

Digital Bangladesh

We already have attained much towards digital Bangladesh, and we sure will be able to go light-years more. But first we must ensure our geographical existence, energy self-sufficiency and relative political stability.

RUMI AHMED

BANGLADESH is being promised a digital future. In fact, the tagline of the landmark election victory of Awami League was a promise of digital Bangladesh by 2021. BNP also promised to implement digital Bangladesh sooner than 2021. Our intellectuals have started advising the government about how to implement digital Bangladesh, and opposition rhetoric locked horns with the government about who can make Bangladesh digital faster.

But way before this brouhaha by disconnected politicians Bangladesh had stepped into, and now walks boldly in, the digital age thanks to a new generation of IT savvy youth. This digitalisation took place during the fifteen years of democratic Bangladesh.

Bangladesh used to be a country where getting an analog land telephone connection was a combination of waiting, bribery, good connection with government high-ups and good fortune. Starting in the early 1990s, a digital telecommunication revolution took place. Nearly one-third of Bangladeshis are using high-tech, latest generation digital

mobile technology for communication and other information related needs -- no political leader had to promise this!

Without any manifesto or political rhetoric, computer villages grew in places like the IDB Bhaban or Elephant Road. And against all odds, totally through private initiative, young Bangladeshi entrepreneurs started bringing in IT related business to Dhaka.

Until the 1990s we had only one TV channel, and conversion into colour broadcasting was the sole major technological breakthrough in a decade. Thanks to some private entrepreneurs' innovation, efforts and skill, in a matter of only several years, dozens of highly sophisticated TV channels started broadcasting quality programs.

There was hardly any need for overseas technological assistance, and the young people who made this happen did not have any formal IT education. They educated themselves to accomplish difficult technological feats.

While few people had ever seen a computer even five years ago, personal computers are now household items in middle class Bangladesh. Millions of households in remote alleys of the cities and towns, and even vil-

lages, are now connected to the information superhighway via broadband or mobile Internet connections.

A new generation of entrepreneurs, engineers and IT professionals made Bangladesh digital without much government help or vision. These folks can take our country farther than anyone can dream of. They will probably be able to achieve all, provided our leaders can ensure three important prerequisites to a prosperous Bangladesh.

What the nation needs from the leaders is a promise of a stable and secure Bangladesh. A repeat of pre-1/11 style street violence will take us back to the Stone Age, not digital age. Frequent sieges, unannounced closure of ports and roads, and violence in public places turn the wheel of development backward. Similarly, corruption, nepotism, rampant politicisation of the administration and political thuggery make the country weak and unstable.

One of the major components of digital Bangladesh is wooing of foreign investment and IT work-orders. These will never come our way as long as we keep patronising the bribery culture or resort to middle-age style violence.

A digital Bangladesh needs another much more basic prerequisite -- its very existence. Bangladesh faces at least two existential challenges. Although we did not hear about it during the election cycle, we cannot afford to ignore the issue of energy security. We have 150 million people on a very small piece of land, and are rapidly using up all our natural

resources.

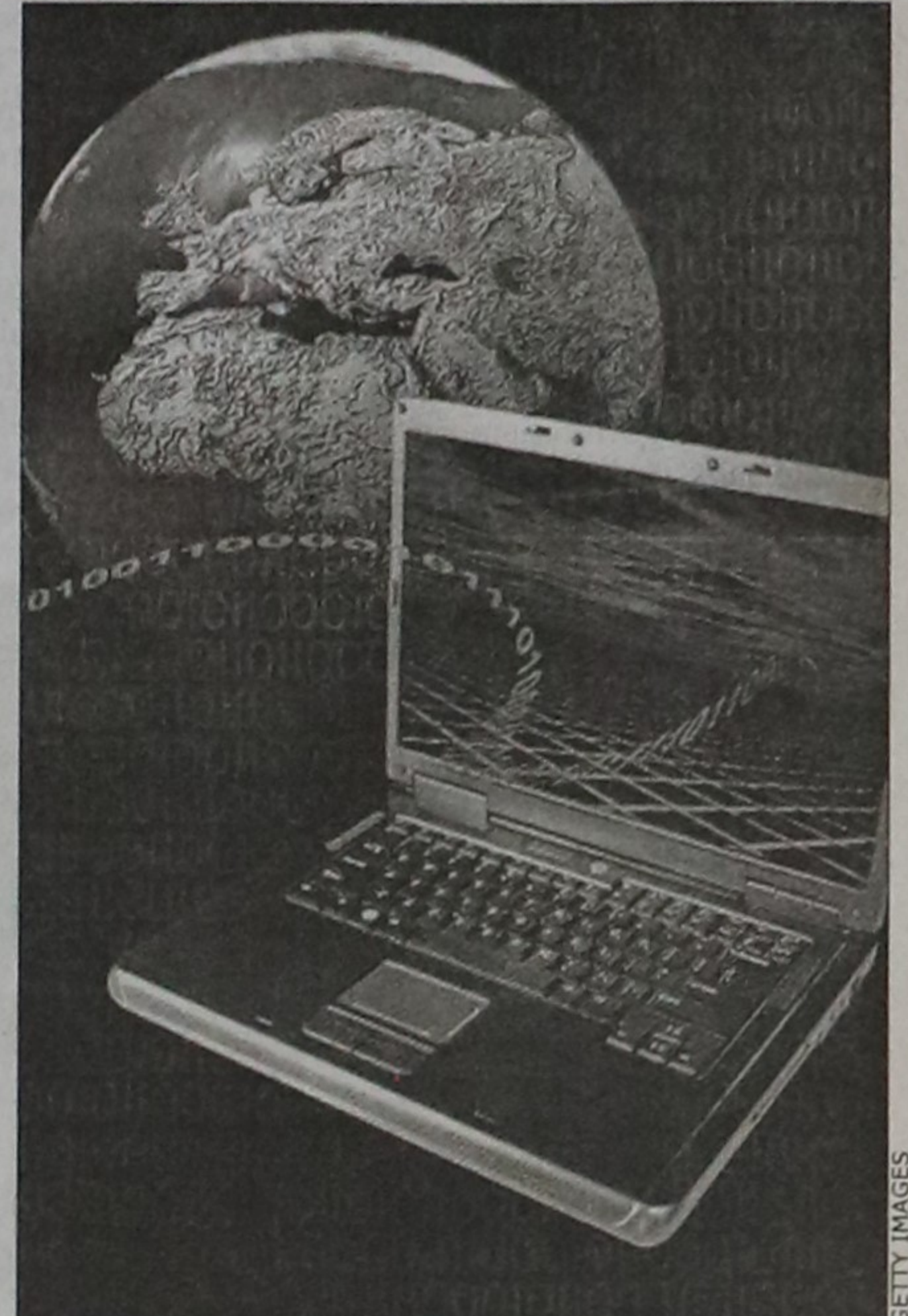
If we don't act now with the highest possible priority, we will leave our next generation nothing but an overcrowded, used up piece of uninhabitable land. With global demand, time will come when energy will not even be available for import.

There is another vital issue that is missing from the politicians' rhetoric and party manifestos. The physical existence of Bangladesh is imperiled by rising sea level. Bangladesh is set to face the brunt of the environmental holocaust earlier than most other nations. Some reports suggest that Bangladesh might lose half its landmass to the rising sea within the next fifty years.

During the election politicians spoke against cronyism, corruption, nepotism and war criminals. But we did not hear much about the energy security plans of the political parties. We also did not hear anything about how our political parties will combat the threat of global warming. And also missing, after the election, is a full-scale embrace of pre-election promises of shunning the culture of intolerance, suppression, exclusion, rejection and boycott.

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Linking up with the world.

Let there be rule of law

If the government has to prove its democratic credentials, the best way to do so is to enforce the rule of law because, where there is rule of law, there will be democracy. And where there is peace and progress, there is truth and justice. It is only where there is no rule of law that truth and justice take a back seat and crime and corruption begin to breed.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

WE have a lot of democracy loving people these days waxing 'eloquent' on how Hasina and the government could have earned political mileage if they had been more accommodative towards the opposition in the parliament. The speakers in a talk show on a TV channel sounded so committed to democracy and constitutional rule. The issues discussed left me with the impression that perhaps Hasina and her government have fallen short of the democratic behaviour expected of them.

First, the slot of deputy speaker ought to have gone to the opposition. Second, the seating arrangement for the opposition should not have been altered by the speaker. Third, the parliament should not ratify all 122 ordinances promulgated by the president during the caretaker government.

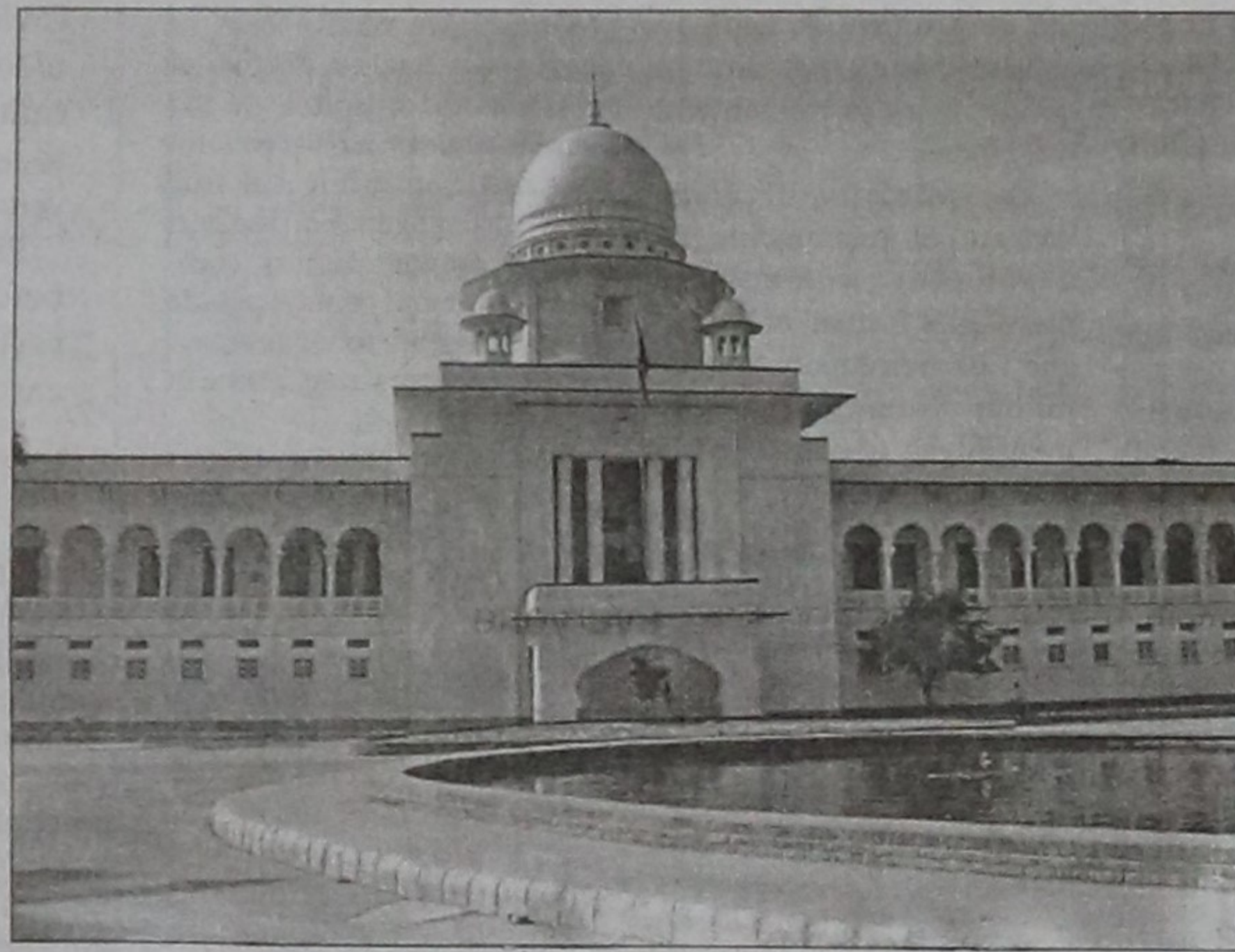
If this is the impression I got as an educated man, imagine the impact on the millions of illiterate people who

have no knowledge of the constitution and the rules of business in the parliament, and of how wrong and partisan Jamiruddin Sircar had been in allocating seats to the lawmakers of his party.

It is wonderful to hear votaries of democracy, constitutional rule and human rights speak on TV talk shows and put across their illuminating views to the people. But I wonder why some of them sound so partisan. Why is it that the government has to prove its democratic credentials by walking the extra mile to give space to the opposition?

One great legal mind of our country suggested towards the fag end of the caretaker government's tenure that the panacea for all our political ills lay in Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia having a dialogue, and that the popularity of this government would have gone sky high if the deputy speaker had been elected from the opposition.

Why this weird suggestion? Was it a commitment made in the election manifesto of the AL? Is it a practice in



The law is supreme.

democracies the world over that the deputy speaker must be from the opposition? Does our constitution say that the deputy speaker has to be from the opposition? Would it serve the cause of democracy if a deputy speaker elected from the opposition behaved in the same blatantly partisan way as Jamiruddin Sircar had as a speaker?

One former bureaucrat came down on Sheikh Hasina for back-tracking on her statement on the eve of the election that she would consider having the

deputy speaker from the opposition. He also said that he would have given all the seats to the opposition as per their demand. Such magnanimity is indeed praiseworthy. But why was not such a suggestion made when BNP was in power?

In the 8th parliament AL, which had 62 seats, was given only 8 seats in the front row. On the basis of proportional representation in the present parliament, BNP, having 28 odd seats, should not get more than 4 seats in the front

row. But Sircar, in his capacity as the departing speaker, allotted all 10 seats in the front row to opposition lawmakers.

Why don't our democracy loving friends condemn Sircar for his partisan action and for creating this unnecessary fracas over seat allocation? Why could they not say that boycotting parliament sessions over the issue of seat allocation is not in keeping with democracy and democratic culture?

It was suggested that the parliament should not only refrain from ratifying ordinances which were promulgated by the president in violation of the constitution but also take action against those who violated the constitution and prolonged unconstitutional rule by the caretaker government.

If at all the constitution had been violated during the rule of the caretaker government, is it the first instance of such violation? Was not constitution violated when a legitimate government was pulled down in a bloody coup in 1975? Was not the constitution violated when a serving army chief contested election for the presidency and retired after winning it? Was not constitution violated when an army chief took over power in a bloodless military coup in 1982? Would you call it constitutional rule when grenades were hurled at an AL rally, and the government of the day did everything possible to ensure that those who committed this horrendous crime were not brought to justice?

I can go on citing more instances of constitution violation. Has anyone been even censured for violation of constitution, let alone tried and awarded penalty? The caretaker government may have done many a thing wrong, but to say that the constitution was violated during its 2 year rule is a travesty of truth. After all, this is the government which took the bold action to make the judiciary independent.

True, Hasina has not kept her word on the issue of election of deputy speaker. But this does not mean that her commitment to democracy and good governance has run out of steam in any way. Her post-election conduct as a political leader has shown enough maturity and political tolerance to vouch for her sincerity towards ushering in democracy.

On the other hand, democracy is being undermined by the continuous boycott of the parliament session the opposition on the flimsy ground of seat allocation.

If the government has to prove its democratic credentials, the best way to do so is to enforce the rule of law because, where there is rule of law, there will be democracy. And where there is peace and progress, there is truth and justice. It is only where there is no rule of law that truth and justice take a back seat and crime and corruption begin to breed.

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

Independent operators or team players

What must be seriously pondered is whether those at the helm of affairs will act as independent operators, or will they be team players.

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE government has put together a team of key players in various ministries to bring change to the people of Bangladesh. Like Obama, who promised sweeping changes, the Bangladesh government has also pledged many changes so that the dividends of development can flow to the grassroots level. Notably, new faces have been brought into the cabinet, replacing the old guard tainted with various allegations. Impressively, important portfolios have been given to women: a remarkable and desirable development indeed, and a tribute to their long-ignored capabilities.

The new administration may already be sensing that managing the affairs of the country can be both enthralling and challenging: enthralling because if the right policies are introduced, the support of the citizenry, and the resultant smooth functioning of the nation can endear the leadership to the people; challenging because it requires the melding of mindsets at various tiers into a synergistic flow of thoughts and energy that can be harnessed to achieve many good things.

What must be seriously pondered is whether those at the helm of affairs will act as independent operators, or will they be team players. This question is pivotal because what the nation has seen in the past is that, as long as the

highest office was kept happy, those placed in positions of responsibility went merrily about their way, often pillaging, destroying, or harming national interests. They were accountable only to the highest office, while the people's hopes and wishes were dashed to the ground or strewn callously by the wayside.

What is important is for the government to energise itself with a vision, missions, and goals that are people-centred. Every key player (political and bureaucratic) must subscribe to these basic elements. There must also be channel markers along the way to indicate what is being accomplished.

The following approach may help bring coherence and substance to the government's efforts. Importantly, the government can place its vision and mission statements, related activities, and achievements on a digital map in a bid to establish transparency and accountability to the people.

For starters, it would be useful to espouse a clear vision or dream that should state where the government aspires to take the nation compared to where it is today, and what it intends to show upon completion of its five-year term. This should be followed by a mission statement that should describe in broad terms: 1) who the government intends to serve 2) how they are to be served and the contributions that would be of value to them and 3) what would

differentiate the present government's approach from the approaches of previous governments.

If poverty alleviation is central to the vision, the following represent the government's priority missions: 1) generate employment 2) establish food security 3) assure physical safety 4) build energy security 5) enhance the infrastructural platform (physical, digital, etc.) 6) improve education, 7) provide better health for all and 8) enhance the country's image abroad (to draw investors). Of course, there could be a different set of priority missions, but the above seem to be reasonable.

These missions can be translated into a set of goals so that the government's policies and their outcomes have measurable properties; otherwise, claims would remain just that, subject to speculation and criticism. On employment generation, for example, the government can easily set goals on the percent increments it envisages, and provide statistics on them using clearly defined metrics. With good metrics, the government can take credit if the mission is accomplished, or explain to its constituencies what went wrong and why. Honest admissions of failure with good explanations can actually be image enhancing and garner future votes!

On food security, food stock goals can be projected and information made available periodically about crop yields, stocks on hand, and the status of various inputs. Image abroad can be assessed by metrics such as Transparency International's rankings, or rankings provided by such sources such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) or the Country Risk Assessment (CRA) reports developed by the Human Rights and

Business Project.

Even the embassies could provide useful information or conduct periodic surveys on a list of criteria to assess the perceived image of Bangladesh among important groups -- investors, UN personnel, political leaders abroad, etc.

The key point is that clear goals and their metrics should be established to assess the government's performance on the mission statements. Dramatic improvements are not needed on these indexes; instead, small but sustained gains in the rankings could be confidence bolstering for the people and the government, as well as for potential investors from overseas.

Relevant metrics should emanate from each ministry, identifying where they fit in the mission statements that would then dovetail into the priorities. For example, the Ministry of Finance can tie into the various missions, showing how its allocations influence the metrics on employment, food security, infrastructure enhancements, educational quality, etc. Similarly, the Sports Ministry can tie into a subset: e.g., the physical security and health improvement missions by devising its role and metrics that show how it contributes to reducing crime and improving the physical fitness of the nation.

Each ministry also ought to assess its strengths and weaknesses; strengths being what they do well and can build upon, weaknesses being where improvements are needed to become better. Both strengths and weaknesses ought to be identified in the context of threats and opportunities in the environment, typically known as SWOT analysis. Opportunities may be identified as activities or areas in which the



All for one, one for all.

ministry ought to operate, while threats are elements that the ministry ought to avoid. Good metrics should come from a solid SWOT analysis.

If Bangladesh is to make significant progress in the next five years, the government must bring to an end the era of independent operators. When each ministry's goals and activities are aligned with the vision and mission statements generated collectively at the apex, and when there is total buy-in of

the key players on how they fit into the overall scheme of things, they will have established themselves as team players. And when the team players focus on what makes the citizens happy, not the highest seat of office, they will have understood their true call to duty.

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