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What is at stake

Only the Awami League can bring Bangladesh back on track, argues Sajeeb Wazed

I would like to highlight our accomplishments in one area, the economy. This happens to be the area of most concern to the largest majority of our people. The one economic achievement that impacted the greatest proportion of our population was our extremely successful control of inflation. Even through the Asian financial crisis of the late 90s we kept inflation at a steady 1.59%. The price of rice stayed at Tk. 12-15 per kilo. For only the second time in Bangladesh's history we produced a surplus of grain and were even able to export a significant amount. Can you guess when we were self-sufficient in grain production for the first time? It was under the previous Awami League government of my grandfather, Bongobondhu. Not only could the BNP government not match this first time they were in power, but when they returned to power they promptly turned our surplus into a deficit, resulting in increasing prices once again.

This did not happen by luck or chance. This was a direct result of the diametrically opposing policies adopted by the two parties. The Awami League considers food a basic necessity that must remain accessible to everyone. Our food source and price must not depend on factors outside the country. Therefore we subsidised our farmers and fertiliser production and encouraged new technologies such as genetically engineered seeds in order to enhance production.

The BNP, on the other hand, believed that we could procure grain and fertiliser cheaper on the world market and so it was wasteful to subsidise our farmers. This has the added benefit of giving a few



businessmen close to the ruling establishment the opportunity to profit in importing these items. Of course, this only works as long as world market prices do remain lower. World market prices tend to fluctuate and are difficult to predict at best. If and when they do go up, the price of food in Bangladesh goes up as well. This is precisely what happened.

On other economic fronts, the Awami League is the party responsible for greatest share of our innovation and progress. We privatised the mobile telephone network which made cellular telephones affordable for the masses. The previous BNP government kept it a monopoly owned by one of their own ministers! This kept prices well out of reach of the common man.

We privatised power generation and left the country with a surplus of power production capacity. Once again, the next BNP government promptly turned this into a severe deficit. This deficit, combined with the unprecedented

corruption of their government, severely hurt our businesses and, as a consequence, our economy.

The Awami League privatised the media, airlines and banks, just to name a few others. All this led to increased competition, better products and lower prices for consumers. It also brought about a boom in the business climate which allowed companies to flourish. These in turn created new jobs, reduced unemployment, and grew the middle class. As the middle class grows, the consumer market within the country grows. This in turn drives increasing business profits and the cycle continues upwards. If the Awami League's policies could have been maintained, our economy would have grown exponentially. Unfortunately for the vast majority of our people, this was not to be.

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Sajeeb Wazed is an Advisor to Sheikh Hasina. He has a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Recrossing the stream

Chowdhury Irad Ahmed Siddiky suggests how the BNP can re-invent itself for the future

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 civilised 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 civilised 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 civilised 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 ardently 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 civilised military rulers.

Weakly or strongly, these civilised military rulers of Bangladesh have retained discretionary power over arrangements and rights which in a stable democracy would be reliably protected by the constitution and various independent institutions. The typical sign that transition has begun is understood when these civilised

military authoritarian incumbents, for whatever reason, began to modify their own rules in the direction of providing more secure guarantees for the rights of individuals and groups.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party is committed to that liberalisation through electoral process, the practice of redefining and extending the fundamental and civil rights of the people of Bangladesh. By liberalisation, I mean the process of making effective certain rights that protect both individuals and social groups from arbitrary or illegal acts committed by the state or by third parties that include foreign powers that practice grassroots imperialism in Bangladesh through manipulation of the foreign aid market or by channeling foreign aid through local NGOs.

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Chowdhury Irad Ahmed Siddiky is a candidate for the Mayor of Dhaka, 2009.

Beginning of a dream

A vote for BDB is a vote for change, urges Mahi B. Choudhury

ACT upon your dream. Today, in Bangladesh there is a sense of utter hopelessness and uncertainty for reasons we all know. None of us can say for sure what lies ahead for us. There is a sense that there is nothing we can do as citizens to change the course of our fate.

Change can happen only if there is hope. It is essential for us and our future generations that we re-establish that hope again; the hope that our parents and

grandparents had about our country and the future of their children. Only when we have hope again, can change become possible.

Now, is it possible to revive that hope again within ourselves so that we as a generation can plant the seed of change in the next 30 days?

Those who do not want positive change and progress in our country and in our society are happy with the status quo because it suits their vested interest.

They are not interested in the common good; rather they are only interested in their own benefit at any cost.

We must make a call to all patriotic people to join hands and unite to bring about the necessary change. There is no time and there are no other options; change is a must.

Let us look at why I think change is possible now. In the upcoming elections 33% of voters will vote for the first time in their lives and 25% of voters are second time voters, most of whom voted in 2001 for BNP because they wanted change. These second time voters became frustrated and then started to lose their hope for a better Bangladesh. These young people represent 58% of the electorate who are tired of the age old rhetoric and are ready to roll up their sleeves to work hard and earn an honest living with the assurance that their hard work enabled by responsible politics and development will leave behind a more prosperous country for their children.

People my age, those still under 40 today (70% are below age 40) voted for the first time in 1991 when the entire country had many hopes after the struggle for democracy. Think about the

frustration we are in today. When we look at today's 33% first time young voters, I can see how they will feel after 18 years if we now fail to bring about change.

If you compare the state of frustration and hopelessness today with those prevalent during the language movement in 1952, the liberation war in 1971 and the struggle for democracy in 1990, our hopelessness and uncertainty today is by no means any less. Two generations since 1990 have lost hope and have been disappointed and have seen their hopes and aspirations put on the back burner.

History has put us at a crossroads again and it is time for our generation to rise to the occasion and face the challenge with courage and determination to bring about the rebirth of hope and prosperity for the nation.

As you can see, change is possible. It will depend on whether, together, we can spread and communicate the right message and tell people that they are not alone; many more have the same dream.

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Mahi B. Choudhury is Spokesperson, Bikolpo Dhara Bangladesh, and Convenor, Alor Michhill, a volunteer unit of Jukto Front.

Weighing the odds

Ashfaq Wares Khan take a look at where the parties are as the election approaches

IN early September, dark despair was coursing through the core of the BNP. From the top brass to the rank and file, there was a hardening awareness that to go to elections in barely two months time would be to court disaster. For some, the talk was no longer defeat, but outright annihilation. A boycott was in serious play.

Across town, the BNP's cries of despair were being drowned out by the clamour of Awami League's (AL) premature crowings of self-congratulation. There was talk of an absolute majority of 210 seats in parliament, leaders were discussing possible cabinet posts, while a select few were working hard on a vision for Bangladesh 2021 -- an outline for a decade in power.

Two months on and a growing number of political pundits are asking the question: can the AL win the election at all? Forget an absolute majority, could they even muster 151 seats required to form a government? Those AL members complacent enough to still predict a landslide are now met with harsh rebukes and dark tales of 1991.

Both parties are already on manoeuvres. In November, the AL was forced to entertain ideas of an Ershad presidency. The BNP humiliated itself by disposing of their own farcical ultimatum when their

alliance partner, Jamaat-e-Islami, threatened to run in the elections alone. Fears of a boycott waned as it became increasingly clear that BNP's opposition stemmed from unmet demands rather than an in principle objection to elections under the current administration.

What has emerged is an election matrix that resembles the traditional tight race between two political foes, rather than a new political landscape. New political players, such as the Progressive Democratic Party, barely rate a mention. Despite protests by the big two that the government will continue to undercut their campaigns and the media's willingness to entertain the farcical circus surrounding their insignificant demands, the fundamentals of Bangladesh politics remain the same.

Hence, the most significant question is how much would revelations about the last BNP-led alliance government affect their chances on December 29. In effect, it's more of a referendum on their last term than the last two years of caretaker government rule.

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Ashfaq Wares Khan is a freelance journalist and political analyst.



Looking forward

G. M. Quader makes the case for the JP

ELECTION for the ninth parliament is almost knocking at the door. All political party activities are with an eye towards election at the moment. Election manifesto or future programs of political parties have created lots of curiosity and interest especially among the conscious citizens. At the same time these are also under critical scrutiny of the people. Here I present some of the programs that the Jatiya Party pledges to put in place, if it is part of the government after the upcoming elections.

The country is passing through an economic condition of high price rise of all commodities including the essentials. This has hit very hard the lower income group which comprises a major section of the population. High food price, especially of rice, has resulted in the risk of partial or full starvation in the vulnerable ultra-poor population, people who are unable to work for different disabilities, and also people who cannot manage full-time employment.

The ultra-poor group of the population who are not capable of working would be registered from wards, unions, upazilas, towns, and cities. They would be provided with rice, lentils and edible

oils, etc free of cost. The existing hundred days guaranteed work scheme for the jobless workforce would be enhanced to hundred and twenty days.

The number of beneficiaries would also be enhanced to cover as much landless farm workers as possible, especially in the monga hit northern districts where landless labourers go out of employment seasonally at a definite period of the year. Price of rice would be

kept within the purchasing power of poor by open market sale (OMS) at a subsidised price as and when necessary. Lower middle class people would be provided with a package of basic necessities at a subsidised rate through rationing system.

Very high population density and high rate of population growth is posing a real threat to social order, economic development, and overall good governance by

creating an ever-increasing pressure on the scarce resources of the country.

All sorts of birth control materials would be distributed free of cost. Couples with one or two issues would be encouraged to go for permanent method of birth control by providing cash incentives. They would also get especial priority in case of employment, other government facilities and even for getting of loan facilities.

Unemployment rate is high and it is on the rise due to lack of sufficient job creation compared to the number of fresh youths coming in the job market every year. Agriculture the major job provider has become saturated quite sometime back and has become the cause for under-employment for a good number of farm labourers. Industrial and economic policies congenial to increased production and creation of new employment opportunities are essential.

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