

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

A million dollar question, the PM can only answer



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE question on everyone's mind is, how does the prime minister work? This crops up as a natural reaction to seeing her commit blunders, one after another, and getting entangled in her own devices. Are these of her own making or is she being led up the garden path by vested quarters or the government comforting itself by avoiding due diligence?

Whatever maybe the truth, the people are suffering as their real concerns get overlooked in the race against government's frittering away of its energy and time on virtual non-issues.

Just think of it, 150-200 vehicles are added to the already impassable traffic everyday and over 1,000 persons from villages are rushing to Dhaka city on daily basis. Three point four million live in slums and 28% of Dhaka's poor have no sanitation. Dhaka's population is projected to be 17.91 million in 2015. Just conjure up the dysfunction of the heart of Bangladesh i.e. Dhaka. Where are the peripheral growth epicentres to take the burden off the capital city?

On the one hand, the prime minister wants to make an international mark, on the other, she is doing everything possible to signal domestic mismanagement abroad. But she needn't have done so with her political mandate. Controversies still well up over Padma Bridge financing and going

after Professor Yunus, Grameen Bank, its "associated" institutions, not excluding his social business enterprise.

The prime minister once humorously quipped she had defused two bombs by making Obaidul Quader and Suranjit Sengupta ministers. But she is oblivious to some other time bombs ticking anyway -- in a broader terrain.

The world she wants to leave her footprints on, however, does not take kindly to her ego-driven impulses; this seems obvious from the comments from the West on the government's move to change the unique and time-tested contents and character of the original Grameen Bank. If the US gets a cold, Western Europe sneezes, leave aside the bewildered look of countries embracing the Grameen Bank model, let alone astronaut Ron Garan's comment in Dhaka that social business holds the answer for the planet!

Do we need compliments from abroad to appreciate the visionary, or for that matter, any other international icon amongst us? Hardly, because 50 of our own women activists have demanded that eight million subscribers of Grammen Bank be not disempowered by one fell stroke. Are we bent upon proving the Bengali adage *gadyer jogi vik pae na* -- village yogi does not get alms?

Bangabandhu himself used to say,

parashree katorota is a word to be found in Bengali lexicon only; the phrase translates into English as piteously burning at other's serene success. Why must Sheikh Hasina's advisers even betray a whiff of such an impression -- even unwittingly -- one wonders!

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has herself repeatedly said she has nothing left to ask for. Twice prime minister of the country and twice as the leader of the opposition with her own accomplishments (including introducing non-partisan caretaker system blessing the country continuity of three

working reality as giving seal of approval seems to be there is all to it. We would like to stand corrected on any of these conclusions by an authentic statement which would facilitate public education in the process.

She has practically no inner political circle, her inner circle of advisers is known to be technocrats or retired bureaucrats. She is walled up by a circle of loyalists and relatives. In our culture, the supreme political leader is used to hearing what pleases him or her, even the agencies set their sails to the wind direction. So, the leader grows deafness to murmurs in the extended party or the purr of the public pulse. Many tend to believe she acts on her own, rarely consulting even her political allies.

Periodically, a spokesman would reel off data about cabinet decisions taken and implemented, but impact analysis is sorely missed.

Meanwhile, Begum Khaleda Zia had admitted to blundering herself in 2006 by deciding to let President Iajuddin become the chief adviser to caretaker government. This she thought brought in the misery of 1/11. She now openly blames her policy advisers for failing to consider the option of making retired Chief Justice Aminuddin Ahmed the chief adviser when the immediate past CJ K. M. Hassan had set aside gracefully his claim in the face of opposi-

tion AL's rejection of him. Khaleda Zia now argues that spurning Aminuddin Ahmed on the alleged ground of being pro-Awami League couldn't stand to reason because retired Chief Justice Latifur Rahman, known to be loyal to Awami League conducted an election in which the BNP won. So, what if one has reputation of an inclination to a party, he could still be overseeing a fairly held election on the strength of an independently working Election Commission.

Khaleda Zia has admitted to a mistake of the past, so the nation could not get the benefit of it when it was needed; but Sheikh Hasina can do it in real-time if she sees the wisdom of not continuously ignoring the High Court verdict's observation part allowing for two general elections to be held under the caretaker system, if political parties agree.

In the latest development, BNP is contemplating to present a formula of interim government after Eid, something premised on choosing chief adviser from amongst retired chief justices instead of picking the immediately retired CJ. There is also the alternative hinted by the HC observations dovetailed to the invalidation of caretaker system which is that judiciary maybe kept out of the interim caretaker system with the CA chosen from a list of eminent citizens. These options can be moot points to discuss and build up on by the ruling party in order that the nation can proceed on to the election path with assurances of all-party participation, the key to a stable democratic order.

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Is the interim government the solution?

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

RECENTLY, in the BBC Hardtalk programme, our prime minister proposed the formation of an interim government during the next general election with the participation of the opposition. As expected, the opposition leader summarily rejected the proposal. We thank the PM for her proposal to break the deadlock regarding the coming election, although a similar formula was rejected in the past. However, it would have been perhaps more appropriate to engage in a dialogue with the opposition about the proposal, rather than announcing it in a BBC programme.

At the outset, it must be made clear that the PM's proposal is not consistent with the established tradition of parliamentary democracy. In parliamentary democracy, after the expiry of the term of the Parliament, the president asks the departing cabinet to continue until the election as interim government. Thus, the proposed interim government is an aberration and we doubt that it would be helpful in making the next election free and fair.

The Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution enacted last year requires holding the next election during the three months prior to the expiry of the term of the Ninth Parliament. That is, the present MPs would be in office at the time of the election for the Tenth Parliament, even through, as per the PM's desire, the Parliament may not meet during the last three months. Such a constitutional requirement would be seriously detrimental to creating a level playing field for all parties.

At present, MPs from the treasury bench play the roles of "new zaminders" in their constituencies. They control almost everything there, including the local police. The filing of complaints at the local police station and even the issuing of charge-sheets by police now require a green light from MPs or the ruling party leaders. With such a state of affairs, MPs would be able to use the police to influence the outcome of the election. They could also keep the opposition candidates away from their constituencies through frivolous cases and violence.

A relevant question: who would be the PM of the interim government? Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia? It matters because our constitutional scheme allows for the dictatorship of the PM. In fact, all our past elected PMs within the parlia-

mentary system established their own dictatorships.

It may be remembered that in 1994, with the help of Sir Ninian Stephen, Awami League and BNP initially agreed on a formula of interim government with the participation of both parties, but, at the end, the agreement broke down on the issue of who would be the PM. At that time Begum Khaleda Zia refused to relinquish the premiership. Now, would Sheikh Hasina be willing to make that sacrifice? Even if she does, we doubt that that an easy solution can be reached at this time.

Over the past 18 years, a lot of water has flowed down the river and the situation has become much more complicated. Problems which could be resolved easily in 1994 would not be easy to solve now. There are many reasons for this, for example "particisation" (not politicisation) of the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies was almost

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absent at that time. Other constitutional bodies, especially the higher judiciary, were also not so flagrantly politicised. With the absence of widespread patronage distribution, the civil society -- teachers, lawyers, physicians, journalists, cultural personalities, professionals -- were largely united, and they could play the much-needed role of a pressure group. Establishing a "lease" to loot and plunder after going to power had not yet become part of our political culture. The tit-for-tat mindset of seeking revenge had not become entrenched in our political parties. In addition, the interim government would have assumed power after the term of the Parliament had expired. Thus, if an agreement could be reached on the issue of who would be the premier of the interim government, the course of our politics would have perhaps taken different direction.

A lot of degeneration in our society had taken place as a result of the "bad" and self-defeating politics of the past 18 years. The bureaucracy and law enforce-

ment agencies have become nakedly partisan. Our civil society is now largely divided and has become, in effect, nothing more than the extended arms of major political parties. Taking lease to loot, rather than engaging in public service, has become dominant motivation for winning elections -- whatever the cost. Thus, even if the PM's proposal is accepted and the opposition is given an equal number of cabinet positions, including the premiership, a free and fair election could still not be guaranteed.

One major hurdle to a fair election is obviously the partisan behaviour of affiliation of the government and the law enforcement personnel. Like the four-party alliance of the past, the present government would also post its most loyal functionaries in key and sensitive positions -- sensitive from the point of view of elections. These partisan functionaries, who are recipients of undue patronage, would, because of self-

interest, work to ensure that the incumbent government is re-elected. The PM would not have to even blink her eyes for that to happen. For, if the opposition wins the next election, these functionaries will not only lose their patronage, but like the former DIG Kohinoor Mia, could even lose their jobs. Some of them might even go to jail for their past misdeeds. In other words, if the ruling party is dethroned in the coming election, its loyal supporters in the government will face serious personal risks; thus, given the high stakes involved, they will naturally go all out to harass the opposition and influence the election results.

How partisan law enforcement officials and the lower judiciary can nakedly harass political opponents can be seen in the case of torching of vehicles near the PM's office a few weeks ago. In this case, charge-sheets were submitted, charges framed and a trial started in the special court at supersonic speed. The charges involved 46 opposition leaders, including the acting secretary general of BNP, while

the real culprits who torched the vehicles are still absconding. Even an interim government with equal participation of both government and opposition parties and under the premiership of Begum Khaleda Zia, would not be able to stop such harassment. Rather, they could conceivably be unable to make any decisions in any sensitive matter relating to elections, rendering the interim government itself totally ineffective.

In the past, the non-party caretaker government easily solved such problems of partisan tilts. They would replace the partisan ones by relatively neutral officials and create an enabling environment in order to allow officials to function in a neutral manner. This was an important contribution of the caretaker government toward ensuring free and fair elections.

A new complication has now been created by the controversial stand of the Election Commission on several issues, including the Fifteenth Amendment. For example, even if the government has repeatedly expressed its commitment to further strengthen the Commission, the EC has recently taken the position that it has all the power needed for holding free and fair elections: no further changes in the legal framework are necessary for this purpose. In addition, the EC has so far failed to take any clear position to safeguard public interest. Thus, the Commission's failure to-date to gain the confidence of the people is a serious threat to a credible election.

It is clear that the uncertainties about the coming election created by the abolition of the caretaker system through the Fifteenth Amendment to our Constitution cannot be removed by the proposed interim government. This is because the partisan government and law enforcement officials pose a serious threat to free and fair election. Another threat is created by the constitutional mandate to hold the election before the expiry of the term of the Parliament. In addition, the EC's inability so far to win the confidence of the voters further complicates the situation. However, the PM's proposal could be the basis for a much-needed dialogue between all parties involved, from which we hope a solution would emerge. We therefore request all concerned to give up their obdurate mindset and make sincere efforts to reach a negotiated settlement to overcome the present impasse.

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Branding Bangladesh for tourism promotion

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

THE Amazing Thailand" and "Incredible India," are two good examples of how to promote a country internationally to improve its image despite poverty, hunger, political upheavals and economic problems.

The last military-backed civilian government perhaps wanted to improve the image of the country by following the above examples. So, it constituted a small committee of intellectuals which recommended a slogan, "Beautiful Bangladesh," for use by the private sector, tourism stakeholders and the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), then known as the National Tourism Organization (NTO). The slogan was launched through a high-profile programme, but it did not click because there was nothing to click in the slogan. Every country is beautiful to its own beholders but a foreigner is not beholden to any country without reason.

A new organisation by the name of Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) has now been established by the government and it operates as the National Tourism Organization. The BTB has launched a website to promote the touristic image of the country.

The BPC is now looking after the commercial tourist undertakings (www.parjatan.gov.bd). I have consulted this website. It is free from personal information provided by the BTB website. But both these websites have miserably failed to portray the history of the country. The Parjatan website, in its overview section, describes the history of the country from 13th Century onward. The BTB website, cryptic and miserly, starts the history from December 16, 1971.

The history of Bangladesh did not begin from the 13th Century. The land now called Bangladesh has rich history which is 5,000 years old. Sufi Mustafizur Rahman of the Archaeology Department of Jahangir Nagar University, through his excavations at Wari Bateshwar, and Tim Steel, a British National now working with a private tour operation organisation, have brought to light a gold mine of information concerning the heritage of Bangladesh, which is supported by Wikipedia, a global website which says: "Gangaridai (Ganga Rashtra in Sanskrit, meaning nation on the River Ganges) was an ancient state found around 300 BC where the Bengal region lies today (present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal state in India). It was described by the Greek traveller Megasthenes in his work Indica. Greek and Latin historians suggested that Alexander the Great withdrew from India, anticipating the valiant joint counterattack of the mighty Gangaridai and Prasii (Nanda) Empires, the latter located in central Bihar."

It is strange how, in these days of information highways, the websites of the BPC and the BTB missed an opportunity to highlight the above history of Bangladesh, which has a background of thousands of years of trade and tourism.

The personal information should be withdrawn from the website of BTB and correct information about the history of the country should be put in national interest. Distortion of the national history is an offence, I think.

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