

## True change

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MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

**S**HEIKH Hasina has not only talked about *din badal* (change), she is determined to implement. One should not bother about whether she got it from Obama or whether it was her real desire to bring about changes in Bangladesh politics following 1/11. The situation before 1/11 called for a real change from hartal, forced closure of business and industries, destruction of private and government properties by political mobs, parliament boycott, etc.

### New faces

She has formed a cabinet that reflected real change. All except two are new faces in the cabinet, and many do not have any previous experience of running a government office. However, it is true that they are all educated and have experience in different professions.

I agree with Mahfuz Anam's observation that the important ministry of indus-

tries will be run by a person who had "spent his life castigating industrialists as exploitative capitalists," which may create doubts in the minds of the investors. Of course, the people would expect a change of mindset of the concerned minister(s) in the light of the changes around the world.

Here, the role of the prime minister will be crucial. The ministers will have to go by the policy decisions of the government and not by individual conviction. The well-justified argument is that one must be in the job to learn it.

### Huge responsibilities

The massive victory of Awami League-led mohajote has placed huge responsibilities on Sheikh Hasina's government.

One of the new ministers, Syed Ashrafur Islam, came out with a very strong and indeed timely statement: "We will put an end to politicisation of all institutions, including the judiciary, Public Service Commission, and Election

Commission to make the administration efficient." He also promised that: "The new government will free the administration from politicisation to fulfill the expectations of the people." The people expect the government to strictly follow this, which can really bring change.

### Permanent civil service

It is high time to emphasise that the bureaucracy is not a part of any political party. Any over-enthusiasm on the part of the bureaucracy is sycophancy, which must be uprooted totally. Indeed, sycophancy has nearly destroyed the bureaucracy and brought the administration to an unacceptable situation.

The British Raj left us with one important institution, which is the permanent civil service. Politicians come and go, but the permanent civil service continues to function and serve the people. Indeed, the politicians receive regular briefings from the civil service about what happened in the previous administration. It is the responsibility of the civil service to do the job to maintain the continuity of the administration. If they align with political party(s), then the administration is bound to suffer.

The bureaucracy cannot be allowed to side with any particular political party at any time. But some civil service members do align with a political party(s) to obtain undue benefits, including promotions and re-employment after retirement. This

destroys the neutrality of the civil service.

Such an unethical axis in the administration also increased corruption in the business circle. There has always been the complaint that businessmen cannot get anything done without paying bribes to such an evil axis. Such practices delay decision-making and lead to severe harassment for the businessmen (though it is also a fact that some businessmen go for such bribing in order to get things done).

### Bangabandhu's legacy

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is fully aware of her position and responsibilities as the daughter of Bangabandhu, and she must try to fulfill Bangabandhu's dream and ideals by giving the country an honourable position in the world theatre. Bangabandhu must be re-established in his rightful position, which was disturbed during the last ten years. This has to be done not by naming roads, bridges and anything else in his name, but by bringing in total change in politics and administration so that Bangabandhu's legacy could be well established. She owes this to this nation.

### Senior party members

The experience of those senior politicians who were not included in the cabinet should be suitably utilised, as they can really contribute to the parliamentary committees as chairs and members. They could really be stronger than the ministers



The onus is on her.

as the incumbent ministers will be legally bound to explain their work and conduct to such parliamentary committees.

If the parliamentary committees work efficiently, there could be real balance in the administration, as experienced MPs could easily identify the loopholes in administration for necessary corrections.

Commitment has been made to give the positions of deputy speaker and chairs of some parliamentary committees to the opposition members so that their services could be effectively utilised for making the parliament the centre of all democratic activities.

### PM and opposition leader

Finally, an appeal to the PM and to the leader of the opposition to talk on major national issues. Whatever the differences in their political philosophies, they should sit together to discuss major issues confronting the country. Sheikh Hasina, being the prime minister, should take the initiative. Several citizens have already insisted on it. Let's hope that the process starts right away. This should be a part of Sheikh Hasina's *din badal*.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and Founder VC of North South University, and Chairman, Civic Watch-Bangladesh.

## What we need

The government must see that the political and social elites indicted on corruption charges during the rule of the caretaker government are not freed on any pretext until and unless they have gone through the due process of trial by the highest judiciary.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

**F**INALLY, we now have an elected government after nearly two years under a caretaker government. Sheikh Hasina has been sworn in as the prime minister amid great expectations that she will not waver in keeping her pre-poll commitments to usher in genuine democracy and rule of law.

She heads a 31-member cabinet. This is in keeping with the wishes of people to downsize the cabinet. The 10-member advisory council of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has proved that it is not the size of the cabinet but the quality of the people in charge that matters.

The people have voted AL into power with such overwhelming majority not because they are enamoured of AL and Sheikh Hasina or because they just wanted a change from BNP to AL but because they believe that the new-look AL will bring about a positive change in the system of our governance and, more importantly, in the quality of life of the people.

There are many problems besetting the country, resulting from decades of misrule and criminalisation of politics, which cannot be solved by this government in its five-year tenure.

But what must and can be done by this government is the promotion and fostering of democracy and the democratic culture of political leaders subordinating their personal interests and well-being to the interests of the party that they belong to, and the party interests to the interests

and well-being of the people and the country. This is the theme of change buzzing in the air now.

Khaleda Zia could have risen in stature and also served the cause of democracy if she had congratulated Sheikh Hasina on the victory of the AL-led alliance, and had gone to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new government -- as is the custom in a democracy.

Sending a 5-member delegation headed by S.Q. Chowdhury, an alleged collaborator and war criminal, to represent her at the swearing-in ceremony was in bad taste. After what she has gone through following the cataclysm of 1/11, one expected her to conduct herself with more sobriety and respect for democratic culture.

But her post-election actions and pronouncements suggest that, perhaps, she intends to carry on the politics of confrontation and violence on the streets rather than play a proactive role in the parliament. But this must not dissuade the government from giving due space to the opposition both within the parliament and outside it.

Sheikh Hasina must remember that she has to make good the pledges she made to the people before election. She must address issues that are of vital importance and concern for the people. Price hike of essentials, adequate and timely supply of agricultural inputs to farmers, improvement of road network and transportation system, augmenting of power generation and gas supply,

creation of job opportunities, and improvement of law are areas where government thrust is required.

If a city dweller does not get water and electricity for days together, which is a very common phenomenon in summer, and when he cannot sleep at night because of swarming mosquitoes, he does not blame Wasa, Desa and Khoka, the mayor, so much for their inefficiency and corruption as he blames the government for its total insensitivity.

If a girl going to school or college is raped on the way by "bad boys" of the locality, and the police station refuses to accept the complaint of the plaintiff as a rape case because of corruption or party politics, which again is very common in this country, the victim and her family will not blame the police as much as they will hold the government responsible for denial of justice.

Reports of atrocities committed by AL party activists against rival political workers in some parts of the country, and of the frenzy with which BCL students have been occupying various halls of Dhaka University, do not portend well for the government.

Nothing will go wrong with this government as long as it holds aloft the ideals of democracy and rule of law. Sheikh Hasina should take the opposition on board with her as she embarks on the task of democratic reforms. If the opposition does not respond favourably, she should go it alone.

The government should form a constitution commission to go in to the whole ambit of reforms needed to make the parliament functional, with the opposition playing its role without boycotting the parliament and agitating on the streets and the government being accountable to the parliament for all its actions and decisions. It will be ideal to have the 1972 constitution restored with suitable amendments.

The government must see that the political and social elites indicted on corruption charges during the rule of the caretaker government are not freed on any pretext until and unless they have gone through the due process of trial by the highest judiciary.

The government must swoop down upon those Islamist extremist outfits, which are funded by, and have trans-border links with, international terrorist organisations. These fanatics and those who had collaborated with Pakistan occupation forces in 1971 have joined hands to pull down everything you call secular and democratic.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd) is a former military secretary to the president.

## As good as it gets

Unnoticed until recently, Jakarta's conservatism is now the envy of the developing world, and Mulyani is being hailed as a model regulator. "She could be the finance minister anywhere in the world," says James Castle, founder of the consultancy CastleAsia. "She's that good."



SOLENN HONORINE and GEORGE WEHRFRITZ

**L**AST month a financial tidal wave washed over Indonesia, but not the one kicked up by the global credit crisis. Money flooded into government coffers from individuals and corporations eager to avail themselves of Jakarta's "sun-set policy" on tax delinquency, which forgave past evasions in exchange for good behavior going forward.

The exact size of the surge isn't yet known, but economists estimate that tax receipts were up more than 50% for the year. "We saw quite a big jump" in revenue in December from "taxpayers who never existed (on the tax rolls) or want to correct mistakes made in the past," says the plan's creator, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati. Indonesians, she adds, are honoring their tax obligations "in a much more accurate way."

The influx marks a major triumph for Indonesia's current government and, in particular, for the woman who put Jakarta's financial house in order. Over the past four years, Mulyani has helped dismantle the financial architecture of the crony capitalism built by strongman Suharto before his 32-year reign ended in 1998. She has pressed hard to slash debt, both public and private; pushed through a rollback of budget-busting fuel subsidies; and overseen sweeping reforms of the customs and tax authorities -- posi-

tioning Indonesia to post the world's best (or at least the least bad) emerging-market growth story in 2009.

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Largely to Mulyani's credit, the country's balance sheet is now among the most conservative in the world; government debt now sits at just 30 percent of GDP, down from more than 100% a decade ago, while Indonesia Inc. is far less leveraged than its peers elsewhere in Asia. Despite that relative austerity, growth is being driven both by commodities -- Indonesia's traditional mainstay -- and by strong domestic consumption from a population approaching 240 million. And neither the commodity bust (which has also driven down the price of the imported energy on which Indonesia depends) nor tighter global credit looks set to hobble a country that, from the household to the boardroom and cabinet chambers, is all but debt-free.

Indeed, Indonesia is one of just three major emerging economies forecast to grow faster than 4 percent in 2009. The other two -- China and India -- have decelerated more rapidly in recent months and face tougher policy challenges. Mulyani says Indonesia could expand by as much

as 5.5% this year, which is barely slower than the 6% it clocked in 2008, and perhaps enough to pip one of its two Asian counterparts in this year's growth race.

Not bad, considering that the country's economy collapsed in 1998, shrinking 18% in a single year. Wolfgang Fengler, a senior economist at the World Bank, says Jakarta's macroeconomic management is now "as good as it gets."

Indonesia owes its turnaround to an ensemble cast. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has provided the political stability and pro-globalisation vision that underpin today's successes. Boediono (who goes by one name) was a deft coordinating minister for economics until he handed the brief to Mulyani last May to head Indonesia's central bank, and Trade Minister Mari Pangestu deserves plaudits for kick-starting Indonesia's export economy.

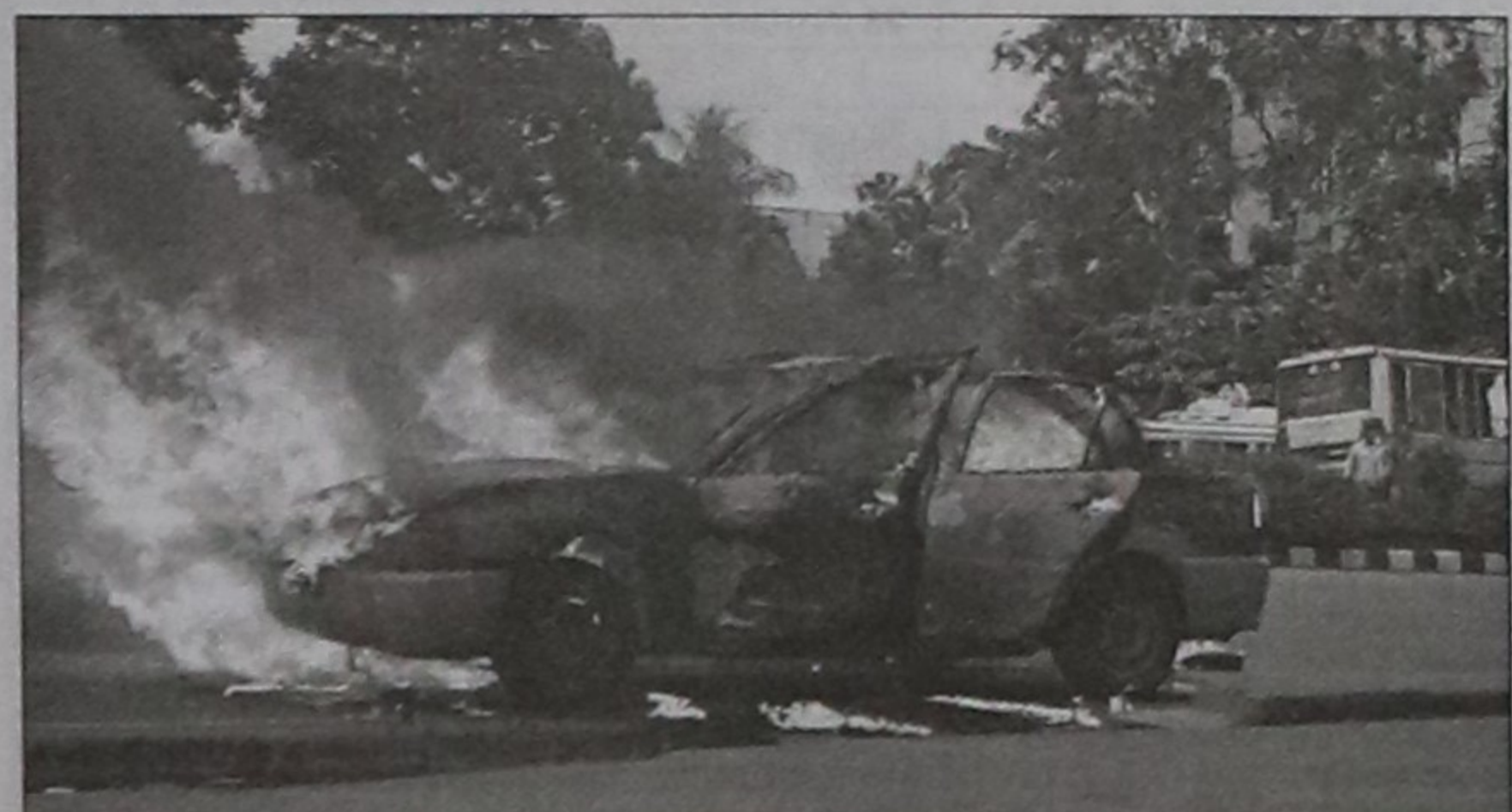
Yet Mulyani stands out for her toughness. She says her staff had to "swallow a lot of very bitter reality" during her first six months on the job. After landing there, for example, she confronted senior staff: "How can you send your daughter or your son to study abroad when you earn only this kind of salary? Where did you get the money?" To which she added: "You have to admit: we are all committing this crime."

Her staffers still work evenings and weekends to meet her expectations, and she's been known to tangle with colleagues. Last year she lobbied intensely to ram through a deeply unpopular reduction in fuel subsidies that President Yudhoyono initially opposed. "She got her way because she is capable of playing politics," says Anton Gunawan, chief economist at Bank Danamon in Jakarta.

Yet by raising pay for bureaucrats, and not demonizing those who previously took payoffs to make ends meet, she has raised standards and steered a reputation as an incorruptible reformer. Her message to her staff is simple and positive: "I only have one goal: I want the Indonesian people to trust us, this department, because this country will go nowhere if the people don't start to trust their own government."

Though nobody would yet describe Indonesia as a model of transparency, the changes in its taxation and customs administrations have been profound, and in turn have enhanced Indonesia's growth potential to the point that "the world needs to update the way it thinks about the country," wrote Nicholas Cashmore, CLSA investment bank's Indonesia analyst, in mid-2008, declaring: "Southeast Asia's largest economy is in great shape." And thanks to Mulyani, Indonesia is garnering more respect by the day.

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Let this be a thing of the past.

NILAKHAS JORIK NEWS

## CEOs get a union

NURY VITTACHI

**N**OW this is weird. The economic downturn means that in many countries white-collar workers are being laid off, but blue-collar workers are more in demand than ever.

It makes sense.

If you need to cut costs, you can struggle along without your ergonomics consultant for a week or two.

But if the family toilet stops working, you need a plumber RIGHT NOW.

Top executives are looking to "shop-floor" workers for advice on how to make themselves unsackable.

I recently had lunch with Ranjan

Marwah, one of Asia's top headhunters. The job markets are in an unprecedented state of flux, he said, adding: "What CEOs need is a union."

It was an intriguing idea. This is how it could work.

The intercom on the chairman's desk buzzes. "The chief executive officer is here to see you," the secretary says.

The oak door opens and the CEO enters, accompanied by a man in a blue overall.

"Who's this?" the chairman asks.

The CEO replies: "This is the senior shop steward of the Federated Association of Top CEOs and Amalgamated Trades Society, or FAT

CATS. It's a new organisation we're joining to ensure we obtain our full rights by the use of standard union techniques such as collective bargaining."

The chairman looks baffled. "Collective bargaining? But I called you in to sack you."

The labour union leader steps forward and calmly delivers a threat. "I must warn you, Mr. Chairman, if you sack one CEO without due cause, every CEO in the country will down tools immediately."

"But I have lots of reasons to sack this man," says the chairman. "He's gambled away the staff's pension funds and saddled the firm with billions in debt."

"As is his right," says the labour leader.

"Job descriptions of CEOs do not expressly forbid such actions."

"Common sense does."

The unionist sighs. "Look, governor, you and I both know that common sense has no connection with union rules, nor with executive pay, come to that."

"I suppose that's true. But are you really saying that I can't sack him?"

"Under collective bargaining rules, if one CEO gets sacked, they all walk out. If one gets a million bucks a week, they all do. Now, do you still wish to downsize my client?"

"Er, no. Let me think about it a bit more."

"In the meantime, here are my client's

demands for better pay and working conditions."

"What?"

"You heard me. From now on, all CEOs must be supplied, at company expense, suitable work uniforms and protective eyewear. An unlimited expense account at Brooks Brothers will suffice, and we suggest designer sunglasses for the eyewear."

"Anything else?"

The labour union leader pointedly throws his cigarette stub into the chairman's Ming Dynasty vase before replying. "We feel there should be a 50 percent salary increase to compensate for unsafe working conditions."

The chairman's eyebrows rise. "That's outrageous. CEOs spend their days in kid-skin leather office chairs in gorgeous harbour-view offices in the most expensive buildings in town."

The unionist nods. "Yes, sir. Long hours in comfortable chairs put them at risk of thrombosis. And the rich food in the executive dining rooms plays havoc with their cholesterol."

"I'll have to speak to the board of directors," the chairman says.

"Sure," says the labour leader. "I represent them, too."

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