

Daring to change

STRAIGHT LINE

The task is to transform our apathetic and lethargic democracy into an anticipatory and participatory one. An anticipatory democracy would foresee the issues ahead and equip itself well to meet them; and a participatory democracy will be one in which the people are not content merely to vote at the time of elections but participate in the continuous process which goes to the making of decisions and the formulation of policies.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ON 27th December last this scribe commented in this column (Bracing for change) that "The common man is deeply religious but wants an improvement in life and for that, whenever given a chance, he has chosen the progressive, forward-looking secular leaders and parties..... In the historic election of 1970 people voted for the secularists in both parts of Pakistan. The common man is perhaps wise enough to place religion and politics in different spaces and believes that worldly affairs are too important to be left in the hands of one group."

On 29th December, people of Bangladesh spoke and spoke stridently

for the values and principles they hold dear to their heart. It was quite a sight to witness the equally astounding and resounding victory of the forces of tolerance over bigotry and obscurantisms.

As of now, would it be an impracticality to hope that our democratic society will harbour a certain extravagance of objectives so that real and potential leaders wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications? Shall we see group cohesiveness and work and achievement? Will our democracy involve the cooperation of all perceptive citizens?

The important question is, shall we maintain discipline or shall we witness the mindless 'hartsals' when government ceased to govern, mobocracy displaced democracy and townships were para-

lyzed by groups of men who regarded themselves above the law? Shall we learn to ensure the rule of law while providing liberty under law? Must we not demonstrate that liberty is not an "optional extra" in a democracy and that human rights are not a luxury intended merely for the elite and the affluent?

Politically speaking, a democratic nation will progress when knowledge and power will be combined in the same set of individuals. As in the past we will face a grave crisis when some will have knowledge and others have power. We have to remember that people will be very soon disillusioned with democracy unless it results in rule by meritocracy.

The task, therefore, is to transform our apathetic and lethargic democracy into an anticipatory and participatory one. An anticipatory democracy would foresee the issues ahead and equip itself well to meet them; and a participatory democracy will be one in which the people are not content merely to vote at the time of elections but participate in the continuous process which goes to the making of decisions and the formulation of policies.

If one cares to find out, one will see that a phenomenal change has taken place in the thinking and behaviour of the general masses. And it is a positive one. While things at government level are deteriorating or stagnating, at societal level there is a yearning for change -- a realization that this is our own country and we have to do something to improve it.

To the discerning eye there would appear an unfortunate disconnection between the state and society. There is a wide and growing gulf between the ruling elite and the people. The government with all its power, mandate and huge resources has very little clue about the ground situation: how people think, how they perceive things, what are their needs, what are their priorities. People on the other hand, have little faith in the government.

Under the vastly altered political scenario, may the citizens of Bangladesh hope that Shaikh Hasina's government shall wholeheartedly hold aloft the majesty and the guardianship of the judiciary? That her government shall defend our judges against political pressures and threat, insist upon integrity and impartiality in judicial appointments and will not pressurize for appointing persons who subscribe to the philosophy of ruling party.

That her government shall ensure the trial of war criminals to put Bangladesh's history in proper perspective and accord proper honour to the valiant sons and daughters who laid down their lives for our independent existence.

That her government shall display high level of maturity, vision and wisdom to ensure the growth of a strong and merit-based administrative system and realize the fatality of having a bureaucracy whose quality is doubted by the

society at large.

That her government shall genuinely strive for internal democracy in the political party; and free themselves and their followers from the shackles of feudal ethos and shall conspicuously insist upon a change from privilege to talent and emphasize on calibre in all our corporate activities.

That her government shall create a climate where businessmen and professionals realize that there is more to life than success, and more to success than money; and shall painstakingly establish that money has to be earned rather than to be got or won and that extra effort is put before extra leisure.

That her government upon assumption of power shall not restrict freedom of speech, assembly and movement under an admittedly democratic dispensation and shall refrain from confining gatherings of opposition to the immediate surroundings of party office under the pretext of maintaining public order; and shall not pass patently illegal orders to enforcement officials to virtually quarantine the opposition protest in a limited place.

That her government shall make sincere and earnest efforts to ensure that electoral popularity does not become the exclusive preserve of ill-gotten money and muscle power. That politics of annihilation shall be unequivocally abjured by all parties and there shall be no teaching the rival group a lesson and to mischief-

vously polarize communities into voting blocs.

That her government shall not allow any State complicity in the perpetration of organized acts of violence and inordinate delays in securing justice; and ensure that political affiliation does not obstruct the process of accountability of culpable individuals and further ensure that criminal convictions are not ordinarily condoned and convicts accorded mercy without cogent grounds.

That her government shall not permit the deliberate dilution of State and government interests and ensures the realization of the distinction between public service and private service in all sectors of national activity.

There is no denying that Sheikh Hasina is now the leader of all the citizens of Bangladesh. Her government of the immediate future has to ensure that power and hunger for more resources does not become an end in itself. Protecting the status quo from all challenges must not become the prime activity of the government. Devoting the energy and resources of the establishment for solving people's problems and maintenance of order in the society should be the main focus of the rulers as against the ignoble use of government machinery to keep the rival claimants to power in check.

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Priorities for the next government

BITTER TRUTH

The government to be formed must try to find out the reason for such a massive voter turn out, especially the women voters that broke all previous records. Hard pressed by poverty, hunger and deprivation, the rural women, who went without food or lived on just one meal a day on most occasions after feeding their children and male members, have turned out in overwhelming numbers, to vote for a change.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

PEOPLE have spoken very clearly about the change that should come about and they need in the state policy and economy and of their abhorrence of politics of hatred, religious fundamentalism and communal divide through the Parliamentary election held on December 29 last. The overwhelming mandate that the voters have given to AL or, so to say, the Grand Alliance has increased their share of responsibility of building a new Bangladesh free from hunger and deprivation.

When in a peaceful and credible election the AL led alliance won a landslide victory, BNP chairperson was crying hoarse of wholesale rigging. The country, it appeared, was about to be pushed into a crisis situation by the BNP stalwarts through rejection of the election result with allegations of election engineering without any proof. What is first apprehended of this worrisome situation is that with sort of inspiration from the frustrated BNP the streets of the country could once again become the theatre of violence in the days to come.

It would have been far better if, without engaging herself in the tirade of attack and accusation, the BNP chairperson like McCain, the Republican candidate in the American presidential election, could

have accepted the defeat gracefully and urged the people who supported her to join her in not just congratulating the AL chairperson but offering the government to be elected their good will and cooperation.

However, with a global recession looming, there is no chance of Bangladesh escaping its effects. Now the attention of the Prime Minister of the newly elected government should be aimed at reorganizing the power and agriculture sectors in a bid to boost food production. With supply position improving and availability overstripping the need, prices will automatically come down. Unsurprisingly, in absence of job opportunities in other sectors, 50 per cent of the country's total population is still dependent on agriculture. Unhappily, while population boom continues, agricultural production in the country has come down to less than half in just about a decade and export earnings from agricultural goods has come down to 7 per cent from 70 per cent during this time. Despite all these pitfalls, agriculture remains the focus of economic self-sufficiency in the country.

While fisheries sector, especially pond fisheries, is getting some boost, the most neglected area happens to be forestry and its share is now just around 8 per cent giving an unhappy signal. With popula-

tion increasing by 30 lakh a year and acreage for agricultural activities drastically plummeting, the spectre of foodgrain imports stares the country in the face. Undeniably true, crisis as well as price hike gripped the country because the past alliance government as well as the succeeding CTG lacked the economic vision to foresee the shortage in advance. Taking lesson from the past administration, the newly elected government, by appointing a task force, should accurately estimate the agri output and plan timely import as well as procurement of foodgrain to maintain its buffer stock.

Recalling the fact that food production in 1972 after the liberation of the country stood at one crore ton when the population figure was just 75 million and now with population figure reaching 150 million and the production figure reaching about three crore ton, the shortfall is still acute due to many factors like vile business motive and hoarding. The fact is: the middle is too long and too many are living off it, denying both farmers and consumers affordability. With the growth of population, there has been further fragmentation of land into smaller holdings. Precisely told, the farming sector is fast heading for a collapse in absence of remedial measures like technological breakthrough in terms of high-yielding varieties for foodgrain. Soil fatigue due to over exploitation of nutrients and organic matter, nutrient imbalance due to use of improper combination of fertilizers and non-availability of quality seeds as well as sharp decline in water table due to over dependence on ground water should be taken care of.

In consequence, farmers across the country have taken a beating. Their incomes rose by about 0.30 percent as compared to 5 per cent in other sectors. The newly elected government must think about giving a big assistance to farmers to give a push to agricultural activities. The immediate past alliance government made a boastful claim that



the country attained a whopping economic growth during their tenure. But analysis by experts indicated that the growth had not only been low, it was a jobless growth. The most important way to look at the quality of economic growth is by examining the impact of such growth on poverty.

Poverty, as we understand, ought not to be measured in terms of not having enough food or clothing. The true measures of poverty are illiteracy, disease, infant mortality, low life expectancy, gender inequality and class exploitation. Bangladesh has the largest number of poor people in the world and currently they survive on less than a dollar a day. A substantial number of our people do not receive basic healthcare and do not have access to amenities like drinking water, shelter and toilet.

The reason for this sorry state of affairs is: the growth rate in agriculture sector

has been low. Land for farming has decreased by about 1 per cent every year and population increased by about 1.5 per cent in the same context. At present land for farming activities has come down to 60 lakh hectare from 90 lakh hectare over the last 30 years. And this situation demands that food production has to be augmented at the rate of 3 per cent every year. With this end in view, the food production target for the year 2008-09 has been fixed at 3 crore and 42 lakh ton which is achievable with the availability of inputs. Past governments over the years spent crores of taka to boost agricultural production but the result has been far below our expectation. If this amount was invested in public works such as irrigation canals or wells, small dams, water-harvesting projects, desilting water bodies, rural roads, and above all, houses for rural poor, it would have triggered a multiplier effect and transformed the

economic facade of the country. Shockingly, we do not invest the money, we simply spend it.

The message for the Grand Alliance that is going to form the government within a couple of days is very clear. The government to be formed must try to find out the reason for such a massive voter turn out, especially the women voters that broke all previous records. Hard pressed by poverty, hunger and deprivation, the rural women, who went without food or lived on just one meal a day on most occasions after feeding their children and male members, have turned out in overwhelming numbers, to vote for a change, that could arrest the price hike of food items and essentials and provide them with jobs and work to live on.

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Is war between India and Pakistan inevitable?

For the sake of peace in the South Asia region, Saarc and Asean countries must jointly make diplomatic move to defuse the tension and bring back normalcy. Neither the US nor Russia or China should be encouraged to engage in diplomacy because all of them might have different agendas.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

TENSION is building up between India and Pakistan following the attacks in Mumbai, which, according to India, was instigated by a Pakistan based extremist group. Initially, India's Deputy Foreign Minister Anand Sharma reacted sharply: "We are a nation outraged right now. Our response will be very serious." It was followed by India's demand that Pakistan hand over 20 suspected terrorists who are involved with Lashkar-e-Taiba. This group was banned by Pervez Musharraf.

It is not understood how an armed terrorist group could enter Mumbai after crossing the sea without the knowledge of Indian naval units and the coast guard. According to the *Nation* newspaper of Pakistan, India has the largest navy in the region and the most modern ships. Not even a sparrow flying on the Karachi-Mumbai sea-lane is supposed to pass unchecked. On November 20, Indian intelligence agencies alerted the coast guards and naval headquarters of possible attacks, but the Mumbai police were not informed.

The *Indian Express* of December 26 reported about

a meeting of bureaucrats asking Intelligence Bureau Director Halder why such information was not passed on to the Mumbai police. Halder bluntly replied that the police could do nothing on the high seas, clearly indicating that the navy and the coast guards had failed to deliver. Another surprising thing was that ten terrorists had seized Mumbai for three days and started firing from four places. How was that possible? How lax was security?

The same drama took place in the United States on September 11, 2001. American intelligence had been informed of the immi-

nent attack by Al-Qaeda, but no appropriate action was initiated to prevent that. 160 Saudi nationals, many of them relatives of bin Laden, were allowed to fly out of the United States between September 16 and September 23, 2001 without being questioned.

There has been suspicion about the motive of the Indian government. Interpol secretary general Ronald Noble is reported to have told a news conference in Islamabad on December 21 that India had not authorised the sharing of any information with the global police agency about those suspected of involvement in the Mumbai attacks.

Meanwhile, Islamabad indicated that the name of only surviving gunman, Mohammad Ajmal Amir Khan, does not appear in Pakistan's national citizens database. Pakistan also refused to provide him any legal assistance. On the other

hand, Pakistan shut down Lashkar-e-Taiba's charity organisation, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, on the basis of UN resolutions and placed their leaders under house arrest and froze its assets.

Another ominous sign has been revealed by Gregory F. Fegel, a Russian columnist, in an article in *Pravda*. The writer is of the opinion that "now, after supporting Pakistan for decades, during which time the US not only ignored but also aided and abetted the Pakistan's state terrorism against India, the US is making a public show of turning against Pakistan. The US's recent sabre-rattling against Pakistan is not a result of the US government suddenly becoming wise to or fed up with Pakistan's terrorism. It is a part of the US' long range programme of divide and conquer against Pakistan and India. The US and Israel intend to encourage or provoke India into proxy war against Pakistan." This article

was published on December 11.

Suspicion and mistrust between the two nuclear powers in South Asia have been prevalent since the two countries became independent from British India in 1947. Since then, these two neighbours have fought three wars. The current tense situation

on their borders has led to serious concern among peace loving people. Both countries have initiated diplomacy to defuse the tense situation, but their armed forces have mobilised troops along the borders.

For the sake of peace in the South Asia region, Saarc and Asean countries must jointly

make diplomatic move to defuse the tension and bring back normalcy. Neither the US nor Russia or China should be encouraged to engage in diplomacy because all of them might have different agendas.

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