An Agenda for Change

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More than five years ago, on December 31, 2008, Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina spoke at a press conference at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in Dhaka. She was smiling and had looked confident. Her expression suited the landslide victory of her party in the parliamentary election held just two days ago. She might have understood the people's long cherished expectations as she announced, "We do not believe in politics of vengeance. We want to put an end to the politics of confrontation and present a new political culture to the nation." In the run up to the December 29, 2008 general election, her party in its electoral manifesto styled "A charter for Change" had also promised to inculcate tolerance and decency into politics and formulate, on consensus, a code of conduct for political behaviour.



Sheikh Hasina PHOTO: STAR FILE

But over the past five years the government and the party under her leadership could not deliver on the promises. There was hardly any effort to materialise the promises. So the charter for change could not change the country's confrontational political culture. Rather, it changed the AL, a party with a history of long struggle for people's voting rights, to trample on its historic glory by denying the people the right to choose their own candidate. The controversial January 5 parliamentary election put the party in the same league of the BNP and Jatiya Party for holding voter-less elections. The AL had long been blasting the BNP and Jatiya Party for their birth at the cantonment as they were founded by military rulers.

The brute majority the AL obtained in the December 29, 2008 parliamentary election made the party desperate to unilaterally abolish the election time caretaker government system, triggering a political crisis. The day the caretaker government system was abolished through the passage of the constitution's 15th amendment on June 30, 2011, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the parliament announced that her government had ensured 'empowerment of people and their democratic and voting rights' through the amendments. But by holding the one-sided January 5 election, her government has proved something rather contrary to her announcement.

In the January 5 election, the AL again won a brute majority without facing any challenge as, its archrival BNP had boycotted the polls. In the run up to this election, the AL in its election manifesto promised to forge a national consensus to keep the democratic process uninterrupted and make the new parliament effective. But the way the political situation is developing, this promise looks all set to remain confined to only words. The manner in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her colleagues in the party and the new cabinet have been blasting Khaleda Zia and her party the BNP, it will only continue to further pollute the political atmosphere, let alone forge a national consensus. If the Prime Minister sincerely wants to forge a