Genesis

The AL-led government has done some major development work in the last four and a half years. Its magnitude and penetration into the grassroots very few governments in Bangladesh's modern history can match. Despite some hiccups (read corruption/scandals), it has steered the country's economy at a time when major economies are experiencing negative growth; the number of school-goers has increased significantly; internet penetration has reached a level where people are arrested for liking Facebook pages and ordinary people's standard of living has got better. All the reasons are there for the ruling party to start dreaming of coming back to power in the next election, if not in an electoral landslide but by a slim margin. Not so, it seems. The AL-led Mohajote government in its last year in office has suddenly given birth to a flurry of crises that any political party anywhere in the world will be uncomfortable to handle.

It is not expected of a mature, seasoned political party like Awami League to decide to send police into the office of the main opposition, 'retrieve' some handmade bombs and arrest top BNP leaders on charges that are ridiculous in nature. If the AL policymakers had thought it a good idea, one can accept it as a tactic, but the party it seems has made this a strategy. Arrest of top BNP leaders and the denial of bail to most of them is not actually harming the opposition much, it is on the other hand, giving them an excuse to call one general strike after the other and keep the momentum of its movement for the caretaker government going.

In the run up to Hefajat-e-Islam's (HI) Dhaka siege, local administration officials and central AL leaders are holding talks with HI leaders, trying to dissuade them from holding any programme on May 6. Dhaka is abuzz with a rumour that the government has established an unofficial line of communication with an important junior member of the 18-Party Alliance. But the government has not taken any initiative to hold a dialogue with the BNP. It is evident from the speeches of senior AL leaders that the party leadership is not open to the idea of a neutral election-time government.

Karl Marx once said that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. It is indeed ironic for the AL had refused to participate in the election even under a caretaker government in 2007, saying late President Iajuddin Ahmed was not neutral enough and an election held under his leadership would not be free and fair. And rightly so. An election held with Iajuddin as the Chief Adviser would not have been acceptable by all the political parties.

A Rose is a Rose is a Rose

The AL had led the nation in its glorious war of independence in 1971. It is the largest political party in Bangladesh and it has members even in the remotest of villages. It should not be afraid of handing over power after its term to a caretaker/interim government and join the polls. There is always the risk of losing and the 64-year-old party has faced such a situation in its chequered history before. The party should prepare itself for an electoral defeat, not that it is going to lose the next one (or it might), but a party like the AL should be strong enough to stand even a political tsunami.



Two top arrested leaders of the BNP. PHOTO: STAR FILE

To clear the air and to ensure a smooth transition of power, the government should free the remaining BNP leaders and sit with the main opposition to hold a dialogue on the formation of an election-time government. It will spare the economy of the fallout of general strikes that have crippled the country's future growth. As the party in power, Awami League has to take the initiative and the new President Abdul Hamid can do the primary mediation. It does not matter what it will be called– caretaker or interim– but without a neutral election-time government some major political parties will not participate in the election, which might not give it the acceptability that an election needs to have to call it free and fair. Even when Fakhruddin Ahmed-led government finally set the roadmap, it had to make sure that all the parties had participated it.

It is not time to predict the outcome of a venture that is yet to see the light of the day. But it can be said with perfect certainty that any dilly-dally in starting the dialogue might cost both the AL and BNP dearly. If only they knew.

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