

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2009

The reality of reforms

DR. MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

A caretaker government unlike any of its predecessors stepped in for an unprecedented two-year tenure on January 12, 2007. That long pause has ended with the resumption of parliamentary democracy following the peaceful national elections on the 29th of December 2008. The caretaker government tried its hands in the difficult field of reforms.

The dramatic events which led to the reconstituted caretaker government raised high expectations for political, economic, social and administrative changes in the country. The new transitional government backed by the armed forces, promised widespread and far-

reaching reforms in politics, electoral processes and economy. It also mounted a massive anticorruption campaign through the reconstituted independent Anti Corruption Commission (ACC). All these appeared to hold out prospects for revolutionary change through reforms effected by a non-political government that was not elected. Efforts to combine the two, reform and revolution, faced built-in challenges. These are distinct and different processes which can rarely be rolled into one.

Reformist statesmen provide visionary leadership. They set out with clear and transparent resolve to implement their missions. Successful reformers seem to realise the significance of the truth expressed in the Holy Bible. The prayer is to God Almighty to give one "the serenity to accept the things (one)

face greater problems in responding to the inexorable demands of politics without support of politically organized forces. Meeting the challenges of political and economic governance becomes more difficult in their case.

All this was writ large in the predicament of the transitional government produced by the events of 11th and 12th January 2007. Its unique character was forged by unprecedented circumstances. In essence, it no more remained a caretaker government as stipulated in the constitution.

On the other hand, though backed by the armed forces, it did not become a military government. In substance, it assumed the form of a half way house the like of which the country did not see

unfettered operation of the political parties. Besides, the massive anticorruption drive led to the detention of many important political leaders along with some high officials and prominent businessmen on charges of alleged corruption. Attempts at implementing the so called "minus two formula" also resulted in the arrest of the top leaders of two principal political parties both of whom were former Prime Ministers. Endeavours to effect reforms of political parties with the help of reformist leadership in various political camps also proved ineffective. Political parties were kept in a state of suspended animation. The government, because of its very nature as a neutral and non-political entity, could

much of the reforms proposed and initiated by the interim government have taken roots and will be sustained?

The separation of the lower judiciary from the executive, reforms for democratisation of political parties and some measures to ensure healthy elections free of influence of money and muscle seem to have been generally accepted by the major political forces.

Reforms for strengthening of the local government system in accordance with the recommendations of the local government committee also appear to have wide acceptance. One of the consequences is the staging of upazila polls after a gap of nearly eighteen years. By contrast, not much has been done in the field of administrative reforms. Constitutional bodies such as the Election Commission, the Anti Corruption Commission and the Public Service Commission were reconstituted immediately after the advent of the interim government. Reform of these entities did not seem to have been on the agenda. Doubts still linger in the minds of the people as to the long-term impact of ambitious anti corruption drive. All told, it appears that the transitional government's record of sustainable reform is one of mixed partial success and greater failure.

The causes of its lack of success lay in the ineffective strategy which failed to appreciate and use political force in support of the reform programmes. The responsibilities of cleansing politics, the election process and administration need sound political support-base for success. The interim government in effect failed to mobilise support of existing political forces behind its reform agenda. This could be done only by reaching a consensus on the reform measures. The Election Commission went ahead with efforts to seek and realise such a consensus with regard to the process of elections at various levels. In some measure it did achieve success. But how far these will be sustained in the future is another question.

The transitional government's reform attempts suffered from the inadequacies of a non-political and non-elected government. Its endeavours in this field were handicapped by its distance from politics. Political processes are the engines of communication between the rulers and the ruled. These are the propellers of mobilising the support of the entire society for meaningful, desirable and sustainable reforms.

The transitional government of Bangladesh remained unable to comprehend this reality. Good intentions are not enough. Sound and successful politics alone can secure desirable and enduring reforms.

Now there is an elected government ruling Bangladesh. Its presence creates a strong basis of hope. Given the will the Awami League-led 'Mohajote' government can initiate and implement enduring reforms. Its massive victory in the national polls has given it a very sound and strong basis of popular support. The visionary manifesto of the Awami League may act as the starting point and framework for desirable reforms that will endure. It is interesting to note that the new government has reflected the national eagerness to reform and improve the quality of politics and political leadership. The new cabinet of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, by and large, consists of persons with clean record and image. Moreover, the Prime Minister and her government in their avowed resolve to unite the nation, give the opposition its due respect and role within and outside the parliament and continue the anti-corruption drive loyally reflects the national mood for following the correct path to politico-economic development. The unfolding scenario seems to indicate that the reform efforts of the transitional government did not entirely go in vain. The need of the hour is the will and determination of the newly elected government to continue this process of political, economic and administrative reforms which will speedily realise the dream of a thriving and digital Bangladesh.

Dr. Mizanur Rahman Shelley, a noted thinker and social scientist, is the founder Chairman, Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB) and Editor, quarterly "Asian Affairs".

Revolution causes sudden and often basic changes in the values and systems of the concerned society. It is occasioned by both objective factors and determined action of organised political groups. It is also accompanied by violence on different scales. Though it is perceived as a sudden change it is preceded by gradual preparations over a long period of time. Aptly has it been remarked, "Revolutions rarely occur suddenly and never by chance." This is true of all major revolutions such as the French Revolution of 1789, the Bolshevik Revolution in Czarist Russia in 1917 and the Communist Revolution in China under the leadership of Mao Tse-Tung in 1949. More recently in 1979, the revolution in Iran under the leadership of Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini dethroned the imperial regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi and set up an Islamic republic.

By contrast, reform is a peaceful process which makes exacting demands on the leadership seeking transformation. Reform does not attempt a wholesale dismantling of the existing socio-political and economic order. Reform is gradual, orderly, discrete but purposively integrated. It is more difficult than revolution but can bring gradual and orderly change. Reformist leaders do not break up existing structures and systems. They work in a planned and systematic manner to bring change where it is needed. The movements take place step by step and relate to specific segments of the society,

cannot change, the courage to change the things (one) can and the wisdom to know the difference".

Reformist leaders carry on their work in accordance with realistic strategies. These are formulated and implemented in tune with their specific socio-political situations. Thus, Kemal Ataturk devised and followed an effective strategy of isolating the forces resisting reforms. It is said of him: "Those whom the Gazi destroys he first isolates".

Reformist leaders use politics to achieve their goals. They fully exploit the political support they enjoy in the cause of enduring reforms. Reform is hardly possible without a sound base of political support. Popular and elected governments are the best and most effective instruments of sustainable political, social and economic reforms. This lesson seems to have been learnt anew by Bangladesh during nearly two years of the Caretaker government.

That abiding lesson is indivisible from life lived in politically organised societies which we call States. Governments are the instruments that conduct the affairs of the State. Notwithstanding the form, governments are inseparable from the all-pervasive political process.

Politics do not mean only elections, party activities or political campaigns. Articulation and aggregation of group-specific interests of social forces form the core of political processes. This requires handling the process of interest aggregation with practical knowledge, foresight and skill. The exacting demands of politics challenge all governments, elected or not. It also does not matter whether the government has a fixed tenure or an interim mandate. The only difference is that elective political Governments have the necessary apparatus at their disposal which a non-elected one does not have. Elected governments are assisted and supported by their parties in the acquisition and exercise of state power. Non-elected governments do not have such instruments at their command. In consequence, they

before. Putting off the national elections scheduled for the 22nd of January 2007 was the least of its tasks. It had to defer that election indefinitely in the context of intense political confrontations exploding in violence on the streets.

The situation existing at its inception seemed to compel the government to get on the track of massive and widespread reforms. Its leaders avowedly assumed the responsibility of cleansing a veritable Augean stable of polluted politics, malgovernance and unprecedented politicisation of vital state institutions and pervasive corruption especially at the higher echelons of the society.

The need to meet such onerous challenges caused the government to assume greater responsibilities than were required of a caretaker government. The caretaker governments of 1996 and 2001 had easier tasks to be performed according to constitutional provisions: to hold national elections within the constitutionally stipulated ninety days and only conduct day to day routine activities. By contrast, the interim government led by Acting President Chief Justice Shabuddin Ahmed in 1990-91 was substantively, though not constitutionally, a 'Caretaker government'. It is true that it had to face historic responsibilities of changing the political system. However, it was greatly supported by national consensus as reflected in the viewpoints and actions of the major political parties.

The government in office from the 12th January 2007 to 6th January 2009 confronted an all-together different challenge. Its responsibilities were as significant as those of the interim government of Justice Shabuddin. The obstacles on its way were more complex and difficult. National consensus on fundamental political issues that assisted the work of the Shabuddin government was present in the case of the government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed only in an implicit manner. The state of emergency suspended the

not create a political force to support its reform agenda. In consequence, it remained unable to organise and mobilise overt peoples support for its program of reforms in politics.

The acquiescence of the people in the avowed well-intentioned reform and anti-corruption campaigns of the government created a popular support-base, however, unstructured and amorphous. Nevertheless, clinical and administrative response to problems which were basically political, did not provide effective solutions. Adverse politico-social and economic developments led to further erosion of the support base. Excessively technocratic and administrative leadership remained unable to adopt effective measures to reduce economic sufferings of the people. Shrinking scope of employment and income generation both in the public and private sectors, waning business opportunities and slowdown of economic development greatly reduced the purchasing power of common men. Global crises in food supply, unprecedented increase in the prices of fuel, seriously affected the national economy. In more recent times the global economic recession also held out grim prospects for the nation struggling against poverty.

These negative economic developments coupled with indecisive, inadequate and weak management led to renewed restlessness in politics. Different segments of the society such as organised industrial labour and politically motivated students communities took to frequent and increasingly strong agitations despite the state of emergency.

In response to the increasing complexities the transitional government chose the pragmatic way out: softness in dealing with political leaders and parties. Both the top political leaders were freed from their captivity and triumphantly continued to lead their parties.

The political process is back in force and democracy has returned.

The question is how many and how



Politics do not mean only elections, party activities or political campaigns. Articulation and aggregation of group-specific interests of social forces form the core of political processes. This requires handling the process of interest aggregation with practical knowledge, foresight and skill.