

BNP's 6th National Council More on restructure, thin on politics

SHAMSER M. CHOWDHURY BB

THAT the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) could finally get its much delayed 6th National Council on the road on March 19, overcoming adversity from outside and from within its own ranks, and truncated in space, is in itself an achievement of some significance. The enthusiasm among the participants had as much to do with curiosity as it had to do with rediscovery. Only time will tell how far the event went to whet their appetite. It was nevertheless a far cry from the last National Council in 2009, when exuberance among the ranks and interest among the general public was visibly overwhelming.

Personnel changes effected in the Party following the council at the centre and at divisional levels will become public soon enough, now that the chairperson has been empowered to make these changes, as is the prevailing culture with all political parties in Bangladesh. What is known for the moment though is that the number of divisional organisation secretaries and their assistants have been rationalised, although there will be twice as many vice-chairmen in the centre than in the immediate past. It can also be safely presumed that Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir will not need to 'act' as the Secretary General of the party for much longer and will be entrusted with the job full-time, at least for now. He has the unique distinction of suffering harassment from the government and humiliation from his own party in equal measure.

The 'Vision 2030' that was presented at the Council does contain elements that merit public discourse and debate. A part of it, the one on having a bi-cameral Parliament, means a fundamental structural change in the state's legislative body, and warrants serious considerations if one wants to have a truly representative legislature. It must be recalled that at the time of birth of Bangladesh as a state in 1971, 300 directly elected MPs represented a population of seventy five million. The country's population has since doubled, while the number of MPs has remained unchanged. This is most impractical and unworkable.

Most of the other ideas are pious pronouncements but well meaning.

While the 2030 vision may have been thrown up at the Council this time, it has been a work in progress over the last three years or more, unbeknownst to the party's authorised policy framers. Its architects first presented it to the chairperson in a PowerPoint presentation sometime in 2012 or 2013 in her Gulshan office late one evening, as has become the prevailing practice.

Major political parties universally institute structural changes over time. They are also expected to address the primary issues of politics, ideas and policies in order to adapt to shifting times. As things look now, the BNP's 6th Council has also tried to address structural matters, although more in terms of numbers, but the decision making process is unlikely to see any meaningful shift to a more open and inclusive format.

Mr. Abu Hena, a former BNP MP, has recently come

up with some very constructive suggestions in the media on what the Council should do, both in form and substance, if the party is serious about looking into its mid and long term prospects for reinvigorating itself. Many in the party higher ranks privately complimented Mr. Hena for his thoughts, calling them very positive, timely and sound. It is doubtful though that these would have found any readership among those who really matter in the party.

It is in the area of politics that the Council has come up seriously short and has failed to grasp changing realities and loyalty of some people in its own ranks. Its future political steps remained shrouded in near total ambiguity.

It is no secret that the ruling party and large sections of the media and the intelligentsia have been very successful in painting the BNP as a sympathiser of religious fundamentalism in the body politic of

of its agitation programme in 2015. In the same breath, she openly accused many top leadership of betrayal at this very critical juncture. That the Party recognised the use of violence as a failed policy was evident when the Council talked of 'constructive and peaceful' political programmes in the future.

True, under the present circumstances and in its weakened state, the BNP can do very little to resist the current government's continued use of the state machinery against political adversaries. It is in the area of addressing the issue of 'betrayers' that the party can do much if it wants to. Betrayal is not a new phenomenon for the BNP. It first surfaced under military dictator Ershad. However, it was during the infamous '1/11' episode that it became most blatant. During those dark days, many of its leaders took up key posts in the party as imposters in a clear expression of no confidence on the Party's leadership. Their



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Bangladesh. The thinking in the international community, especially among those who matter, is also not much different. Such perceptions can only be reinforced considering that the BNP's close alliance with, and dependence on, political forces that institutionally espouse fundamentalist politics and those that opposed the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, does not show any visible sign of weakening. The 6th Council did not even seriously address this very critical issue. It is indeed a matter of supreme irony that a political party founded by a man who played a steering role in the glorious War of Liberation from the very start should now be seen to be carrying this stigma. If the Council was expected to be a defining moment for the party's future politics, it should have clearly expressed its opposition to politics of fundamentalism and extremism in Bangladesh.

According to media reports, the chairperson blamed the government's heavy-handed response for the failure

mission having disastrously failed, the same people are now publicly bending over backwards in praise of the very same leadership in the hope of landing a plum post in the party's policymaking body. One needs to wait and see how the party leadership plans to deal with people whose commitment and reliability are at best questionable. Then there remains the question of those whom the chairperson believes betrayed the party in the challenging days of 2015.

On the eve of the 6th BNP National Council, Dr. Zafarullah Chowdhury of Gonoshastho Kendro fame, a known BNP sympathiser, had lucidly voiced serious scepticism on its outcome. He had predicted that the personnel changes will have a very, very narrow focus and there will not be much more in terms of substance.

Dr. Chowdhury was obviously looking into a crystal ball. The writer is decorated freedom fighter and a former Vice Chairman of BNP.

Healthcare cards for the poor

A laudable move

IT is heartening news that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare will distribute smart health cards among 30,000 poor families of four upazilas. This will be the first phase of what we hope, a countrywide endeavour, to provide modern healthcare services to the poorest of the poor, free of cost.

Healthcare has become one of the most expensive components of wellbeing for poor people who have to bear the same expenditure as the more privileged sections of society. With their meagre incomes that barely allow them to meet their food and rent, healthcare has become increasingly inaccessible for most poor people. The result is that many poor people just forgo going to the doctor or buying medicine even when they are severely ill, resulting in prolonged ill-health and even premature death.

The health cards that will be distributed by the ministry through an insurance company, will give medical services for fifty specified complicated diseases from district and upazilla public hospitals. According to the Ministry, a list has been prepared of who will be eligible for these cards and they include families living below the poverty level, who have no houses, land or permanent source of income.

The criteria for eligibility is fairly clear and we hope that the ministry ensures that only those who fulfill the prerequisites are given the cards and there is no scope for foul play. We also must add that it is not enough to give free healthcare to the poor if the quality of such services is not up to the mark. Public hospitals and health complexes often suffer from lack of enough doctors, medicine and medical equipment. We hope that the government, along with this laudable effort, will ensure that healthcare standards are improved.

Obama's visit to Cuba

A new era in relations

THIS is the first visit by an American president to Cuba in 88 years. We hope that this historic visit by President Obama will pave the way for the complete removal of hostility that has plagued the two nations since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The visit is groundbreaking because it was a US-led economic embargo that was imposed on the island nation since the Cuban revolution of 1959, and today it is an American president who has made the trip to meet his counterpart. The unfriendly environment that had till lately dictated relationship between the two countries was reminiscent of the Cold War that was left to fester long after its end, and it is time to move on.

That US-Cuba relations have begun to thaw is welcome news. However, the road to full normalisation of relations is dependent on a number of factors. That will depend a lot on how negotiations go between the two States, particularly on the question of political prisoners. There is a lot of opposition to the lifting of the embargo, a key demand on the Cuban side, in the US Congress that is largely controlled by Republicans.

It is perhaps too early to make predictions on what the next steps will be in terms of diplomatic overtures by either side, but the fact is that two adversaries of more than half a century have decided to leave the past behind, as made eminently clear in the words of President Obama that one cannot keep on doing the same things and expect new results.

The Ban on Bowlers

MD. RIZWANUL ISLAM

THE banning of the bowling actions of two Bangladeshi players of the national team have not only incensed millions of Bangladeshi cricket fans but even the skipper of the Bangladesh national cricket team, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. As an armchair 'cricket enthusiast', I would refrain from concentrating on the technicality of the rules involved here. However, if the snippets on social media of Mr. Mustafizur Rahman, a lawyer acting on behalf of the Bangladeshi Cricket Board (BCB), and the words of Bangladeshi skippers are taken, it would clearly seem fans' emotions cannot be dismissed as overreactions. The outrage of this event has to be assessed in a much broader context.

While ICC's actions in the last couple of years on many issues have defied fairness and have often favoured powerful cricketing nations at the expense of the less powerful ones, we need to understand that it is clearly a problem of the ineptitude of administrators of ICC, not of the Indian cricketing fans. Indeed, the ICC is a good example of the problems which follow when money talks and talks very loudly. In the not so distant past, the structure of the ICC had been fundamentally altered to give three Cricket Boards (Australia, England, and India) special privileges on no other reason but solely the revenue generated from these countries which did not only receive scathing criticism from many administrators, former players, and fans from outside the privileged three, but also many fair-minded ones from within. Indeed, the distinction between

the 'three' and the rest has made many cricket fans feel that some of the things happening within the cricketing administration are 'not just cricket'. And naturally on-field matters which would have been brushed aside or lamented as human errors, invisible (often phantom) hands have been looked for. The farce that a man deemed to be ineligible by the Indian Supreme Court to govern his own country's cricketing administration continued to be administered by the ICC, did not help its image at all.

Although it would be simplistic and unfair to brand ICC as Indian Cricket Council as some overzealous cricket fans have done in frustration, it may be fair to brand ICC as the 'International Conservative Council' or 'International Conundrum Council'. ICC's action would often speak for such branding. Only recently, the ICC's schedule for the warm-up matches for the ongoing World Twenty 20, 2016 was so ridiculously arranged that Bangladesh's matches were arranged even before the final of the Asia Cup 2016 in which Bangladesh happened to be the runners-up. Thus, the ICC not so clandestinely revealed that it did not believe that Bangladesh could reach the final of the Asia Cup. It is the beauty of the game that the so-called minnows (not to imply that Bangladesh would fit this tag) on their day can surprise even the mightiest and it is pathetic that those who do not appreciate or believe in this simple fact are entrusted to run the game globally. When many other games (the example of football would be pertinent) have expanded the participation of teams in global events, the ICC has made sure that newer entrants will be eliminated as soon as possible. The appeals of

cricketing legends such as Sachin Tendulkar on this issue have fallen on deaf ears.

The ICC should remember that money is indispensable but hankering for money and money only, at the expense of fair treatment for all cricketing nations, may disillusion many fans and kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. The chronic mismanagement of ICC has given millions of fans more than enough ammunition to be cynical about the fairness of its actions. Despite all its problems with corruption, football, a sport followed almost in all countries of the earth, has probably never been viewed by fans with so much cynicism on fairness in disciplinary matters.

For Bangladeshi fans, it is doubly dismaying that the BCB is not too well known for competent professional management (you would not have to go further than the ticketing circus bordering on scandals before important international matches held in Mirpur Stadium). In a city of hundreds of thousands of cricket lovers, the national cricket stadium has a capacity of only around 27,000 and often in many important international matches, a very high percentage of the tickets are unavailable for cricketing fans at large; this could in itself be testament to the lack of care that the BCB has for the cricket lovers of this country.

It is good that BCB is, so far, standing by the skipper and other players of the national team (albeit probably after being influenced by a strong stand by the skipper and other players of the team as would appear from the unequivocal words of the skipper). Of course, the administrators cannot

behave the way fans can. But they should take every possible action to avenge the feeling of the players within the limits of the rules. While at this stage it may be a very long shot, assuming that the BCB does not get a fair response from the ICC once the ICC's internal mechanism is exhausted, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland should not be dismissed right away. The route to CAS, like all other arbitral bodies, is contingent on the agreement between the disputing parties (here the ICC and BCB) and can be time consuming. However, administrators have to remember that cricket is not only a game to Bangladeshi fans but also a national passion and pride.

Bangladesh need not try to flex its muscle (assuming it has any) as has been done in the SCG saga in 2008 (the New Year Test/ 2nd Test of Border-Gavaskar Trophy), but no option available within the cricketing diplomacy and rules should be left unused. Again, it is also a welcome gesture that the BCB has decided to scrutinise the bowling actions more rigorously in domestic matches. After all, in this time of despondency and suspicion, we should not detract from the fact that even our players and administrators are not very sanguine about the legality of the bowling actions of Arafat Sunny. If we had been able to install a more rigorous domestic regime, this kind of a jarring situation would not have arisen in a global event. All said and done, it is still better late than never.

The writer is an Associate Professor at School of Law, BRAC University.

COMMENTS

"We expect BCB to fight our cause"
(March 21, 2016)

Upol

Don't be so upset, Mashrafe. We, all the Bangladeshis, are with you.

"Muggers kill bKash sales rep"
(March 21, 2016)

Shahnaz Parveen Songita

A lot of bKash agents have been attacked, mugged or killed lately. What kind of security measures has the bKash authority taken to protect their agents? Do they have any insurance?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Mosquito menace

I am an inhabitant of Banasree area. We have been terribly suffering from mosquito menace. It has been very difficult for us to stay at home without using the mosquito net. But it is not possible to stay inside mosquito nets all the time as people have other things to do. The City Corporation must take urgent steps to save us from this menace.
Md. Zonaid Emran
Banasree, Dhaka

Is biometric SIM registration safe?

The recent Bangladesh Bank reserve heist shows how weak cyber security in our country is. On the other hand, mobile operators are conducting biometric SIM registration under the guidelines given by the government. The question is, when the government fails to maintain security in a major financial organisation like the Bangladesh Bank, how will it protect citizens' personal information from going into wrong hands?
Belayet Hossain
On e-mail



Save the river banks of Surma

We urge the authority concerned to stop the illegal digging of soil from the banks of river Surma in the Mirerchar area of Tultigor union. Illegal digging of soil has been a lucrative business for influential people resulting in river erosion. It devours large proportion of arable land every year. A lot of people are also becoming homeless. The authorities must take tough measures against those involved in this illegal practice.
Md. M. H. Manik
Sylhet