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The 'Caretakers' 2007-08: Performance and lessons



ROUNAQ JAHAN

THE peaceful handover of power by the military-backed 'Caretaker' government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed to the democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina on January 6, 2009 is unprecedented in South Asian history. For the first time, a de facto military government kept its promise of voluntarily giving up power to elected representatives within the time limit it set for itself. When the military

intervened once again in Bangladesh's politics on January 11, 2007 declaring a state of emergency, the new government pledged a return to a democratic government through organisation of a free and fair election within two years. Though this pledge was regularly repeated by the government, doubts were expressed by observers within and outside Bangladesh as to whether the military backers of the government would indeed keep to their promises and return to the barracks. After all such promises are

routinely made by a military government only to be broken on one pretext or another. A military government is generally forced out of power by a popular movement or by another military coup.

Pakistan's history is replete with such experiences of military rule including that of its last military dictator General Pervez Musharraf. The voluntary, timely and honorable exit by the military backed government and its role in organising a free, fair and credible parliamentary elections on December 29, 2008 underscore the differences between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Not only is the military establishment different in the two countries, the military being less entrenched in Bangladesh, the relative strength of other institutions vis-à-vis the military is also different. In Bangladesh political parties and civil society are much stronger and they were not willing to accept an indefinite continuation of an unelected government. Indeed none of the major power groups including the military itself found it in their best corporate interest to prolong the involvement of the military in running the affairs of the state. What is, however, remarkable is that all power groups finally demonstrated a willingness to negotiate and make compromises in order to have a free and fair election so that the citizens can be the ultimate masters in deciding how they would like to be governed. The unprecedented high voter turn out - 87 percent - was a clear verdict of the people in favour of a rule by democratically elected government.

The credibility of the elections, enhanced the prestige of the military backed "caretaker" government (CTG), which was eroding fast as the CTG was making one mistake after another in pushing its other major agenda of political reforms. The "caretakers" repeatedly argued that they would not only hold an election but bring about a qualitative change in politics. The performance of the "caretakers", proved, once again, that an unelected caretaker government can at best organise free and fair elections; but implementation of political reforms needed mobilisation

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

What lessons can the political parties, who have generally been critical of the "caretakers", draw from the last two years' experiences? Obviously, they need to think hard about the future of the caretaker (CTG) system. By being able to organise a credible and acceptable election, the "caretakers" demonstrated once again the positive role the CTG can play in our highly partisan political environment. But the problems with the CTG system, particularly the partisanisation of the judiciary, have also become apparent in the last few years. Political parties and civil society need to assess the caretaker system objectively in the light of our ground realities. We need to decide whether in the absence of trust among the political parties about the neutrality of an incumbent administration, we would need to continue with the caretaker system, and if so, what changes we would need to make to ensure the non-partisan character of the "Caretakers".

I AM TRUTH.
I CONSORT WITH FACT AND
EXACTNESS. I DEMYSTIFY AND I
SET STRAIGHT. FOR 18 YEARS I HAVE
UNCLOAKED, I HAVE REMOVED
VENEERS. I AM A COMMUNAL
CONSCIENCE. I TELL IT LIKE IT IS.
I AM WHAT IT IS. I AM THE
BRUTAL HONESTY THAT
SLAYS DECEIT. I AM LIKE
DAYBREAK. I AM TRUTH
AND TODAY I COME OF AGE.
I AM
THE DAILY STAR.



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