

AL's manifesto: Refreshingly specific and time bound

Welcome emphasis on economic goals but needs to show fund sources

THE AL has addressed nearly all substantive issues, and promised new initiatives in many. The prioritisation of the issues—prices of essentials, inflation, poverty, energy, good governance and terrorism --pretty much reflects public concern.

We are heartened by the manifesto's much needed and timely emphasis on economic issues. The timeframe of action for achieving the objectives--both in the short term (five years) and the long term vision up to 2021, coinciding with fifty years of the country's independence--will help in holding the party accountable.

AL manifesto's priority of bringing prices of essentials within the purchasing power of the people is correct. We find encouraging the commitment to break the syndicates that provide the ratchet effect to price hike. The declaration to increase the social safety net and reduction of poverty by 2013 is commendable as also its declaration to attain food autarky by 2012.

Of note is the recognition that unless the energy sector, the most essential vehicle of economic development, is revamped, the economic objectives including the aim of attaining an eight percent GDP growth by 2013, and 10 percent by 2017, might come to naught. Thus the plan to achieve a quantum jump, by aiming for 7000 mw of electricity generation in the next four years, is the appropriate objective to go for.

We are heartened to note that the AL has put its fingers on the issue of good governance that includes, among other things, not only the separation, but also the independence, of the judiciary, and strengthening of the anti-corruption and the human rights commissions. Its promise of an administration fully free of politics and party influence is music to our ears. But our hopes are tempered by the fact that while we had heard it before from everyone, including the AL, we saw the contrary happening.

It is perhaps for the first time that a mainstream political party has included the issue of religious extremism and terrorism in its election manifesto, and has affirmed to work regionally to deal with terrorism by working towards the formation of a South Asian task force. We commend AL for this bold posture and urge others to adopt similar stance, for we cannot allow our religion to be hijacked to justify violence.

While the AL manifesto may be termed as a good, time bound and relevant document, albeit ambitious, that clearly enunciates what needs to be done, we are worried by the fact that there is no clear indication as to how the party, if elected to power, will go about generating funds for achieving the goals, particularly at a time when the world is faced with an economic meltdown.

Additionally, for the manifesto to have any success, the AL will have to maintain an uncompromising stance on corruption.

Road mishaps galore

Need for highway police reinforced

DURING the Eid holidays 41 lives were lost to highway and road accidents, making a daily average of ten fatalities. One simply loses count of the numbers of injured and maimed. The pressure of mobility mounting prior to and following festivals, commandeering of dilapidated transports, overloading, speeding, overtaking, putting novices on the driver's seat et al make a lethal combination with accidents just waiting to happen. All of these factors are more or less present at other times, but these make a reappearance during festive occasions with vengeance.

The typical accidents range from head-on collisions and ramming from behind through turning turtle at the bends to sudden break failure and overrunning of pedestrians. Mini-buses, lorries, pick-up vans usually top the list of culprits while motor-cycles, rickshaws and pedestrians are extremely prone to mishaps. Certain road junctions or bends have been scenes of frequent accidents pointing the finger to road engineering and design faults which have already been identified by experts but no action has been taken to repave the roads at the hazardous points.

With such known patterns of accidents, all manner of experts have reeled off volumes of recommendations to repair the ever widening fault lines. Let's concentrate on what we believe to be the central point of concern. There couldn't be a worse indictment on governance failure than the apathy shown in building up highway police units without which any notion of applying traffic rules on the inter-district roads and highways is utter nonsense. Yet, this obvious necessity has been patently ignored as is evidenced from the fact that even though a highway police squad with a paraphernalia of personnel, transports and gadgets was launched a few years ago, it simply petered out into oblivion almost in no time. The half-baked plan naturally foundered on the rock of the highway squad being attached to the district police authority instead of having a separate identity with delegated authority and well defined field of competence. The net result was that the transport fleet, the better and quality part of it, found its way into already pampered hands like carrying coal to New Castle.

The bottom line is we should have a fully fledged highway police force to keep vigil on the highways which would have the double dividend of not just curbing accidents but also controlling crimes.

Our robber barons!

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE nomination seeking process of prospective members of parliament have exposed the shady past of the new rich of our society and have also disconcertingly brought to the fore the not-so-hidden culture of disobedience of law by the high and mighty. While this may not be surprising to the informed, it is without doubt, a very disappointing sight to the optimists as it lends credence to the cynical view that politics belittle greatness and corrupt goodness; and that while good people are engaged in introspection, the burly sinners continue to run our public affairs.

Concerned citizens would like to believe that politics shall be a particularly edifying activity. The ground reality, therefore, comes as a deep shock to them. The crisis facing our fledgling democracy has to be understood in real perspective because shutting our eyes to the gravity of the situation would only be to invite the forces of darkness.

Going back to the immediate past and also the not-too-distant past, one would find that withdrawal from criminal prosecutions on not very cogent grounds have taken place despite the democratic credentials of the successive political regimes. Such cases of withdrawal from criminal prosecution on alleged political grounds registered a disturbing increase in recent years giving rise to the suspicion that the same has been instrumental in the criminalization of our politics.

The question is, does our political scene present an incredible assemblage of pudding-headed mercenaries that needs to be replaced by individuals of honour and knowledge? Such despondency becomes poignant when one sees the single-minded pursuit of money by too many politicians and businessmen-turned politicians.

It is only in the very recent past that some of our prominent politicians were contemplating to retire when the hands of law were trying to reach them. By another estimate, such folks had found politics a very satisfying route of personal enrichment in a very brief span of time. Some

STRAIGHT LINE

The crux of the subject is primarily rooted in our political culture. The political parties have to decide whether they need rogue and criminal elements in furthering their so-called political objective at the expense of their public image and social acceptability. The politicians themselves should take the lead in the gradual decriminalisation of the political process and ensure its sanitisation.

young politicians rose from rags to riches in the last couple of years. Glimpses of their illegal acquisitions, as reported in the media, are shameful evidence of the abominable low to which politics has descended in Bangladesh.

If we look at the history of the sub-continent we find that the people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. We also see that many regimes have been destroyed not by adversity but by abasement. Corruption has been the greatest solvent of public institutions; poverty poses a far smaller threat.

Incidentally, in the democratic experience of Bangladesh since at least 1991, we find that our politicians have remained occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. Instead of vision and imagination our leaders have been served by deception and craftiness. Their eloquence flourished most when public affairs were in the worst condition.

Without doubt our polity will need time for our democracy to have an aristocracy of talents, knowledge and character. While waiting for that, good number of criminals and plunderers must be permanently debarred from politics and public life.

The process of replacing the mercenaries of our political arena by men of honour and knowledge will prove lengthy and the

delivery promises will be difficult to fulfil but the filth and stench of public life have to be cleansed. Politics have to be salvaged from the dangerous blend of incompetence, unscrupulousness and plain wickedness. The question is, must the reins of power be handed back to those who appear promise bound never to become wiser?

The disenchantment of our people with the state of politics and our politicians has to be appreciated. The premonition that elections and their corruptions, injustice and the power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given cannot be summarily dismissed. It is perhaps time to take freedom in moderation. It is also time to see if our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens.

We have to remember that our society has to not only fight against the big time criminals masquerading as politicians, it has also to do away with the few hundred petty tyrants that mushroomed all over the country during the last couple of years.

It is largely true that most of our politicians seek special favours and feel gratified if corrupt and inept supreme authority bestow these upon them. Instead of collective gains they have preferred individual profits. Most people are beguiled by the feigned humility and politeness of corrupt leaders, ignoring the disastrous

effects of the visionless and directionless policies.

It is time to think if by means of legal and institutional measures we can make life difficult for the corrupt elements. We have to ensure that such elements do not get time to relax and are subjected to real inconveniences in displaying their ill-gotten worldly possessions. The politicians can be kept on track if statutory measures are taken to guard against their becoming unbridled promoters-distributors of favours. This is crucial to stop favour-seeking satellites from hovering around the so-called power points. The opportunity cost of being corrupt in politics has to be very high.

It is time for our society to ensure that the political scene is not dominated by people whose real sources of income cannot be ascertained. For most people politics must not turn into a fulltime occupation. The villains cannot be upstaged in our political history. Sense of propriety in public life has to be retained. Administrative and financial accountability should be considered as solemn, serious and sacred in affairs of the State.

Running the affairs of State is a solemn and grim business where we need individuals of true grit. It was indeed pathetic to see occupiers of very high political office enjoying largely the perks and privileges of power without feeling the burden of responsibilities. Their conspicuous consumption was a rude shock for many. The single minded pursuit of money by the ruling elite has impoverished the mind of the nation and has also desiccated its heart. Wiping the dirt from the art of politics has to be the foremost priority.

The crux of the subject is primarily rooted in our political culture. The political parties have to decide whether they need rogue and criminal elements in furthering their so-called political objective at the expense of their public image and social acceptability. The politicians themselves should take the lead in the gradual decriminalisation of the political process and ensure its sanitisation.

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Thailand in crisis

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE yellow clad mass supporters from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) have rolled up their mats and sleeping bags and vacated Bangkok's two international airports -- Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi. The state of the art airports are again back in business. Thailand has survived its latest crisis and another episode in an ongoing political saga that has not only undermined the stability of the southeast Asian nation but also caused havoc to its tourist industry.

The end came when the controversial Constitutional Court of Thailand dissolved Thailand's top three ruling parties on charges of electoral fraud and temporarily banned the Prime Minister from politics. It brought down a government that has faced months of strident protests seeking its ouster.

The impasse dated back to the controversial premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra, a multibillionaire media tycoon who was elected in 2001 on a populist platform that promised universal healthcare and cash handouts to poor villagers. Soon afterwards, however, claims of corruption began to surface against Thaksin's Administration. The Opposition eventually took to the street to demand Thaksin's resignation, prompting the army to oust him in a bloodless coup.

This was not the first time that the armed forces had intervened in politics. Nevertheless, it was hoped that the next elected government would restore stability in governance. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Subsequent governments constituted by Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat over the last two years, were seen as proxies for Thaksin.

Clash of interest eventually led to the formation of the anti-government PAD alliance in 2005. Leadership was given by Sondhi Limthongkul, a successful media

POST BREAKFAST

Thaksin, a shrewd populist, unlike previous urban-centric rulers, managed to create an important rural vote bank by not only providing economic opportunities to the under-privileged villagers but also by according them greater 'dignity' through the provision of better health-care, easier credit extension and other socio-economic facilities.

mogul like Thaksin. This group represented the traditional Bangkok ruling class and the middle class and vowed to continue their de-stabilizing efforts till the government resigned. This has now happened. Their next goal appears to be the extradition of Thaksin (currently living in exile in Dubai) and his eventual trial on charges of corruption.

The anti-Thaksin protests and the tactics of the PAD rallies have however not elicited great support within the rural hinterland, the media and among those associated with Thailand's successful services sector. Their efforts, despite the removal of Somchai, is being seen as an effort to tarnish the peaceful image of Thailand.

The Court's decision has, however, been seen by many analysts as a stop-gap measure to ensure that a blood bath did not take place in the streets of Bangkok ahead of the 81st birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand (also its National Day) who has reigned since 1946 and commands near universal reverence among his compatriots. Unlike Nepal, the monarchy as an institution is still greatly respected in Thailand.

Nevertheless, despite the opening of

the airports and the removal of the Prime Minister, the political problem has not gone away in Thailand. The prospect of renewed political chaos in that country is still very real.

Former Deputy Prime Minister Chaowarat Chandeeerakul is the caretaker Prime Minister till the Parliament can pick a new Prime Minister within the next 30 days. In an effort to sidestep the Court's ruling, lawmakers with Somchai's party have already started to regroup under a new name in a move that will allow them to retain their grip on power -- a tactic sure to rile anti-government protesters. Non-executive PPP members (supporters of Thaksin) are already busy consolidating a new party -- the Puea Thai party. The former PPP members have no plans to dissolve parliament. The court's decision, therefore, can be interpreted as being akin to a time-out during a game. In other words, Thailand's political crisis is expected to continue.

The underlying situation is still fragile because of the existing divide within this country -- between the power-hungry political factions in Bangkok and other urban centers and the rural hinterland

symbolized by Udon Thani, capital of a north-eastern province bordering Laos and a known Thaksin stronghold. From that point of view many have classified the situation as a 'class struggle'.

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Whatever be the process of governance structure in Thailand in the coming months, two aspects will have to be dealt with on a priority basis. The PAD with its careful planning and logistical efficiency has demonstrated the weakness of Thailand's police force and their poor training as far as riot control is concerned.

The army's refusal to help contain the civilian insurgency has also proved once again that despite claims of civilian democratic institutions having been strengthened, there still remains a lot to be done in this regard.

It will be a pity if conflicting interests continue to harm the impressive progress of Thailand. Least common denominators have to be identified between the two sides. The leaderships of the two sides need to start a constructive engagement instead of resorting to chaos that affects Thailand's stability and the interests of the region.

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OPINION

Four-plus-one year tenure for better governance

MAS MOLLA

RECENTLY a proposal for a four-year parliament (in place of the five-year one) was put forward by renowned essayist and educationist Prof. Serajul Islam Chowdhury in an interview with The Daily Star (November 18). After three days, Prof. Nazrul Islam, not only supported Prof. Chowdhury's point of view, but also elaborated on his proposal in his article "Vital reforms ignored" (DS Pcp 21/11/2008).

I wholeheartedly support this view of having a four-year parliamentary government and add that the tenure of the unelected interim government should be a full year instead of the present three months. The three-month tenure of the caretaker govt. (CG) to deal with huge backlogs created by our so-called pro-people politicians has been proving utterly inadequate. The interim period of governance must deal with renewing the voter list, clearing the politicized administration (if they dare to do so again) and bringing the corrupt politicians to book. So a one-year long CG seems very logical. I don't think we missed the train yet.

The interim government is negotiating many things with the major political parties. Now I dwell on the ways of realizing the provisions constitutionally. The next Parliament needs to ratify also the works of this too lengthy, decidedly ultravires government of the caretaker character. The negotiation also includes improvements to the party constitutions. So the interim government can raise the issue of some essential amendments also to the national Constitution (that the parties can pledge to do in the next Parliament).

Let's ask our politicians to amend Article 58B, 72(3) and 123(3). On the tenure of CG, Article 58B now speaks only "till the date on which a new Prime Minister enters upon his office"; this can be replaced with "till finishing one year in office" or "till the date on which a new Prime Minister enters upon his office" which comes later". In Article 72(3) on the tenure of a Parliament, "five years" can be replaced with "four years". In Article 123(3) on general election, "ninety days" can be replaced with "a year or 365 days"; but for by-election, 90 days (Article 123(4)) can stay as it is. A by-product benefit of

such a provision can be that the election can be held always in winter (dry season) from this year onwards.

For having a Chief Adviser (CA) to the CG that would run the government for a full year, some technical provisions must be dealt with. The aim of CG provision is holding a free and fair election to the next Parliament.

There are four provisions for appointing the CA: 1) The last CJ or any CJ retired before him [Article 58C(3)], 2) The last retired Judge of the Appellate Division or any one retired before him [Article 58C(4)], 3) A qualified citizen based on political consensus ([Article 58C(5)] and 4) The President himself in case all the prior three provisions exhausted and failed [Article 58C(6)].

I propose bringing provision 3 to 1 to avoid mishandling with the singular first provision of appointing the last retired CJ as CA. It is now clear that a political consensus is needed even in considering the CJ; so why not try from the plural qualified citizenry first! This provision will elevate the morale of our high profile citizens having benign aspiration for governing the country well at least for a short period.

Other provisions can be as such only having clear wording on considering all the retired CJ's in a line before opting for the other SC Judges' line and the President can come only after clearly showing that all the other three provisions in order (after amendment) were exhausted.

Besides, during the proposed four-year parliamentary period, our elected MPs must enjoy freedom of thought and expression of that unhindered. Article 70 is a safeguard against floor-crossing; so the intention was good, no doubt. But the provision snatched away the freedom of speech and action of the elected MPs. It is understood that usually an MP resigns from a party just to join another, but voting against the party is almost always out of conscience. So let's make a compromise between the two: after amendment, Article 70(1) can provide for vacating an MP's seat if s/he "resigns from that party" (as it is now), but the part "or votes in Parliament against that party" should be repealed along with the explanation thereof.

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