

Gains and pains of AL's first year in office

I have mixed feelings about evaluating the AL government's performance in the first year. Of course, there are some areas of concern where they did not perform well; however, their overall performance is not bad. There are some signs of confidence in the economy as well since foreign remittance has exceeded its all-time record.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

DECEMBER 29, 2008, was a historic day in the context of existence of democracy in Bangladesh since the election that was held on that day was considered as free, fair, and credible at home and abroad. The call for "change" and "establishment of digital Bangladesh" were the two most important commitments that influenced the voters to cast their vote in favour of the grand alliance led by Awami League.

It is too early to evaluate the performance of the government, however, as the proverb says "morning shows the day." When AL led government took over power, the people of Bangladesh heaved a sigh of relief since they had spent a very tough time under the rule of the BNP-led four-party alliance government and the so-called army-backed caretaker government. Thus, people's expectation from the newly elected government was immense.

After taking over responsibility, the AL government took strong action to control the price hike of essential commodities and, to some extent, achieved some degree

of success. The government deserves special appreciation for the leadership of prime minister in handling the BDR mutiny. Any imprudent step could have had a devastating effect on the whole country. There is no denying the fact that the BDR mutiny was one of the cruelest and most heinous killings in independent Bangladesh. Thanks to the PM for her leadership, which did not allow expansion of that confrontation outside Dhaka.

Internationally, the AL government has improved the image of Bangladesh in its first year in office. The PM advocated the issue of climate change throughout the world with a strong message, which has led developed states to recognise the need for allocating funds for countries most affected by climate change and global warming.

Another issue that deserves special mention is the initiative of the AL government to file complaints in the international court as regards fixation of the maritime boundaries. The people employed by the government to handle the issue in the international court have wide experiences in their respective fields.

The government has provided almost Tk.1,500 crore as subsidy for the seeds and fertilisers. This initiative has certainly reduced the sufferings of the peasant communities. As regards establishment of digital Bangladesh, the AL government has taken some noteworthy initiatives. Along with emphasis on the application of e-governance and distribution of computers and internet connection throughout the country, the government, for the first time, has circulated all information about the pay scale in the web, which has allowed the employees to calculate their scales by themselves. This initiative is also related to the transparency of the government activities.

In addition to these initiatives, the PM deserves special thanks for her declaration on January 5 about posting copies of all the books of the primary level in the web. This initiative will reduce botheration of the guardians, and will also be cost effective.

As regards failures, there are some sectors where the government has not been able to prove its efficiency. Among several issues, the issue of mass promotion in the administration cadre has caused confusion among ordinary citizens. Of course, there is a counter argument that the previous government had deprived a large number of qualified officials from getting promotion. The government could have handled the issue with more attention so as to avoid confusion.

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conflict in order to extend its power base in all most all the educational institutions in the country, which has resulted in closure of many higher institutions. Moreover, they remained engaged in tender related violence, not only in the educational institutions but also in the development sector. Apart from Chattr League, the activities of some AL leaders are controversial in some respects. At the local level, there has been a lot of manipulation in the selection of people to be brought under the social safety nets, which include VGD cards, old age benefit, etc.

Another issue that is important is that the government has failed to ensure representation of the opposition in the Parliament. Of course, it would be unjustified to condemn the ruling party alone in this regard since the BNP did not have any strong ground to boycott the Parliament. But, the debate on the issue of an extra seat in the front row would not have continued till today if the government had allowed them to have that seat. The boycotting of the Parliament by the opposition was started on that issue but, at present, the number of demands has risen to 10. Since the number of the opposition members is too meagre in the Parliament, the ruling party should have made that gesture to keep the opposition in the parliament. The presence of the opposition would have certainly increased the credibility of the government.

Another issue that is considered as a failure of the government is their inability to commence the procedure of the trial of the war criminals in their first year in office.



A mixed bag of achievements

The government should consider the fact that the trail of war criminals is the demand of the people, particularly young voters who constituted almost 30% of the total votes. Moreover, the law and situation has not improved.

Finally, I have mixed feelings about evaluating the AL government's performance in the first year. Of course, there are some areas of concern where they did not perform well; however, their overall performance is not bad. There are some signs of confidence in the economy as well since

foreign remittance has exceeded its all-time record. Moreover, the share market has remained stable for the last one year. These are the indication of the fact that the government has been able to win the confidence of the investors.

There are four more years to go. Let's see how the government performs in days ahead.

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2009: An eventful year in South Asia

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AS the world has just stepped into the new year, one can look back with a great degree of satisfaction at 2009, which was an eventful year -- particularly for South Asia. The year was full of many remarkable developments that made the region an interesting area in the international scenario.

What significantly characterised this period for South Asia was the advancement of democracy -- a feat admired all over the world. In many ways, 2009 can be seen as a crucially important period, when democratic aspirations of the nearly 1.5 billion people living in this region of Asia found greater expression of the representative system of rule, even though good governance remains a big question in some of the countries.

The biggest nation in the region and the world's largest democracy, India, witnessed national elections in April/May of 2009, which saw the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) returning to power with a bigger majority, making the government more stable. The immediate past government was, of course, of the same alliance, but it was handicapped by the spectre of instability as it had to rely on outside support for its existence. At one stage, the outside support of the leftists was withdrawn and the Manmohan Singh government narrowly survived.

At the heart of the differences was the much-talked about Indo-American civilian nuclear cooperation agreement that the Left vehemently opposed. Now the same government of Manmohan Singh will no longer be on slippery ground as it will be able to spread its wings freely without depending on allies in the manner it did earlier. In any case, the elections of the world's biggest democracy is in itself a major event, and the Indian polls were the cyno-

sure of many eyes for obvious reasons -- including the curiosity as to who would eventually win. In stark contrast in size and population, the tiny Indian ocean island state Maldives saw the first democratically elected president in its history when young Mohammad Nasheed beat the long-time ruler Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in a poll that had evoked much interest in and outside that country because of the basic character of the political landscape. It was the first election in the multi-party ambience, replacing the previous one-party rule, and the development was certainly viewed as a step towards flourishing of democratic values in South Asia.

Nepal, the Himalayan nation, has been convulsed by political tensions, but what is remarkable is that changes are taking place in a democratic way although the country is struggling for a constitution, which the present constituent assembly must enact within a particular timeframe. The Maoist government that had come to power through a credible election had to quit as Prime Minister Puspa Kamal Dayal, popularly known as "Prachanda," was at loggerheads with President Rama Baran Yadav over the sacking of the army chief. Finally, the former had to resign, deepening the political crisis. The present scene is not very encouraging as the crisis continues to

persist. The silver lining, however, is that all are seeking solutions to the problems through democratic means and, hopefully, this will remain the mechanism in politics regardless of the severity of the crisis.

The island state of Sri Lanka achieved something extraordinary in 2009 when the government crushed the long-running Tamil insurgency that had remained for nearly three decades as a big challenge for the Colombo authorities. President Mahinda Rajapakse can bask in the glory of this victory, but he faces stiff competition in the January 26 presidential polls from a person who can also equally, if not more, claim such success as he was the commander in the battlefield. The former army chief Gen. (ret'd) Sarath Fonseka is the challenger, and the royal battle will be between the political and military strategists of the war that finally went the government's way. However, the plight of the Tamil civilians and the excesses committed by the Sri Lankan forces during the last phase of the war are haunting both the main candidates during the electioneering.

War-torn Afghanistan held an important presidential election a few months ago amidst allegations of massive rigging and malpractices against the incumbent president Hamid Karzai. His main rival, former foreign minister Abdullah

Abdullah, made the voting interesting because he posed a stiff challenge, but withdrew from the race when the first round of polling failed to bring a decisive winner -- necessitating a run-off election. In this situation, Karzai became the president for one more term, but the fairness of the election and its legitimacy remain somewhat questionable. Nonetheless, the country has initiated democratic practice, and this is something that deserves unqualified praise.

Pakistan was unstable, despite having an elected civilian government, mainly because of the dynamics of regional and international political exigencies coupled with several extraneous issues. The Islamabad government swung into tough action against the religious extremists who had even dared to question the authority of the government in some parts of the country bordering Afghanistan. The last days of 2009 witnessed political bickering stemming from a momentous Supreme Court verdict that invalidated the National Reconciliation Order (NRO), which had given reprieve to many politicians, including president Asif Ali Zardari, from corruption charges. This sparked off speculations of a possibility of army takeover, which was immediately scotched by both the government and the army. Whatever happens in that country should

follow the constitutional process, failing which Pakistan will only be guilty of subverting the democratic procedure. The small Himalayan country of Bhutan is still under effective monarchy, but what is noteworthy is that the king himself is keen to involve people in governance and parliamentary elections have taken place in that country. Last but not the least, a new Bangladesh government took over at the beginning of the 2009 -- on January 6 -- with a massive mandate. The government has just completed one year after a phase of rule by an un-elected caretaker government. The new government has a mix bag of successes and failures, but the achievements appear far greater despite failure in some sectors. In the foreign policy area, after an initial phase of some indecisiveness, the government has moved carefully and adroitly, demonstrating maturity by seeking to integrate the country with the larger world of all shades of opinion.

By all accounts, 2009 had been a remarkable and eventful year for South Asia, and the impact of the preceding year will be discernible in the new year in many ways. Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.

The Green Movement of Iran

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MAHMOOD HASAN

THE controversial presidential election of Iran in June 2009 provoked what is now known as the "Green Movement." The disputed election produced a second term for Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. As the controversy raged, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decreed that the election result was valid. Ahmedinejad was thus sworn-in in August. However, the election split the Iranian polity deeply.

The three defeated candidates -- Mir Hossein Mousavi a former prime minister, former speaker and an influential cleric Mehdi Karroubi, and former president Mohammad Khatami, nicknamed as the "troika" -- have emerged as staunch detractors of President Admedinejad. Immediately after the election Mousavi said that the election was rigged and rejected the results, demanding a fresh election. Millions of people staged violent street protests, which continued for several days. The protestors used green coloured banners and flags, demanding Ahmedinejad's resignation and introduction of reforms. Mousavi used the green colour for his campaign. Thus the "Green Movement" was born.

have continued intermittently in Tehran. The Movement has been demanding massive reforms and removal of Ahmedinejad. The president has so far succeeded in quelling the protests in Tehran, but it has now spread to other major cities of Iran. So far, according to unofficial estimates, nearly 100 protestors have died in clashes with the pro-government militias known as the Basej. Thousands have been arrested. For the protestors in Tehran facing police brutality and intimidation has become the norm. Anti-government newspapers have been banned and websites blocked.

The "troika" has not been directly involved in instigating the street protests. Instead they have used the officially sanctioned religious and political calendar -- when public demonstrations are allowed -- to turn them into opposition showdowns.

On Al Quds Day (September 18), young demonstrators clashed with government forces. During the protest march former supporters tried to attack former president Mohammad Khatami. On the 30th anniversary (November 4) of the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran, thousands of protestors poured on to the streets of Tehran wearing green wristbands, ribbons and scarves and fought battles with troops.



Under siege.

On December 7, National Students Day, university students and non-students carrying green flags descended on to the streets of Tehran and chanted anti-Ahmedinejad and anti-Ayatollah Ali Khamenei slogans. They also defiled and burned portraits of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The latest violence took place on December 27, 2009, on Ashura, when eight protestors -- including Seyed Ali Mousavi, nephew of Mir Hossein Mousavi -- were killed in clashes with the feared Basej. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested.

In a desperate bid, Ahmedinejad supporters also organised a big rally in Tehran on December 30, chanting "death to opponents." But the show of strength did not succeed in scaring the Green activists.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the clerics have ruled Iran with a firm hand. It is interesting to note that there is now an ever-widening rift among the top clerics of Iran. The aristocratic group of clerics seems to have split into two distinct groups -- "conservatives" and "liberals." The "troika," however, proclaim their allegiance to the "guardianship of the Jurist" and consider themselves as "loyal opposition."

The supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds massive administrative powers and religious sway over Shia Iran, has so far supported conservative Ahmedinejad. Khamenei appoints the commanders of the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards, who are still loyal to him. As president, Ahmedinejad derives

his legitimacy from the powerful Guardian Council and administrative authority from the omnipresent Revolutionary Guards.

The reasons for the discontent and anger among Iranians can be found surrounding two issues -- lack of human rights and freedom, and alleged deviation from Islamic values and principles. While the people in general crave for basic freedom a group of senior clergy have accused Ahmedinejad's regime of grossly violating the principles of the Republic on which the Islamic Revolution stands.

Grand Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montazeri, one of the most respected liberal clergy of Iran, has condemned Ahmedinejad's regime and warned that unless his government was "in step with the people" and told them about their rights, the religious authorities would "become weaker and shakier." Ayatollah Montazeri (87) died on December 19, which is seen as a great loss to the Green Movement. At his funeral there were violent clashes between the green activists and the security forces.

Internally, the Green Movement has put Ahmedinejad's regime under serious strain. On the external front, Ahmedinejad is staring in the face of tough US-led economic sanctions over Iran's nuclear program. For the West the current instability in Iran is a welcome development as the Movement is weakening the government. The West, however, is in a dilemma about whether to fully support the Green Movement or to deal with the recalcitrant Ahmedinejad. Supporting the Greens may backfire, as they too want to develop nuclear fuel.

On the nuclear issue, the opposition supports the government's policy. They are, however, wary of the sanctions. The

Movement has been in contact with the Obama administration through private and public channels. It favours calibrated sanctions against members of the regime and not economic sanctions that affect the people. Ahmedinejad has been accusing the US and UK of interference and encouraging the Greens.

The Green Movement seems to have gathered steam after the confrontation on Ashura. The demand for reforms has surpassed the demand for Ahmedinejad's ouster, and has gathered strength. Arresting the "troika" will push the Movement in only one direction -- ouster of Ahmedinejad.

On 1 January, Mousavi gave five proposals for ending the current unrest. These include accountability of the administration, transparent election laws, release of all political prisoners, freedom of press and recognition of people's rights. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his protégé Ahmedinejad will have to accommodate the demands of the protestors if the current regime has to survive. If the Movement continues and hardens Khamenei may have to abandon Ahmedinejad for the sake of the Islamic Revolution.

The exasperated Iranians want freedom. Over the past three decades the Ayatollahs, instead of relaxing their grip, have systematically gnawed at the freedom of people. People in all ages have fought for freedom and liberty. Iranians are no different. It is probably time for Iranians to break the shackles and usher in reforms for freedom.

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