

# Will MPs lead the challenge for change?

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SABER HOSSAIN CHOWDHURY

IF Bangladesh politics is indeed to move away from business as usual mode and usher in and embrace qualitative changes for the better, parliament will need to be the focal point for all debates, discourses and discussions on all matters of national importance.

The extent to which parliament can deliver and be seen to be doing so, will in turn be determined by the commitment of its members -- the MPs -- to the agenda for change, which received a historical and overwhelming mandate in the December 2008 elections. The House has many responsibilities but one specific duty that it performs on behalf of the nation is the duty to speak for, and ask questions on behalf of, the public.

It is the MPs who have to do this job, amongst others, and whilst they rightly enjoy many privileges and sweeping powers, MPs themselves in many parliaments have chosen to regulate their action and conduct by self-imposition of standards of behaviour and codes of ethics expected of them through agreeing to formal codes of conduct or ethics.

Putting in place a general code of conduct to bring about a qualitative change in politics is an electoral pledge of Bangladesh Awami League (as articulated in its manifesto) and a code only for MPs has also been raised as an issue in various seminars and media articles.

If MPs of the Bangladesh parliament are to act as real catalysts of change in the national sphere, I believe they must do so by setting the right examples and demonstrating traits of leadership. Agreeing to and adopting a code of ethics, which would govern and guide their actions and conduct, would be a huge step forward for the institution of parliament as well as

elevating the status and dignity of parliamentarians in Bangladesh.

Whilst mere existence of a parliament does not in itself guarantee practice of democracy, it is equally true that there can be no hope for democracy without parliaments.

MPs -- the life force of parliaments -- are ultimately responsible to their electorate, which is the final arbiter of the conduct of representatives that it elects, and the electorate of course has the right and opportunity to express its views at regular elections.

MPs must, accordingly, acknowledge their responsibility to maintain the public trust and confidence placed in them by performing their duties with honesty and integrity, respecting the law and the institution of parliament and using their best endeavours to advance the common good of the people of Bangladesh.

Recent events in Westminster -- the cradle of parliamentary democracy -- involving MPs from both the Treasury and the Opposition in a catalogue of scandals and financial irregularities is a stark reminder that democracy cannot and should not be taken for granted, and we have to remain ever vigilant and guard against possible abuses.

Per Universal Declaration of Democracy adopted by Geneva based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU): "Public life as a whole must be stamped by a sense of ethics and by transparency, and appropriate norms and procedures must be established to uphold them."

It is in this spirit of accountability and ensuring transparency that I have submitted a Private Member Bill in the parliament to the speaker on code of conduct for MPs.

The purpose of this proposed code is, on the one hand, to assist MPs discharge

their obligations to parliament, their constituents and the public at large by providing guidance on the standards of conduct expected of them in discharging their parliamentary and public duties, and in so doing providing the openness and accountability necessary to reinforce public confidence in the way in which members perform those duties.

By virtue of the oath taken by all members when they are elected to the parliament, they have a duty to uphold strictly and unexceptionally the law of the land and to act on all occasions in accordance with the public trust placed in them.

Members have a general duty to act in the interests of the nation as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents. It is absolutely critical and imperative that they must at all times ensure that they perform their public duty and parliamentary duties in an objective manner and without consideration of personal and financial interest and gain.

The Bill stipulates seven general principles and traits that should guide and govern an MP's conduct (and there is no reason why the same set of principles should not apply to elected public representatives at all tiers of local government):

Selflessness: Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.

Integrity: Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity: In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices solely on merit.

Accountability: Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness: Holders of public office should be as transparent and as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give

reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty: Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership: Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Dealing with conflict of interest situations is a major challenge for public representatives everywhere and, given that in Bangladesh 63% of MPs in the 9th Parliament are businessmen by profession (self included), this is an area where self-regulation by MPs is vital.

The Bill proposed by me has a clear provision of disclosure and defines conflict of interest situations and what is expected of MPs in such instances, as follows:

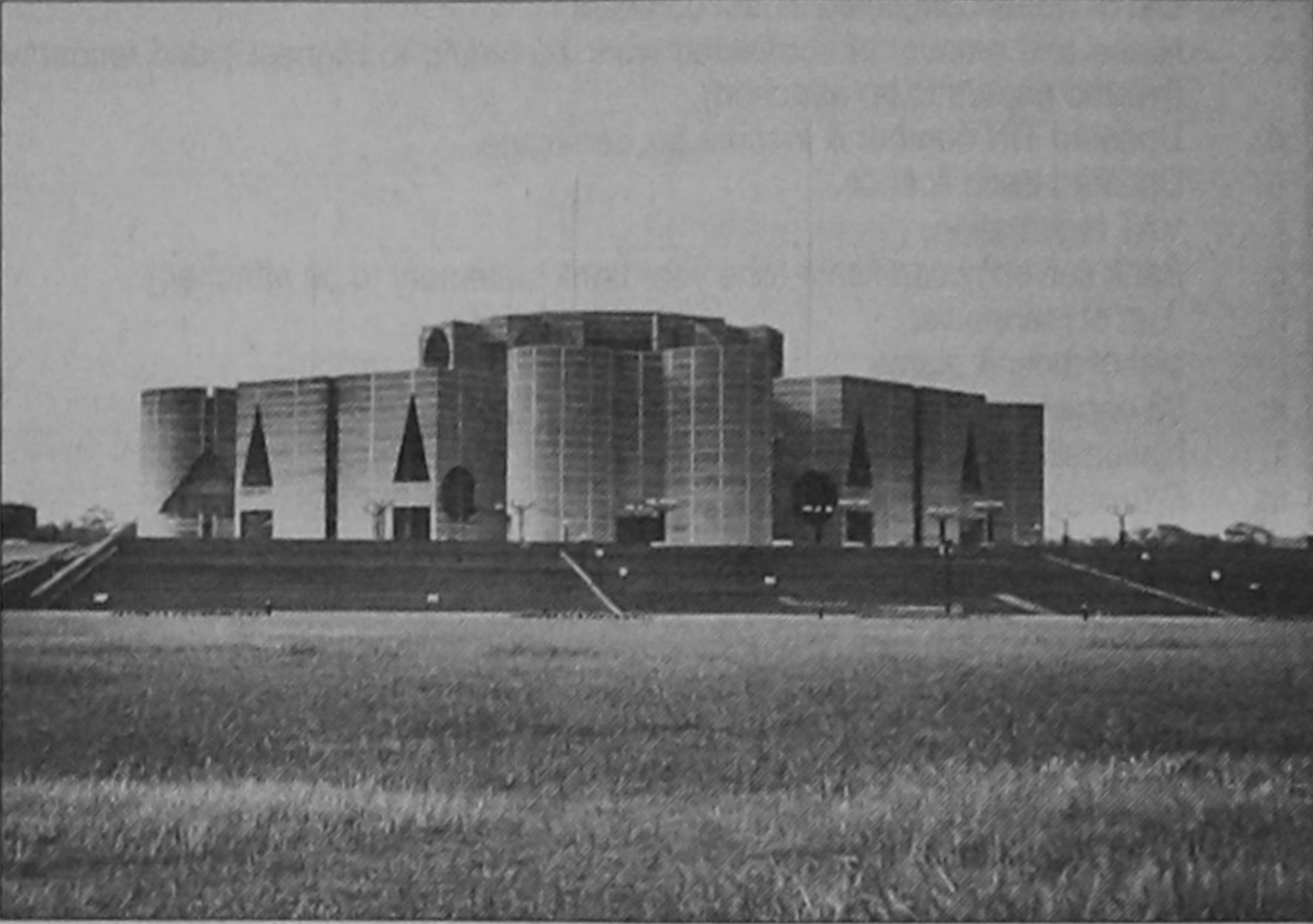
A conflict of interest exists where a member participates in or makes a decision in the execution of his/her office, knowing that it will improperly and dishonestly promote the member's private interest or another person's private interest directly or indirectly.

A conflict of interest also exists where the members execute, or fail to execute, any function or duty, knowing that it will improperly and dishonestly benefit their or another person's private interests directly or indirectly.

Members are individually responsible for preventing conflicts of interests and must carry out their official functions and duties and arrange their private affairs and lives accordingly to prevent such conflicts of interest arising.

MPs must take all reasonable steps to declare any conflict of interest between their private financial interests and decisions in which they participate in the execution of their office. This may be done through declaring their position when speaking on the matter in the parliament or a committee, or in any other public place, in an appropriate manner.

The proposed legislation emphasises proper conduct and relation with regard to dealing and interacting with ministers and public bodies, and also covers bribery, gifts, use of public resources, confidential information and the conduct



The conduct of MPs must be impeccable.

expected of MPs thereof.

On the matter of "freedom of speech" within the parliament, the Bill states that the members must be mindful of privileges conferred when speaking in Parliament and should consciously avoid causing harm to any individual who does not enjoy same privileges.

The Bill requires that members should not knowingly mislead the parliament or the public in statements they make, and imposes an obligation upon them to correct Parliamentary records as soon as possible when incorrect statements are made unintentionally.

The Bill seeks to promote a healthy working environment in the parliament and requires that members must apply high standards of behaviour and consciously avoid personal abuse and denigration of Parliamentary colleagues.

In the event MPs fail to measure up to the standards of ethics and conduct as expressed in the code and are in breach of any provision thereof, the Bill provides for a mechanism to respond to such situations through the formation of a parliamentary ethics committee that will be headed by the speaker and comprise of nine members drawn from the treasury and opposition benches on a proportionate basis to their strength in the House.

Anyone can file a written complaint to

this committee against the conduct of an MP, and the ethics committee can also take into cognisance reports of allegations against him/her as published in the print and electronic media. The MP against whom allegations are made will be duty bound to cooperate fully with any enquiry the committee may undertake.

The Bill also requires that the ethics committee submits an annual report to the House.

Now that Bangladesh has a Right to Information law, it will hopefully facilitate greater transparency, and this should extend to the realm and domain of MPs and their public duties.

Change must be championed and owned by the very top, and passing of this Bill and having in place a legislation that regulates the conduct of MPs would be a very powerful testament to the commitment and sincerity of the MPs themselves in owning and leading the agenda, challenge and quest for change.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh's history is one of missed opportunities and, as far as opportunities come, the present is as good as any we have ever had. Rather than just hoping, I would like to believe we will, in fact, make the most of this opportunity.

The time to, and for, change is therefore now.

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## It shows Burma holds the cards

Senior General Than Shwe's gesture in commuting her sentence to 18 months under house arrest, and relaxing the terms of her arrest, could be seen as a concession to blunt international outrage and potential domestic anger.

NIRMAL GHOSH

THE sentencing on Tuesday of Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), will essentially keep her out of the public eye and away from any role in elections slated for next year.

The verdict was not a surprise. Writing on Monday in the Chiang Mai-based journal Irrawaddy, Burmese journalist in exile Min Zin, who teaches at the University of California in Berkeley, said: "Without any balance of power in the state institutions, putting faith in the rule of law and expecting justice are at best illusory."

The regime's larger purpose has been achieved, said analysts, and it is to continue to marginalise Suu Kyi, ruling her out of influencing the elections, which are aimed at legitimising the army's grip on the country.

Senior General Than Shwe's gesture in commuting her sentence to 18 months under house arrest, and relaxing the terms of her arrest, could be seen as a concession to blunt international outrage and potential domestic anger.

In the final analysis, it remained just a gesture. But tightening sanctions in response to the verdict is unlikely to achieve more than it has over recent years -- which is now widely acknowledged to be little or nothing.

Domestic anger is undeniable, but it is tempered with a sense of hopelessness. Dissidents who are not in prison know that taking to the streets will only invite a crackdown. Their only option may be to wait for slim windows of opportunity that can be exploited to create more democratic space.

Keeping Suu Kyi out of the picture will also challenge the NLD to find alternatives and rejuvenate its leadership. Some



The verdict: The height of outrage.

analysts see the possibility of a break-up of the NLD, with some factions participating in elections and others staying out.

The regime's senior leadership views events through the lens of national security. Born out of decades of conflict and

war, it sees itself as fulfilling a greater mission of preventing the country from disintegrating.

The Tatmadaw -- the army -- is now the only effective institution left in the country, and in effect is the state itself. Steps

towards "discipline-flourishing democracy" have been carefully calibrated, with the army convinced of its role at the centre of gravity.

In recent years, Gen. Than Shwe, trained in psychological warfare and hardened on the battlefield, has consolidated the regime's position.

Soon after Tuesday's verdict, Jared Genser, president of the Washington-based Freedom Now, which campaigns for the release of political prisoners, said in a statement that the outcome of the trial had never been in doubt.

The real question is whether the international community will do more than simply condemn this latest injustice?

So far, the international reaction has been shrill, with calls mounting for the United Nations to impose an arms embargo on the regime. Sanctions will be tightened by many countries. But India, China and Thailand will continue to engage the regime for economic and strategic purposes.

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's veiled overture to the generals at the Asean Regional Forum in Phuket last month, promising more US engagement and investment if the generals released Suu Kyi and improved their human rights record, may not progress.

But Washington has the choice of acknowledging realities inside Burma and viewing the gesture of returning Suu Kyi to house arrest, and relaxing house arrest rules rather than imprisoning her in Insein, as small but nevertheless of some significance.

Democrat Senator Jim Webb is due to visit Burma soon, in the first high-level visit by a US figure in 10 years -- so, to some degree, the door to a more constructive relationship remains open.

As long as Suu Kyi remains an iconic figure in Burma and across the world, the focus on her keeps Burma and its regime in the news and on the table at the UN. But it also creates a logjam centred on two bitterly opposed people -- Suu Kyi herself, and the senior general.

For its part, Asean has said that explaining Burma, an Asean member, to the rest of the world is a "burden" on the group -- and that elections in Burma need to be fair and transparent to have any degree of credibility. Allowing Suu Kyi to participate would be an intrinsic part of that fairness.

However, for now, the senior general holds all the cards.

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## God bless this gadget

Ever since Galileo, the relationship between technology and organised religion has been uneasy. Religious organisations are embracing cutting-edge communications technologies, hoping to stay on the right side of the next technology revolution.

EUGENY MOROZOV

IF you had to choose one weapon for fighting the next religious war, you could do worse than to pick an iPhone. In recent months, the foot soldiers of religion have come out with a bevy of new programs designed to win converts and make religious practices more accessible.

For those of the Jewish faith, iBlessing helps in figuring out which blessings go with which food. ParveOMetre keeps track of the waiting times between eating meat and dairy, and Siddur gives prayer times based on one's GPS coordinates.

Devout Roman Catholics will appreciate

iBreviary, which pulls up and displays complete missal and principal prayers in Spanish, French, English, Latin, and Italian.

Ever since Galileo, the relationship between technology and organised religion has been uneasy. The printing press helped spread the Gospel and win new adherents to Christianity, but it also greatly undermined the Catholic Church's information monopoly.

To avoid repeating this mistake, religious organisations are embracing cutting-edge communications technologies, hoping to stay on the right side of the next technology revolution.

Less than a year ago, the Vatican

deplored "the age of the Internet and the mobile," in which, according to Cardinal Lombardi, the pope's spokesman, it's "more difficult than before to protect silence and to nourish the interior dimension of life."

Since then, the pope has changed his tune. "Young people [...] have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication, and understanding between individuals and communities, and they are turning to them as means of [...] forming networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions," he said in May.

Thank the Vatican's younger cohort for this turnaround. Paolo Padriani, a 36-year-old Italian pastor and a Vatican insider with a knack for technology, is the developer of iBreviary, the first iPhone application officially approved by the Vatican. Padriani launched the ambitious Pope2You site, which aggregates the Vatican's presence on various social networks.

It boasts cutting-edge social-media

components, including an iPhone application that keeps its users updated with the pope's recent speeches and activities and a YouTube channel that features papal video addresses. A site called Wikicath delivers the pope's messages "in a new way, interactive and hypertext, through a platform built in the Wiki style."

Not to be outdone, followers of Islam have begun battling over religion online almost as vehemently as they used to clash in the streets of Baghdad. Even mobile-phone ringtones are emerging as important affirmations of religious identity. So many people have been downloading verses from the Qur'an that a Muslim organisation in India saw fit to issue a fatwa declaring it a sin to interrupt the tone before it has finished the verse.

As the Vatican has discovered with its Wikicath site, posting boring texts online doesn't guarantee thousands of followers. Lately the site seems to elicit little comment. If Vatican officials continue to haunt



The world in one's hand.

Facebook and Twitter, though, they are bound eventually to absorb the new-media culture. Whether the young crowd will have

moved on by then is another story.

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