

Governing in crisis proves the mettle of leadership



Satisfactory handling is the sign of a good leader.

Leadership in such a paramount crisis is a super-human quality that must be called into play. There is no second thought or a shadow of doubt about the fact that almost all crises are consequences of the blunders we had committed earlier. There is a necessity for grasping the future implications of present events and forestalling any catastrophe.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

OMINOUS crises of mythic proportions have taken hold over the country, breaking down hopes and aspirations of the people. Foremost among them is the simmering political crisis. The administration, leaders of political parties and their operators do not act on the basis of rational discussion and orderly action. The rule of reason or a consensus seems to be an illusion. They continue to be the guiding spirit in newspapers, public speeches of the leaders and seminars.

Both the treasury and the mainstream opposition party MPs took an oath that they would jointly work for the welfare of the country regardless of their political differences, but this has been honoured more in breach than in compliance. People and government are swept away by events that are uncontrollable and push the government to the brink of a disaster

Floods in the north of the country along

with river erosion and cyclones Sidr and Aila in the south resulted in deaths, heavy crop losses and total destruction of dwellings. Post-calamity recovery in these regions has not proceeded in the way it demanded.

On the other hand, the force of events and pressure from powerful blocks has led the government to shift policies too frequently. Reports published in leading dailies on "World Trade: Mobility of Chittagong Port" indicated that the container handling capacity of the Chittagong port has come down to an all-time low because of dilly-dallying and interference in selecting berth operators.

BGMEA President Salam Murshedi told the conference that garment exporters had to spend Tk.2,000 crore extra as freight charges. This does not augur well for the country, because this extra expenditure will have spill-over effect on the economic health of the industry, especially in the payment of wages to the RMG workers.

People running the state seem to be sailing a boat that they think won't capsize.

They look quite calm in the face of dark clouds hovering on the horizon. Some of them say that they inherited corruption, tender business and politicisation from the past government, and they hasten to add that nothing drastic can be done to rid the country of this malaise, forgetting the fact that this government came to power promising big changes in the affairs of the state.

Admittedly, there are crises, which are deepening day by day because of our indifference and callousness. For instance, traffic congestion could be reduced appreciably by introducing some fast trains between Narayanganj and Tongi, with stoppages at important crossings in the city. But this aspect was never attended to although traffic-handling authorities have been making unending experiments with buses and other transports plying on the road.

Callousness, incompetence and apathy of the concerned department or ministry have only added to people's suffering. A bridge over the Padma and smooth ferry service at Mawa and Paturia, connecting Dhaka with 23 southern districts, are vital for the growth of business and the livelihood of a large number of people.

A report in The Daily Star on October 3 said that 600 vehicles remained stranded at Mawa for about a week as 6 out of 12 ferries were out of order. Apart from the acute suffering of the people travelling by road, food items and perishable goods will get spoiled if they reach Dhaka after such delays on the road.

There can be no second thought about improving railway service to attain faster economic growth, expand business activities and eradicate poverty. Years of neglect and lack of investment have taken toll on the railway.

Dr. A.M.M. Safiullah, immediate past vice-chancellor of Buet and a civil engineer of repute, said: "All previous governments mainly focused on the development of road networks and did not invest in railway when it was necessary. But railway is the most efficient mass transport system, and taking Bangladesh's geographical layout and high density of population into consideration, it is specially ideal for us. The main advantage of railway is that it can carry a huge number of passengers and big amount of goods, ten times more than a bus, other than the fact that it cuts down energy demands, pollution and operational cost. Moreover it is hazard-free when viewed in the context of deaths due to road accidents."

The revealing report made public by the Buet Accident Research Institute (ARI) said that every year 12,000 deaths are caused by road crashes.

However, the communication minister's disclosure that the present government has taken up massive programmes at a cost of Tk.6,000 crore for the development of the railway sector, which includes purchase of locomotives and passenger coaches, is

highly encouraging. From the cattle cart to other modes of transports, the way people transport themselves is an indicator of a country's progress.

The crisis in the electricity front has hit everybody -- rich and poor, industrial entrepreneurs and farmers in the field -- alike. There is a reluctance to invest in new projects because of power shortage. But investment is the lifeblood that keeps an economy moving, and it has remained ominously static during the past several years.

Despite the government's call to foreign investors, the investment climate rather looks bleak. Foreign investors once drawn to the country's cheap labour prospects are perhaps having second thoughts. Few investors will risk being put in a politically heated biosphere. The impact of this gradual but critical slowdown is being felt at the most personal level. It is beginning to cost people their jobs -- job loss is now close to 20 million -- every single one of them devastating many more lives.

At the moment, the ruling party and the opposition are caught in a political feud of unusual dimension. The opposition allegedly wants to create a crisis and dissension in the country on the issues of war crimes trial, annulment of the 5th amendment to the Constitution, and restoration of the 1972 Constitution by the apex court. They tend to forget the cardinal issue that triggered the bloody warfare between the Pakistani rulers and freedom loving Bangladeshis.

Leadership in such a paramount crisis is a super-human quality that must be called into play. There is no second thought or a shadow of doubt about the fact that almost all crises are consequences of the blunders we had committed earlier. There is a necessity for grasping the future implications of present events and forestalling any catastrophe.

Historical records are galore with instances where great leaders imbued with statesmanship and pragmatism played very crucial roles and saved their countries from ignominy in the face of challenges. Looking back to America, we can see that Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Truman owe their reputation to their leadership during crises.

Hopes for early reconciliation of the festering problems and feuds seem to be dying. But people's expectation runs high, urging the leaders in the ruling party to face the responsibilities and unify the country in the face of militant activities and the sinister conspiracies of the anti-liberation forces.

That needs leaders imbued with pragmatism, statesmanship and vision. If the rot does not stop immediately, the ghouls and ghosts of the country's troubled past will have won the day. So the leadership must act, and act now and in the right direction.

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Developing democratic culture

If distribution of parliamentary seats is done on the basis of total votes obtained the current practice of accusation of one party by the other may, perhaps, be gone and there may develop some sense of responsibility among members of parliament who may start promoting democratic culture.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

IF Bangladesh has to establish democracy quickly its major parties, the AL and the BNP, will have to work together to make amendments in the constitution and the election procedures. Without such an effort the present negative practices in its democracy may continue and the common people will never be able to see establishment of a true democracy in Bangladesh.

It was AL which brought the parliamentary system of democracy in Bangladesh. The constitution was amended to a large extent in the fourth amendment on January 25, 1975. The amendment made the president, not the prime minister, the constitutional head. Twenty-six amendments were made in the constitution. The president remained constitutional head till the fall of President Ershad in 1990. The prime minister was again made the constitutional head through the 12th amendment on August 6, 1991.

In the election of 1991 the BNP won 140 seats in the Parliament and formed the government. It obtained 55.6% votes in the election. After the futile election of

February 1996 there was regular election on June 12, 1996, in which the AL won 146 seats and the BNP won 116. AL formed the government.

In the election of 2001, the 4-party alliance of BNP obtained 195 seats and assumed power. Despite the fact that AL won only 62 seats it obtained 40% of the votes against 46% of the 4-party alliance. In the election of 2008, Mahajote alliance won 230 seats and 49% of votes against only 30 seats and 33% votes by the BNP.

If we analyse the results of the elections during 1996-2008 we see that there was no clear reflection of public opinion because there were big gaps between the number of seats won in the parliament and the percentage of votes won by the members of the parliament. This resulted in creation of bad feeling and mutual suspicion between the party/parties in power and party/parties in opposition. This is certainly harmful for Bangladesh in its transition to democracy.

Mutual mistrust among the parties in power and the parties in opposition resulted in the creation of a non-party caretaker government (cf. Art. 58 of the Constitution) whose tenure is only three months. Mistrust is so much that even

elections under the caretaker government are not accepted as neutral by the defeated parties. Indeed, an unfortunate phenomenon.

Due to our poor political culture we try to support only those representatives who are acceptable to the voters and ignore political philosophy or economic plan. In the election of 1970, 20% of elected candidates were not involved in anti-Ayub movement of 1969. In the election of 1973, 33% of the elected members of parliament had no direct relation with the people's movement of 1969. Among them 20% never participated in the war of independence. They were nominated because of their influence and acceptability to the people.

It appears that our political parties are not fully capable of fulfilling the aspirations of the people. Instead, allegations of partisanship and corruption are raised against them by the media. No strong political institutions are coming up in Bangladesh. Our party chiefs and heads of governments are the same. The party activists at the field level do not participate in democratic process to the extent necessary.

Though our politically conscious population are involved directly with some party or the other they have not yet been able to develop any democratic thought. We would like to make Bangladesh a democratic state. There are reasons behind lack of development of political institution. Among the main reasons following may be identified:

- Our political activists participate in politics because of their personal gains;
- Mistrust of the parliamentary chiefs on

elected members. This is regarded as the greatest impediment to our progress toward democracy; and

- Our political parties are mainly centered round an individual and no real democratic practices are encouraged or allowed to thrive.
- The political weaknesses mentioned above may be overcome if we reform our parliamentary framework and bring some changes in the election procedures. The following are some remedies suggested:
- Amending the people's representation act to enable distribution of parliamentary seats on the basis of total votes obtained;
 - Abolition of Article 70 of the Constitution (vacation of seat on resignation etc.);
 - Pay and allowances of the members of the parliament be given on the basis of their conduct; and
 - Enactment of law to fix the emoluments of the members of parliament.

What is actually needed at this stage is development of democratic attitude and political institutions. If distribution of parliamentary seats is done on the basis of total votes obtained the current practice of accusation of one party by the other may, perhaps, be gone and there may develop some sense of responsibility among members of parliament who may start promoting democratic culture.

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The day I lost my computer

MANY people tell you to make back-up copies of your computer files. Don't listen to them. I did, and this is what happened.

I got up early and started copying my files into a back-up drive. Then I looked at the clock -- it was time to get the kids to school: I tossed the laptop and the drive into a bag and raced out of the door. Ten super-busy hours later, I reached the end of a normal (i.e., "nightmarish") day.

I looked down. And my bag was Gone! Aiyeeah! It was the only time my laptop and back-up drive had been out of the house together. And both were history. This is proof that the governing principle of the universe is irony.

I did not panic. The subsequent five minutes I spent rolling around on the floor hyperventilating was for a completely different reason, which I will share when I have thought of something plausible. But I will admit I was not happy. My laptop contained large amounts of brilliant work, which could have been sold to unappreciative publishers for laughably small sums of money, as usual.



I was this tired that day.

To cheer myself up, I borrowed a computer and checked my email and this web site. I found a host of recent stories from readers about a recent topic featured in this space: people caught on video. The funniest was about a US woman who found her daughter, 16, and a similar girl, having a fistfight.

Instead of stopping the battle, April Newcomb, 43, offered advice: "Don't %\$#@ing stop! Punch her in the @\$%ing body."

Police saw a video of it on YouTube and charged the mom with one count of Just Not Getting the Whole Parenting Thing. This email gave me an idea. I trotted down to the basement and asked the security guards to find surveillance videos of me. Within seconds, they located (this is not a joke) four-color videos of me taking the 20-second walk from the elevator to my office door.

I was too nervous to ask whether the high surveillance was just for me, or whether everyone entering the building was so honored. The guards then sat down to view many hours of tape and make a compilation of all my wanderings that day.

I'm not sure what they named the file, but it was probably labeled: "Dozy bald guy walking around." This is undoubtedly the single most boring video in the history of the world, with the possible exception of Baywatch Nights.

Then they noticed one clip showed me going through a door with a bag, and another showed me leaving without it. They raced to the spot and recovered my bag. I was delighted. Last week, New York police commissioner Raymond Kelly announced that he had installed an intelligent camera system in every part of the city's subway.

You can ask it to locate unattended bags or even people of a particular appearance. "If we're looking for a person in a red jacket, we can call up all the red jacket footage in the last 30 days," he told the Daily News a few days ago.

No doubt he expects his guards to type in: "Find Al-Qaeda types."

No doubt the guys will actually type in: "Find hot babes."

Now look up, smile, and wave at the ceiling.

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