

Giving MPs a developmental role in upazilas!

We urge the PM not to go for it

THE reported mulling by LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Syed Ashraf Islam over formally empowering the MPs with a developmental role in the upazilas originally designed to play a pivotal role in the local government system has come as a big surprise and shock. The implication is that the amended ordinance whereby the previously assigned advisory and development role of MPs in upazilas was withdrawn through an initiative of the caretaker government is sought to be restored through another amendment.

The conflicts that raged between the MPs as advisors to upazilas and the upazila chairmen having severely affected development of the upazilas, the rationale for clipping the MP role was unassailable and so came the reform during caretaker government. Now to revert to status quo ante is entirely inadvisable, against the very spirit and philosophy of local self-government system and, above all, it runs counter to the Awami League's electoral commitment to strengthening the local government institutions.

It won't be an overstatement to say that the MPs looked upon the concept of elected upazila parishads, or for that matter, their chairmen as being adversarial to their position as elected public representatives. That's why it is believed that the upazila system was throttled after its first cycle in 1991 and no further elections could be held in the last 19 years.

There are two reasons, one unstated and the other stated about why the MPs demand a role in upazila development matters. First, the dynamics of formation of government which entail majority support from the MPs foster a sense that perhaps the MPs need to be kept in good humour. To this subjective argument we have to say that their very own owed it to the party ticket. Secondly, the MPs openly demand such a role as if they have earned it by reasoning that in order to fulfil the pledges they had made to their constituencies they should have a developmental role.

The MPs can do a lot of good to the upazilas as elected lawmakers taking interest in legislation touching the interest of their constituencies. Moreover, they can influence the government in and out of the parliament to procure funds, secure projects for the upazilas and thereby accelerate their pace of development. They needn't also rest content with a lawmaking role. For instance, they can pull their weight as standing committee members and even chairmen to serve their respective area interests. Besides, at the party level, MPs are often put in charge of their districts, especially in times of disaster.

Imagine, what would happen to the given autonomy and power of the upazila chairmen, if the MPs with all their links to the PM, ministers and the secretariat are endowed with a codified role in the upazila on the platter? They will simply dominate the upazilas.

Looked at deeply, the MPs' worry that they will be distanced from their constituencies if they are devoid of a developmental role in the upazila is misplaced. Since all of them will be without developmental functions, their frame of reference will be the same in terms of meeting expectations of their constituencies and facing the next election. Let us not also forget, it is the so-called development work that lies at the root of corruption of the MPs.

A final word, we bank on the mandate and moral authority of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to effect the historic decoupling between the lawmaking role of the MPs and their image-sapping demand for development functions at the upazilas.

Obama moves on Guantanamo issue

Justice must be ensured for those held

THERE is little question that Barack Obama faces a whole slew of challenges as he begins his presidency on a note of euphoria. In these past few days since his inauguration on Tuesday, America's new leader has happily demonstrated his determination to do business through living up to his campaign pledges. He has ordered prosecutors to halt all proceedings against prisoners held on Guantanamo, a directive that has been heeded by the military judges handling matters in what has turned into a symbol of notoriety. Obama's action is welcome, though many are disappointed that in the matter of those on trial on the island, proceedings have been halted for 120 days. Obviously, these individuals, many of them families of those detained, expected quicker action and so quicker justice to be done.

That said, President Obama's action, together with moves in other areas, is a clear sign of the change he wishes to bring about in American politics and in its dealings with the outside world. Guantanamo, in that respect, is one area where speedy action is demanded not because justice has been delayed but because all norms of justice have been flouted by the just departed Bush administration. Men accused of being part of the Taliban or being their associates have been jailed there for years in some of the most horrendous conditions imaginable. For a country that has regularly projected itself as a land of liberty, America's treatment of the inmates on Guantanamo has been a hard slap across the face of human conscience. These prisoners, caught or abducted in various parts of the world, have then been subjected to intense torture. The Bush administration infamously arranged rendition flights by which many of these men were flown to countries known for the sophistication of their torture methods and treated badly. In other words, Guantanamo will forever stand as a crude symbol, that of a supposedly democratically elected western government undermining the rights and self-esteem of prisoners seized in strange circumstances.

It is this blight that President Obama must push into the past. A thorough, swift review of cases relating to those being held must be gone through. That should be followed by a transfer of cases, if any, to regular courts empowered to try all accused in full view of the world.

1/11

The limited tolerance of the Bangladeshi people for an extended period of non-democratic rule and their clearly expressed preference for democracy is the nation's best guarantee against unwanted interventions in the future.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

NOW that the dust has settled and that we have an elected government in place, the time is right for a full inquiry into 1/11, whether on balance it was a good thing or a bad thing, what the interim government did right and what it did wrong, what lessons have been learned, and what are the implications for the future.

Today, I want to focus on the very first question: the question of whether the soft military intervention of 1/11 was a good thing for the country or not.

There are some who argue that such an intervention can never be justified and that we would be better off had the army stayed in its barracks and let the political process take its course.

They argue, on principle, that any interference in the democratic process is unhealthy and unacceptable, and that it sets a dangerous precedent for the future. Democracy, they argue, cannot take root in the face of repeated interventions.

However, I am not so sure about that. I think it depends on the kind of intervention and that, as it happens, 1/11 appears to have strengthened our democracy in many ways.

Indeed, I would make the counter-argument that democracy most certainly cannot take root in the face of a ruling party that does not believe in democracy or rule of law, kills, fire-bombs, loots and maims, makes partisan every corner of the administration and the private sector, controls the judiciary, runs the police and intelligence agencies as its own personal militia, has no respect for public opinion,

imposes a reign of terror over anyone who opposes it, and rigs elections.

What would have happened if 1/11 had not occurred? There would have been massive violence starting from January 14, as the AL promised to take to the streets and ensure that the elections could not be held. Many people feared complete anarchy and a civil war-like situation. Frankly, that would have been a best case scenario.

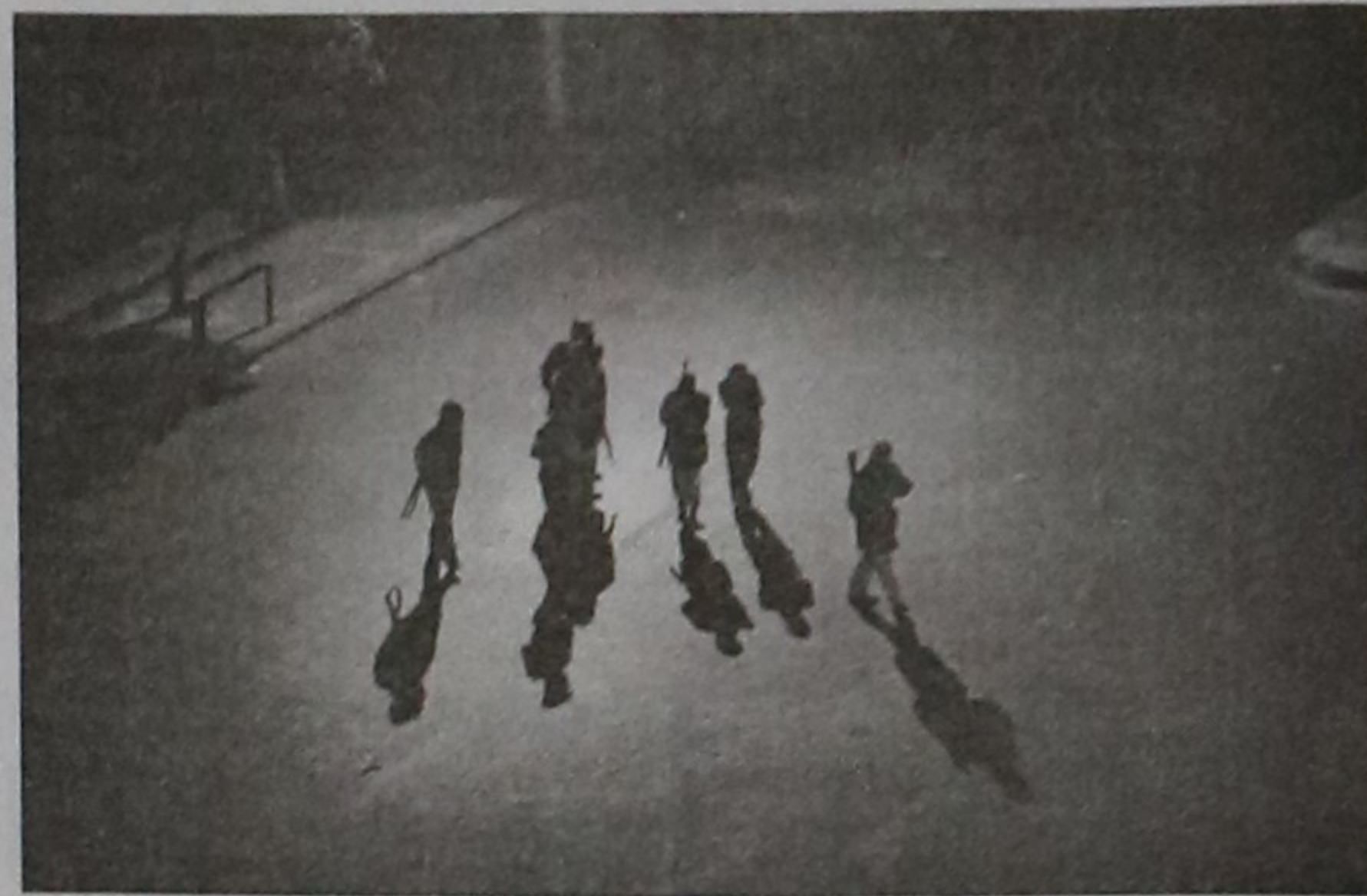
I have always believed that the then-government would have been able to weather those storms and hold things together sufficiently in order to administer elections that the BNP would have won by walkover.

Immediately upon election, its propaganda machine would have gone into overdrive arguing that the new government was constitutionally legitimate and that the results would have to be respected.

In fact, the arguments for "constitutional continuity" in favour of the BNP's rigged elections had already started making the rounds of the chattering classes in editorials and op-eds and on talk-shows.

With arguable constitutional legitimacy for the new government, the army, civil society, and international community would have signed on. With an elected government in place, however farcical the elections, and police and army under its control, protest would have been crushed.

The administration and judiciary would have been made partisan beyond repair. Ditto the army and police. All would have been used as organs of political repression. Dissent of any sort would have been choked, the media silenced, opposition of any sort decimated.



Was 1/11 worth it?

We would have ended up with one-party rule and no way of removing it, however unpopular it got, with the electoral, judicial, and coercive machineries of state firmly in its hands. This was the writing on the wall on 1/10.

One key point which needs to be made as counter-point to those who point to the rule of law and due process violations of the interim government is that the government was a temporary one.

Had the BNP come to power via a rigged election and then kept all coercive machineries of the state and the EC under its control, then it would have been impossible to remove, and, unlike the interim government, it certainly would not have left voluntarily.

I am certainly not arguing that it would be better to live under army-backed rule permanently. But the question is whether the abuses of the past two years were worth it considering where we are today and what the alternatives were.

Given that we were saved from a rigged election and that the country appears to have emerged from the past two years not

as badly scathed as one might have feared, and that we now have a democratically elected government in place, I would argue that on balance it was worth it.

Of course, there are worries about the precedent set by 1/11. But it is important to recall that the alternatives were worse and unless there is complete political breakdown or rampant lawlessness on the part of an elected government, uncorrectable by electoral means, I don't see any reason to fear a reprise.

Indeed, one thing the last two years have brought home to us quite clearly is the limitations of what the army is capable of. The trajectory of the last two years suggests that the army can only act in concord with broad public support for its actions.

The limited tolerance of the Bangladeshi people for an extended period of non-democratic rule and their clearly expressed preference for democracy is the nation's best guarantee against unwanted interventions in the future.

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Where have all the men gone?

Any clue where men are heading? In Rwanda they perished in death. In this country, their own excesses have ruined them. If politics is about force of an idea turning into power of an ideal, it requires character and resolve. More men are failing to show that they are on their mettle.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

MAX Fashions, a New Zealand based fashion company, with 38 retail outlets throughout the country, put up a three-story high billboard in which it called New Zealand a women's republic. What prompted that aphorism has a context of its own. The sitting heads of three branches of New Zealand government were all women: the prime minister, the speaker of the house and the chief justice.

In this country, we have got five women sitting in five key positions. Our prime minister, opposition leader, foreign minister, home minister and agriculture minister are all women. For the first time in history, the highest number of women sits in the highest echelons of this republic. A couple of notches ahead of New Zealand, we have all the more reason to call ours a women's republic.

Trust me, I cast aside the gender filter before I embarked on writing this piece. I don't mind who wears the pants in the house or government. I don't care if faces calling the shots in this country wear

makeup or moustache on them. Yet, while women are climbing up the ladder once dominated by men, it's only natural to ask what is happening to men. Are they politically shrinking?

No, I don't have any bias for men. But I sure am curious as to where all the men have gone. For the fourth time in a row, a woman has been elected prime minister in this country. What does it mean? Is power slipping from men? Are women replacing them as heavyweights in politics?

Men and women have their obvious differences. Men vary from women in curves and contours. They differ in hair and voice. But deep-down inside they have more striking differences. Men can hold more drinks than women because they have more muscle than fat. Women tend to live at least 5 to 10 years longer because they are less prone to cardiovascular diseases compared to men.

Average man is 12 centimeter taller than average woman. Average woman is 13 kilos lighter than average man. The Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK

says men are approximately 3 times more likely to commit suicide than women. The British Journal of Psychology claims men, on average, are five IQ points more intelligent than women.

Few summers ago, Larry Summers, Bill Clinton's Treasury Secretary, paid through his nose for drawing a similar conclusion. As president of Harvard University, he compared the relatively low number of women in the sciences to the numbers of Catholics in investment banking, whites in the National Basketball Association and Jews in farming. The bottom line of what he said was that women had low intrinsic aptitude. In layman's terms, he meant to say that women were dumber than men.

Summers was to quickly retract his statement under criticism. In fact, there is no conclusive evidence that women are intellectually inferior to men. Rather, history is rife with examples when women ruled countries as empresses and dowager empresses. There was a period of Chinese history when even the eunuchs controlled palace politics.

Perhaps gender doesn't matter in politics. Still, why are women coming up while men are going down? In Rwanda, it was the outcome of genocide. When the Tutsis and the Hutus stopped killing each other, twice as many women were left as men. Naturally, women had increased participation in government. More cabinet posts went to them. They also headed the supreme court, the police and most of the prisons.

Debora Spar, a former Harvard professor, recently made a compelling argument. She claims that women could have averted the financial debacle unfolding in the USA. Women are less aggressive than men when it comes to handling risk. All the perpetrators of the greatest economic mess in the last eight decades are men, she says.

More importantly, she claims that women are more inclined to blow the whistle within an organisation. A woman was the first to call for greater disclosure and new rules to govern the exploding world of financial derivatives. It was a female executive who warned the Enron CEO that the company was heading for financial trouble. A female FBI agent had prodded her superiors to investigate the men long before they unleashed the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Any clue where men are heading? In Rwanda they perished in death. In this country, their own excesses have ruined them. If politics is about force of an idea turning into power of an ideal, it requires character and resolve. More men are failing to show that they are on their mettle.

The law of buoyancy discovered by Archimedes explains it. The force of women is equal to the moral weight of men displaced by them. It may not tell how much women have gained. But men have certainly lost their substance.

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Where Osama came from

Today, Bin Laden, and forces sympathetic to him but outside his control, are gaining nationalist space in the region between Egypt and Pakistan. That is, or should be, the most worrisome consequence of Bush's long eight years in office.

M.J. AKBAR

IN 1918, a startling coincidence took place. Every single Muslim in the world was colonised. The defeat of Ottoman Turkey eliminated the last independent space in the Muslim world. The restructuring of Arab west Asia also began after 1918. Over time, with halting steps, new nations were granted qualified freedom.

Neo-colonisation is easily defined. It is the granting of independence on condition that you do not exercise it. Britain had protected its Indian empire through a similar exchange of security commitments with princely states. A superpower assured security to a ruling

clan in exchange for the clan becoming a local guardian of superpower interests.

The Arab street was not divided into left or right, but rather into radical and moderate avenues. "Moderate" became a dodgy word in nationalist circles as governments sold oil to their mentors at artificially bottled prices. The radicals were broadly "left," but there was a small but significant stream that took its inspiration from a heady mix of Islamic theology and Arab history.

When the fetid royal clans collapsed, the "left" found champions in army officers. Nasser in Egypt and Ba'athists in Iraq and Syria promised a good deal and delivered little. There was neither democracy nor economic growth; and

social reform was vitiated by political compromise as dynasties survived on a diet of stagnation.

Arabs created room for an Osama through inertia. America expanded it through war. Bin Laden deliberately provoked conflict by destroying Bush Jr's isolationist complacency with a successful strike that could have been scripted for fantasy-history. Today, Bin Laden, and forces sympathetic to him but outside his control, are gaining nationalist space in the region between Egypt and Pakistan. That is, or should be, the most worrisome consequence of Bush's long eight years in office.

An accident of sectarian interests has kept Ladenists at odds with radical elements in Iran, but their reading of the west is not sharply divergent. In exile from the Shah's Iran, Imam Khomeini developed the concept of twin threats: if America, godfather of Israel and principal oil glutton, was the Great Satan then the Soviet Union, as successor to tsarist imperialism, was the Lesser Satan.

Having made his reputation in war against the Lesser Satan it was only a question of time before a confrontation built up against the more dangerous adversary.

Bush Sr created the first moment with his Iraq war. Bin Laden fell out with the Saudis when they rejected his offer to fight Saddam in Kuwait and received sanctuary in Afghanistan. Ironically, Bush spent seven death-drenched years searching for Bin Laden, and failed. But when Bin Laden wanted to find Bush, he seemed eerily capable of doing so.

Bin Laden is no more than an agent provocateur, but his historic importance is as a manifestation of despair. He may arouse toxic alarm in the West, but his more enduring legacy should be as a wake-up call for the Muslim world. If Muslim nations do not modernise, and eliminate social ills like gender bias, he will have inspired a regression that will deepen the present haze of confusion into storm clouds of chaos.

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