

AMIRUL RAJIV

HERACLITUS once observed that no man crosses the same stream twice, because the stream has changed, and so has the man. In Bangladesh, a transition from civilianised military rule is about to come to an end just as the stream of representative democracy through elections is beginning to gather strength. As it grows into a broadening river, and then become a torrent, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party would cross and recross it, striving to alter its course and, at each stage, being itself subtly altered in its goals and vision.

January 11, 2007 -- a day to remember. A day that will last long in infamy. A day when Bangladesh entered the list of failed states. Thus began a long journey of transition through civilianised military rule in a country that was devastated by dynastic authoritarianism, burning in an inferno of electoral engineering.

What I refer to as the "transition" is the interval between one political regime, a dynastically elected authoritarian one, and another. Transitions are delimited, on the one side, by the launching of the process of dissolution of an authoritarian regime that was controlling the interim caretaker government in late 2006, and, on the other, by the installation of an alternate form of civilianised military caretaker government as we have at the moment in Bangladesh.

It is characteristic of the transition that during such a time the rules of the political game are not defined. Not only are they in constant flux, as we have witnessed in the last two years, but they are usually arduously contested as we have seen since the two former prime ministers were released from their prisons.

Military and political actors struggled not just to satisfy their immediate interests and/or the interests of those whom they purport to represent, but also to define rules and procedures whose configuration will determine likely winners and losers in the future.

Indeed, those emergent rules will largely define which resources can legitimately be expended in the political arena and which political actors will be permitted to enter it. Moreover, during the transition, to the extent that there are any effective rules and procedures, these tend to be in the hands of our civilianised military rulers.

Weakly or strongly, these civilianised military rulers of Bangladesh have retained discretionary power over arrangements and rights which in a stable democracy would be reliably protected by the