

# On political party reform



Any sort of party reform should follow the bottom-up approach. Party members at the grassroots level should decide what reforms they want to see in their respective parties, and only then can a sustainable change be achieved.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

REFORM, especially political party reform, was a buzzword that baffled our country's people during the previous caretaker regime. Some of that government's advisers, along with some members of different political parties and civil society, emphasised the urgency of political party reform. Ironically, that advocacy distorted the very connotation of the term "reform."

To them, reform signified dislodging Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia from their respective parties' apex positions. For this, in following Pakistan's General Musharraf's steps, they tried to implement the so-called "minus-two" theory but failed as the country's democracy-loving people strongly con-

demned the Fakhruddin's government's stance.

However, the public still wants to see a qualitative change in the political parties. No doubt, our political domain is now moth-eaten. Ideological bankruptcy, devoid of the internal practice of democracy, non-tolerance, dominance of muscle power and above all political criminalisation are the essence of the present-day Bangladeshi politics. To get rid of these, political parties must be reformed. For this, some strategies are outlined as follows:

- Political parties must ensure the internal practice of democracy. For this, they should arrange regular councils at the grassroots level, following the provisions of their respective party constitutions.

The selection of top leaders, including the party chief and different committee members, should be made in a democratic manner. Moreover, the party constitution should include a provision for accountability of the party leaders to its members, if there is none in the existing constitution. The Election Commission (EC) should devise a strategy to monitor whether a party is practising democratic norms in this regard.

Following the EC's instructions after the last general election, major political parties arranged their councils, but apparently those were mere eyewash since their councillors did not get the opportunity to elect their parties' executive members in the real sense.

- Political parties must not give party membership to identified criminals or convicted persons (at least for a certain period after their punishment) with a view to decriminalising the country's political arena.
- Representation from society's different segments should be ensured in party forums at different stages. Proportionate inclusion of women should be especially

considered.

- A party must have some vision and a mission, and must work for the society in line with these.
- The nominations for national elections should be given very carefully. Honest, dedicated, knowledgeable persons of integrity should be selected as national and local election candidates. In the nomination process, the party can follow a democratic approach for a better outcome. This, eventually, will stop the "nomination trade" that we observed during some past elections.
- A party's financial transaction must be transparent. For this, party funds and transactions must be regularly audited and revealed to party members. The EC should take initiative in this regard to minimise the country's corruption level. It is quite unfortunate that though the EC has formulated a law in this connection and urged the major political parties to submit audit reports on their financial transactions, they have not yet responded positively.
- Political parties should always be dynamic and pro-people. They should have a research cell, which can play a vital role in making pro-people decisions.
- Religion is a very sensitive and emotional issue. The use of religion, specially in election campaigns, must not be encouraged by any party. The EC can play a positive role in this context. The recent Supreme Court verdict banning religion-based politics in connection to the 5th amendment is really encouraging. Hopefully, Parliament will take the initiative to ban religion-based politics following this verdict.

If political parties reform according to the above-stated guidelines, then no doubt the country's political domain will transform into a healthy and congenial one.

In conclusion, any sort of party reform should follow the bottom-up approach. Party members at the grassroots level should decide what reforms they want to see in their respective parties, and only then can a sustainable change be achieved. Adoption of any top-down approach for so-called reform will only weaken the party without realising the major spirit of that reform.

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# Thaksin distancing himself from reds?

Unfolding events will prove whether Thaksin is in a tactical retreat to mount a new offensive or whether he is genuinely showing remorse in order to win forgiveness and get "his life back."

AVUDH PANANANDA

A number of positive signs have emerged in recent weeks, giving hope the country can overcome its predicament, although the situation remains fragile and precarious.

Depending on how key players responsible for the political polarisation can tone down their egocentricity for the sake of the greater good next year, when there will be a general election and celebrations for His Majesty's auspicious 84th birthday, a fresh start could be ushered in for the country.

Since the end of the red-shirt rally in May, fugitive premier Thaksin Shinawatra has been putting out feelers to signal he is a changed man. He is keeping a low profile. Gone is his tough rhetoric promoting the red-shirts' struggle. He has cut down on his "tweets". And his central message has turned passive in a bid to distance himself from violence in lieu of the aggressive remarks against his opponents.

With Thaksin turning 61 last month, his friends and relatives, particularly his sister Yaowapha and her husband Somchai Wongsawat, have renewed their efforts to seek out a sympathetic ear for his legal wrangling.

To the powers-that-be, Yaowapha has delivered an explicit message that her brother wants to come home. But does this signal a willingness by Thaksin to be humble and play by the rules, instead of seeing himself as bigger than the game?

Should Thaksin decide to comply with the law and abide by judicial decisions, he may find his problems resolved in a speedy manner. The king will reach his seventh cycle and this may be a good opportunity for the former PM to bury the hatchet. It should not escape Thaksin's attention that the royal birthday is an occasion for pardon reviews.

The vetting of the red-shirt petition on his behalf for a royal pardon is expected to be completed later this year.

Last week, the Appeals Court freed red-shirt leader Veera Musigapong on 6-million-baht (\$186,000) bail, pending his trial for terrorism. The move is seen as a shift from confrontation to accommodation between the authorities and the red shirts.

Next week, the Supreme Court will cast a crucial vote to decide whether to launch an appellate review into the verdict to seize 46 billion baht (\$1.42 billion) in assets from Thaksin and his family in February. If Thaksin opts to repent in order to spend his retirement at home, then it is not far-fetched that problems previously seen as insurmountable will start unravelling.

Fugitive red-shirt leader Jakrapob Penkair made a frank assessment that Thaksin was pondering his next steps focusing on his future rather than the red-shirt movement.

In an interview aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Saturday, Jakrapob admitted that while Thaksin would remain an icon of the movement, he was reflecting on his involvement.

"I think that he is re-evaluating whether or not it is a fight worth fighting," he said.

Though conceding that weapons were found among the reds, Thaksin denied condoning or instigating violence.

Jakrapob said organisers of the red-shirt protest had a group of advisers and violence erupted not because of advice they were given but the apparently poor organisation of the rally.

In contrast to denials by other leaders like Jatuporn Promphan and Natthawut Saikua, Jakrapob admitted that some protesters were armed, although he insisted the people with no links to the reds were responsible for the "unrest."

He also insisted that with or without Thaksin, the reds would remain a viable movement due to domestic and international support. He said the reds would get financial backing from international donations.

Jakrapob is the first to step out and claim that Thaksin is having second thoughts about his links with the reds.

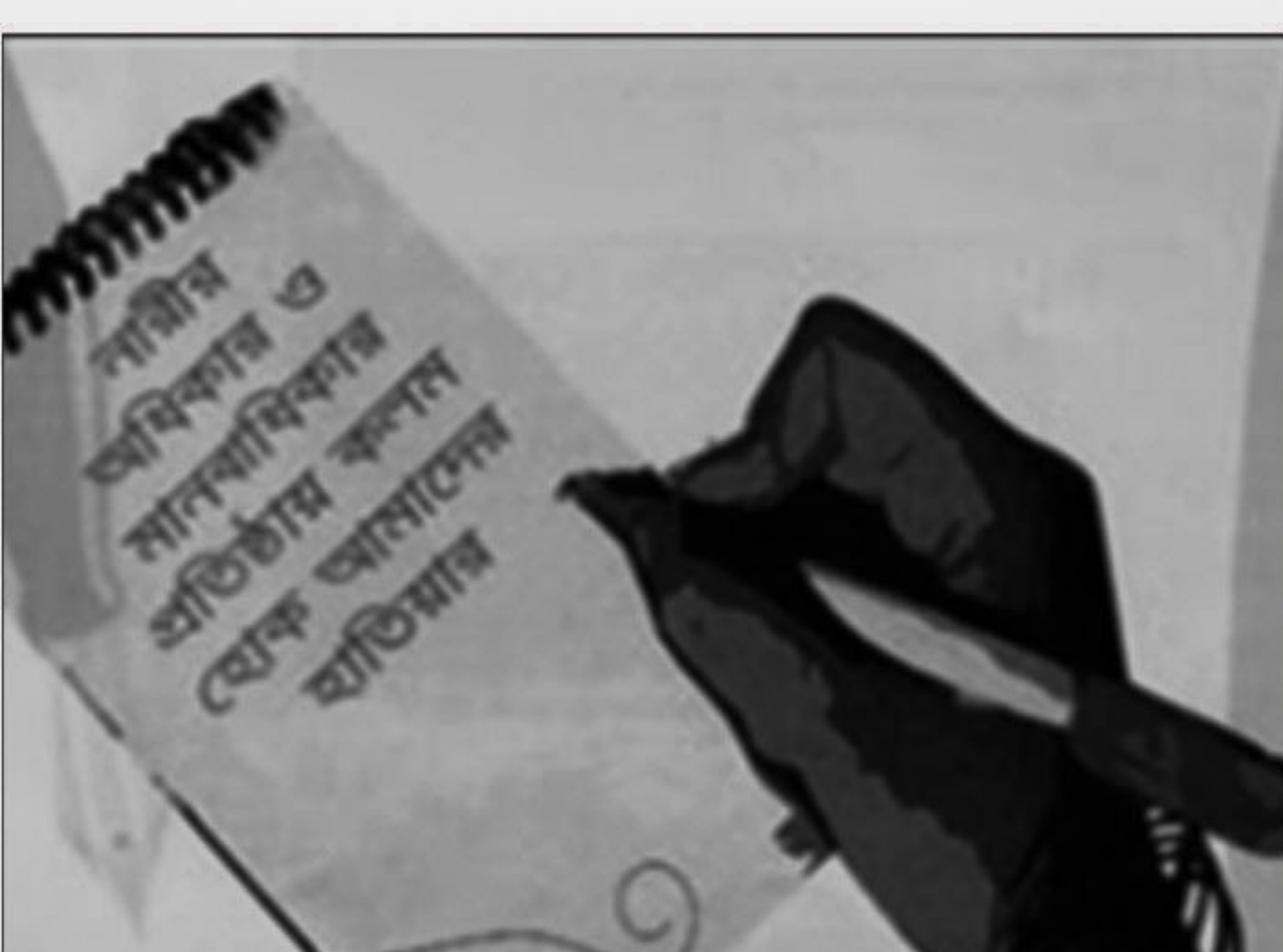
Unfolding events will prove whether Thaksin is in a tactical retreat to mount a new offensive or whether he is genuinely showing remorse in order to win forgiveness and get "his life back."

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Thaksin Shinawatra.

# Women in media



In spite of great improvements achieved by and for women in journalism many problems remain, which must be addressed by journalists' unions at national, regional and global levels. Journalists' organisations have to reform their own structures to ensure female representation in the union's policy-making and governing bodies.

PARVEZ BABUL

WOMEN have been doing noteworthy work as journalists in our country as well as elsewhere during the last decade. But their number in both print and electronic media in our country is less than expected. We need to recognise the challenges and explore the opportunities for women to encourage them.

American journalist Mary Temple Bayard wrote in her article on women in journalism: "The newspaper is the educator of the public, and men and women who write in newspapers have the best opportunities for creating public opinion. They know their colleagues of the other sex watch them with an attention naturally critical, but not always sympathetic; neither is there a royal road especially prepared or made smooth for either sex. A fair field and no favour must suffice for women in journalism. There is no claim to be set forward on the basis of sex. Women who have suc-

ceeded in journalism have succeeded as journalists and not as women, and this along the same lines on which men have succeeded."

Women journalists of our country said recently in a workshop that unfair treatment discouraged women in journalism. Recognition of their work and better wages are needed to encourage female journalists to stay in the profession. Experts said that women's participation in journalism, in both electronic and print media, marked a rise in the last couple of years, but most of them give up the profession for various problems.

Women journalists identified stereotyped attitudes, unfair treatment, harassment by male colleagues and job insecurity as the reasons that prompted them to give up the profession. Prof Dr. Gitiara Nasreen of Dhaka University's Mass Communication and Journalism Department said: "Socio-cultural factors play an important role in advancing or hindering women's access to journalism.

Despite the rise in number of women journalists in last few years, only 4% women stay in the mainstream of journalism."

The speakers pointed out that females were paid less as compared to male colleagues in some media houses, and they worked under immense social pressure and mobility problems. Participants urged removal of gender imbalance in media, and said that there was a need to provide women with equal opportunities as enjoyed by men. Female journalists should be encouraged to work on hard beats, which are reserved for male journalists.

Shanta Maria, a radio journalist, told me that women were looked down upon by some male colleagues, and that sports, economic and political beats were not assigned to women in some media houses. Women are not given assignments out of Dhaka. Electronic media is a bit more liberal in this issue than print media. Shanta added that opportunities were available in journalism and women were overcoming the odds and doing well, but they had to go through testing times.

Nasimun Ara Huq, president of *Nari Sangbadik Kendra* (Centre for women Journalists) once invited me to attend a feature-writing workshop. I observed that women were eager to work in media, and they had talent and were able to cover beats like men.

I suggested the formation of a forum of women writers of Saarc countries to get more journalists and writers from these countries. She agreed and formed the forum accordingly. I congratulate her for pro-activeness, and for exploring ways for women to join journalism.

Journalist Sultana Rahman works in an electronic media house. She said: "Women are responsible and sincere. As a woman, I have an advantage in collecting news from any person, group or institution. So, I take the responsibility and do my assigned job very sincerely, so that no one can define my reporting as 'woman's reporting.' I must get recognition as a journalist, without considering the gender. I encourage more women to join journalism and accept the challenges because I believe that journalism is a profession particularly for women."

Journalist Farhana Milly works in the print medium, and is hopeful of seeing women taking journalism as a profession, though it is not as same as now as it was ten years back. In addition, newspapers should give the same pay to women journalists as they give to the men for same jobs, Milly added.

Women journalists of Bangladesh do not

face the same challenges their counterparts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and war-affected countries in Africa do. We should train the women journalists of our country not only to cover the local and national news, but also to cover the news of whole world.

In this age of information, people are interested in getting news of different issues of different countries of the world at a time through different media. That is why I think that, to face the challenges of globalisation, women representatives of the media must be global representatives as they have to represent the globe directly or indirectly.

In spite of great improvements achieved by and for women in journalism many problems remain, which must be addressed by journalists' unions at national, regional and global levels. Journalists' organisations have to reform their own structures to ensure female representation in the union's policy-making and governing bodies.

The number of women journalists is on the rise in most countries. The percentage of women in journalism ranges from around 50% in Finland, Thailand or Mexico to as low as around 6% in Sri Lanka or Togo. The average percentage of women journalists is 38%. An IFJ survey ten years ago found an average of 27% women journalists. But the number of women in decision-making positions in the media is still shockingly low. Even though women represent more than a third of working journalists around the world, the percentage of women editors, heads of departments or media owners is only 0.6%.

In 1951, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted the Equal Remuneration Convention No.100, which is one of the fundamental ILO conventions. ILO conventions are international treaties, and once a country ratifies a convention it is obliged to implement it in national law and practice.

The Convention sets out that men and women workers must receive equal remuneration for work of equal value without discrimination based on sex. It obliges member states to establish this right through national law or collective agreements. Rebecca West, a British journalist and author said: "Journalism is the ability to meet the challenge of filling space."

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