

Welcome transition to elected government

The challenges before it are many and enormous

AS Sheikh Hasina had promised, the cabinet that was inducted last evening is largely composed of new faces, with a few surprises. For the most part, it is an inexperienced team. It will therefore be a big challenge for the government to deliver the goods in full measure to the nation. Even so, we wish the government well and expect it to bring about the changes that the people of Bangladesh so keenly look forward to.

Yet the nation has particular reason to take pride in itself today. For the first time since 2001, a general election has taken place to the satisfaction of the people; and for the first time in two years, an elected democratic government is back in charge of the country. It will not be remiss on our part to suggest that we can give ourselves -- and by that we mean the caretaker government, the Election Commission, the armed forces, the police, indeed the entire nation -- a pat on the back for an achievement that truly reflects our traditional belief in constitutional government. We trust that the journey we have set out on will further strengthen our democracy and help institutionalise political pluralism in Bangladesh.

Even as we feel optimistic about the future, we remain aware of the myriad challenges the new government is faced with. It surely makes sense to suppose that the government itself is conscious of those challenges and will take the necessary steps to meet them with wisdom, sagacity and foresight. These challenges can broadly be categorised into three areas, namely, national, regional and international. The priorities at the national level are prices of essential goods, employment generation and improvement of the energy situation. At the same time, the new government will need to formulate well thought-out responses to the risks emanating from the recent global economic downturn. Equally important will be the need to tackle firmly the menace of religious extremism.

The new government will be expected to pursue a clear, purposeful foreign policy. Of particular importance will be a firm handling, in the national interest, of such issues as our maritime boundaries and checking and eliminating cross border insurgency. Bangladesh can play a constructive role through promoting further the SAARC spirit, especially in light of lingering tensions between India and Pakistan. On such issues as the Middle East, a strong response on Bangladesh's part to all aggressive acts, such as those being committed by Israel in Gaza, will signify an assertive foreign policy. We note that the incoming Obama administration in Washington symbolises for many a wind of change in the United States. In similar manner, the people of Bangladesh expect positive change from their new government.

By far the biggest challenge for the government will be to unify the nation through bipartisan, forward-looking leadership. The enormity of the victory the Awami League and the grand alliance have achieved are at once a call for humility and purposeful leadership. The government ought to remember that despite their low seat numbers in the Jatiyo Sangsad, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami together garnered 36 per cent of the vote at the December 29 elections. It is this large chunk of voters the government will have to reach out to if it is to adhere to its promise of inclusive government. The opposition must be engaged through being given the space a normal democratic situation demands.

Let the new government speak for all citizens of this land.

Reviewing DAP

The committee should get more time

NOT very long ago in these very columns we had called upon the caretaker government not to approve the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) before addressing all its flaws that had been pointed out by the experts from time to time.

We note that the CTG before its exit decided to form a review committee to go through the recommendations therein of the long term development of the capital and its surroundings, and recommend actions to rectify the faults that are in it. And needless to say there are a number of basic flaws that will render the plan totally counterproductive if it were to be implemented in its current form. The members and the head of the committee are reputable persons with expert knowledge whose suggestions we are certain would make the DAP more wholesome.

However, we suggest that the committee be provided more time than the one month that it has been given to come out with substantive suggestions to put right the flaws. We also expressed our concern that there has been an undue haste in seeing the plan passed. The plan has been in the works since 2004, and it can wait a few months more.

The authorities cannot overlook the fact that a common apprehension expressed as regards the plan is that it has taken the interest of the land developers and real estate agents into consideration more than that of the city dwellers as well as the environment.

As it is, the two things that the metropolis suffers from is the lack of open space for its residents and seasonal flooding caused by the filling up of the catchment areas surrounding the capital, by land grabbers and the so-called developers, mostly with the connivance of those that are supposed to prevent it happening. These concerns should find adequate reflections and responses in the DAP.

We would like to think that the committee will be provided adequate time to address all the inadequacies of the DAP.

Fortifying democracy

GROUND REALITIES

The new government that Sheikh Hasina will preside over as prime minister will need to hit the ground running. That will call for decisive action on the part of the prime minister and her colleagues in the government.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE new government that Sheikh Hasina will preside over as prime minister will need to hit the ground running. That will call for decisive action on the part of the prime minister and her colleagues in the government. And such action must be taken in those particular areas where public interest has been intense in these past couple of years.

The chief of the Awami League has promised to strengthen the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). That is a good beginning, but for the promise to acquire substance, the new government must swiftly and unequivocally go into the business of devising the measures that will truly transform the ACC into an independent body.

A bad casualty in these past few years, especially during the period of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led four-party coalition government, has been a systematic undermining of public institutions. And when you have institutions that go wobbly, you cannot really expect democracy to work in its natural fashion.

A rebuilding of institutions, a revitalising of departments and ministries and other organisations is, therefore, called for. When you think of the ways in which the ACC has

been working under Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, and when you put all that in juxtaposition with the Anti-Corruption Commission as it earlier operated, or stultified, under the authority of politically partisan men, you realise with a bit of happy surprise that the ACC under the former chief of staff of the army has done commendable work. It has revived our collective confidence in the ability of institutions and the law to help us turn back to the lost heights of morality.

We, the people, expect the new administration to be a true manifestation of cabinet government. And with that we believe that this government should, in its own interest as well as in the overall interest of the country, undertake the job of enhancing the powers of the ACC. Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and his team have done a fine job despite the many odds stacked against them.

As an early sign of its seriousness of purpose, the new Awami League government should be taking the long-term view, through asking and telling this team to stay on. The political leadership and the ACC must get down to the business of framing the rules upon which the latter will operate absolutely independently of the government, to a point where no political influ-

ence will or can be brought to bear upon the working of the ACC.

In the coming weeks and months, the degree to which the ACC prosecutes those guilty of corruption in the past (and it matters little where or to which political party such elements belong), and the extent to which the government will resist the temptation of intervening in or interfering with the work of the anti-corruption watchdog, will indicate the route this country will take in its drive to cleanse itself of the sins that have long undercut its essential values.

The imperative for an institutionalisation of politics and governance goes up a good many notches when you consider the immense role the Election Commission can play in a transformation of national politics. Election Commissioner M. Sakawat Hussain hinted at the powerful institution the EC could be when, the other day, he spoke of firm action against those in whose hands ballot papers were observed, outside the polling booth.

In these two years, for all the stumbling they sometimes fell to, the Chief Election Commissioner and his team have done a good job. For the first time since 1973 has the Election Commission made sure that the results of an election fully and definitively reflect the will of the people.

Sheikh Hasina and her government will now need to follow it all up, by ensuring the emergence of a free, powerful Election Commission, one that can match, in its actions and deeds, the performance of the Indian Election Commission, which T.N. Seshan once led so creditably. A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, Sohul Hussain and Sakawat Hussain

have proved to be dedicated, firm public servants. We need to have them carry on with their jobs.

Nur Mohammad is one other individual who has, through his bluntness of language, impressed people with thoughts of what he could possibly do to reinvent the nation's police force. He knows and acknowledges, as we all do, that the police in Bangladesh have never been able to turn themselves into a professional organisation largely because of the propensity of elected politicians and military dictators to use them as instruments to browbeat the opposition into submission. Perhaps the Inspector General of Police knows too, as the rest of us do, that recruitment into the police service in the five years of BNP-Jamaat rule was based on parochial political loyalties.

It is men like him the new government should be tapping into, for they can steer the police service away from politics and into the work the rules of service stipulate they should be doing. The prime minister and the cabinet ought to make it clear to the country that the police, indeed any force entrusted with the maintenance of public security, will function in the interest of the republic and not in the defence of the interests of the political parties or alliances in power.

The new government inherits terrible realities. It, therefore, cannot afford to make mistakes or drag its feet. It needs to be humble; it must demonstrate wisdom and it must reach out to all citizens. Sheikh Hasina's second stint in office must be an inclusive experience of throbbing, thriving, compassionate government.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanlared@yahoo.co.uk

Small boys, big game

BYLINE

If they must stretch their wisdom to a thousand words, may I offer a suggestion? They are making a mistake by looking at the big boys. The elections of 2009 might well be a game whose result is determined by the small boys.

M.J. AKBAR

THERE is only one relevant question in an election year: who will win? The pundits have begun to get themselves into the usual tangle, most of the tangle created by the spin of bias. The right thing to do would be to admit that no one really knows, but that would reduce a column to just one sentence. Since pundits get their money from columns rather than sentences, this is an inadequate solution to their dilemma.

I offer a suggestion? They are making a mistake by looking at the big boys. The elections of 2009 might well be a game whose result is determined by the small boys.

Allies, rather than principals, could be the key to the formation of the next coalition in Delhi. It will also depend on how many seats the Third Front gets, and on which side its partners fall if they have to choose between the UPA and the NDA.

The three major allies of the Congress are Lalu Yadav in Bihar, M. Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu and Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra. There is bad news for the Congress in all three states. The Chennai street is buzzing with talk about a triumphant return for Jayalalitha. Between the pain of family feuds and the disgust of unprecedented corruption, the DMK seems to have lost it.

It is often forgotten that the DMK has been in power in Delhi for two terms, first as an NDA partner and then in the UPA. That is a lot of temptation for DMK ministers in Delhi to handle, and they handled it by succumbing totally. They may have begun life from the usual humble origins, and they could be out of office soon, but trust me, they will never be poor again -- for many generations.

In Maharashtra, the Congress is facing a double-whammy. There is a dip in both voter-support as well as in the cadre. The voters have shifted to the opposition

after two nearly full terms of a best-forgotten chief minister, who has had, uniquely, to be dropped twice. A good section of the Congress cadre has moved to Sharad Pawar, who has been building his party as a regional force for the state, on the lines of Telegu Desam and DMK/AIADMK.

He has nominated an heir, his daughter, and the next general election may see her shift into the Lok Sabha from the Rajya Sabha. His best legacy is not a victory in 2009, but a strong party structure that can survive the ephemeral phases of democracy. Pawar is sharp enough to see the future clearly. For 2009 is a transition, not a horizon.

The UPA bastion in the east is crumbling. Nitish Kumar, with the simple offer of good governance, has made substantial inroads into Lalu territory. Muslims are moving towards him in substantial numbers, and Lalu Yadav's traditional vote-bank rhetoric about the BJP will not stop the drift, since the voter has made good governance his pre-eminent priority. The Congress has the difficult task of not only preventing erosion in its own numbers, but also compensating for the losses that will be suffered by its allies.

Since 1991, allies have gained far more from alliances with the Congress than the other way around. Lalu Yadav has boxed the Congress into just four seats out of 40 in Bihar. When a party does not contest seats, it withers at the roots, which is

what has happened to the Congress.

Mulayam Singh Yadav will not concede more than 15 seats out of 80 in UP; Mamata Banerjee will keep the Congress down to 10 out of 42 in Bengal. Congress will gain in states like Kerala and Punjab, and could improve its numbers slightly in Rajasthan, but that will not easily offset losses in big states like Maharashtra, Andhra and Tamil Nadu.

One assumes that Congress believes it can use the BJP bogey to bring in the Left and Third Front parties into its coalition after the results. This will not be easy. The Left believes it has been betrayed and abused by Dr. Manmohan Singh, inside and outside parliament, over the strategic alliance with the United States.

It is not likely to hand over leadership of any alliance it supports to the Congress. Congress might offer to prop up a minority government from outside, but other parties will recall what happened to I.K. Gujral and Deve Gowda. They might prefer stability to a temporary triumph.

The balance will, in any case, swing towards the alliance with the larger numbers. To be in play, the BJP-led NDA must deliver over 220 seats. Will that happen?

Why don't we let the electorate tell us in April and May? The pundit pontificates. The citizen votes.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.

Relations with India and Myanmar

BOTTOM LINE

In the past, an inconsistency existed in the conduct of Bangladesh foreign policy. On the one hand, there appeared to be a set of policies, which were designed to turn the country into "a cocoon," on the other hand, there was another set of liberal policies that tended to operate in a trans-national environment.

HARUN UR RASHID

ALTHOUGH Bangladesh's relations with India and Myanmar (Burma) are characterised as friendly and mutually supportive, there is room for much improvement in interactive relations in all sectors with both the neighbours. In the past, an inconsistency existed in the conduct of Bangladesh foreign policy. On the one hand, there appeared to be a set of policies, which were designed to turn the country into "a cocoon," on the other hand, there was another set of liberal policies that tended to operate in a trans-national environment.

What is called for is removal of this incoherence because policies that pull in different directions are being implemented. The landslide win of the Awami League (AL)-led grand alliance provides an opportunity to take the initiative for bold and courageous decisions in removing the anomaly.

The realities of the 21st century (such as globalisation and interdependence) will inevitably have an impact on the choices for Bangladesh. It seems that the range of

choices available to Bangladesh will depend on the policy makers' capacity to take advantage of geopolitics rather than being constrained by it.

Relations with India

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, congratulated Sheikh Hasina on her stunning victory. It is reported that India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee is expected to visit Dhaka in the third week of this month.

Awami League is deeply committed to secularism in the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The majority of non-Muslims in the country support AL. Secularism is not to be mistaken with atheism. In government, secularism means a policy of avoiding entanglement between government and religion, of non-discrimination among religions, and of guaranteeing human rights of all citizens, regardless of faith.

India's leaders, irrespective of political parties, appear to be more comfortable with Sheikh Hasina than Begum Khaleda Zia because of AL's commitment to secu-

larism. Furthermore, there are other reasons, like AL's stance on terrorism and the formation of a South Asian Task Force.

Most of the veteran Awami League leaders had worked hand in hand with Indian leaders during the 1971 liberation struggle. There had been much goodwill between the leaders of the two countries.

During the past rule of AL in 1996-2001, two landmark agreements were concluded. One was the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty with India for 30 years, and the other was the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Agreement with Tribal representatives in 1997.

During her tenure as opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina maintained good relations with Indian leaders. One of her visits took place in June 2006, when she was accorded a warm reception and her visit was widely covered in the media.

Sheikh Hasina's government will have to play a prudent role in forging economic integration of the region for economic advancement. Furthermore, interconnectivity, including multi-modal transport within the region, has historically been the key to regional prosperity. On energy, water, food, global warming, and terrorism, Bangladesh needs to have a cooperative policy with India so that both countries may be placed in a "win-win" position.

As an emerging regional power, India, on the other hand, has the responsibility to understand and respect Bangladesh's sentiment, and take initiatives to settle prickly bilateral issues, including the maritime boundary, on the basis of fairness.

Although no one can deny that there is a presence of a small group of anti-India elements in the country, there is also a

tremendous goodwill in Bangladesh for the people in India. But India has failed to utilise this goodwill through neglect and naivety.

Relations with Myanmar

Although Bangladesh and Myanmar have many similarities, including the observance of the New Year on April 14th, Bangladesh has not given much attention to some issues that are vital for Myanmar.

Myanmar's concerns, like the rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, some Rohingya's link with militants, suspicion of smuggling of weapons to Myanmar from Bangladesh, and underlying apprehension of economic exploitation by Bangladeshi people (as those in the colonial days of Myanmar), need to be addressed immediately.

Apprehension exists that militant Islamic forces around the Teknaf region may cross the border with weapons to destabilise Myanmar, and that is why one may argue Myanmar has been hesitant to provide direct road connection with Bangladesh.

Bangladesh must deal with these lurking sensitive issues, and convince Myanmar that Bangladesh poses no threat to Myanmar's stability. The time, and opportunity, has come for the new government to meet the challenges.

The prime minister-elect may consider undertaking her first official visits to neighbouring countries to underscore the importance Bangladesh attaches to them.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.