

Selected extracts from the January issue of Forum

Politics, Yes ... Change, Not Yet

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FIRST, the truth. Something Barack Obama did during his campaign for the United States presidency in 2008 quickly caught on around the world. He promised change if he were elected to the White House. And suddenly other politicians in other countries were picking up the idea, to tell their own people that change was theirs for the asking, only if they voted for those who promised it. That was what the Awami League did in the campaign leading up to the general elections of December 2008. Having gone through the bitter experience of the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government, a period which saw Sheikh Hasina undergo a spell of imprisonment and, before that, a bitter struggle to be let back into the country following a bad move by the authorities to prevent her return from a trip abroad, the Awami League appeared willing and ready to inaugurate a new phase in national politics. Its pledge was one of change. It called the promise "dinbodol-er rajniti" -- the politics of change.

Briefly, Sheikh Hasina and the

Awami League gave people to understand that certain reform measures the caretaker administration had undertaken during its tenure would be maintained, indeed strengthened. And into that set of measures came, or so people thought, more accountability and transparency in government through having such bodies as the Election Commission, the Public Service Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission operate independently and so underpin the overall idea of government as a thriving, throbbing experience in modern times. There was the pledge of an institutionalisation of local government through a clear devolution of authority away from the centre. The party promised an independent judiciary; it spoke of respecting a free press. Indeed, it informed the nation that the right to information was one it would protect as part of its policy plank. The party promised other crucial steps as such, among which was a trial of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army in 1971. The Awami League also made it clear that it would bring the assassins of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to justice, 13 years



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after they had been convicted and which conviction had run into inordinate delays insofar as implementation was concerned owing to the indifference of the Bangladesh

Nationalist Party-Jamaat-e-Islami government to the entire process in the five years preceding the declaration of a state of emergency in January 2007.

Two years after the Awami League assumed power, yet once again, in January 2009, it makes sense to ask whether or not the party has kept its promises; indeed,

whether it has truly brought change as a central factor into Bangladesh's politics. The answer is not a complex one, despite the complexities which politics has largely epitomised in all this period since the December 2008 elections. And yet one cannot lose sight of the fact that the government has found itself buffeted by unforeseen difficulties which, in the early stages, meant it spent a precious length of time finding its feet. The ground was made slippery early on through the mutiny which claimed the lives of 70 people, including 57 army officers, at the Bangladesh Rifles in February 2009. Into office for a mere 50 days when the murder and mayhem occurred, it was a rudely shaken government which needed to have its credibility restored with the army in particular and with the country in general. In the end, it did emerge, somewhat bruised but nevertheless secure, from the ramifications of the mutiny.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on January 3.

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Sporty Forty

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

THE young boy diving around in this veritable dustbowl can hardly be eight years old. He is small for his age, and most definitely either a rubbish collector or a beggar plying the roads of Dhaka every day. But in the early hours of this winter morning, kicking around a deflated football in the grassless plains of the Banani playground, he is someone else entirely. "Bangladesh," he shouts as he kicks the ragged football a few yards. His partner in crime could be a twin. He has the same sunken eyes and stick arms that say poverty better than any words ever could.

But this morning there is a sparkle in his eyes.

They shuffle around vigorously, kicking up enough dust to form a cloud around them but none of it matters. Not too later on, there will be food and a home to think of, or more explicitly, how to get both for the day.

But right here and now, the only thing that matters is the football.

When they settle enough for me to speak to them, I ask who their favourite player is.

They are stumped. I venture further, "Do you watch cricket?" I ask.

"Shakib Al Hasan," says the first immediately, with no hesitation. He doesn't even let me finish my question.

He rings off other names. These are on the edge of his lips. Evidently, the cricketers are popular. There is now a feisty smile on his lips. This is a topic he knows and he is comfortable with. And as the smile suggests, this gives him joy.

This early morning shenanigan is the perfect metaphor for a more macro-outlook on things. Because in a country of 160 million people, most of whom suffer from rampant poverty and increasing inequality, the one tie that binds us all together is sport.

Our politics may differ, but our outlook on sport is the same: it gives us something to smile about.

And politics of course, but sport is still unique in that it is still the one aspect that unifies us all. Our politics may differ, but our outlook on sport is the same: it gives us something to smile about; it helps us showcase ourselves to the world. It is one of our few positive conduits to the rest of the world.

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Bollywood Badshah and Bangladeshi Loyalists

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

LET me begin this article not from 1971 or any of the other momentous political dates over the last 39 years with which so many of our friends and families are intricately connected.

Rather, let me start with Friday December 10, 2010. It was in the truest sense a historical day. All that happened surrounding the events of that night summarises the state of confusion we are in as a nation as we start our 40th year of independence and state building. There was an excitement in the air that I have yet to see among my fellow countrymen for any other national days.

That was the day when Bangladeshis saw the closest thing to modern world royalty -- the Badshah himself, Shah Rukh 'King' Khan! The new generation most probably felt more excited and was able to relate to that concert than to any event to commemorate 16th December.

Everyone from the poor rickshaw puller who spent his entire family's monthly income for the cheapest tickets (Tk. 5000) to the richest epsilon paying a whopping Tk 25,000-1 lakh (approximately \$357-\$1430, in a country with a GDP per capita of \$1500 and Human Development Index inequality valued at 0.331, reflecting on the high disparity between the rich and the poor) just to get a glimpse of the Bollywood Badshah.

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The Problem of Poor Pressure



AMIRUL RAJIV

MIR MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

BANGLADESH has concluded 39 years as a country free from direct external control of its administration and resources. A society is judged by how it treats its weakest citizens. In that regard, where do we stand?

Over these almost four decades, Bangladesh has emerged as a country which very few people, and least of all the ever-dour Henry Kissinger, ever gave any chance of holding its head high. The challenges have been many -- including destruction of almost all its physical infrastructure, poverty for the majority of its citizens, famine in 1974, and the jolt of sudden political shifts which destroyed most institutions from laying any foundations to allow them to play any major role in governance. The macro-economic resilience in the face of endless challenges of the past two decades, i.e. abolishing of quotas, challenges of a floating exchange rate, oil price hike, food price spike and the economic meltdown, have made Bangladesh a strong case for growth due to basic increase in factors of production. Specific government institutions, especially Bangladesh Bank, have played a formidable role in keeping this macro-economic stability.

But where does all of this leave us as a country looking forward towards the next 10 years? As a society, and as a country, where do we want to see ourselves in 2020? Leaving aside the political rhetoric, we need to be able to have a benchmark on how we rank ourselves. Without reaching too high for a parable, Nelson Mandela has said about his almost three decades in prison, "You had time to think -- to stand away from yourself, to

look at yourself from a distance, to see the contradictions in yourself."

While we are overjoyed at the prospect of USD 600+ per capita income -- as we feel that it will bring about a better life to all the hard-working people who are toiling every day in the fields and factories to earn enough to provide their children with a better life -- we are also inveterate lawbreakers. All of us have our own stories of unmitigated law breaking, which may mean something as simple as trying to run across the road or throwing the garbage just outside our homestead.

But where does all of this leave us as a country looking forward towards the next 10 years? As a society, and as a country, where do we want to see ourselves in 2020?

However, the clearest signal of those whose existence dominates the final judgment of how we as a people are doing can be explained by the huge masses of people who are coming into Dhaka, and other large divisional head-quarter towns, in search of a livelihood due to the slow decline of the ability of the country to absorb rural unemployed. After all, a society is judged on how well it treats its weakest, and not how well its most powerful and wealthiest live.

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