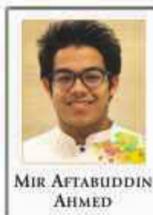


# EIGHT YEARS OF AWAMI LEAGUE RULE Bangladesh at a Political Crossroads



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

**B**ANGLADESH will be observing the eighth consecutive year of the present Awami League Government on January 5, 2017. In the last eight years, the country has witnessed

government system neither have we been vociferously demanding its restoration. Our media did not promote a crisis. Our businessmen did not advise the leadership to go for destructive politics. Our political parties created and enhanced a crisis which had absolutely nothing to do with the average Bangladeshi, and this lack of realisation, is the biggest dent to our democratic values.

Going back to the confinement of Khaleda Zia, the former Prime Minister might have expected the public to storm into the streets of Dhaka in her support. But the backdrop of this day was mired by the paralysing hartals and violent agitations of the BNP and its allies. Mind you, it was not the BNP that invented the practice of violent agitations. Again, this was a trend set forth during the Ershad-era and carried on to the post 1991 period, a trend adopted by the Awami

them in their quest towards restoring democracy? Yet almost paradoxically, we need democracy to be respected again. The Awami League, on the other hand, has consolidated its supremacy during the course of its tenure in office. It has established an ever-growing political network throughout the country. The Awami League led the political struggle which led to the formation of independent Bangladesh. This notion has been well-established. Their political progress has been assisted by the good performance of Bangladesh on the socio-economic frontier. But at the same time, many of the Awami League's actions have been detrimental to Bangladesh's democracy. For one, the harassment of Khaleda Zia and her party leaders through legal instruments and not allowing any democratic space, have not only diminished the BNP but also the AL

## Another fire disaster Take lessons from the incident

**T**HERE are many lessons that the authorities can take from the devastating fire at DCC Market in Gulshan 1 that broke out in the early morning of January 3. While we are thankful that there was no loss of life, the two-storied building blazed away for more than 16 hours destroying some 200 shops begs that some hard questions be asked as to why this happened and why it took the fire service so long to bring it under control.

The major damage to property could have been avoided if the market had a fire fighting system in place. Indeed, there was also no water pool from which fire trucks could replenish their tanks as the market blazed away through the night. We believe that had these measures been in place, the carnage could have been contained in time. It is high time that the two city corporations conducted a study on precisely how many such markets and shopping malls are in the city and whether they are adhering to fire safety standards. This can be done in conjunction with the fire service department, which has the expertise to better advise the city corporations on what provisions must be kept in such markets.

We feel too that the hundreds of proprietors and their employees who have overnight lost everything in this incident need to be rehabilitated as soon as possible. We hope they are compensated timely in earnings and let this incident serve as a reminder that cutting corners when it comes to safety issues really does not pay in the long run.

## Shoddy railway maintenance

### Scant regard for public safety

**A** story published in this newspaper on Wednesday reported how 50 percent of the wooden sleepers of a railway bridge in Kulaura upazila on Dhaka-Sylhet railway line are damaged. On top of that, the response by the authorities to this issue of public safety has been to do a slapdash job in the name of repairs.

Instead of proper replacements, authorities have used pieces of bamboo to hold together the word-out sleepers. We are confounded as to how this could ever be a proper response to the issue, especially when train drivers themselves feel that the train might derail anytime due to the poor condition of the bridge.

Sloppy repair jobs are not new. We have seen instances of this before from authorities, be it in terms of buildings or railways. The common thread is an utter disregard for human lives that are put at risk. In the case of a major railway line in the country, the negligence is all the more unpardonable.

The assurances given by staff and engineers of the bridge and Bangladesh Railway fail to convince. Shortage of sleepers or failure to get response from higher authorities are parts of the problem itself. If those are indeed factors to the poor condition of the bridge, it shows that the fault and irresponsibility is not just an isolated incident, but a reason to doubt the efficiency of the railway authority itself. We demand that this sloppy maintenance job be dealt with severely, and the lack of coordination and care on the part of the authorities be investigated. Public safety on this scale cannot be just glossed over.

impressive socio-economic development. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet have successfully enhanced the scope of the Bangladeshi economy whilst restoring Bangladesh's soft-power image internationally. The statistics and data support this. Nevertheless, uncomfortable questions have arisen regarding the state of democracy in Bangladesh. If Bangladesh is to continue in its path towards becoming a middle-income economy, the values of democracy that have diminished over the past few years, requires a major revamp in the current year.

Begum Khaleda Zia may have flaws. But nobody can question her role in the anti Ershad struggle or her defiant character. In a public rant against the Awami League regime and state organisations, the erstwhile Leader of the Opposition questioned the audacity of the law-enforcement agencies in surrounding her residence without a warrant in December 2013. When Begum Zia strode out of her car and expressed her anger towards the Government, many believed she had the sympathy, if not support, of the public. The facts remain that the Awami League Government had harassed her, cordoned her house off with the notorious sand-trucks and arrested many senior leaders of her party, prior to the January elections.

And yet how the tables have turned! Does the Awami League Government enjoy nationwide support? Surveys give indifferent responses. Who knows, maybe people do not care anymore. But then does the public have an overarching support for the BNP? The answer is no. Neither the BNP nor the Awami League enjoy the levels of popularity that they had in the past. Social media and an ever-aware population do not succumb to the rhetoric of politicians.

To judge the January 5 election of 2014 as a simple matter of right versus wrong, is in itself erroneous. The Awami League is right when it says that the election was a constitutional requirement. The BNP is right when it suggests that the day was a dent to democracy. And General Ershad's flip flopping on whether he would participate in the election or not, was in all honesty, a comical charade for the public. But what Sheikh Hasina, Begum Zia and General Ershad fail to realise is that this entire episode and its long term effects were consequences of a purely internal political issue. The public had nothing to do with it. We did not demand a scrapping of the caretaker

League and the BNP collectively. The means of violence may have changed from Logi Boithas to arson, but it is a trend whose architects are our two major political parties.



People protesting on the streets during the anti-Ershad movement.

PHOTO: DINU ALAM

Analysing BNP's brand of politics and its mistakes during the last nine years explains why the BNP is where it is today. Why should people support a party which continues to ally, for whatever reason, to a political entity, which as an organisation had opposed the very birth of our nation? Why should the public approve of a party which is seemingly losing its identity? Why should people support a party whose leader, a courageous woman and a former Prime Minister, celebrates her birthday on the death anniversary of her adversary's father, the country's founder? What democratic values have BNP adhered to in the last four years for us to support

and at the same time diminished the possibilities of inter-party collaboration. The nature of the January 5 elections was largely undemocratic. An election for the sake of holding an election, that too where no opposition or the mass public participated, did more to hurt democracy than to protect it. The country is increasingly becoming divided into ideological groups. We call these groups secularists, populists, radicals etc. The moment these groups become powerful, Bangladesh will lose the hard-earned unity we have. The killings of bloggers, the increasing growth of radicalised youth and the international growth of right-wing nationalists, serve as a warning to our political establishment.

Those, like many in the Awami League leadership, who believe in the concept of development first, then democracy, are surely mistaken. Political scientists cite

they could be firmly established. We have observed silently as the Awami League and BNP selfishly took each other on for mere personal gains, ignoring the plight of the common man. Bangladesh is at the height of its economic progress, a process for which both the Awami League and BNP deserve credit. More than ever before, Bangladesh needs its political leadership to rise to the occasion. The initiation of electoral-related dialogue by President Abdul Hamid is a positive sign. Let us celebrate democracy, and the values it represents. If we do not, then Bangladesh's developmental achievements may very well be overshadowed by the ever-increasing internal socio-political concerns, concerns which, if history is correct, will have grave, long term consequences.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Free hostels from student politics

Most government universities and many colleges have residential facilities. Students who come from less privileged backgrounds have to live in university hostels. But unfortunately, a lot of meritorious students cannot avail the facilities because political goons control the distribution of seats. In some hostels, a large number of students are forced to live in one room, which badly affects the quality of life of students. On other campuses, students have to take shelter in the corridors. Besides, a lot of students are sometimes harassed by "student leaders." Universities and colleges are seats of learning. Future leaders are made in these institutions. Students have a right to access residential facilities of educational institutions without being subject to harassment by political leaders. Much has been said and written about the topic but the authorities seem to have turned a blind eye to the situation. We urge the authorities to free hostel seats from the so called student politics and ensure that seats are distributed on the basis of merit and need, and not political orientation.

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# Flaws of demonetisation: Lessons from India's experience

SHREEKANT SHARMA and CHATURBHUJA BARIK

**T**HE saying goes "a wise man learns by the mistakes of others". Many countries may go for demonetisation in near future looking at the success of India in curbing fake notes circulation and curtailing black money. Demonetisation in the short run would slow down aggregate demand but as Prime Minister Modi says, it's a cleaning process for the economy for establishing faith and fear in the society. The impact of demonetisation in India is too early to be assessed. But certainly loopholes in the implementation are clearly visible. The experience in India suggests that if demonetised currency's exchange and deposit mechanism is not planned and monitored properly, the whole exercise would turn futile.

Demonetisation is a process of removing the legal tender status of any banknote; generally, high value currencies of a particular denomination are taken out from the financial system of a country. The same volume, or usually less than that volume of currency, is again introduced into the market through banks. Before implementation of demonetisation plan, various factors are considered such as level of literacy, extent of mobile and internet penetration, availability of new financial transaction and banking technologies, political strength of the government i.e. majority in case of democracy, extent of coverage of unique identification number or tax identification number, size of population and extent of penetration of financial system in the country.

In India, prior to this bold step, financial inclusion was targeted by Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana in which Rupay debit cards were distributed. Internet banking, mobile wallets, and unified payment interface were encouraged. Income declaration scheme was also launched in which an opportunity was given to citizens who have not paid full taxes in the past, to declare their undisclosed income and pay tax, surcharge and penalty of about 45 percent undisclosed income declared. Similarly, other financial sector reforms like Benami Transactions (Prohibition) Bill was also passed, which prohibits a person to pay and own property in another person's name. The planning of demonetisation has to be done in a very secretive manner and its declaration has to be sudden, giving almost no time to the black money hoarders to act. The new banknote has to have

many unique features with the help of new technologies, making it quite impossible to be duplicated. These features should be well publicised soon after the launch through reliable media sources, along with different methods of cashless transactions. The new currencies should be stocked in sufficient amount by the central bank and made available as per the bank's requirements. In India, a private bank was alleged to have provided undue advantage in converting the demonetised banknotes with new ones, hence, a day to day basis monitoring by central bank could discourage such cases. After the declaration of demonetisation the old banknotes could be either exchanged or deposited. Exchange of old banknotes by new banknotes is important when



banknote demonetised is of very high volume to allow flow of cash in the market. As far as deposits are concerned, there need not be any restrictions to the amount deposited, which can later on be reported to the income tax department. But this process is not as simple as it seems. The government of India realised it and made some interim corrections in the implementation. But by then some clever big fishes were already out of the net. These flaws should not be repeated by other economies.

Firstly, as the cash in hand is limited for a particular individual or entity at the time of demonetisation and as there are no further possibilities of getting cash in future, banknotes are no longer exchanged in the mar-

ket. Hence, multiple deposits options should not be given to an individual or entity. Government can still have a liberal approach by allowing deposit of limited amounts for the second or third chance. But withdrawal has to be strictly monitored and a limited amount must be allowed for withdrawal per week. Furthermore, the government should take details of deposits made by asking depositors to first report to tax authorities about their demonetised cash in hand and, thereafter, deposit them in banks. Banks can also directly give such details to the income tax department. Secondly, currency exchange is a method in which all money goes unaccounted; hence, a limit in this is a must. The state should allow only one type of photo identification card (as proof) such UID or social security number to facilitate exchange. While exchanging banknotes, identification number is fed into the software and limited repetitions are allowed for an individual. Ink mark used during elections can also be used with prior permission from the election commission. Thirdly, after tackling the above loopholes, black money hoarders could still split their black money in smaller accounts. They might open new bank accounts or deposit in other bank accounts. Therefore, all new accounts opened during this period should be thoroughly monitored and Know Your Customer (KYC) norms should be strictly followed. To demotivate lower income groups from indulging in any fraudulent practices (such as allowing their accounts to be used by others), a guideline can be issued stating that those people involved in illegal activities of serving black money hoarders to convert demonetised banknotes to new banknotes would be devoid of social security benefits. Some relaxation in the implementation could be provided for hospitals, tourists, travels, and for buying other essential commodities. The task of demonetising 86 percent of currency was not easy. Holidays and leaves of bank employees were cancelled. The government worked on war footing with multiple police and income tax raids. The bullion and foreign exchange dealers were strictly monitored. It was termed as "surgical strike against corruption".

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