

An open letter to the prime minister

Please do not read too much into the unprecedented mandate of the people. Public memory at times can be very deceiving and often take a 180-degree turn around in the shortest possible time. Beware of the sycophants. Never rule by default.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

Venerable Prime Minister, I am happy for you. Today you illuminate the office of the prime minister. Although you had the same privilege some years ago, I strongly feel that this time it is of a different dimension and magnitude. The nation has great expectations from you. As a matter of fact, the people of this country never reposed so much trust in any other person other than your father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation. Madam Prime Minister, My heart goes out to you as one who had undergone unprecedented personal tragedies. I clearly remember the day when your father was brutally killed by a band of mercenaries and traitors. They killed your mother, brothers and their wives, including your minor brother. Trust me, these men shall continue to bear the burden of carrying the cross

both here and hereafter, through eternity. Beloved Prime Minister, It is my feeling that you are destined and ordained by divinity to lead this nation to a life that provides people not only enough to eat but also a life of honesty, moderation and dignity. Your Excellency, As much as you and I understand that it will not be possible for you to single handedly reach that coveted goal but, given the will and the determination, you could succeed with your team. In order to succeed, however, you must take the poor and the down-trodden into fold, and close the ever-increasing gap between the poor and the rich. We the people strongly believe that our salvation, in a sustainable way, lies in strengthening the operations and operatives of the administration, making them transparent and accountable. After all you happen to be the chief custodian of the country's administration. Good governance also

calls for people's trust in your team as a whole. Respected Prime Minister, It does not befit you and your calling to indulge in cheap slogans, the blame game and so called conspiracy theories. I am somewhat concerned about the style and manner in which you articulate on the floor of the Parliament. I am afraid the language used and the gestures made appear to be rather unbecoming of a prime minister. You are no longer the leader of the opposition, you happen to be the prime minister, hence there should be a qualitative change in your deliberations at all times. All this does affect, and has an impact on, your day-to-day management -- besides sending wrong signals to the people. You see, it is ultimately you who would be responsible for all the government's successes and/or failures for the coming five years. My dear Prime Minister, I am happy with whatever I have, physical, material or moral, despite being partially disabled. May I, with all humility, make an observation? On occasions I have observed that you seem to lack humility, a quality that is vital for a political leader of your standing. You also seem to harbour a kind of anger within. This attitude may prove to be self-defeating and counterproductive. Have faith in Allah, repose trust on the people, be honest to yourself, proceed with caution and wisdom, and rest

assured that success shall be yours. In this context, you would do well to remember that "politics is a game of addition and not subtraction." Madam Prime Minister, To this extent I have been somewhat apprehensive of the moves made by your administration to date. Please rest assured that I also realise it may be too early to come to any conclusion. I am sure that you will agree with me that there is nothing wrong about being extra-cautious from the start. I have been rather disappointed with the undue haste with which you have embarked upon reorganising and revamping of the administration. God alone knows why I have this eerie feeling that you are perhaps overlooking the growing perception amongst the people that there is an element of politicising in the entire exercise. I most sincerely hope that I am proved wrong. Frankly, I believe that the way you are positioned you need not indulge in any such tactics. Please remember that whatever you may or may not do, you must help the judiciary to be free and above all controversies. Trust me, this is the most important of state institutions that keep a nation going even after others falter. An effective judiciary is crucial in a civilised



So far so good.

nation. Similarly, take care not to unduly hurt the dignity of anyone, irrespective of his or her calling. At all times refrain from taking a compromising stance or shaking hands with known enemies of democracy and democratic practices. I pray you succeed. But at the same time I will also give you a word of caution. Please do not read too much into the unprecedented mandate of the people. Public memory at times can be very

deceiving and often take a 180-degree turn around in the shortest possible time. Beware of the sycophants. Never rule by default. Your progressive interventions in administering the nation do call for wisdom, sagacity, tolerance and forgiveness. May Allah keep you in His grace and protection.

Shamsher Chowdhury is a columnist for the Daily Star.

Moving towards a government by advisers?

This government has amended the Rules of Business to empower the prime minister to appoint any number of advisers and special assistants, and to give them status of ministers, ministers of state and deputy ministers.

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

BA NGLADESH'S peaceful transition to elected government has unfortunately been overtaken by post-election conflicts, of which the BDR carnage has been the worst. As a consequence, we have failed to take advantage of an opportunity to turn the corner. In the midst of these conflicts, we have overlooked a new trend in governance that has been set into motion by the government. Bangladesh opted for parliamentary democracy in 1991 after the country's two major political parties, Awami League and BNP, succeeded in ending the military dictatorship of General Ershad. However, in the fifteen years during which BNP and AL held power alternately, parliamentary democracy was compromised as Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia emerged as undisputed leaders who exercised unrestrained power in the party, and in governance when in the government. At the same time, the parliament was also made non-functional as the party in opposition opted for the streets for resolution of conflicts, which made politics more conflict-ridden and violent. The form of government in Bangladesh

during this period can best be described as prime ministerial where, unlike the Westminster model, the prime minister was by no means the "first among equals," she was much more like a president. The incumbent government, without any discussion in parliament, has made further dents in the parliamentary or prime ministerial form of governance. This government has amended the Rules of Business to empower the prime minister to appoint any number of advisers and special assistants, and to give them status of ministers, ministers of state and deputy ministers. The amendment thus allows the prime minister to sidestep the constitutional requirement that restricts her from appointing more than 10% of her ministers as "technocrats," who do not have to be members of Parliament. It also allows these advisers and special assistants to participate in cabinet meetings as equals to ministers, who are members of Parliament. In the context of forms of government, this is uncharted territory for it does not fit into any known form -- parliamentary, presidential, prime ministerial, etc. The issue is not just one related to the form of government; more fundamental issues

are involved here. Allowing advisers and special assistants the status of ministers/state ministers/deputy ministers, and also charge of different ministries, contradicts the sovereignty of the parliament because they are not answerable to it. Instead, they are answerable to the prime minister. In this context, the amendment has put the prime minister's power over that of the Parliament. It would be worthwhile to look at Alexander Pope's famous dictum "for forms of government, let fools contest, whatever is administered best is best" to try and understand what is emerging in Bangladesh. Is this emerging form really

going to be best for Bangladesh? This is a tough call because such a form of government has not been tried anywhere before. One can look into this issue from various viewpoints to find an answer. First, the prime minister chose to leave out from her cabinet those who had experience as ministers during the party's last stint in power. Instead, she inducted individuals without such experience. Second, she told the new ministers that she was keeping them under watch, and if they failed to perform they would be shown the door. Third, in a talk show, one of the high profile advisers said that it was his responsibility to keep watch over the



A shadow cabinet?

ministers and report to the prime minister. In all these viewpoints, there is very little that suggests that this new experiment in governance will succeed. Instead, there is plenty to hint that it could cause problems rather than solve them. An interesting case in point is the ministry of energy that is headed by the prime minister. This ministry has an elected minister with the rank of a state minister, and also has an adviser with the rank of a full minister. The adviser will obviously not act under the state minister given the superior status he holds. But then, if the state minister acts at the dictates of the adviser, the principles of elected government will be compromised. An adviser enjoying the rank of a full minister as the minister of planning and the minister of finance has been given the responsibility to look after these ministries as the prime minister's economic affairs adviser. In terms of realpolitik in Bangladesh, where access to the prime minister is a major basis of influence in governance, this system has the potential of becoming a management disaster. The incumbent government has followed its predecessor, the un-elected caretaker government (CTG), in amending the Rules of Business (RoB). The CTG had amended the RoB to by-pass the constitutional restriction on the size of the council of advisers. The constitutional legality of that amendment was not tested in court because people were more focused on the constitutional legality of the CTG itself for extending its stay in office beyond the constitution-

ally set limit of ninety days. Times are different now, and it is an elected government that is in office where the principles of democracy and constitutionality are of the essence. In the case of the AL, the principles of democracy should be more sacrosanct than it was for the un-elected (CTG). People were disappointed when Bangabandhu imposed one-party rule in the shape of Baksal, rejecting the very principles with which he had motivated the people to follow him in 1971 to establish a democratic society and a democratic system of governance. The people have given his daughter Sheikh Hasina a historic majority and mandate, believing that her party would establish the democratic Bangladesh that had eluded her father. Amending the RoB to allow non-elected individuals to head ministries and take part in cabinet meetings at par, or better, with elected individuals contradicts both democratic premises and the constitution. If contested in a court of law, there is no reason why the amendment of the RoB would not be declared un-constitutional. For a government that has been installed with broad public approval, a better way out is to elect these advisers to Parliament. The AL can do this easily, given the numbers they have in Parliament. A few members could vacate their seats to get these advisers elected. It will allow the prime minister to use their services democratically and constitutionally.

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Amir Ali Chowdhury: A friend forever

ABDUL MOMEN CHOWDHURY

MARCH 22 began on a happy note. Three of us friends went to Rajendrapur to spend a quiet day together. Sitting in a log cabin in the serene environment of the shal bon, we were engaged in recalling some memorable incidents of our lives. We lost the thread of discussion when my cell phone rang and I was asked to urgently contact Mrs Amir Chowdhury for an update on her husband's health condition. The information I got was a shock. Mr Amir Ali Chowdhury had passed away following a minor surgery. I met Amir Sahib for the first time in

Kolkata in February 1972. Amir Ali Chowdhury had raised the Bangladesh flag atop the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in Kolkata and became the first in the batch of freedom fighter diplomats to declare allegiance to Bangladesh. He gave help, hope and inspiration to countless others who found refuge in India. He lived on a subsistent allowance himself yet shared his home and hearth with people who had nowhere else to go. We heard from others about the role Amir Ali Chowdhury and his colleagues had played during the war of liberation. His sterling qualities began to touch my heart from the moment I met him. I got the feeling that I had known him for a

very long time. For thirty-seven years we had valued and nurtured our relationship, that grew stronger with the passing years and after we both retired. We remained in close contact with each other until his sudden death. A loving husband, a doting father and a dear friend had to pass away under circumstances that has left us all in deep agony. In this day and age, when everyone is speaking of transparency and accountability, can we expect an intervention from someone in authority to find out the truth about the circumstances surrounding his death? This alone can lighten the burden of his family's irreparable loss. Or is it too much to ask for?

Amir Ali Chowdhury was a freedom fighter. However, I never came across anything said or done by this self-effacing man to get recognition or reward on account of his role during the war of liberation. He was proud of his association with the war of liberation but never intended his patriotism to be overshadowed by some mundane consideration of professional reward or advancement. Amir Ali Chowdhury was a simple man. He was a thorough gentleman, coming from an old family, and was related to many illustrious families. I am fortunate in having known him for the better part of my life and in knowing that he also counted me as one among his

many friends. There was nothing humble in his origin yet he was a humble man, and his company lifted my spirits and taught me lessons in humility. He lived in a virtuous circle, a family man for whom his wife and children came first. Every time he spoke to me about his children I felt as if he was sending up a prayer of thanks to the Almighty for blessing him with such loving son and daughters. He gave his children everything that a mortal on this earth can possibly give, but nevertheless felt deeply indebted to them for their overwhelming care and affection for their parents. He took nothing for granted. He was a gentleman throughout his life.

Amir Ali Chowdhury will remain my friend forever. I shall follow with the same interest the course of life of his children -- Ruhi, Tighi, Apu, Bithi and Shoily. Our prayers will always be with bhabhi to give her strength to bear this loss. The emptiness of a dear one's death can never be filled, yet life has to go on. When all is quiet, the night appears in all its splendour and the sky is studded with countless stars, I shall keep on looking for a lone star somewhere in the universe. Beyond the Milky Way, in the constellations, someday I shall see it sparkling in all its celestial brilliance. Then I shall connect with him once again.

Abdul Momen Chowdhury is a former Ambassador.

How to survive a family



THE other night I watched a movie where a spy was machine-gunned, thrown out of an aircraft and dropped into a tank of piranhas. I felt sorry for the guy. His life was so dull. No, I mean it. James Bond is completely incapable of forming emotional attachments, which means he cannot

know what real pain is. In contrast, your days and my days contain the biggest challenge that any human being can face. I am referring, of course, to Family Life. Sometimes I have three heart-attacks in a single day because my children take turns getting lost at airports. Sometimes I get locked out of the house all night because Granny forgets who I am and bolts the front door. Sometimes I get no sleep for days because all my dependents (children, granny and hamsters) organise their visits to death's door in consecutive all-night relays. ("Your turn to have a tem-

perature of 103," they whisper to each other as dusk falls.) My mate Suresh Singh of Madhya Pradesh in India has it worse. He was quietly minding his own business when his neighbour Devanki knocked on his door. "I just had this really weird dream that the brains of your mother and father had been transplanted into the bodies of two snakes," Devanki told Suresh. Suresh replied, laughing: "What are you ON?" and told the guy to go detox. No, of course he didn't. This is Asia. Suresh took this nugget of information as indisputable scientific evidence about what had really happened to his parents.

(They'd actually died in an accident several years earlier.) He promptly went out and adopted two snakes. He has since been treating them as a son treats his mother and father, newspapers reported. (I assume this means that he ignores everything they say and only comes home when he has laundry to be done.) Last week a temple ceremony was held starring Suresh and his serpentine mom and dad. Hundreds of people attended. That is so typical of Asia. Humans suffer miserable existences and no one cares if they live or die. But spread the word that they have been reincarnated as

snakes or rats or divine potatoes and everybody wants to know them. Meanwhile in Malaysia, family love is causing funeral goods stores to stock up on flammable dentures. It started when a guy realised that his late grandfather probably wasn't enjoying heaven because he had no teeth. (In fact, the old man had been cremated years ago, so was probably lacking quite a few things, such as skin, flesh, bones, and so on.) The dutiful son made false teeth to burn in a ceremony, which would send them to heaven and started a fashion. (I can imagine the surprise at the angels' internal mail distribution centre: "In-

coming, one set of dentures. Any takers?" ) In the US, people don't pamper dead ancestors, but focus on relationships with live ones. A few days ago, police in Indiana arrested a 19-year-old man for drunken driving. They went to ask his father, the local coroner, to drive the car home. They found the old man drunk behind his steering wheel. Father and son ended up in the same jail. That's family togetherness, Western-style. I think the snake probably had better parenting skills. Visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.