

The next few months are crucial



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ZIAUDDIN TARIQ ALI

AS the sun was setting on Pahela Boishakh, I was talking to an SB official who was deployed onto the street for the first time in his police career of 17 years, such was the thoroughness of the security screen that was employed that day. He expressed satisfaction that all had gone well despite the red alert that there would be violent disruptions of peace on a scale not witnessed before, and that the police security-net had been successful. He quickly added: "But for how long?"

We have a lot to thank all the agencies for, despite the corruption that riddles their rank and file. The war criminals do not want a trial, which would certainly leave some of them dangling with a noose tight around their necks.

The government has done well on food production and distribution and, despite the flak that the home minister draws for her simpleton remarks in the media, even the law and order situation has so far been good. But we know that it will take only one terrorist attack to put the country into a tail-spin. The real Achilles heels are as follows.

The opposition is playing up the energy situation and rightly so, for it is the opposition's job to keep the government on its toes. The decision to circumvent the normal procedures on solving the energy crisis has been the kind of initiative that the people have been waiting for. But let us also take measures, however draconian, to purge the genies that lurk in the bureaucracy to trap these decisions in the bureaucratic tangle.

There is talk about raising gas prices at the pumps, which is welcome. This will make more gas available to the housewife and put money in the government coffers

for expanding the public employment program, which has sadly lost steam in the bureaucratic web.

The city water supply is a crisis that will shortly be forgotten by the media for another year. But water conservation should be started in earnest as we are depleting the water table so quickly that we may have a disaster one of these days. Besides, the longer we delay using river water, both for drinking and for large scale irrigation, the weaker will our claim be in water sharing talks with India.

Electricity is a different matter altogether and the crisis has come to a state where it needs to be handled by political decisions, which may not necessarily be financially sound ones. Despite the hue and cry of the demonstrators, open-pit mining is the way to go for us to extract coal and put up power plants. But the construction of coal-fired and nuclear-powered plants have to be actually started within the next 7 or 8 months so that by 2014 these plants, producing about 5,000 MW, are fairly close to completion.

The government must also take care not to talk about solving the electricity crisis "within so many years," as it is doing now. The more energy one produces, the more the demand goes up. Besides, our electricity distribution system is hopelessly inadequate now and new distribution systems need to be created. Let us reintroduce various slabs of domestic electric tariffs to ensure that those who use more electricity pay three times more per unit.

The other embarrassment that this government has to swallow is its student and youth wings. I think that these people have made enough money by now through admissions business and tender-baaji. If the government takes a unilateral

decision to curb its own cadres, the ripple effect may carry to the opposition camp too.

Then there is corruption. I hope the readers will not pelt me with stones if I venture to say that the only way we can handle that is by looking the other way to the minor corruption that the common man encounters every day. Some strict measures have to be taken for curbing large scale corruption -- and that can come only at the expense of the government letting-go of some of its useless controls (as if, these controls have ever been useful) -- and letting the market forces determine how much corruption the people will tolerate.

India is progressing so well, even with the street level corruption that is rampant there, because there are some incorruptible people up there, like our finance and agricultural ministers are, and more importantly, they have had 10 years of stability.

With the latest S and P ratings, and a robust foreign exchange situation, we are actually looking at massive investment and a growth of 7 percent if only we can maintain the stability of the country. The government should also take note that the only growth in the country has been in the real estate business, and that the new owners overwhelmingly belong to a certain organised force. The government should take steps to bring these forces to some semblance of accountability. With stability, foreign investments will take place in other sectors and thus create more employment.

But all that has been written above will be redundant if the political parties do not come to a consensus regarding 3 or 4 broad principles governing their conduct, which they will not waver from, whoever wins the next elections. For me, I will still place my bets on the government, unless they forget in the next 3 months the mandate and the trust they were given 15 months ago. Yes, the time we have is actually that little.

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Positive politics

We must unrelentingly resolve to impress upon our leadership to practice patience and tolerance, prime movers of positive politics, which, when fashioned with flexible frame of mind, will reward the nation with a democracy that listens to "vox populi."

Z.A. KHAN

MANy elderly citizens in Bangladesh lament that they are unlikely to see "politics for prosperity of the country" during their lifetime. Indeed, most of us feel that we are still experimenting with the format of politics that suits the nation. The liberation war veterans are dying with dreams unfulfilled and a new era is yet to begin.

In the interregnum, a variety of morbid symptoms is appearing that do not promise to accommodate the challenging dynamics of change and the unheeded sensitivities that may trigger an all devouring violence. Can we preside over the continuance of this situation? Can we find ways to midwife rebirth of the commitment that inspired us to fight for our independence regardless of political difference?

The bumpy road of politics that we have travelled so far has failed to take us to the destination. The nation inherited a war ravaged economy and fractured political institutions due to mismanagement and manipulations of some of the then political bigwigs, who did not pursue the cause of independence in spite of the people's wishes. Behind this situation, there was personal greed, ethical misunderstanding and political jealousy. What we lacked in our pursuit of democracy and development was unity in diversity in the political dispensation.

We have seen that the major political parties opposed each other even on vital national issues. This notion has become more prevalent in the recent years, and the leaders are ambivalent about the consequences of the negative approach. Right now our nation is in quest of a model of political initiative best suited for us, backed by accentuated necessity for accommodation. It is time that the political leadership abandon their attitude of opposing everything that the opposite number proposes.

One does understand that the suspicion that has accumulated over the years cannot be supplanted by hastily taken initiatives to enable good politics to return to centre stage. Our people today are preparing themselves to challenge the character of our politicians, because they are doubtful of the probity of those in the proximity of power. This is a situation that is fraught with the potential danger of a wedge being driven between the opposing political leadership, which may block intercommunication.

Experience shows that our people have a talent for the unexpected, and may force a rapprochement on the leadership to weave an alliance based on necessity and shared values. An array of reckless disputations has immersed our nation in the current political imbroglio. The leaders of the major parties go haywire when voted to power, and take decisions on national issues without discussion with the opposition as they have the carapace of power around them to make them impregnable against violent public outbursts.

It is not difficult to fathom that the current conflict between the political parties is tinged with mutual personal contempt. This has prompted the top

leaders to espouse "yesmanship," even by cajoling, when so needed to consolidate their hold on national politics. In this process, the masses have been alienated and political institutions have been desecrated to the extent that they have become private organisations run on individual whims, thus the leaders hardly felt obliged to be transparent and accountable. Instances of amendment of party constitutions summarily to suit the leader's design are replete.

The party conventions of the major political parties have legitimised the top leaders' absolute authority to act at will, forgetting the adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely. This has not only weakened the functionality of democratic institutions but has also made statecraft critically vulnerable to the power-game and to the use of power for long.

The nation has waited for long to see that politics improves to consolidate good governance. There had been a brief tremor in the recent past to tell us about the true status of our democracy and the dwindling edifice of the leadership. Although the brief intervention failed utterly to focus on a minimum program to "right the wrong," it has at least made us aware of our lacking.

The need of the hour is to tide over the self-created barriers to liberate democracy, which is like a riddle wrapped enigma. In our brief national history we have witnessed the rise and violent fall of political leadership for pursuing absolute power both in the dispensation of state responsibilities and within the party.

This process has catapulted a few less known leaders to prominence, who become sycophants to consolidate their hold on the new found political influence by doing anything to convince their top leaders that there is none in the party or in

the country more capable than the leader to run the party or to govern the country. They used ruses and deceit to convince their leaders that "they (leaders), being superior, must always be the holders of powers."

Thus, the foundations of democracy, which are freedom of choice and justice could not endure the test of time in Bangladesh. Flagrant violation of patience and tolerance, the two pillars of sustainable democracy, became rampant. The top leaders have made themselves incommunicado to each other, and the party divide has become wider.

Even the mandarins of the parties have become resigned to the currency of the time, which is sycophancy, and indulge in all kinds of activities that gladden their leaders. Jealousy tiptoed into the attitude of the top leaders about their opposite numbers who, taking leave of their senses, started castigating the opponent as inefficient, anti-people and unpopular. So both the parties oppose every decision made by the other, and lead the way to confrontational politics.

The gnawing dilemma prevailing now is that while some are keen to take a privileged look into the future, others are battling to survive because of the sheer inertia of the system that they have craftily mapped. This has forced backtracking of the reform effort, which could have despatched confrontational politics to its murky backyard to rot unnoticed.

Many people committed to championing the cause of the deprived and underprivileged are making a voluntary exit, appreciating that no measure of reform is possible in the current political environment. It is time to stop pursuing the blame game without suggesting antidotes.

We should not forget that blaming each other will carry diminishing returns. We must unrelentingly resolve to impress upon our leadership to practice patience and tolerance, prime movers of positive politics, which, when fashioned with flexible frame of mind, will reward the nation with a democracy that listens to "vox populi."

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Politics is a game of patience.

Lift etiquette 2: Survey results



LAST week we asked readers to share their ideas about behaviour in elevators and it's time to reveal the results.

Lift etiquette (Exterior)

- 1) On arrival, press both the up and down buttons to tell it to come down and get you because you want to go up, or vice versa.
- 2) Repeat the above process continuously because this will make it come faster.
- 3) Remember that each extra person who arrives in the foyer needs to

do both these actions or they are not entitled to use the lift when it comes.

Lift etiquette (Interior)

- 1) When it arrives, stand in the doorway so that there's no chance you will miss getting in. The people inside can squeeze past you, you're not that fat.
- 2) If possible, have a large ankle-jabbing trolley with you, so that you can fill the entire space and no one else can get in.
- 3) Once inside, press the button of the floor you want to go to, and then use your body to cover the panel.
- 4) Lifts give you a two-minute pause from the rat race, so it's a good location to ease your flatulence problem and enjoy a good belch.
- The rules above are scrupulously followed in most cities in Asia, for sure.
- But your humble narrator, who spends most of his working life in and

out of elevators, favours a more creative mode of behaviour.

How to liven up your lift-life

- 1) As each person enters the lift say, "Hi, welcome, glad to have you aboard," and shake his or her hand.
- 2) Hold the door open at ground level longer than necessary. When the other passengers glare at you, tell them that the lift is refuelling.
- 3) Then speak into the panel microphone. "This is Alpha Bravo Elevator one to Control. Ready for departure. Over."
- 4) When it starts to move upwards, say: "Please turn off your mobile phones and laptops as they may interfere with the elevator navigation system."
- 5) When someone presses a floor number, give them a strange look and say, "So. You're the one."
- 6) If people are looking grim, suggest a group hug.

- 7) If someone tries to get in wearing a t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, stop him, saying: "I'm sorry, you need a jacket and tie." This creates a more dramatic impression if you are wearing only your Speedos.
- 8) Carry a razor, towel and cup of soapy water, so you can use the wall mirror to shave.
- 9) Halfway up, ask other passengers if they want chicken or fish during the lunch service.
- 10) Tell people they have entered "the karaoke lift" and sing along to the muzak at the top of your voice.
- 11) Whenever a guy in a dark suit gets on board, sing the James Bond theme.
- 12) When any male and female enter, especially if they don't know each other, sing the wedding march.
- 13) When someone leaves the elevator, say, "Goodbye, darling. I'll never forget you."