

BCL's disquieting show of strength

Just rein them in

HOT on the heels of reported dislodging of students belonging to the BNP student wing JCD from residential halls of Dhaka University, came the factional fight within the BCL at the Zia Hall and BCL's purge of Shibir activists from the dormitories of Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (Ruet) on Thursday night. Several students were injured in both incidents. The academic atmosphere has been thrown out of gear.

The flare-up in BCL at the Zia Hall in DU centered around two JCD students joining one of the BCL groups. Six BCL students were rounded up by the police together with an outsider.

A sigh of resignation over these incidents being typical of the syndrome that follows any change of government has to be scrupulously avoided by all those whose responsibility it is to call a screeching halt to BCL's wave of excesses. To say that this is a retaliatory replay of the JCD's hall capture swipes following the victory of the BNP in 2001 elections is a vain attempt to whitewash the failure to come out of the tit-for-tat behaviourism that students as the most educated and conscientious segment of the society must learn to shun from the core of their being.

Actually, we need to go deeper into the heart of the matter seeing it in a historical context. Our insights into history tell us that with either of the two major political party scoring electoral victory over the other, its student wing invariably feels powered to the point of infinity, so to speak, as its leaders of all denominations throw their weight around university, college, residential hall and hostel authorities in a muscular bid to procure admission for students and seats in the dormitories by way of strengthening their support base in breach of set criteria. At the same time, they would engage in tender business, rent-seeking and variegated extortionist forays. They had not stopped short of lobbying with ministers, MPs and high government functionaries in the past to gain favour or to act as commission agents. It is no overstatement to say that such behavioural aberrations turned money-making into a covetous goal relegating education to a secondary status. It is time all this is rolled back.

The people have voted the AL to power on a mandate for change which per force should include reining in the student wing in time before it crosses the critical threshold eventually affecting governance.

Israel's rejection of UN ceasefire proposal

Sustained pressure on it is the need today

THE refusal by Israel to accept a ceasefire resolution on Gaza speaks of the risks its government is putting the entire Middle East to. In these past few days, close to 800 people, most of them innocent Palestinians, have been killed in Israeli air and ground attacks. And that is not the end of the story. Israeli forces have fired on medical teams trying to extricate wounded civilians from the streets and have also blocked supplies of essentials to the besieged region. It has continued to carry out targeted assassinations and in the process has left hundreds of homes and offices destroyed. But nothing could be worse than the rejection of the United Nations Security Council ceasefire proposal calling for an end to hostilities and an opening of land routes to Gaza.

We share the disappointment of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon about the Israeli response to the ceasefire proposal. Tel Aviv's acts have drawn widespread condemnation all across the globe and yet it is obvious the government is least concerned with such worries. Moreover, it is now quite clear that the government has in mind the forthcoming general elections in the next one month and would like to pummel the Hamas into surrender as a way of ensuring its continuation in office. That is a troubling outlook. The more worrying part of the story is that with support for it in Washington, which has just abstained over the Security Council resolution (it was carried by a majority of 14-0), the Israeli administration apparently feels it can do things with impunity. But the attitude has surely not helped. In the past couple of days, rockets, which have landed in the south of Israel, have been fired into northern Israel as well. That is a sign of the conflict taking on a wider dimension. Of course, no one expects Hamas to prevail against the Israeli military machine. But none expects Israel to be triumphant either. By acting the way it has so far, Israel has only dug a deeper hole for itself.

Sustained international pressure must be brought to bear on Israel. It is clearly aiming at an occupation of Gaza despite its denials. It is a goal that the United States, especially the incoming Obama administration, must prevent from being achieved.

An auspicious start

BY THE NUMBERS

Staying in touch with the concerns and expectations of the common people is the paramount importance for a government that has come to power winning a resounding victory. Therefore, the new government must strive to stay connected with the people who have installed it in the office and also remember that it takes little for the people to become disillusioned.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE new government begins its journey with a new vision of change amid huge expectations from the people for easing their enormous woes. The people of Bangladesh have spoken in a resounding voice that they keenly look forward to put an end of the corruption and misrule of the past.

Sheikh Hasina, sworn in as the 12th prime minister of the country following the landslide victory of her party in the ninth parliamentary polls, once again renewed her pledges for curbing the spiralling prices of essentials and maintaining a stable law and order situation. She also assured farmers, who are growing boro paddy this season, of providing fertiliser and other essentials.

The new cabinet is not only pleasantly small but also composed of new faces, many of whom are first-timers not only in the government but also in parliament. Her mission to bring about change has got an auspicious start in comprising her cabinet of people with clean image and good track record, leaving aside most of the bigwigs in her party.

On the count of experience, the new cabinet may fall short of the expectations of many. But there are reasons to be optimistic, as none whose name is linked to crime and corruption is in this cabinet.

Judiciously applying their merit, wisdom and sagacity, the first-timers of this cabinet also can deliver the good to the nation better than those of the experienced corrupt.

It is an encouraging development that in a bid to boost boro production in the coming season, the new government has decided to reduce diesel price and increase subsidy on fertiliser in its maiden cabinet meeting held on January 7. Meeting its strong commitment to bring down the price of essentials, including rice, largely depends on boro production.

The new government of Sheikh Hasina will have to meet a myriad of challenges to set many things right. The very real need of the hour is containing price spiral of essentials, tackling power crisis, combating corruption, and maintaining of law and order.

Sheikh Hasina in her post poll press briefing on December 31, however, disclosed her priority list that includes bringing down the prices of essentials within people's reach and alleviation of poverty. She also sought cooperation of all, including the opposition and other political parties, in establishing a new political culture to build a developed, modern, and poverty-free Bangladesh.

The voters have set five priority agendas for the new government to address: inflation, corruption, food security, crime, law



New faces in the cabinet.

and order, and education, as revealed by the US-based International Republican Institute, working worldwide for advancing electoral democracy. IRI conducted the countrywide exit poll for the first time in Bangladesh, covering 150 constituencies.

The ten economic challenges for the new government, identified by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, are very much real, with 2009 projected to be tough year all over the world. The damage done to the economy during the past seven years is so serious that prudent government intervention and careful regulation is a must.

The new government will inherit \$1.8 billion extra foreign loan burden, as the country's foreign loan stood at \$20.4 billion on September 30, posting a 9.67 percent growth from \$18.6 billion two years back. The burden of foreign loan was more or less the same at the end of 2008.

The Foreign Aid Budget Accounts department data revealed that foreign loan stood at \$15.88 billion when AL government left power in 2001-02 fiscal. The BNP-

led four-party alliance government added \$2.72 billion or 17.12 percent additional foreign loan burden on the people during its five-year rule from 2001 to 2006.

Though the burden of foreign loan and the current foreign currency reserve of \$5.32 billion can be a reason for slight discomfort for the new government, it should feel the comfort of starting its journey with a pretty healthy stock of food grains. The food grain stock stood at 12.6 lakh metric tons on January 6, while a stock of 8-10 lakh metric tons is considered a safe reserve in the present context of the country.

Staying in touch with the concerns and expectations of the common people is the paramount importance for a government that has come to power winning a resounding victory. Therefore, the new government must strive to stay connected with the people who have installed it in the office and also remember that it takes little for the people to become disillusioned.

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Digital Bangladesh

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Unless student politics is streamlined by politicians through a productive debate in the parliament, public universities would remain in disarray and a digital Bangladesh would be afar cry.

ABDUL BAYES

ESTABLISHMENT of a digital Bangladesh by 2021 is the main motto of the newly elected government. The slogan was timely tuned to attract a large number of young voters to vote for the boat. But digital Bangladesh might slip back in the absence of a national education policy embracing secular, scientific, and sustainable system.

As a university teacher, I shall mostly dwell on the present status of the universities and the changes we need to move towards digital Bangladesh. Please note that this is my personal position based on my experience of Jahangirnagar University only.

To begin with, let me note that a digital Bangladesh is inconceivable with a "divided" or multi-track education system. We need to ensure a one-track education system. The inner sub-systems within the whole education system should be done away with. This requires that major stakeholders come to a consensus on the modalities immediately.

In terms of capital expenditure in education, resources should be shifted away from primary education to secondary education. This is because the proportion of primary school going children has been falling over time. However, resources on training of teachers and other logistics should continue to pour in.

Time has come to decide whether HSC level should be replaced with 12 years of schooling period. Free education up to degree level is a welcome declaration for a digital Bangladesh. De-politicisation of the committees of the institutions is a must to move forward.

Coming to universities, I reckon that the University Act (1973) requires rigorous revision for two reasons. First, the previous government has allegedly encroached upon the rules of an autonomous university postulated by the parliament. Then government removed three elected VCs (of JU, DU and RU) by invoking a clause that dates back 300 years! If elected VCs could be removed with the stroke of a pen, then why there is election?

Second, the composition of the syndicate, senate and other academic bodies should be revisited so that "too much democracy" does not disdain academic developments.

Third, special mention may be made of teachers' lack of accountability and absence of actions against them. In all universities, students should have the right to evaluate the performances of the teachers concerned in terms of the total appearance in the class, quality of teaching, and releasing the results. The promotion policy

of universities should give more weight to class intake and departmental duties. Two-thirds of the weight should be devoted to these activities and one-third to research and publications.

I fear that the current status of student politics would deter a digital Bangladesh. Mostly controlled by political parties to suit their agenda, student politics heavily affects the academic environment. Under the present system, there is very little chance for merit to override muscle. Unless student politics is streamlined by politicians through a productive debate in the parliament, public universities would remain in disarray and a digital Bangladesh would hardly be on the horizon.

No less harmful is the teachers' politics in public universities. But allow me to suggest two options to stem the rot: (a) Any candidate vying for the post of VC must have 10-12 publications from the date of his/her professorship; (b) The senate should select only one name for VC instead of three for chancellor approval; (c) In addition to academic results, a candidate seeking teaching jobs in university should pass a certain period (at least two years) as interneer.

While condition (a) would address the question of academic excellence of a VC, conditions (b) and (c) might reduce the pressure for the politics of teachers. En passant, I mentioned earlier that selection of dean among senior teachers and dropping lecturers from syndicate would help the same to a certain degree.

Public universities should serve as the laboratories for the private sector. Many industries are located in North Carolina just because there are a few world famous universities there. University authorities should establish contacts with private industrial houses to provide them with experiments. Private commercial and industrial houses should also invest in public universities in terms of research funding, infrastructure buildings, etc.

Thus, the establishment of a digital Bangladesh requires that the divided education system should be done away with. A secular, scientific and one-track system should help us reach the shore.

As far as university education is concerned, old mindsets need to be changed; productivity should take over politics; public-private partnership needs to be built; merit should override muscle. Digital Bangladesh warrants development in the education sector in fact it demands a new education order. Time is short though, progress cannot be tardy.

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Democratic rollback

GOING DEEPER

The question that arises in one's mind is whether the countries accused of democratic rollback do not reflect American discomfort in living with the nationalism of other countries,

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

WESTERN analysts fear that Samuel Huntington's waves of democratisation (first, second and third) and, perhaps, premature declaration by Francis Fukuyama of the "end of history" in terms of human evolution of the most suitable form of government might have come to a halt due to democratic roll back in some parts of the world.

Stanford University Professor Larry Diamond finds signs of democratic recession in Nigeria, Russia, Thailand, Venezuela, the Philippines, and some countries of former Eastern Europe.

Though the majority of the people still prefer democracy as the best form of government, substantial minorities in many countries entertain an authoritarian option. Though the reason for democratic recession is reportedly poor governance with everything it entails, analysts believe that the trend "is not an aberration, [but] a natural condition. The natural tendency of the elites has been to monopolise power and use their consolidated power to limit economic competition so as to generate profit that benefits them rather than society at large."

Warnings have been sounded against the "fallacy of electoralism" that provides only a façade of democracy, where the people elected are unable/unwilling to meet the demands of the electorate and, in the words of political scientist and Harvard Professor Robert Putnam: "Political participation is mobilised from above, civic engagement is meager, compromise is scarce and nearly everyone feels powerless, exploited, and unhappy."

Vertical accountability in the form of a genuine democratic election and horizontal accountability in the form of investment of power in independent agencies to monitor the conduct of their peers and the government are absent. Bangladesh has proved to be an exception in the process of democratic recession. In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan are regarded as fragile democracies at risk of authoritarianism.

The question that arises in one's mind is whether the countries accused of democratic rollback do not reflect American discomfort in living with the nationalism of other countries, while it is comfortable with giving space to "new sovereignists" who would like to subordinate international laws to US domestic laws and who consider US sovereignty as illimitable and unbound.

Chavez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Vladimir Putin of Russia can only be accused of following policies independent of US dictates.

The morally indefensible US veto in the UNSC against a resolution to stop Israeli atrocities on unarmed people in Gaza and the US's unilateral intervention in Iraq in the face of opposition of the UNSC reflected, in Michael Glenon's (of Fletcher School of Diplomacy) opinion, were due to the inability of the UN to function according to the shift in world power as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet empire that effectively established unipolar moment for the US. One, therefore, has to take with a grain of salt the list of countries claimed to be at risk of falling into the lap of authoritarianism.

Besides, it is debatable whether one should not consider the essentialist construction of the people and the religion of Islam dominant in Western academic orthodoxy is not grossly distorted, because of some deviants' grotesque interpretation of the religion posing serious threat not only to the West but also to developing countries regardless of religious faith practiced by them.

Terrorism is unlikely to bring about Islamic renaissance. Instead, efforts should be directed towards achieving "global civic ethics" that derives from the principle that all people are bound together morally, regardless of their distinctive culture and identity. If it is recognised that human security is central to global peace then a government's right to rule must be weighed against its people's right to security.

If it is found that if the people's security is being threatened under the cloak of religious activism, then the state should assume its responsibility to put a ban on such religious activism that incipiently tries to crawl towards staging a so-called Islamic Free Election Trap to stage a coup to establish a theocratic state.

The state's responsibility becomes more acute as religion-based politics generates fear among minority communities, the protection of whom has been pledged by all civilised countries, both in their domestic law and in international commitments.

The 1972 Bangladesh constitution did provide for such a ban. The post-1975 conservative establishments amended the constitution, once in 1977 and again in 1988, by passing the eighth amendment making Islam the state religion.

In the ultimate analysis, one hopes that inter-faith dialogue becomes an essential part of global discourse and Samuel Huntington's clash of civilisations does not continue to chart the relations between the First and the Third Worlds.

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