

# Politics of CG: Hasina now and then

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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has become protector of the constitution after rejecting BNP's demand for reintroduction of a non-partisan election time government. The reason is clear -- the present constitution allows her and her cabinet to remain in office during the next parliamentary polls as her government has ensured it by hurriedly abolishing the caretaker government system through amending the constitution in June 2011.

Since then, she and her colleagues in the cabinet and the AL have been trashing the BNP's demand, saying that the constitution does not allow unelected people in the form of a caretaker government to run the country for even a moment and the next elections will be held under the elected government.

But when Awami League under her leadership had waged vigorous street agitations 18 years ago for introduction of the caretaker government system she and her party colleagues did not pay heed to the then constitutional provision, which also did not allow unelected people in the form of a caretaker government to rule the country.

The violent street agitations including blockade, non-cooperation movement and around 100 days countrywide *hartal* forced the then BNP-led government to introduce the caretaker government system in 1996 by amending the constitution to allow unelected people to run the country during the election period.

Alongside the street agitations during 1994-96, Hasina and her party had also presented some models for the caretaker government.

They had proposed making the sitting chief justice or any other sitting judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court head of the caretaker government. In a bill submitted to the Parliament Secretariat on October 28, 1993, the AL proposed amendment of Article 56 (4) of the Constitution and called for formation of an interim caretaker government headed by the sitting chief justice.

Besides his own duties, the chief justice would perform the additional duty as the head of the caretaker government and would return to his original post after the election. The president would appoint a council of advisers whose members would not take part in the polls, said the AL's bill.

The AL chief reiterated the proposal during mediation between the AL and the BNP-led government by a group of five eminent citizens about

resolving the political standoff over the demand for introduction of the caretaker government.

The proposal for making the chief justice or a judge of the Appellate Division was also contrary to the then constitutional provision as none of them are elected by the people. Moreover, it was also unconstitutional as the constitution in no way allows the sitting chief justice or any other judge of the Appellate Division to hold another constitutional office.

On request of all political parties after fall of autocratic ruler H.M. Ershad in December 1990, then Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed assumed the office of the vice-president and acted as the president during the fifth parliamentary polls held in February 1991.

Later, the parliament formed through the elections amended the constitution, ratifying and

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validating resumption of the post of vice president by Justice Shahabuddin, his return to the office of chief justice, and all actions taken by his interim government.

The AL had also rejected a formula given in 1994 by Sir Ninian Stephen, a special envoy from the then Commonwealth secretary general, on formation of a makeshift government with elected people under the provision of the then constitution.

According to his formula, an 11-member makeshift cabinet would be formed with the then incumbent prime minister in the chair. Five cabinet members would be from the ruling and five others from the opposition parties. The interim cabinet would give all-out support to the Election Commission for holding free and fair parliamentary polls.

To gear up street agitations to mount pressure on the then BNP-led government, the AL and other opposition parties including Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami also boycotted the parliament for

a long time, giving birth to a culture of House boycott. They boycotted 135 of 400 sittings of the Fifth Parliament, despite taking oath not to allow personal interests to influence the discharge of duties.

Their House boycott was declared illegal and unconstitutional by the High Court. In a verdict delivered on December 11, 1994, the High Court strongly denounced the continuous parliament boycott by the then opposition parties -- AL, Jatiya Party and Jamaat.

"They are not only coercing the ruling party members to concede their demands [introduction of the caretaker government system by amending the constitution] but also about to bring a downfall of the democratically elected government for their selfish end," said the verdict whose effectiveness was stayed by the Appellate Division next day.

The Court also asked the opposition MPs to return to parliament. But the opposition MPs belonging to AL, Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami refrained from returning to the House, paying no heed to the court's verdict. Rather, they resigned en mass from parliament on December 28, 1994, to take their agitation to the peak to realise their demand.

The AL also did not care about its constitutional duties as the main opposition in parliament during the past BNP-led government during 2001-2006 and continued the House boycott to meet its various demands, including the one for electoral reforms. In the five year tenure of the eighth parliament AL MPs boycotted 223 out of 373 sittings.

This time, when it is in power, AL did not pay heed to the Supreme Court verdict to abolish the caretaker government in June 2011. Even before the Supreme Court released the copy of its full verdict, the AL-led government with support of its two-third majority abolished the caretaker government system and amended the constitution. In so doing, the government did not even consider the other part of the court's verdict that spoke for keeping the caretaker government system to hold two more parliamentary polls for the sake of security of the state and people.

The 15th Amendment, which dissolved the caretaker government system, also includes some controversial things like making provision for allowing MPs to remain in office during the polls and making more than 51 articles of the constitution unamendable.

Given the situation, isn't it clear that Sheikh Hasina defends the constitution strongly only when it serves her party's purpose?

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# Prospects of energy self-sufficiency in tea industry

MD. ASRAFUL ALAM

BANGLADESH is a fast developing country and considered to be one of the few countries that have the fastest rate of economic growth, which will lead to its attaining the status of a "middle income" nation within the next decade. Hence, the energy needs have to be not only sustained but also greatly enhanced.

The expenditure of foreign currency for the import of fossil fuel is a big drain on our financial resources. Increasing global demand for fossil based fuel worldwide and the depletion of global crude oil reserves continue to cause inflated oil prices. The global use of fossil based oil is causing drastic environmental damage, which will have serious impact on countries like Bangladesh.

Although Bangladesh is blessed with natural gas reserves, they are depleting rapidly. This is creating havoc in the power and energy sector as generation of electricity is curtailed, causing serious problems in the industrial and domestic sectors. With advancement in the agricultural sector through use of vehicles and machineries, the demand for diesel has also increased drastically.

On average, Bangladesh imports about 3.9 million tons of petrochemicals yearly, of which diesel accounts for 2.3 million tons costing around \$570 million. The Bangladesh tea industry consumes about 0.14% of this volume, which is approximately 3,220 tons.

Policy makers and researchers in many countries have been looking for alternatives to fossil oil, and bio-fuel is one of the promising options. Compared to other bio-fuels, "*Jatropha Curcas*" is identified as a good source of bio-diesel. *Jatropha* can be grown from both stems and seeds. *Jatropha* oil not only has potential as a substitute for fossil diesel, extraction of diesel from *Jatropha* seeds is also reasonably simple and economical.

Bangladesh tea industry currently produces 56-60 million kgs of tea per year and consumes 3,200 tons of diesel at an import cost of Tk.120 million, which means Tk. 2.14/kg of the production costs, whereas these costs could be poten-

tially reduced to Tk. 1.00/kg thereby making a potential savings of Tk.1.14/kg overall. This means a saving of Tk.63.84 million, with consequent favourable impact on prices for the buyers.

A recent study indicates that tea estate management support exploration of the possibility in view of the potential reduction of production costs, utilisation of fallow land, employment of unemployed labour force, improvement of environment and, considering national interest, they would venture to cultivate *Jatropha* in tea estates.

Both primary and secondary data show that there is approximately 8,600 hectares (ha) of land available for *Jatropha* cultivation in the tea

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estates in Bangladesh. Aside from the fallow land/inhospitable land within the tea estates there are sectional roads crisscrossing the tea estates, which means that around 1,900 ha could be brought under *Jatropha* cultivation -- thereby increasing the total area to 10,500 ha. Based on these resources, estimated average production would be in the region of 52,500 tons of *Jatropha* seeds, which will produce approximately 15,800 tons of bio-diesel against the requirement of 3,200 tons per year at the current rate of consumption. This will leave a surplus of 12,600 tons, which may be put into the national marketing chain and preferably dedicated totally for the

farmers -- this would reduce transportation costs and risks also, thereby benefitting the agriculture sector.

Due to the potential demand within the tea industry and the available land along with the favourable weather conditions, the cultivation of *Jatropha* appears to be a very viable proposition. It may be noted that *Jatropha* cultivation is suitable even in lands which are unsuitable for tea, are less productive and where no irrigation facilities are available. Thus, the *Jatropha* cropping will not replace other important food crops and in turn will not have any major impact on cropping patterns within the tea estates or on their major product -- tea.

The economic life of a *Jatropha* tree is 35-40 years and the plant survives for up to 50 years if the root zone does not come in contact with underground water table. Under Bangladesh weather conditions the first yield trial was carried out at the BAU farm and the available data indicates that *Jatropha* contains 25% to 37% oil content. Based on this data the production of *Jatropha* bio-diesel will be in the region of 1600-1800 litres per ha per year. The bi-product/residue after the diesel extraction remains as oil cakes, which are an excellent source of plant nutrients. Moreover, there are other extracts (seed cakes and glycerin) that are produced during the processing of the diesel oil. These extra revenue sources reduce the basic cost of production and raise the financial viability of *Jatropha* cultivation. Incidentally, traditional and locally made expellers can be used to extract the diesel from *Jatropha* seeds.

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## SHIFTING IMAGES

# Shouting: A national sport?



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IT'S interesting that when you visit your native country after a period of absence, certain behavioural patterns about your own people strike you as well, shall I just say "different"? And you wonder: are these character traits inherent or acquired over time because of circumstances and situational pressures? During my short stay here I have been going through some introspection about whether or not, I, too, demonstrate many of these traits in my behaviour. Hence, my observations are part of a self-analytical process rather than an exercise in finger pointing.

As soon as you land in Dhaka airport, you are hit by unusually loud sound bytes. People seem to be cross talking and out-shouting each other. And it's not only the airport; the shouting problem is so endemic that you begin to forget what silence "sounds" like! If you are in a shop patiently waiting to catch the salesman's attention, some "*apa*" or "*khalamma*" is sure to elbow her way in, screaming her demands at deafening decibels. And, of course, whoever shouts the loudest gets served first!

Dhaka restaurants, too, have become hubs of loud conversations where you are obliged to overhear details of other people's private lives. A friend of mine narrated an amusing incident. She actually heard a group of men

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and women gossiping about her sitting at an adjacent table at a fashionable French restaurant. Obviously, these people didn't know her personally and were oblivious of the fact that the subject of their censure was sitting within hearing distance.

Physical proximity is hardly a deterrent -- even in relatively small social gatherings there are three or four loud, parallel conversations taking place. Amazingly, these discussions are on serious topics like politics, religion or the state of the world economy. One must admire the dexterity of people to keep abreast of at least two simultaneous conversations and participate in them as and when the occasion demands! Obviously, we humans have a great capacity to adapt to our environment so that most people in the country have accepted loud exchanges as part of the norm.

I believe that much of the "shouting" is the outcome of a national malaise that we seem to be afflicted by -- a fragile ego. People go about their daily businesses until someone says or does something that has hurt the individual or collective ego and the entire community erupts in anger. The "offense" may be something as trivial as the doorman in a grocery store asking a customer to leave his shopping bag outside before entering the store. Or it could be as serious as a politician accusing an opposition party member of misdemeanor or corruption. The person concerned goes berserk and announces in a loud voice that he is offended because his integrity has been questioned.

In the case of the grocery store (and I write from experience) the "victim" collects a mob of supporters threatening to get the poor doorman fired for doubting a customer's honesty. Of course, politicians go a step further and express their outrage in front of TV cameras, demanding swift action from the public. The "accuser" then comes on TV saying he has been misquoted and the ego battle continues.

Meanwhile, who cares about real issues like the cancellation of the Padma Bridge project that would have facilitated communication and trade for millions, or the loss of precious lives in a garment factory fire? Most social and political debates are basically ego battles centered around who has offended whom. They seldom focus on core issues that negatively impact the population or the country's future. On the other hand, certain interest groups are quick to take a cudgel against abstract comments in a blog that have "supposedly" insulted Islamic sentiments, or some ambiguous anti-Bangladesh statement made by a foreign diplomat.

And, once they are offended what do people do? They shout, they scream, or, in extreme cases they take out mass processions and set other people's cars on fire. If the issue is one that the opposition party can capitalise on, a *hartal* is announced and public property is hacked and damaged. The police, who are often reluctant to press charges against murder and rape, are quick to make a few arrests.

The shouting match continues on television and public spaces. Sitting in the comfort of their cool and comfortable living rooms, the intellectual elite debate loudly about who has offended whom. And, in the midst of all the pandemonium the real problems that need real solutions are buried and lost. If there was a way we could "shout out" our problems, Bangladesh certainly would be a utopian nation!

And, by the way, if this column has offended some of you, let's have a discussion on "freedom of speech" -- a loud and feisty one!

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