Will there be Real Change?

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This Monday could not be more important. The election, for which 140 million people of Bangladesh has been waiting for, is finally going to become a reality. The interim government, which was supposed to last for only three months according to the constitution, ended up lasting for about two years in the pretext of paving the way for a free and fair general election and the establishment of an effective parliament. Through this long overdue election, everyone hopes democracy will take shape in Bangladesh, bringing an end to the extended rule of an unelected regime and the uncertainty that surrounds our lives.



Chief advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed

The ninth parliamentary election, originally scheduled for January 22 last year, was postponed in the wake of severe street violence leading to killings between two biggest political alliances. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led Four-party Alliance and the interim government of Iajuddin Ahmed dictated by the alliance were obstinate about holding the election without Awami League (AL)-led alliance as they had declared to boycott it alleging election engineering.

On the other hand, the AL-led grand electoral alliance announced resisting the poll at any cost if held without them. Grand alliance leader Sheikh Hasina on January 10 last year announced hartal for an indefinite period of time to stop the polls which would be virtually a BNP controlled rigged election. Going to election without the opposition too had been introduced in February 1996 by the BNP but the 'elected government' managed to exist only a few months, and a new election had to be declared in which AL won.

Under such a suffocating environment, the military persuaded President Iajuddin Ahmed to promulgate the state of emergency on January 11. Amid overwhelming popular support, the present caretaker government under the leadership of former Bangladesh Bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed took the helm of the country on January 12, promising the people a fully participatory parliamentary election. But doubts about the election were already filling the air.

Fakhruddin Ahmed's commitment is going to be implemented on Monday.

The Chief Advisor's promises were to cleanse the country of the traditional rogue politics, bringing a qualitative change in political culture and paving the way for a functioning parliament to end violent politics on the streets and to bring stability to the country for steady economic growth.

The people were happy to extend support to the caretaker government when it launched a countrywide anti-graft operation capturing alleged corruptionists and criminals responsible for pushing the country back through their destructive political culture. The support, though short-lived, was overwhelming as people were fed up with the negative politics of strikes, blockades, vandalism and widespread corruption.

Within months, over 100 high-profile ministers, politicians and businessmen, including two former Prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, landed in jail. Corruption and extortion charges were framed against them. Some of the high-profile prisoners were convicted in trials by special courts.

To accomplish their mission, the Fakhruddin regime took a number of reform initiatives, including recasting the EC and separating the judiciary from the executive branch of the government. Unfortunately, the mission did not succeed and now the question comes: What are the outcomes of the last two years? Did the desired reforms take place in the political system and culture? Have the attitude of politicians changed? Skeptics will give a resounding 'no' to such questions. But though most of the arrested have been freed and many are contesting in the polls after clearance from courts, there is a glimmer of hope that this may be the beginning and the developments over the last two years might have a long-lasting impact.