

In quest of an acceptable polls-time government



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THE ruling Awami League's proposals for limiting the jurisdiction of the election-time government to carrying out only a routine job has now paved the

ground for discussion to resolve the current political deadlock over the mode of the polls time government ahead of the next parliamentary election.

This proposal reminds us of the jurisdiction of the election time non-partisan caretaker government system, which was abolished in 2011.

Constitutionally introduced in 1996, the caretaker government would form after the tenure of a government had expired. It had jurisdiction only to carry out routine jobs. Its main functions were to provide the Election Commission with all sorts of assistance to hold free and fair parliamentary elections.

The proposal placed by the AL to President Abdul Hamid on Wednesday during the talks over the formation of new EC will give the AL-led government a character of a caretaker government, though a partisan one. It will refrain from making any policy decision. Its main job will be assisting the EC to hold a free and fair parliamentary election.

Political analysts have lauded the proposals and said it was "a breakthrough" in the prevailing political deadlock. The proposals also indicate that the ruling AL has changed its mind. An example will make it clearer.

Three years ago, a delegation of eminent citizens including Dr Kamal Hossain and Dr Akbar Ali Khan met President Abdul Hamid and proposed limiting the prime minister's powers to overrule ministers' decisions in order to have the BNP join the polls-time government and contest the parliamentary election.

At the meeting with the president on November 26, 2013, they opined that this could be done by amending the government's rules of business, which would be effective only for the interim

cabinet. And it would still be in conformity with the constitution, said meeting sources citing the proposal.

The rules of business now give the PM unlimited powers to override any decisions of the cabinet members. The eminent citizens observed that the provision might prevent the BNP from joining the polls-time government led by Hasina.

The delegation thought the BNP might think even if it gets the desired ministries in the interim government, this provision would allow the PM to overrule any decisions of BNP ministers.

They came up with the proposals amid a growing political turmoil centring the parliamentary election scheduled for January 2014. The political crisis prevailed following cancellation of non-partisan election time caretaker government by the AL-led government in 2011 through constitution amendments. The constitutional amendments allowed the then ruling Awami League to stay in power during the 2014 parliamentary election. The BNP-led alliance vehemently opposed the cancellation of the caretaker government and demanded its restoration. It also refused to join the polls while the AL remained in power.

The AL was adamant not to restore the caretaker system. Then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina however proposed the formation of an all-party election time cabinet and offered BNP to join it and take the ministerial portfolios of their choices. But BNP leaders refused the offer. In defence of refusing the PM's offer, some of the BNP-led alliance leaders referred to the MP's absolute powers to overrule any decision of the ministers. Against this backdrop, the eminent citizens proposed for limiting the prime minister's powers and sought the president's intervention to break the political deadlock.

Their proposals were however not welcomed by the prime minister then. Next day, on November 27, 2013, she criticised them and questioned their neutrality too. The move made by the eminent citizens did not see the light of day. Political deadlock remained unresolved. The January 5 election was held amid a boycott by the BNP-led

alliance. AL got an easy win.

The crisis remains unresolved till date. With the next parliamentary election coming nearer, the issue of the mode of the election time government has started dominating the political landscape as the BNP is still demanding for a neutral election time administration.

After three years, the AL came up with the proposal to limit the jurisdiction of not only the prime minister, but the entire cabinet. In addition, it also proposed for empowering the EC with supervising authority over the administration, law enforcement agencies and all other departments engaged in the election process.

Some important things now need to be settled in light of the AL's proposals. How will the polls time cabinet be formed? How many ministers will be needed to run the interim government during the polls? Only the chief advisor and 10 more advisors were able to lead the election time caretaker government. Will the BNP be invited to nominate some of its leaders to join the polls time government as was offered by Hasina in 2013? BNP has no participation in the parliament. Yet, constitutional provision allows a non-MP to be a minister.

What will be the fate of the current parliament during the next election? The constitutional provisions allow present MPs to remain in office when they will seek re-election in the next polls. They were in offices during the last parliamentary election. But it may appear as an obstacle to create a level playing field for all contestants in a competitive polls. To resolve this problem, we may follow the system in other countries practising parliamentary democracy. Countries like the UK, birthplace of the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy, New Zealand, Australia and Canada go to general elections through dissolving their parliaments. India is the only exception. Over the past 60 years, it has held 15 general elections. Of them, parliament, popularly known as Lok Sabha, existed during the general election on eight occasions. Sometimes parliament was dissolved after the election process had begun.

The electoral code of conduct for political parties and candidates need to be reformed. Here the model code of conduct in India may help us to draft the reform proposals. The model code of conduct allows political parties to criticise the opponents' policies and programmes, past record and work. The use of indecent words to launch personal attacks and undermine others socially and politically is prohibited.

The code of conduct also imposed restrictions on the party in power. According to it, ministers must not combine official visits with election work or use official machinery for the same. The party must avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for publicity on achievements to improve chances of victory in the elections. Ministers and other authorities must not announce any financial grants, or promise any construction of roads, provision of drinking water, etc. Other parties must be allowed to use public spaces and rest houses and these must not be monopolised by the party in power.

Now, BNP should come up with an open mind to discuss the AL's proposals. Remaining rigid to the demand for non-partisan caretaker government will contribute nothing to resolve the political deadlock. Civil society organisations may work on the proposals and should come up with proposals how to supplement the ruling party's proposals. The ruling AL expressed its willingness to move away from the notion of a political government to a more neutral government during elections.

We all should explore ways and means to make the move a success. In many countries practicing parliamentary democracy, the outgoing governments turn into polls time caretaker governments. Why won't we be able to do the same? Political good will can turn any impossible into the possible. Our political parties now need to demonstrate their good will to pave the ground for making the next parliamentary election participatory, free and fair.

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Why more private universities?

Authorities do not seem to be serious about quality

WE are at a loss as to why the University Grants Commission (UGC) is granting permission for the establishment of an additional 16 private universities, especially at a time when the quality of education in most of the existing 95 such institutions is suspect. By the UGC's own observations, 42 of the 95 have no Vice Chancellors, 62 have no pro-VC and a massive 52 have no treasurer! Then of course, some 12 of the 95 universities have no dedicated campus, a prerequisite of the Private University Act 2010.

Given such gross anomalies with which many of these highest seats of learning are operating and the inability or unwillingness of the UGC to enforce the Act, what are the grounds for granting permission for more of the same? The more than 450,000 students who are enrolled in private universities face an uncertain future with the "degrees" that they earn. With the exception of a handful of private universities, the bulk of these institutions have mushroomed in all parts of the country with little to show in way of governance or quality in terms of the education they impart.

The only rational explanation for such great enthusiasm for setting up a university is of course commercial; that we have essentially transformed education into a moneymaking machine is obvious even to a blind man. Successive governments have given approval for an abnormal number of private universities which are both understaffed and that have failed to meet standards set by legislation passed to oversee quality of education. We find this latest move a step in the wrong direction and authorities should focus more on streamlining the quality of education in the existing private universities before embarking on granting more licenses for universities in the private sector.

A good initiative on paper

Follow through with the idea

THE Dhaka South City Corporation's (DSCC) decision to remove hawkers from the roads and footpaths of Gulistan and its adjacent areas during working hours, for the safe passage of pedestrians, is welcome. If done correctly, we believe that the initiative would benefit everyone. The hawkers would, of course, need to be rehabilitated and it seems that the DSCC has also recognised that. And in line with that, the DSCC has decided to allow hawkers to run their businesses at selected spots on workdays from 6:30pm onwards and at all times on Fridays. Such arrangements should be made regarding all our footpaths.

The DSCC, with the help of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), has made a list of 2,500 hawkers and will hand out identity cards to them for the purpose of rehabilitation which is heartening. According to the DSCC Mayor, legal steps will also be taken against linemen who extort the hawkers and cause further problems to arise.

And this is where the DSCC and the DMP will face their biggest challenge. Because as encouraging as the initiative may seem, what is most important is for it to be followed through. The DSCC, with the help of the DMP, must ensure that the initiative does not fall flat and that neither hawkers nor linemen or other extortionists are allowed to have it their way in return for handing out bribes to those involved with it.

The strategy that has been presented by the DSCC does seem encouraging for the time being. However, what we want to see is for it to be implemented sincerely and in a way that is most beneficial to all.

TPP's demise sounds no death knell



NGUYEN HAI VAN

THE final doomsday countdown has begun for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Donald Trump will take the oath to become the 45th President of the United States

in one week, on January 20, 2017. In an announcement that sent shock waves across the world, the President-elect had said on November 21, 2016, that on his very first day in office, he would kill the agreement that 12 nations had negotiated for years.

Without its major driving force, the US, as a member, the trade pact, said to be the biggest ever breakthrough in global trade liberalisation, simply cannot pull its weight.

Under the agreement's rules, the TPP can only come into force if it is ratified by at least six members representing 85 percent of the group's combined GDP. By itself, the US accounts for nearly 60 percent of the group's GDP.

Trump, essentially a businessman and a hawkish "America first" advocate, had repeatedly slammed TPP for not giving the US any direct and profound economy-wide benefits and taking away jobs from American people.

However, January 20 is yet to come and it may be too soon to pronounce the TPP dead, because it remains uncertain if Trump meant he could do it or he would do it.

If some trade experts or even politicians are still clinging to hopes that the landmark pact, combining 36 percent of world GDP, can be brought back to the negotiation table, there is no need to call them delusional.

Stranger things have happened. Just look at how things unfolded during the 2016 US Election. At the outset, not many people gave Trump even an outside chance at being the US President. Now he is on the verge of being sworn in.

Trump may reconsider his own TPP decision because perspectives are different from the driver's seat of the US economy. He has to consider not just foreseeable economic benefits but the merits and demerits of his country's global trade leadership role in the years to come.

Anyway, here in Viet Nam, a TPP member long hyped as its largest beneficiary, the agreement is no longer an issue of major concern. The focus is on how trade liberalisation will move in the coming months and years, with or without the US, and what the new

directions are for smaller TPP members, especially export-driven economies like Viet Nam.

Not devastating
 For all the touted benefits, the TPP's collapse is not likely to be devastating for its member nations, fortunately.

"Do not expect any dramatic economic consequences from TPP's demise" said Stephen Olson, a scholar at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

"Trade is already open and flowing at robust levels amongst many TPP partners and that will continue."

According to the Asian Development Bank, from 2000 onwards, nearly 100 new free trade agreements (FTAs) have been signed in the Asian region alone. Within the TPP group, the game leader - the US - has FTAs in place with 6 of its 11 members.

Viet Nam, a comparatively small

larger markets encourage businesses to exploit gains from global specialisation and develop value chains.

"TPP's dissolution may cause some fluctuations in the global market, but it definitely can't reverse the free trade trend. Free trade will remain the mainstream (form of) economic cooperation in the world," he said.

His observations seem to match what the 11 remaining TPP signatories have been doing over the last couple of months.

Following Trump's statement, there have been clear signals that TPP members in Asia are shifting their attention to other trade opportunities. The Regional Cooperation Economic Partnership (RCEP), a proposed trade initiative including the 10 ASEAN members plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand, has been most talked about recently.



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economy, has signed 12 FTAs with powerful economic blocs like the EU, and with large economies like Japan and South Korea.

Prominent economist Võ Trí Thành, chairman of Vietnam's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 2017's organising committee, said: "TPP's demise is disappointing, but with or without TPP, the global trade liberalisation trend is irresistible.

"I think it is human nature to be eager to explore new things, learn new ways and get connected. In business, the production and trade capacity of each country is so huge and diverse it can't satisfy its own demand without international trade connectivity," he added.

Thành said the benefits of free trade's lower tariffs, better connectivity and

Negotiations on RCEP started in 2012 and 16 rounds have been completed so far, covering trade in goods and services, competition policies and dispute settlement, among other things. Even though some economists have said RCEP does not match TPP in terms of the level of liberalisation, it is now an alternative choice for many TPP members.

If adopted, RCEP would be the largest free trade bloc in the world, accounting for 40 percent of global trade and 45 percent of the world's population with a combined GDP of USD 22 trillion.

Reforms will continue

When one country is said to benefit most from a pact, it also stands to lose the most from its demise, and several experts have remarked on this fact.

But a spectre of gloom, with falling foreign investment and limited export

markets, is uncalled for.

"With or without TPP, the Vietnamese economy will stay on a positive note because all the preparatory work and reforms in the lead up to TPP have been underway, leading to new, positive changes beneficial to the business community and national sustainable development," Thành said.

Over the last three months, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuân Phúc has consistently sent out a firm message in response to people's concerns about TPP: "With or without TPP, we will move on with our open-door policy and our ongoing reform process."

Those who are familiar with Vietnamese politics know that the country's independent open policy is not a newfound thing, but a consistent pursuit for the last 30 years.

Viet Nam has entered into trade agreements with 55 nations. It is currently home to 21,666 FDI projects worth USD 293 billion, with investors from more than 100 different countries.

Its enthusiastic involvement in the TPP negotiation process over the last 7 years and its readiness to verify the agreement signals its strong commitment to international integration and trade liberalisation.

But one additional fact can be highlighted here. Viet Nam is also one of the first TPP members that put the agreement's ratification on hold, even before Trump's video statement was released. This caution shows Viet Nam's adaptability and flexibility to global fluctuations.

Over thousands of years, Viet Nam has faced unexpected situations galore, and it has always managed to land on its feet. The "secret" is traditional - adaptation. As a Vietnamese saying goes: "O bau thi tron, o ong thi dai" (Live in a gourd, you grow round. Live in a tube, you grow long).

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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To Bangladesh Railway

Death is inevitable; no one will live forever. We have to accept it, but untimely deaths due to accidents are very hard to accept. Often we hear about road accidents in which many lives are lost. Most of them happen from sheer negligence. Faulty vehicles and inexperienced drivers are responsible for those. On January 8, 2017 a tragic incident happened at a level crossing in Gazipur, in which two mothers and their three kids died horribly when their car was smashed when it was hit by a train over the unmanned Shonakhali level crossing in Kaliakor. The driver of the car also shared the same fate.

We offer our condolences for the bereaved families. May the departed souls rest in peace.

The question remains why this sort of accidents happens and what is the Bangladesh Railway doing? We want to know why level crossings remain unmanned. We do not want to hear any excuses. The government must take steps so that in the future people will be able to pass level crossings without any mishaps.

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