability of the DCs to play their due role as returning officers, or due to lapse in law and order function of the police.

It is worth reiterating the chief adviser's counsel that a free, fair, neutral and peaceful election needs efforts of all concerned at various stages. In this respect the two most important functions involve ensuring that a peaceful atmosphere prevails in which the voters can cast their ballots freely and without intimidation, and that there is no electoral malpractice before and during the day of voting.

One cannot say with certainty that we have seen the end of the evil influence of money and muscle power in politics. There is no guarantee that a few will not be predisposed towards using these to wean voters. Therefore, the tasks of the law enforcing agencies should not be restricted to only the day of voting but should start well before that, when electioneering starts in full swing. Reportedly, there may have been an influx of illegal arms in the country of late. Identifying and apprehending possessors of illegal weapons is a precondition of establishing fear-free environment. In the same vein, known criminals who normally become hyperactive at these times, must be neutralised.

Likewise, the civil administration must resist every pressure and intimidation from any quarters and report any violation of the electoral law to the election commission. Not only must the civil administration be non-partisan, it must be also be demonstratively so, or run the risk of having the election portrayed as a tainted one.

However, there is much that the government can also do to ensure smooth functioning of the civil administration and law enforcing agencies, particularly on the day of voting. There is need to define the role of various agencies tasked with law and order duties, and to have a coordinating authority through which these organisations would be employed and directed. Also, the DCs' request for being invested with magisterial powers, during the election, may be considered.

Good people, bad governments and hartals

Bad governments do not listen. When they do not listen, you need to make them listen. You do that by closing down everything, by converging on the streets in what you would call a demonstration of people power.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE nation's business leaders have appealed to the political parties for an end to hartals in the future. As citizens who remain aware of what has not been achieved in Bangladesh in the last thirty-seven years, and what must be done in order for us to come level with the rest of the world, we will tell these good men and women that we are with them.

It is never a good idea to shut down a factory, to force a country to a stop only because some political parties may be driven by narrow partisan ambitions, by a false sense of ego.

It is outrageous to call general strikes that go out of hand and result in citizens being harassed on the streets, ailing people being made to wait endlessly for their families to come visiting them and poor men condemned to eke out the bare means of sustenance every living day compelled to stay home, deprived of the ability to feed their children because of bad politics.

And we do not, of course, forget that hartals have in these past many years caused devastation to the economy. Our businessmen have found it hard to operate their establishments; garments exporters have missed deadlines set by their foreign buyers, and foreign investors have spotted, legitimately too, in the hartals disquieting images of a country in free fall, incapable of inviting or handling the resources that could come in from abroad. Universities and colleges and schools have gone without classes.

Hartals have often been a matter of humiliation for citizens. Individuals have been stripped in public because they have served a not so popular government; buses and scooters have been set on fire, reducing their drivers and owners to tears. Policemen have clashed with protestors; heads have been smashed, hands have been fractured and sometimes lives have been lost.

At the end of the day, hospitals have struggled to tend to the wounded; families have huddled in prayer for their badly mauled sons and fathers and brothers and sisters. Almost every hartal in recent times has been symbolic of unmitigated shame for all of us in this country.

And so, when our businessmen enlighten us on the need for an end to hartals, we share their point of view. They speak for all of us. And yet, there ought to be a caveat here, even as we try persuading ourselves that hartals are a suicidal act, a patent attempt at political hara-kiri. And that caveat has to do with the reasons why hartals are called by political parties in the first place.

Recall a bit of history, spot the realities around you. The fundamental truth for all of us has been one of a perennial absence of democracy in the country. Yes, we have voted politicians to power. And, yes, we have been mighty happy with ourselves as we have exercised our right to choose governments for this country. But note that not all politicians, not all parties have respected that expression of will by citizens.

Support at the ballot box has been deliberately twisted to mean a wholesale occupation of a country in old-fashioned feudal-

ism. Supporters of the victorious party have swooped on loyalists of the vanquished one, have run members of minority religious communities out of their homes in a malevolent desire to own property not theirs.

When the government formed by people these rapacious men consider their leaders says nothing about these misdeeds, or looks the other way even as the country writhes in agony, how do you propose that the nation reassert its self-esteem? And why should a hartal not be a powerful, peaceful way to draw attention to this humiliation of a country?

There was time when hartals intensified our collective urge for autonomy, for freedom. What if hartals had not been called then? We will leave you to answer the question. In the Ershad years, repeated hartals caused damage to the economy, true. But then think of the bigger picture. It was the nation that gave itself space when no other political way was left for it to push the regime to the wall.

In the five years preceding the imposition of a state of emergency in January 2007, the Jatiyo Sangsad did not function because the ruling party, lulled into a sense of arrogance, saw little reason in letting the opposition speak. Motions by the opposition were shot down, microphones into which opposition lawmakers spoke were constantly shut down by a speaker who saw little reason to stop his own party men from hurling abusive language at the Leader of the Opposition and anyone not with the government. If similar conditions arise in the future, should we really be irritated if the opposition walks out en masse from the House to protest the outlandish behaviour of the Treasury benches?

And when the government of the day, not content with a mere muzzling of the opposition in Parliament, chooses to prevent the masses from marching on the streets by letting the police loose on them, can we morally argue that hartals ought not to be? When those who do not agree with the rulers call for demonstrations all over town, they

have all the right in the world to be allowed to register their peaceful protest before the country.

The scandalous happens when the state swoops on the people, puts up barricades all over town and thereby intimidates citizens into a condition of ugly fear. The government treats its rivals with derision; the police cheerfully go into the job of clubbing everyone around on the streets; innocent people alighting from buses in Sayedabad or Gulistan are rounded up as potential opposition camp followers and swiftly packed off to prison. That is a violation of human rights.

Indeed, every time a government seeks to snuff out all peaceful means of political protest, it undermines democracy and wounds the state over which it has a sacred responsibility of governance. And when that happens, it becomes the right of citizens to respond in the only way that remains open for them. And that is to have the country shut down, not because the goal is to push it toward bigger chaos, not because it is the ambition of a political party that must be massaged, but because the state needs to be saved from a government that has mutated into a corrupt oligarchy.

Governments, like any other organ in society, are peopled by good men as well as bad. Sometimes, in this country, governments have been bad to the tiniest bit of the bone. Bad governments do not listen. When they do not listen, you need to make them listen. You do that by closing down everything, by converging on the streets in what you would call a demonstration of people power.

The question, then, is not whether hartals should be put an end to. It is one of whether political parties in Bangladesh can transform themselves into ennobling realities, can truly and unequivocally take governance as a trust to be exercised on behalf of the people of the country. When that truth comes to pass, hartals will be no more.

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Challenges for the president-elect

Obama has made history by winning power. As he attempts to make history in the way he exercises it, he will be weighed down by high expectations. In the Kenyan language "Barack" means "blessed." He is going to need all the many gifts and all the luck to meet the huge challenges.

HARUN UR RASHID

STANDING before 250,000 fans at the Grant Park, Chicago on November 4, when the sweet scent of victory was fresh in his nostrils, president-elect Barack Obama, in his victory speech, underscored that it was important that everybody understood that the promises he has made during the campaign could not be fulfilled overnight. There has to be a realistic expectation of what can happen and how quickly.

He said: "We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you we as a people will get there."

On January 20, when he sits in the Oval Office of the White House, he will face the reality: the most difficult economic climate for an incoming president since Franklin D. Roosevelt, and foreign policy and environmental issues.

Economic

He faces three key economic challenges:

- Ensuring the stability of the financial system.
- Dealing with the looming recession.
- Pay for his ambitious plans in health, education and environment.

Unemployment rose to its highest level

for 14 years; the crumbling powerhouses of Ford, Chrysler and General Motors produced more terrible figures; and consumer sales, in the words of one analyst, fell off a cliff.

The car industry painted a bleak picture of the US economy in these words: "The leading indicators are showing no light at the end of this tunnel. In the last week of October, they registered their worst readings in the six decades of history. It tells you the economy is not just down, it is plunging. There is no end in sight to this recession."

Obama has promised a tax cut to 95% of Americans, and plenty of other things that will cost money to look like better access to health care for the 45 million people without insurance, and an army of new teachers, with improved salaries, for the school system.

None of that will be cheap and Mr Obama is inheriting a budget deficit running into hundreds of billions a year and a national debt, which is about to go above the \$11

trillion mark.

And then there is the long-term budget challenge, the future gap between revenues and spending for the two biggest government programs, social security and Medicare (which provide pensions and medical care for older people) as the baby-boomer generation retires.

These programs are likely to turn from surplus to deficit by the end of the Obama presidency, and have proved very difficult to fix politically. The growing cost of medical care, in fact, threatens to derail government spending both in the long term and the short term.

All in all, how Obama responds to the formidable set of economic challenges could well determine how he is remembered in history: either as an FDR who changed the US political landscape for a generation, or as a Jimmy Carter, whose failure to tackle the economic challenges of the 1970s led to a one-term presidency and the election of Republican Ronald Reagan.

Foreign policy

Obama will find himself tested and perhaps defined by foreign policy issues just as his predecessor was. He has to find an exit strategy for Iraq that does not somehow enhance the regional power status of Iran.

And, of course, the issue of Iranian nuclear ambition cannot be ignored either. How will President Obama react to pressure from Israel, or from his own military commanders, to bomb Iran's reactor to prevent it from developing a bomb? We might know very soon.

In Afghanistan, Obama has talked of putting in more American troops and finishing the fight with al-Qaeda. That is easier said than done, and if a beefed-up Afghan campaign goes badly it will reflect on his judgment and damage his standing.

Obama's 250 tough calls

The 250 who remain at Guantánamo include at least 15 alleged Qaeda leaders and another 60 men whom the Bush administration classifies as eligible to be tried by military commissions.

STUART TAYLOR JR.

WHAT should Barack Obama do with the 250 men who are still locked up in the Guantánamo Bay prison camp? Of the many problems the new president will face, this is the most difficult, and one he must get right.

Along with that, he must answer tough questions about how his administration will deal with suspected terrorists in future: Where will they be held and what legal rights will they have? Which interrogation methods will President Obama allow and which will he forbid?

He answered some of these questions on his campaign promises, and would be wise to announce his intentions on or before Inauguration Day. Obama should and probably will renounce all brutal interrogation methods, not just those that Bush administration defines as torture.

He should and probably will discontinue or overhaul the widely derided and largely failed system of "military commissions" that

President Bush created in 2001 to try suspected terrorists for war crimes. And he should and probably will announce a detailed plan to close Guantánamo.

In my view, that plan should include promptly appointing a bipartisan, blue-ribbon commission to evaluate prisoners. The commission's mandate should include an exhaustive study of each prisoner: how he has been treated at Gitmo; whether there is enough admissible evidence to prosecute him in a federal court or by a regular military court-martial; whether he appears to be dangerous; whether to release or continue detaining those who do appear to be dangerous but cannot be tried; and whether to pay compensation to some or all of those who have been wrongly detained.

The commission's proceedings and final report should be public, except to allow for the protection of intelligence sources and methods. Those who are found not dangerous should be released or transferred to other countries. Obama should move the remaining detainees to prisons inside the

United States soon to erase Guantánamo's ugly symbolic stain on America's image.

But such steps alone may well fall short of expectations around the world and in the Democratic Party's liberal base. Even Bush said that he wanted to close Guantánamo and denied that he sanctioned torture.

Obama's global constituency and the human-rights community want him to make a clean break with Bush by banning even moderately coercive interrogation methods that may (or may not) violate international law against "humiliating and degrading treatment." They also want him immediately to abolish the system of detention without charges that Guantánamo represents.

Obama should not be stampeded into taking those steps without careful deliberation. (Voters won't rush him. Only 29% of respondents in a recent Quinnipiac poll favored closing the prison; 44% were opposed.) Both policy and politics argue against deciding whether to ban moderately coercive methods until Obama and his subordinates have had time to study the disputed evidence on effectiveness of these techniques and until the president has sought bipartisan support (including that of John McCain) in Congress.

The hardest decision will be whether to release the scores of apparently dangerous detainees who cannot be convicted of

crimes or to continue holding them without charges. The 250 who remain at Guantánamo include at least 15 alleged Qaeda leaders and another 60 men whom the Bush administration classifies as eligible to be tried by military commissions.

The other 175 or so would be difficult or impossible to prosecute in any court: some have committed no crimes, and evidence against others is inadmissible or not strong enough. The administration has deemed about 100 of those 175 to be potentially dangerous.

Some moderate Democratic (and Republican) experts argue cogently that Obama and Congress should continue to hold detainees without charges at least for a while longer, but provide them with more due process to help decide whether and when they should be released.

Some have called for a new "national security court" to sort out which detainees can be held without charges and for how long. Others counter that continuing to hold prisoners without charges will foment so much hatred of America abroad that doing so could be more dangerous than releasing them. This is a worthy debate, and it will be a real first test of Obama's resourcefulness not just as a politician, but as a student, and former professor, of the law.