

BANGLADESH AT 40: LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD-PART I

Professor Rehman Sobhan, one of the earliest proponents of economic justification for independent Bangladesh, and a member of its first Planning Commission, delivered a commemoration lecture yesterday at the National Museum on "40 years of Bangladesh: Looking back and moving forward." We publish its full text in a four-part series starting today, in which the author expounds the historical genesis and narrates the struggle that led to the Liberation War and discusses the strength and weaknesses of democracy in Bangladesh, the first of four founding principles of the nation.

The Spirit of the Liberation War

Rehman Sobhan

OVER the last year we have been commemorating the 40th year of Bangladesh's independence. In these 40 years Bangladesh has registered many gains for which we should feel proud. We have established a globally competitive garment industry moved ahead of India in particular areas of human development and gender parity, extended micro-credit to 25 million women and drastically reduced aid dependence through an explosive growth in remittances by our hard working migrants. We have furthermore held four reasonably free and fair elections where incumbent regimes have been replaced by opposition parties through the ballot box. These are not inconsiderable achievements for a country once written off as a basket case.

But these achievements also remind us how much more we could have made of ourselves where Bangladesh could have fulfilled the promise which inspired our struggle for nationhood. My presentation today addresses the unfulfilled expectation of the generation which shared the privilege of participating in the liberation struggle. Had we been able to live up to these expectations Bangladesh would have been a very different place today. I will therefore explore this chasm which separates the hopes of yesterday from the reality of today and will then move on to offer some suggestions on what we may attempt to do to build a society which restores meaning to the spirit which sustained our struggle for liberation. In looking ahead we will need to recognize that both Bangladesh and the world around us have experienced seismic changes. We will accordingly need to calibrate our dreams of yesterday to the world we live in today.

Bangladesh was not born because of an historical accident. Nor was it the gift of a departing colonial power grown weary of bearing its imperial burden. Our nationhood emerged out of a long process of struggle which culminated in a bloody war of liberation. To move large numbers of ordinary people to pledge their lives for a separate existence we needed to inspire them with a vision for a better world than the one they were repudiating. This inspiration was what came to be known as the spirit which inspired the liberation war, what we popularly term *Muktijuddher-chetona*. This is a phrase which is used so frequently and so casually as to be rendered almost devoid of meaning. We invoke this spirit as a ritual incantation and rarely bother to ask ourselves what this spirit embodies. I would argue that the spirit of the liberation war is adequately captured in the four principles which have guided our

constitution: Democracy, Nationalism, Secularism and Socialism (which has later been elaborated to mean social justice). In my presentation before you, I will discuss why these pillars of our constitution capture the spirit of the liberation struggle, how far we have departed from these guiding principles and where we need to travel in order to restore meaning to the spirit of the liberation war.

Our emergence as a separate nation-state was the direct outcome of the persistent denial of democratic rights to the people of Bangladesh by the Pakistani ruling class. In 24 years of shared nationhood never once was central power in Pakistan exercised through the outcome of a free and fair election. The first such election in December 1970, 23 years after the emergence of Pakistan, led to the Awami League, under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, capturing a majority of seats in the National Parliament, with an electoral mandate from the people of Bangladesh to establish self-rule. It was the attempt by the Pakistani military junta to frustrate this democratic mandate, through the instrument of genocide, which inspired the liberation war. The liberation war was, thus, the final phase of our democratic struggle when the Bangali people had to come to terms with the reality that democracy could never be realised within the Pakistani nation state.

It is a tragedy for Bangladesh that our nationhood emerged out of our quest for democracy yet we have spent most of our national existence frustrating its realisation. We have lived through long episodes of martial rule and civilian autocracy. In 1990 when the Ershad autocracy was overthrown through a mass mobilisation the nation experienced the excitement of a second rebirth of democracy. But who would have imagined that within 17 years of this renewal of democracy our confrontational style of politics would have reached a point where the military were once again provided with an opportunity to intervene in the political process through the process of Emergency Rule. The military may have overstayed their welcome and overtaken their mandate. But, fortunately for democracy and quite exceptionally in our historical context, the military, as promised, returned to the barracks within two years after helping to engineer a universally recognised free and fair election which enabled the incumbent government to return to power with a large plurality of seats in parliament.

There is no evidence that we have learnt the right lessons from our most recent malfunction of the

democratic process. The politics of confrontation and intolerance appears to be once again permeating our political culture. The political opposition, over successive regimes, has been marginalised, partly as a result of its own political immaturity in boycotting parliament thereby violating its democratic mandate. As a result of these endemic boycotts four successive parliaments have been rendered virtually dysfunctional in their incapacity to discharge their primary mandate of keeping the executive accountable to the will of the voters.

The malfunctioning of our democratic institutions remains compounded by the continuing inability to strengthen democracy in our principal political parties. The principal political parties, in turn, reflect the gradual ascendance of money and muscle power as the driving force in democratic politics. Whilst some effort was made by the current ruling alliance to induct some candidates of modest means into parliament, politics in Bangladesh has remained largely a rich man's game where both women and the financially deprived have been effectively disenfranchised.

The proliferation of violence, which becomes more pernicious when it is patronised by the state, continues to be deployed to further political and personal objectives. The purveyors of violence, the *mastaans*, have served to undermine our public educational institutions, interfere with the working of the administration, challenge the credibility of our institutions of law enforcement and compromise the vitality of our investment climate.

In such a distortion of the democratic process every institution of governance tends to be compromised. Our administration has become ineffective where both recruitment and advancement have been politicised and divorced from performance or norms. As a result virtually all public services as well as law enforcement have become partisanised and commoditised to a point where the machinery of government has lost virtually all capacity for functioning as an instrument of public service. The last remaining bastion of the rule of law, the judiciary, is now under threat. Over the years, the lower judiciary has degenerated into a politicised instrument of the ruling party. The once independent upper judiciary, which served as a bastion of our democratic freedom, is being exposed to a process of creeping politicisation.

The appointments to the Election Commission (EC) had been similarly politicised upto the tenure of the last elected government. It remains to be seen how far the new appointments to the EC, who are expected to

preside over the next round of elections to parliament in 2014, will be selected on the basis of merit and consensus. The integrity of the very institutions to safeguard the democratic credentials of our electoral process needs to be protected.

However, the independence and credibility of the EC may not be enough of a guarantor of free and fair elections. Experience over the last three decades has established that prior to a national election all recruitment and postings in the police force, *upazilla* administration, schools, and now the armed forces, which can in any way influence the direction of the national elections, have tended to be politicised. In such circumstance, the scope for a free and fair election, where the role of money and ruling party patronised *mastaans* could be contained, have compromised the freedom of action of the EC. It was this exposure to the influence exercised by a partisan administration which inspired the Awami League and its allies in 1995 to initiate the campaign for institutionalising the system of holding elections under a non-partisan caretaker government. This system was incorporated in the constitution in 1996 and has, with some limitations, ensured three relatively free and fair elections over the last 15 years. The logic and wisdom of the present government's decision to do away with the very system it had politically sponsored remains questionable and is unlikely to be compensated by a strong EC. The history of electoral politics in Bangladesh, going back to the period of Pakistani rule, indicates that in the absence of a non-partisan caretaker government no incumbent government has ever vacated office through defeat at the polls.

The last recourse of democracy, the free media, is demonstrating considerable resilience. But the security of journalists has been periodically endangered and the independent press itself faces a constant struggle to secure itself from both state pressure and private terror. Here again, people with money and state patronage are making inroads into the media and are investing both in the print and electronic media with the expectation of "managing" the news in the service of partisan and private gain. That our institutions of democracy and governance should have degenerated to a level where the very sustainability of the democratic process is endangered is particularly distressing when we consider our long and painful struggle for democracy.

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BITTER TRUTH

Permissive administration: Eroding confidence



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THREE years is not a long time for a political administration to bring about administrative reforms. But it is long enough to judge the quality of a party's governance when in power. As the AL-led alliance completes three and a half years in power, the occasion

should ideally be a cause of celebration. But there is hardly anything to celebrate because what actually happened was contrary to people's expectations.

As time rolls on, there is disillusionment or a sense of indifference among those who wanted to see the chief executive as a person chosen to bring a great change. Power, it now seems, has not only corrupted the party and its stalwarts, but has also immobilised them. With Padma bridge construction and Metro Rail project now in limbo and development efforts in total disarray because of governance failure, it is clear that there is hard time for people in the coming days.

The government is facing enormous challenges on all fronts: unbridled corruption, moral decay, political stagnation, mounting inflation, accumulation of wealth in some unscrupulous hands, price hike of essentials resulting from continuous hike in power tariff, and politicisation of administration

The alliance government will walk out not like heroes in the cause of the people but like one betrayed by its partners and sycophants. The people brought them to power because there was a groundswell of faith, and it was up to the government to turn that popular faith into performance. That didn't happen. The last three years of this government saw only instances of hope abandoned and trust betrayed.

There was and there is stability, and no political threat to anybody's position, nor any stirrings of change in the country. Politically the balance sheet is

pathetic. There seems to be no agenda, no vision. There is a chance for the exploiters, extortionists, corrupt officials and political *mastans* to have a field day. The PMO appears incapable of taking action against corrupt officials and associates of the ruling alliance.

One of the most infuriating features of the country as well as the government is that time and timeliness have no value. The last few months were dominated by events that demonstrated the grave consequences of allowing things to slide. It started with the murder of Narsingdi Mayor Lokman. The murder of Nurul Absar (35), Nalua upazila chairman and a teacher in a local degree college in Satkania, has sent chills up everybody's spines. It reinforces our belief that social workers and activists are not safe even in the sanctuary of their houses.

With so much violence day in and day out we seem to have become a nation where one's lust for money, or failure to get the woman of one's choice, or disagreements in politics, are too often resolved by taking the life of a human being.

People cannot fathom the reason or rationality behind setting a passenger bus on fire, which killed one person on the spot and severely injured Mokbul Hossain, a veteran freedom fighter. Mokbul asked in a choked voice: "Did we free the country from the clutches of the Pakistani hordes just to put it in the dirty hands of our own children inspired with such savage mores?" In Sylhet, stalkers, in their bid to kidnap three girl companions, beat two students to death when they resisted and threw them in the river.

Mugging is on the rise. Reports published in *Prothom Alo* revealed that in eight incidents of mugging in the

city in December, Tk.62 lakh was looted, one person was killed and eight persons were severely injured while resisting.

These dastardly criminal activities of a microscopic section of the populace should have alerted the politicians to evaluate the goals of a democratic society. Everyday concerns of the safety and security of the society should not be mortgaged to the ideology of power, wealth and violence. The sooner this reality is understood, the better. It is in this light that our leaders, politicians and custodians of the society must take appropriate measures to curb terrorism of all sorts.

Many people now say that the country is faced with a crisis of governance, the root cause of which is the "flawed design" of our democracy. While committing ourselves to the dictum of development and taking measures that would enable us to ensure law and order and stability, we tend to think that everything is fair in

politics. If what is happening in the country is any indication, governance at all levels of administration seems to be flawed. With the political parties busy in hurling abuses at each other and mostly preoccupied with digging up the past, the administration is facing a crisis of confidence. By now the rule of reason, ethical responsibility and proper surveillance and monitoring of activities have become illusions.

Stability requires a degree of rectitude, coherence, policy pattern, courage, capacity to make intelligent guesses and determination to stand firm in the face of all odds. Of course crime has always existed in the society but the rot was never as pervasive as it is now.

Majority of the politicians in the earlier days were men of austerity known for their charisma, sacrifice and fighting spirit. But now a majority of them flaunt their wealth, no matter that they owe banks crores of taka as overdue loans.

Shockingly, the weakening of moral standard and authority of politicians only increase arbitrary power of officials at different tiers of administration. People feel this has led to a situation where bureaucrats are indifferent and shy away from their administrative responsibilities. Many public employees demand pay-offs even for moving a file from one table to the other.

People want fulfillment of the promises made to them time and again by the leaders. They are getting tired of slogans and rhetoric. They are sick of the leaders preaching ideologies but never practicing them, and by now are convinced that unscrupulous persons occupying the driver's seat in public offices cannot be booked -- because of the politicisation of criminal investigation.

With crises multiplying everyday, Prime Minister Sk. Hasina surely understands what is at stake. We might recall that great US presidents (Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman) owe their reputations to crisis leadership. Their lesser failures were forgotten. By the same token, many presidents were destroyed by crises. Lyndon Johnson was devoured by Vietnam War, Jimmy Carter by the Iranian hostage crisis and Nixon by the Watergate scandal.

The overriding fear is that political feud and administrative paralysis that have started surfacing may take the country back to chaos and the economy could bleed again. Fully aware of the pitfalls that lie ahead, Prime Minister Sk. Hasina, people believe, could change her style of governance with a vision.

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