

Keeping hope alive

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ANAM A. CHOUDHURY

ANY new democracy must clear two main barriers. It must experience a peaceful transition of power from one party to another after a free and fair election. We have crossed the first hurdle, albeit with the help of a caretaker government, but the second one still largely remains a forlorn hope.

In the words of John Quinton: "Politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy some more tunnel." We can't agree more with John Quinton with regard to Bangladesh. It appears that the political crisis of one-eleven has not induced any serious rethinking in the minds of our leaders. Both the major parties' tactical decisions, to dig in their heels to confront each other, may pay off for them politically but is hardly good for the nation as a whole.

Before the election, the Awami League promised bi-partisan efforts to deal with the long-term problems and pave the way for real national reconciliation. What we are experiencing instead is a return to the old game of "power" politics. Politics is turning nasty and personal. It isn't just a

matter of ideology and policies, but of personalities. It would be a shame to witness a creeping erosion of democracy in our country once again.

Bangladesh badly needs consensus and decisive action on a whole range of issues. Today, many countries in our region are experiencing rapid social, economic and political change. Bangladesh is in close proximity to two economic powerhouses -- India and China. They will eventually diversify their economies and move their factories beyond their borders to the export oriented coastal countries of the region. We can very effectively use the opportunity to plug our economy with Asia's two fastest growing giants. We need to work seriously to boost the competitive attractions of our country. We can't afford the luxury of mixing domestic politics with the national economy.

Most politicians accept the reality of our power shortage. 52% of our populace still lives in darkness -- and industrial zones can experience dozens of power outages daily. The demand for power is rising by 15% to 20% a year. It is naïve to believe that we can modernise our economy without boosting the anemic

gas and electricity supply.

We need to attract energy multinationals to build power plants across the nation on a fast-track basis. Well intentioned but misguided attempts to double our gas production by a state-owned company might prove futile. We need companies with state-of-the-art technology to conduct a seismic survey to pinpoint new reserves, and extract natural gas lying under the ocean floor. New technology has made the extraction of deep-water gas economic.

Bangladesh desperately needs foreign investment to build highways, power plants, ports and other infrastructure. A climate of political instability, antigovernment riots, and collective protests in the streets will surely scare away international financiers in such key sectors.

Today, ordinary people cast a wary eye on the steep rise in the cost of rice and other staples. The price of rice always determines the destiny of a political party at election time in Bangladesh. Any government thinking of re-election needs to take note of it. Critical days lie ahead. Fluctuating weather pattern and uncertainty about future supplies mean that the poor will face higher food prices in coming months.

Some political analysts think that the government may be pushing its way, ignoring the opinions of others. Critics may say that maintaining peace is more important than confronting old crimes, while the eager beavers in the ruling party ask how anyone could allow suspects in the century's worst atrocities to escape

accountability. The war crimes tribunals must ensure that evidence, not politics, determines who is indicted. People should be prosecuted only for specific criminal acts, not for controversial political decisions.

Some people think that our judicial and prosecutorial systems lack credibility. The use of torture and extralegal methods has violated our best traditions and provided little in return. Near weekly reports of extra judicial killings by law enforcing agencies, and news of mobs beating suspected thieves to death, suggest that people have little faith in the courts. The government should try to create a court system that is not only just but also prompt in enforcing the laws it enshrines.

Most political observers reckon that the Awami League is a left of centre political party with secular roots. It has very skilfully managed to reduce fundamentalist political parties into an endangered specie in the parliament.

Our political situation is much more volatile than it is in most of our neighbouring countries. Unsurprisingly, in our country, anti-incumbency fervour often grips the nation during election campaigns and the electorate hardly re-elects an incumbent government. When the opposition party wins the election and forms the new government, it sincerely believes that everything its predecessor had done was feckless, stupid, ill-informed and characterised by corruption. It rejects, reverses and repudiates everything associated with the



Awaiting better times.

past administration.

Such an irresponsible attitude may have a tremendous negative effect by sending a message to the international community that there are uncertainties in the whole political system of Bangladesh. Doesn't the government realise that failure to get re-elected jeopardises the future of the programmes it is implementing?

Make no mistake; in Bangladesh voters tend to equate the failure of one

party with the victory of another. I would like to conclude by borrowing an appropriate quotation from Wills Rogers, a noted political scientist: "The more you read and observe about this politics thing, you got to admit that each party is worse than the other. The one that's out always looks the best." The incumbent government would do well to keep this at the forefront of its thinking.

Anam A. Choudhury is a former investment banker.

'Seen from a trade and financial angle, Bangladesh has a bright scope'

The Chief Minister of Tripura, Manik Sarker, who has long-standing ties with Bangladesh since the War of Liberation in 1971, talked to The Daily Star Special Correspondent Rezaul Karim on bilateral issues such as trade and investment, transit, connectivity and relationship at his Secretariat Office in Agartala recently.

The Daily Star (DS): Do you think that Bangladesh-India relations have reached a special level after the Delhi summit in January. Being Chief Minister of a bordering state how do you evaluate the matter?

Manik Sarker (MS): There was India-Bangladesh ties, it exists now and will continue to exist in future. The sky cannot be broken into pieces. The relations will remain intact. However, in this regard, the role of both the governments has to be positive. A conducive environment exists, which has to be consolidated and carried forward.

DS: Is the process of implementing the decisions taken in the summit meeting of the two prime ministers moving in the right direction?

MS: Some decisions have been taken after the meeting of the prime ministers of Bangladesh and India. Earlier also, the two countries had made preparations in this regard. The decisions made in January were not taken instantly, so new problems may arise while implementing them. They will have to sit again across the table to solve the problems. This is a continuous process, and has to be continued. The Tripura visit of the Bangladesh foreign minister is a part of the process. Now we expect that Bangladesh Premier Sheikh Hasina will visit our state. Tripura University has conferred an honorary doctorate degree on her, which she has agreed to accept. These are part of the overall process. There is no scope to see these in isolated way.

DS: A decision was taken to carry heavy equipment for a power plant using Bangladesh territory through Ashuganj

river port. 10 months have elapsed since then but the work of constructing infrastructure has not yet started. Has the implementation become stuck in red-tapism?

MS: The matters involve two countries, which have separate styles of working. The nature and speed of work are also different.

The style of work of one country may not match with that of another. Following the Bangladesh-India internal trade and transit agreement, Ashuganj river port has been declared a port of call. The river port has remained unused for long, and some infrastructural facilities have to be built around it. Some more time may be required to build up the infrastructure, including augmenting navigability of the river. The Bangladesh government is actively thinking about the matter. At the initial stage, equipments for power plant generation will come to our state through the Ashuganj river port. Later, goods will come and people will move through the river route (Kolkata-Ashuganj river route and then Ashuganj-Akhaura roadway). Transportation will take various ways, as this is a port of call.

The sea route will end at a point where you will have to take a road. A road connection has to be made through Ashuganj. The existing road has to be widened and strengthened. It has been decided that India will take the responsibility of constructing a road from Ashuganj river port to Akhaura. If we do the work, we will have to abide by the rules of the Bangladesh government. An agreement is being drafted in this regard.



Manik Sarker, Chief Minister of Tripura.

The work will start after it is signed. The attitude of both countries is very positive in this regard.

DS: You have said that Ashuganj will be used not only for transporting machinery for the power plant but also after that. The plan is to build up the infrastructure for transportation of equipments for the power plant. In that case, is it not more logical to take into consideration the issue of its long-term use?

MS: At the initial stage, goods for Palatana power plant will be transported. But even after that Ashuganj will remain as a port of call. Then a road will be a necessity. If the type of infrastructure needed to connect with the river port does not exist problems may be created. When Ashuganj becomes a port of call it will create scope for big financial gain for Bangladesh. Such is the rule in trade and economic relations. Nothing will be unilateral. All will want a win-win situation. But there cannot be a win-win situation on every issue. One side will win in one matter, the other side in another.

Overall, everybody will be benefited. If that does not happen, a consensus cannot be reached. It creates scope for misunderstanding. All have to play their role for the welfare of the people. Keeping this in mind our approach should be broad, positive and constructive.

DS: Tripura is thought of as the main gateway into Bangladesh for the north-eastern states of India. In that case, alongside roads what are the other alternatives in your view?

MS: We are working towards creating links in various ways. We could depend only on roads, but we are also building up railways, waterways, and also airways. We want to add telecommunication also. Building up communication is a big affair. Countries cannot come close to each other without communication, and no development will be possible. Keeping that in mind, different possibilities for future communication will be explored.

Let's start with one type of communication and see how it works. We will choose the easiest way first. This should

be the technical attitude. After that, many people will also suggest different ways. I say this from our experience. I believe that, in future, many ways of establishing communication will open up.

DS: You said that when direct link is established, it will create a big scope for Bangladesh to do business and invest in Tripura. So far, in what areas have Bangladeshi businessmen shown interest for making investment? What about other areas of trade and business?

MS: So far, Bangladeshi businessmen have shown interest in steel industry and food processing industry alongside establishing garments industries. Besides showing interest in investing in other Indian states, Bangladeshi businessmen have shown their eagerness in investing in steel industry, taking advantage of power generated in Tripura. As large-scale development work is going on here a huge demand for steel has been created. The steel produced here may be profitable in meeting the demand in Tripura.

Besides, due to convenient location, surplus steel produced in Tripura can be marketed in other states of the region. Large-scale work for road infrastructure development has started. As a whole, the prospect for business is bright. Both Bangladesh and Tripura have demand for steel. Alongside Ashuganj, we can get linked with Chittagong port; we will extend the rail line upto Subrum. We will build a bridge on Feni River. We will finalise joint alignment. If that is done, freight containers can easily come from Chittagong port to Tripura by railway, which will hugely benefit businessmen in Bangladesh. The goods will travel from Bangladesh to the heartland of India, besides the northeastern region.

Now we have to bring our essential commodities from 2,000 kilometres away. Oil and spices are available in Bangladesh. Where is the logic of bringing these goods from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana? If these goods can be imported from Bangladesh they will reach the market in the northeastern

region, where four crore people live. Seen from a trade and financial angle, Bangladesh has a bright scope in this region.

DS: What amount of trade is expected?

MS: Let us consider Chittagong Port. We will have to pay fees to Bangladesh for using the port. The number of vessels using the port will increase in future. Bangladesh will benefit from it. At the moment there is a huge deficit in trade between Bangladesh and Tripura. The greater part of trade between the two countries is in favour of Bangladesh. If anybody raises any objection about this, I say there is no scope for such objection. Bangladesh can export the goods as they have that ability. Besides, we need the goods. At the initial stage the volume of trade was worth Rs.5 crore annually. Last year it reached Rs.160 crore. We exported goods worth a maximum of Rs.10 crore. I think this year the volume of trade will exceed Rs.200 crore.

DS: What do you think about cooperation between the two countries in checking terrorism?

MS: The Bangladesh government has been taking positive steps to check terrorism. I have been saying for long that we have taken a strong stance against terrorism as it has created a big problem for us. We are fighting for territorial integrity on the soil of Tripura. If our country's unity and sovereignty are affected, it may also affect our neighbouring country. In the same manner, if there is no peace and stability in our neighbouring country we will be affected by it. No positive work can be done without peace and stability.

If your neighbour's house catches fire, a wedding function at your house cannot be performed properly and with peace of mind. You cannot do that. When this is the reality, none of us should allow anybody to use our land for harming the other. I think that the present government has been playing a positive role, taking into consideration the overall situation.

Steal this column



LAME WAR! A wave of outrage is sweeping the internet. Again. I was so excited I nearly fell asleep. I usually ignore these things (unless I've caused them), but since the latest one involved Journalistic Principles, I thought I'd better check it out.

A naughty journalist stole the work of a colleague -- and then asked to be paid for it.

Judith Griggs, editor of US magazine *Cooks Source* secretly copied a cookery article by freelance reporter Monica Gaudio.

When Monica complained, Ms. Grigg replied with an email so obnoxious that

it will go down in history. She wrote: "But honestly Monica, the web is considered 'public domain' and you should be happy we just didn't 'lift' your whole article and put someone else's name on it. We put some time into rewrites, you should compensate me!"

Whoa! To ask for money after having been caught stealing is cheeky. Hitler would have balked at that. Judas would have had refused on ethical grounds. Even I wouldn't do it, unless necessary.

More than a thousand people immediately signed up on the magazine's Facebook page to complain.

Ms. Griggs, unashamed, gloated by putting a positive spin on it: "We used to have 110 friends, now have 1,870!"

This unleashed another torrent of anger.

Commenter Maria Ogneva patiently explained that they had all signed up as friends to criticise her. "There's no 'dislike and publicly trash' button on Facebook yet," she snarled.

Liam Markham wrote: "By my calculations, 94% of your friends hate you."

Scott Allen Morris made a thoughtful comment: "The only way to post abuse is to be a friend: there's a deep metaphor in that somewhere."

The internet community snapped into action and started analysing several features in Ms. Griggs' magazine.

All had been stolen.

The magazine closed down.

Articles about the row are appearing all over the world. I read quite a few. They all said: "Why do some people think anything on the web is stealable, or 'public domain'?" "What happened to journalistic ethics?" "This editor is naughty," etc etc.

But you know what? Not one dealt with the key question. Why are internet users so angry -- since web-surfers are famous for stealing stuff?

Content-thieves from Napster to YouTube are worshipped and any attempts to criticise them or stop them

are fiercely opposed. Why are they suddenly so self-righteous?

This thought caused me to sit down and compose Mr Jam's Law of Internet Ownership:

If you are perceived as a corporation stealing content from individuals, the internet community will get you shut down fast. If you are perceived as an individual stealing content from corporations, the internet community will defend your actions to its last breath.

So the best thing Ms. Griggs can do is quit her now-defunct magazine so she can be perceived as an individual.

Among the river of abusive statements (now 6,000) on the magazine's Facebook page, I found this wise message to her from one David Edelstein: "Congratulations, you're a meme! Usually a talentless nobody has to do porn or kill a kitten to become this infamous this quickly."

Good point, David.

Now give me a minute to think of something I can steal to become instantly mega-famous. Have you heard about my new book idea? It's called "Eat, Pray, Steal."

It's about a kid called Harry Potter

who penetrates people's dreams and ends up on Brokeback Mountain sharing a tent with Buzz Lightyear and Batman. Any offers?

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