

BNP's 35th anniversary

Introspection is in order

WHILE we felicitate the BNP on its 35th founding anniversary, we feel that a serious self-critique by the policymakers in the party is called for urgently. While the party is hoping to be returned to power in the next general election, we wonder whether it has addressed and rectified the mistakes that caused its defeat in the last election.

The BNP should also ask itself whether it has been able to play the part of the opposition effectively, whether it has been able to represent properly in the parliament the 33 percent of the electorate that voted for the BNP, whether continuous abstention from the House has served their or the voters' or the cause of democracy at all?

If the purpose of politics is to better the lot of the people, then there is need for BNP to take a stock of what they have done to ensure, as the opposition, that the basic aspirations of the people are fulfilled.

And if the purpose of politics is to strengthen democracy, we feel that the BNP should take a strong and hard look at its own credentials, which is woefully lacking in so far as intra-party democracy is concerned. No democratic party can call itself so if there has not been grassroots level election within the party for as long as one can recall. It should also ask itself what it has done to create leaders that will take up the rein of the party in future. Leaders must be groomed and not thrust upon from the top.

Resolution of Syrian crisis

Centrality of UN crucial

WE endorse Bangladesh government's stand on Syria that not only must the crisis in the war-torn country be ended quickly, it must happen without adding further to the bloodshed and miseries of the Syrian people, and retaining the integrity of the country.

We are happy to note that the British parliament has voted against military action in Syria and President Obama has left it to the Congress to authorize military action in Syria. While that has at least staved off any US action before September 9 when the Congress convenes, we would like to warn against any hasty or unilateral action by any country bypassing the UN or circumventing it. Whatever response, 'tailored' or full-scale, must have the mandate of the world body.

Furthermore, one fails to understand the modus of taking out the chemical weapons (CW) arsenal of the Syrian regime, and particularly when many are still calling for convincing evidence that the Assad regime is indeed responsible for the chemical attack. That aside, there are serious consequences of military action on targets containing CW arsenal.

While one understands that lack of action may encourage repeat use of CW, we feel that it is not merely the issue of CW but the Syrian crisis as a whole that must be addressed by the international community. Already more than a hundred thousand lives have been lost in the civil war in the last two years, and by conventional weapons, and millions have been displaced internally and forced to seek refuge across the border.

Dhaka: 139th among 140 liveable cities!

ABDUL MATIN

DHAKA has been rated as the 139th most liveable city among 140 cities surveyed by the Economist Intelligence Unit. We beat only war-torn Damascus which now occupies the lowest unenviable position. We have however only one consolation. We moved up by one step from last year.

For three years in a row, Melbourne has been adjudged as the most liveable city in the world. This year it is followed by Vienna and Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary. Australia's Adelaide, Perth and Sydney are also among the top ten cities. The survey is based on five categories: stability, health care, culture and environment, education and infrastructure.

While the civil disturbances caused the downfall of Arab cities like Damascus, Cairo and Libya, what are reasons for our poor state? Are the concerned authorities addressing the problems?

We must have scored poorly in all categories. Frequent hartals, emergence of extremist forces, poor law and order and uncertainty about the next general election must have affected our score on stability. In spite of improvement of child mortality rate and average lifespan, the general healthcare system remains poor due to poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation and water quality, unhygienic living conditions, limited availability of public healthcare services and high costs of private medical facilities.

We have a reasonably rich tradition in music, art, literature and drama and we are proud of it. High population density, unplanned urbanisation, poor air quality, uncontrolled discharges of industrial wastes, and disappearances of greenery and wet-lands dealt a severe blow to the environment of Dhaka. Poor teacher-student ratio and prevalence of coaching have downgraded the standard of education at schools. Frequent hartals have disrupted academic schedules at all educational institutions, affecting the quality of education at all levels. There are session jams at public universities. The standard of education at some of the private universities is being questioned.

Even though the construction of a few overbridges has helped to ease the traffic situation in some areas, Dhaka's streets remain a nightmare to any traveler, no matter which transport system one may choose. The city badly needs an effective mass transportation system. The electric supply system is still erratic in spite of some recent increase in generation capacity. The recreational facilities of the city are also inadequate.

Unless there are significant improvements in all sectors, we can hardly expect to go up in the ladder of the liveable cities. One wonder who would look into these problems when our leaders remain engaged in political arguments.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

SYED Badrul Ahsan's identification of five Republics based on the history of evolution of the country's constitutional and political process appears to be plausible. Barring the free and fair elections held under the caretaker governments in the Fifth Republic one factor is common throughout all the Republics, which is lack of governance and gradual deterioration in the quality of politics. Establishment and stabilisation of democratic norms and culture has suffered all through. Despite our having four free, fair and credible elections in the Fifth Republic we rarely see prevalence of democratic governance.

What we have in the Fifth Republic is an elected dictatorship. All powers and authority lie in the hands of the prime minister. A democracy is essentially a government by consensus and presence of pluralism, but these are totally absent here. The political parties do not practice democracy in their composition and functioning. Naturally, we cannot expect a democratic behavioural pattern and democratic governance from them. So far, all suggestions/recommendations offered by the civil society and the international community have not yielded any result. Rather, almost all the state functionaries and institutions have deteriorated so much that some of them have become virtually rotten and cannot serve the purpose for which they exist.

The process of their becoming dysfunctional is constantly being willfully helped by the machinations of our political parties and their leadership without caring for the interest of the country and without realising that in the long run it will be totally detrimental to their own interest. This is because almost all the parties are myopic in their attitude; they don't see anything beyond their immediate gain.

Some important reforms in the electoral system -- in the laws, regulations etc governing the election -- introduced by the immediate past Election Commission after thorough discussion with the civil society and the political parties are yet to be implemented. The past Commission could not implement some of its own reform proposals due to the mounting pressure on it to hold the election for the ninth parliament as early as possible without insisting on implementation of their proposals in full.

We expected that the present Commission would take up those unimplemented proposals and, in addition, would also initiate implementation of other recommendations which the past Commission formulated on the basis of its experience and left for its successor to take up. All these were aimed at making the electoral process free from the rule of corruption, muscle, money and other malpractices which are now vitiating the elections.

Mr. Ahsan's proposal for a proportional representation system will definitely eliminate many of the current mal-

"For a Sixth Republic"

Some comments

Article 70 has to be suitably amended so as to enable the MPs to speak out whatever they genuinely feel necessary to be spoken in the interest of the country (not filthy attack on each other).

practices which are not only eating into the vitals of the electoral system but also hindering the growth of sound democratic culture and governance. But given the attitude of our present political leadership it will be a far cry to expect that they will voluntarily opt for replacing the first-past-the-post system with the proportional representation one. Because doing so will warrant total change in their mindset, they will have to sacrifice their present tendency to grab political power or remain in power by any means -- fair or foul -- no matter how damaging the consequences for the country might be. What we can propose and launch movement for the following:

Firstly, the Election Commission, the Judiciary and the Public Service Commission should be constituted by a process of selection through parliamentary scrutiny in a transparent process, as has been advocated by Mr. Ahsan.

Secondly, to establish balance of power the president of the Republic should be elected by an electoral college consisting of the elected members of the Parliament, the Zila Parishads, Upazila Parishads, City Corporations/Municipalities and Union Parishads if not through direct election by adult franchise. This will provide some inherent strength to the office of the president. Mr. Ahsan's suggestion for direct election of the president on the basis of adult franchise may be difficult to sell to our politicians. However, the power of the president has to be increased so that a real balance of power and the rule of pluralism, a basic necessity for a democratic system, are established.

Thirdly, we totally agree with him that an MP should lose his seat in the parliament for absence from sittings without any credible cause for a maximum period of ten days. I propose that, in addition, in case of organised boycott of parliament sessions the MPs resorting to such practice should be unseated forthwith.

Fourthly, the principle of devolution of power between the central and the local governments and allocation of resources between them should not depend upon the whims of the rulers but on constitutional provisions. The elections of the local bodies should also be a constitutional responsibility of the EC, not dependent on the direction of the Local Government Division.

Finally, Article 70 has to be suitably amended so as to enable the MPs to speak out whatever they genuinely feel necessary to be spoken in the interest of the country (not filthy attack on each other). The Speaker, on being elected, should resign from the political party to which he belonged. Moreover, the prime minister should not simultaneously be the leader of the House and president of the political party to which he/she belongs.

How about reformulating his prescriptions for the Sixth Republic on the basis of the above suggestions?

The writer is a former adviser to a caretaker government.

underlines one of the fundamental flaws of our democracy and political culture.

Historical experience of the evolution of democracies shows that the collective wisdom of the people eventually prevails to sustain democracy and democratic ideals; it is Rousseau's General Will over the will of a brute majority.

Now is the time to right the wrong. As ordinary mortals we are all prone to making mistakes; the difference is that a wrong decision by a political leader entrusted to lead the nation, but refuses to make amends, could have unpredictable consequences for the nation.

We sincerely hope that the PM and the party in power will act with wisdom and statesmanship, rising above all narrow partisan considerations, and invite the leader of the opposition and the it's allies for a dialogue paving the way for a negotiated political resolution of the crisis. This is the demand of time and history.

The tragic developments in Muslim majority countries Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, etc have raised concerns of our friends and development partners of the possibility of Bangladesh sliding into an unpredictable cycle of violence, anarchy and uncertainty unless there is a peaceful resolution of the political deadlock through dialogue, paving the way for holding of a free, fair a credible national election.

Bangladesh is a model of a Muslim majority democratic society in transition, a multi-religious and multi-cultural tolerant state where there is no room for extremism, militancy and terrorism unless there is a total failure of governance. Instability and conflicts are exploited by extremists and by those who are opposed to open societies for their sinister agenda. Islam, other religions and democracy can beautifully coexist on the bedrock of our rich Bangladeshi culture of humanism, of compassion and love for art, music, poetry and aesthetic aspects of life.

There are formidable challenges awaiting the next government. They include, among others, a rethinking on current polity to ensure a functional democracy and development for transition from a least developed economy to a developed one. To achieve this we will need a clean and stable government with zero tolerance for corruption; rule of law, a strong economy, and purposeful diplomacy to maximise huge potential of our relations with India, China, USA, EU, OIC, ASEAN, Japan, Russia among others. We need a professional defense force to tackle man-made and natural disasters, ensure our security and to backup our diplomacy. We have to begin anew.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Misunderstanding secularism

Waheed Nabi's article titled "Secularism in search of truth" glimpses over the history of secularism. Though his historical analysis regarding the Muslims' backwardness in this subcontinent seems right but the analysis of the present situation is not right at all.

In the book "The Indian Mussalmans", William Hunter says that the Indian Muslims did not learn the Persian language during Muslim rules. They did not change their mindset during the British rule and were unwilling to learn English. On the other hand, the Hindus learned English and so the Muslims lagged behind. Perhaps this situation inspired many Indian Muslim leaders to demand a separate state for the Muslims. And they thought it could save them. Unfortunately, it could not save us. Rather the partition made the environment favourable for communal conflict. Now the situation is that many Muslims believe that secularism is atheism. This happened because secular leaders did not explain secularism to the people in light of the actual teaching of Islam, and, many political leaders supporting secularism appeared as totally corrupt.

Mobarak Ali
Gopibagh, Dhaka

Debates in US election

In USA's election process, open debates take place between the presidential candidates. It gives them chance to explain their stances. While the presidential candidates speak, a panel of intellectuals and guests sit in front of the dais. There the candidates come up with their political plans. They also explain how it will be implemented and how the people will be benefited from it. The audience has the right to make every single query. The good thing is people are convinced in this transparent process.

Election is knocking at the door of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi political parties can also follow the above noted democratic practice. They must not give blurry hopes to people to get votes. If our politicians follow this practice of open debates, it will be easier for the people to cast their votes for the right candidates.

Ms. Jesmina Shanta
Executive Committee Member
Bangladesh Peace Council
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Our national leaders!

I have gone through the post editorial titled, "Stubbornness is not leadership" by Mahfuz Anam. He has described the quality of the leadership that this nation is in need at this critical juncture. We must not forget that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia became leaders by virtue of being daughter and wife of our past leaders and did not undergo the process of becoming leaders.

So, it is futile to expect any leadership from them that can salvage the nation from the present crisis created by them, more specifically by the present PM. Dr. Kamal Hossain, the pioneer team member who wrote the Bangladesh Constitution has opined that the present constitution had been mercilessly operated by AL at the wishes of the PM to realise their aim to retain power. On the other hand, to have a dialogue to find out an acceptable formula for holding the next general election, Khaleda Zia should refrain from such silly activity of celebrating her controversial birthday on national mourning day. Until now, history will remember them as two quarrelling women causing endless suffering to the people of this poor nation.

Engr. Md. Aminul Hoque
East Rampur, Dhaka

Comments on post editorial, "Is AL asking itself why it lost the latest elections?" published on August 30, 2013

Ash C.

Another super write-up by Mahfuz Anam. But why ask about only the latest elections? What about other elections AL lost since Bangladesh earned its freedom?

Ehsan Abdullah

It is really sad to see someone in the stature of Mr. Mahfuz Anam has taken the unfortunate path of partisan journalism.

agent_47

Can you please let us know which information was incorrect in the article?

Nds

I entirely agree with the observation that extreme arrogance and overblown ego of the AL leadership constitute the prime cause of the fall of its popularity.

Saif Shahid

It may be difficult to resolve the issues like Padma Bridge, stock market scam, Sonali Bank, Destiny, Rana Plaza, etc., in the few months that's left, but how about saying 'sorry' to Prof. Yunus? It could be a good start.

truthprevails53

Mr Anam is mostly right. Can he write in a similar fashion about BNP and also about the risk Jamaat brings to the nation?

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Wise people learn from grave mistakes. Our Prime Minister never goes through that way.

K Ashfaq

The observations made by the editor are relevant. These issues should be taken seriously by the party in power, but obviously they won't be bothered.