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# The challenge of statesmanship



REHMAN SOBBHAN

**S** EVEN weeks have lapsed since the Awami League led grand alliance assumed office. This is the Awami League's third opportunity to lead Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina is hopefully, conscious of how history has given her a second chance to realise the unfulfilled aspirations of her father, Bangabandhu. It would be both a personal tragedy as much as a national loss of immeasurable consequences, if she and her government fail to meet their trust with destiny.

Since the moment of her party's unprecedented, indeed, unexpectedly handsome electoral triumph at the polls on 29th December, 2008, Sheikh Hasina has demonstrated a strong awareness of her moment of truth. She has spoken with considerable sobriety in setting the tone of her administration. Her cabinet, with a few exceptions, appears to have been chosen within an eye to the integrity of the person rather than their experience for the job. This has meant that an exceptionally high proportion of the cabinet appointees are holding office for the first time. In such circumstances we have to give the appointees a chance to prove that they can preserve their integrity while learning on the job.

In practice, given the relative inexperience of the cabinet, much will depend on the direction given to them by the Prime Minister and key appointees such as the Finance Minister, who have rather more experience as well as expertise in their particular portfolio. However, this lack of expertise on the part of ministers should not be seen as a justification for concentrating decision making within the Prime Minister's office, now being strengthened by the infusion of a growing retinue of specialist advisers. This would merely perpetuate the tradition of an all powerful executive Presidency where cabinet government became the first casualty. The Ministers should be encouraged to assume responsibility to fulfill their mandate and left free to establish their own panel of experts to advise them in their tasks.

The new government has to also recognise that it is assuming office in the wake of three largely ineffective parliaments which failed to discharge their constitutional mandate of holding the executive accountable. This owed to our tradition of confrontational politics where the ruling party gave little opportunity for the opposition to effectively give voice to public concerns. In response, the opposition opted for the streets rather than the Sangshad as the arena for political expression.

To reactivate parliament will, to a large extent, depend on the will of the ruling party and particularly the Prime Minister, to ensure that it can be made the centre of our political life. This task

has been made more difficult because of the exceptionally weak representation of the 4 Party Alliance in the parliament who command only 32 seats in a house of 300, assuming that they will retain the two seats vacated by Khaleda Zia. A further concern is that only 2/3 members from the current Opposition have any front bench experience with a capacity to effectively challenge the government on the floor of the house. The Leader of the Opposition, for one, has yet to demonstrate her parliamentary skills.

In such circumstances, the ruling party will have to make an extra effort to keep the Opposition engaged in parliament. Otherwise, the Opposition may, once again, be tempted to make their case on the streets. With the support of 37 percent of the electorate they have the capacity to do so. In such a context, the ruling party could have dealt more generously with the demand of the Opposition, for a disproportionate share of the front bench seats. Invoking the precedent of the BNP's unfair behavior to justify the present government's ungenerous response, demonstrates weak political foresight. 8/10 members sitting on the front bench would provide both voice

and visibility to the Opposition which would have been registered on the TV screens every day that the Sangshad was in session.

Beyond such cosmetic gestures the more substantive opportunities provided to the Opposition should come through giving them voice in the business of parliament. It is hoped that the offer of the second position of Deputy Speaker will be carried forward and accepted by the Opposition. 50% of the Prime Minister's question hour should be allocated to the Opposition. The Prime Minister, has already demonstrated her facility in handling questions and would clearly revel in the opportunity to face the Opposition. This will be contrasted, in the public mind, with the tenure of the last BNP government when the Awami League, then sitting in the Opposition, was denied any opportunity to interrogate the former Prime Minister during question hour.

A further gesture would be to offer the chair of a few of the more important parliamentary committees, such as the Public Accounts Committee, to the Opposition. Furthermore, on all mat-

ters of debate and legislation the Opposition should be given a prioritised and a disproportionate amount of time, to speak. This too could be contrasted with the denial of opportunities to the Opposition to speak, during the tenure of the outgoing Speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar, who made a mockery of the concept of an independent Speaker of the House.

Whatever positive gestures may be made towards the present Opposition there is no guarantee they would not prefer the street to express themselves. However, the incumbent government would then be absolved of the charge that their autocratic behaviour in parliament drove the Opposition into the streets. It is to be hoped that the Opposition would give the government a fair chance to prove or disprove their promise of fair play within the Sangshad. The BNP also too needs time and space to rebuild their party and recoup their depleted political fortunes.

Apart from the attempt to heighten the voice of the Opposition much greater use should be made of the unusual presence of a large number of senior parliamentarians from the ruling party who are, sitting in the

from outside the administration. As in the US Congress the PCs should be empowered to convene public hearings on issues of national concern.

It is not clear if the Prime Minister had such an enlightened mission in mind, when she opted to leave so many senior members of her party out of her cabinet. Whatever be her motives, her decision, could emerge as her most imaginative to date. These senior members now invest the 9th Sangshad, with a unique opportunity for building a strong parliament as the basis of a strong democracy. The real re-balancing of constitutional power for strengthening democracy should not be between the President and the Prime Minister but between an all powerful Prime Minister and an empowered Parliament.

Beyond making the Sangshad effective, the crucial task will be to deliver on the promises spelt out in the Awami League's Vision 2021 manifesto. This would be a welcome point of departure for an electorate grown cynical at the unkept promises of elected governments. The government should spell out the specifics of how and when they intend to deliver on their manifesto. Civil society should carefully track this

get. The machinery of government will certainly need to be re-energised, re-incentivised, and for the more ambitious tasks, re-invented. This will need decisive leadership to deliver a clear message to the administration about the firmness of the government's commitments.

Over the years our governments have remained excessively and needlessly dependant on donor advice and external expertise. This has demotivated the administrative machinery and led to the neglect of our domestic professional talents. This government, with its enormous democratic mandate, should be the first, in many years, to reach out to this wealth of underutilised indigenous expertise and invite them to put their talents to productive use in the service of the people of Bangladesh.

This appeal should not limit itself to those who are direct sympathisers of the ruling party. Those who enjoy the confidence of the ruling party and have the expertise to be of service, should be effectively utilised by the government. However, there is a much larger community of apolitical or non-partisan professionals who also have much to contribute. They need to be motivated to come forward and invest their talents in the service of policy change. Once such an appeal is made a variety of institutional mechanisms should be devised to put these mobilised talents to work, through advisory panels, specialised task forces, committees, commissions and direct employment in the government for the implementation of specific programmes.

In a traditionally partisan political culture such an inclusive strategy would invoke the support of the professional community who traditionally remain alienated from any government. It would also encourage all voters, but particularly the new generation of voters who are increasingly coming to determine the outcome of elections, to view the government as representatives of the nation rather than just a party. Such an approach to governance would greatly broaden the support base of the government. The true measure of mature political leadership lies in the capacity to reach out to the non-partisan and motivate them to become supporters. But it is the statesman among such leaders who has the vision to win over his/her opponents to transform them into allies in a mission for genuine change. Dare we hope that Bangladesh is on the threshold of such a transformational point in our fractured political history?

Rehman Sobhan, eminent economist, is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

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