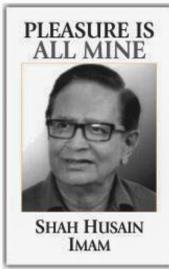


Change of style or substance?



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WITH at least 27 new faces and only a few septuagenarians around, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was greeted on her re-election to a record fourth term at Gono Bhaban on Tuesday. The air, supposed to have been rent with elation, even perhaps jubilation, was anything but filled with triumphalism. The PM sounded like driving home a trifle stern message to the newly inducted ministers, state ministers, deputy ministers with the members of the AL central executive committee and party presidium members present. She told them to be "careful," for they would always be under the purview of surveillance and under her watch. "No matter what, I would get to know about it," she added on an apparently tone-setting note.

She was "grooming new leadership for the AL's future," she said, marking a relay race of changing batons in which each was required to prove equal to his/her new slot—nothing to be miffed about, the old generation yielding place to the new! Sheikh Hasina comes across as politically astute taking a calculated risk with a bit of a rider, apparently countervailing, clause. In the first place she seemed to convey that people of her family, in the extended sense, were given nominations for



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, stepping into a record fourth term as prime minister of the country, has formed a cabinet with many new faces, dropping 34 members of the previous cabinet in a surprise move.

With the economy firmly on the trajectory of becoming the 24th largest economy of the world by 2033 to the credit of the AL government, forward-looking matching governance is the need of the hour.

election to be MPs alright; but avoided taking them into the Cabinet diluting any dynastic association. Secondly, this principle along with intent to set aside ministers who had served two terms enabled her to ease off many old guards in a blanket fashion. But let's not forget the PM commiserated with those seniors who didn't find place in the Cabinet. Recognising their services to have contributed to the uplift of Bangladesh, the PM counselled the new team to remember they have not failed.

Yet, keeping alliance partners from ministerial positions has come as a stunner, streaking a ripple in

the placid water of Dhaka politics. At any rate, the AL general secretary Obaidul Quader defended party position post-haste that the alliance was not contingent upon granting ministerial slots to partners. The other old guards who have been passed over as well as the dropped alliance partners have to wait for Cabinet reshuffles down the line, a normal course of events in politics at which the AL general secretary subliminally hinted. The new entrants to ministerial portfolios, however, are no greenhorns because they have risen through a bottom-up process, and are mostly above 50 years of age. Protagonists say they bring to bear a "clean image" on the Cabinet. So if they mean business as they should, many people would like to believe they must distance themselves from sycophants, fair weather birds and pressure groups who hinder effective time management and deflect the ministerial focus on pro-people agendas.

By way of morning showing the day, the large new team, instead of riding a cavalcade of 50-60 cars to the Savar Memorial, the much-revered resting place of the Father of the Nation, used buses. Even the motorcycle ride on a pillion by a state minister who, on a correctional thought, did not forget to put on a helmet later on during the journey, would have, one hoped, marked a symbolic departure from the VIP culture that pervades our democracy. This gesture, even though symbolic, and expected to be replicated deep into the layers of governance and delivery of public services, I would venture to say, belies Milton Friedman's famous quote: "Governments never learn.

Only people learn." There are other quotes to convey public expectations. Plato said, "Democracy is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a kind of quality to equals and unequals alike" (*The Republic*).

"The pleasure of serving must be exquisite if we may judge from the vast majority who are eager to be concerned with it," Voltaire mused.

David Hume, in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, said, "Nothing appears more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few."

Since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is taking a long-term view, people want her to strengthen the state institutions on the bedrock of a system of checks and balances.

Meanwhile, let's commute with relative ease and safety, be rid of violence against women and corruption, and be assured recipients of efficient service deliveries—all under the stepped-up watch of the new government. These governance issues are the closest to the hearts of the people. With the economy firmly on the trajectory of becoming the 24th largest economy of the world by 2033 to the credit of the AL government, forward-looking matching governance is the need of the hour.

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How did Rohingyas get Bangladeshi passports?

Undermines our image and security

AS reported by the domestic and international media, dozens of stateless Rohingya individuals are being deported to Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia. They allegedly went to the country with Bangladeshi passports, which they had obtained from smugglers who manufactured fake or counterfeit documents for them. Some of them are now being sent to Bangladesh, having spent years languishing in jail, while some others still remaining there.

While Rohingyas are Myanmar's nationals by birth, the Saudi authorities have sent them to Bangladesh because they were carrying Bangladeshi passports.

The fact that foreigners have been able to obtain Bangladeshi passports so easily and even go abroad exposes the lacuna in the scrutiny process which poses a threat to our national security.

According to Henley Passport Index published recently, Bangladesh's passport has been ranked 97th in a tally of 190 nations. Ensuring a robust scrutiny process for those seeking to obtain passports will alleviate the concerns of many developed countries. In the process, citizens of Bangladesh will enjoy better chances of securing employment abroad, admission in foreign educational institutions and face less harassment at the hands of foreign authorities.

At a time when Bangladesh is attaining solid economic growth and is expected to become one of the 25 largest economies in the world by 2033, it's imperative that we focus on brightening our image on the global stage. And, ensuring that the loopholes in issuing passports, which obviously exist as evident from this incident, are plugged, should be top priority.

Public consultation a must for Delta Plan 2100

No one wants it to suffer the DAP fate

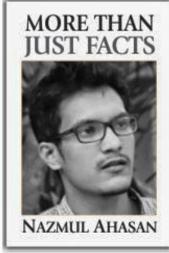
A two-day conference jointly organised by Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) and Bangladesh Environmental Network (BEN) is to start from January 11 bringing together environmental experts to inform the public about the government's long-term strategy Delta Plan 2100 and point out its strengths and weaknesses. The Delta Plan focuses on the management of the deltas and the implementation of delta-related interventions, both old and new, which will eventually see budgetary allocations up to 2.5 percent of GDP per annum by 2030 (with 2 percent coming from public funding and 0.5 percent from the private sector).

There are some 80 projects, 65 of which are physical and 15 of which are institutional and knowledge development. Environmentalists fear that unless there is room for public debate and extensive involvement of various stakeholder groups (outside of the departments and ministries of the government), the Delta Plan 2100 may end up like the Detailed Area Plan (DAP).

With DAP, our experience was less than satisfactory. The final formulation of DAP was far removed from the original plan because business interest groups were allowed to get control over the process. DAP ended up being a plan that ignored the years of hard work and numerous inputs from experts.

The Delta Plan 2100 is of far greater importance than DAP as the projects and interventions being envisaged affect the whole country and not just one city. If we fall into the same pattern of ignoring public and expert opinion (as had been the case of DAP), and cut corners here and there to ignore the environmental safeguards and simply accommodate the views of powerful interest groups, we may end up doing more harm than good. We believe that lessons need to be learnt from the DAP experience so that the Delta Plan 2100 can be made a success to truly benefit the country.

Choking social media is not the answer



MORE THAN JUST FACTS
NAZMUL AHASAN

IT'S common knowledge that many opposition candidates were unable to campaign for themselves in the recently concluded elections due to several

constraints unfairly imposed upon them. Denied space offline, the opposition devoted much of its resources online in a bid to reach out to voters.

In contrast to highly tilted campaigning favouring the ruling coalition seen on the ground, social media was more vibrant, abuzz with numerous posts, opposing or favouring a certain policy or party. Many influential Facebook users, with hundreds of thousands of followers, took a particular side. Ruling party sympathisers utilised

has plagued social media, which is arguably one of the last few avenues for people to express their opinion freely. Not just people with strong political views, but even those who simply want to express grievances about a particular issue are using carefully crafted sentences, lest their wording evokes the ire of the powerful.

The extent to which people are exercising self-censorship on social media is extraordinary. And, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the palpable climate of fear is largely the result of actions by the government such as enacting draconian laws, going after noted critics and political opponents, using prosecution as a means of harassing people, and paving the way for greater surveillance.

But does suppression really work? Years of a heavy-handed approach towards dissent could not prevent protests for seemingly mundane issues such as road safety and quota in government jobs. Does this mean more intense and repressive techniques

them when they refused to vacate the streets. In its defence, the government argued that "rumours" and "fake news" fomented the protests and that it needed to intervene to restore order.

Such a notion was justified to an extent, but what the government failed to see was that the spreading of "rumours" and "fake news" was the direct result of its heavy-handed approach towards dissenting, independent voices.

The road safety protest for example was largely peaceful until August 4. Two days earlier, the police had filed cases against 29 people and news websites, accusing them of inciting protests. A warning letter was delivered to Ekattor TV by the information ministry for its coverage—a move that sent a message to other media outlets.

On August 4, the government shut down or significantly downgraded mobile internet service and threatened to block Facebook. The home minister warned that if protesting schoolchildren

in wild rumours.

The more the government was perceived to be trying to suppress something, the more people became curious about it. This made for a perfect situation for some opportunists to spread wild rumours, further whipping up the protests. In contrast, had the government allowed the press to operate independently, the people's trust in the media, in general, wouldn't have eroded and the media would have been able to debunk fake reports.

There were similar experiences during the Tahrir uprising (or Arab Spring) in Egypt, one of the earliest and most prominent examples of social media-inspired protests. The largely peaceful demonstration turned violent when the authorities blocked Facebook and Twitter and began trying to curb it. Suppressing the means of communication does not only create suspicion but also induces fear, the mixture of which makes people more receptive of materials which they would otherwise have laughed off as made up.

The answer to public agitation or anger does not lie in severing modes of communication or disrupting the flow of information. As seen in the quota protest, what is needed is a sensible and reconciliatory approach by the authorities to alleviate the protesters' concerns. When the students were asked by the authorities to sit at the discussion table, they postponed their protest out of respect. When the government, albeit grudgingly, accepted their demands, not only did the students halt their protests but also congratulated the authorities.

Choking social media shouldn't be the approach to deal with those who hold different views. Such a move points towards a willingness to restrain people from voicing their opinions freely, and what that does in turn is foster even more resentment and anger among the public. Peaceful public protests and political expression on social media are well within the periphery of one's constitutional rights. Stifling online expression forces people to exercise self-censorship—which many, including journalists, have begun to do—and also cuts off the channels through which the government could have known about people's real grievances.

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social media to publicise the successes of the government and denounce the opposition for its past records. On the other hand, those supporting the opposition had to choose their words very carefully. Many vocal, prominent opposition supporters were those who live abroad or have resorted to using pseudonyms. Over the years, the fear of reprisals

would have worked? Obviously not.

Both the major protests that the previous administration had to face were organised through Facebook. Students created Facebook groups which attracted hundreds of thousands of users, many of whom were motivated enough to turn up in offline protests.

While the government initially acknowledged the protesters' grievances, it later cracked down on

"crossed the limit" he would be compelled to take action.

Journalists and photographers covering the event were particular targets of goons believed to have ties with the ruling party. As such, there was a widespread perception that the mainstream media was blacking out the protests and wasn't reporting the real situation. That is when the protesters and the public began to find credence

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A moment of introspection

It was early in the morning. I was in a bit of a rush to catch my university-bound bus. I suddenly noticed a man, likely in his mid-twenties, lying on the street. It looked like he had an accident or he was suffering from a bad physical ailment. He looked unkempt—he wasn't wearing sandals or shoes, his faded trousers had dust all over and his shirt unbuttoned. Most of his upper body was exposed to the cold.

Waiting on the roadside, I could clearly hear him struggling to breathe from a distance of almost 20 feet. I was wondering why no one was coming to his aid and whether I should go and offer him assistance.

Then, all of a sudden, a local resident passing by called him a "bloody thief." I was taken aback by this hurtful comment but later realised that the man lying on the ground had perhaps mugged someone and a mob might have beaten him up. I did not want to pass judgement on him, or anyone else. Maybe he indeed was a thief, but shouldn't we also consider what forced him to choose this path of crime in the first place?

This seemingly casual encounter made me realise a number of things. First, we should reflect on why some people resort to committing petty crimes in the first place, and treat people living on the streets with kindness and empathy. Second, the government needs to be much more committed to uplifting these people from a life of poverty and insecurity.

Umme Habiba Mimuna, By email