

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



The New Bangladesh Government: The Road Ahead

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Introduction

29 December 2008 was a watershed in Bangladesh's democratic evolution. In the elections that have been called historic, the Awami League-led Grand Alliance or Mohajote swept the national polls. Following an overwhelming victory, its leader, Sheikh Hasina, was sworn in on 6 January 2009 as Prime Minister of this nation of 147 million people. There could be few better examples to underscore this point than the Shakespearean quote that "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." She was immediately confronted with challenges that were legion, including a bloody mutiny among border guards. The future of democracy of the vast populace, impoverished yet filled with promise, will depend on her ability to tackle these issues successfully.

Bangladesh Society

To comprehend the backdrop to these challenges, it may be worthwhile delving a bit into the nation's history. Its nearly 38 years of existence in the form of an independent country was preceded by centuries of presence as a cultural entity. In the past, Greater Bengal, comprising current Bangladesh and West Bengal, which is now a part of the Indian Union, gave birth to progressive ideas and ideals that often led Indian thought processes. Early in the 20th Century, Indian politician, G. K. Gokhale, famously remarked, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow".

The Bengali literary renaissance that occurred in the 19th Century moulded the 'protestant' or 'argumentative' intellectual heritage of contemporary Bangladesh. The Bengali intelligentsia, often called the *bhadralok* (literally meaning gentle-folk), not a class in a Marxian sense because they were unrelated to the processes of production but rather more of a Weberian status-group, challenged the existing mores by refusing to accept as incontrovertible truth whatever they heard at the feet of the guru (they also have been accused by some of cosying up to the British Raj as collaborators). They were intensely critical and Socratic in their mental make-up and would be in total agreement with Aristotle's retort vis-à-vis his mentor, Amicus Plato. Aristotle said, "sed magis amica veritas" meaning "Dear is Plato, but dearer

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He was the Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh from 2007 to 2009. He can be reached at isasiac@nus.edu.sg.

still is the truth.” They were the forerunners of the extremely vibrant middle-class and civil society of today’s Bangladesh that every government in that country has had to contend with. Bangladesh, earlier called East Bengal between the Partition of India in 1947 and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1956, and, thereafter, East Pakistan, became independent following the Liberation War in 1971. Since then, it has been a kaleidoscope of social and political transformation. It had tried several experiments in terms of political systems, ultimately settling for Bengal’s old love, the Westminster Model (albeit a single-chamber Bangladeshi variant). Behind these periodic shifts in political experimentation was the insatiable resolve of the Bangladeshis for a just and equitable social order. It is said that the Bangladeshis never fear to change, nor do they change out of fear. It is their will to change, fed by their penchant for perfection, that render them, as some would describe with a modicum of truth, as such a volatile society.

Over the past decades, the urges of the intelligentsia have been reflected in the nation’s famous civil society – in non-governmental organisations that have earned such global renown. Institutions such as Mohammed Yunus’ Grameen Bank and Fazle Hasan Abed’s BRAC, along with many others of their ilk, have become agents of social transformation. They have been instrumental in the fight against poverty and social injustice. They have become a source of inspiration throughout the developing world where they are being copied. Indeed, many parts of the world are now marching to tunes first piped in Bangladesh.

These efforts have rendered Bangladesh a success story in poverty-alleviation. In fact, Bangladesh is on track towards halving extreme poverty by 2015 in consonance with the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. These also have had a unique role in women’s empowerment. Women, through micro-credit and non-formal education, have become mainstreamed in the socio-cultural ethos. This has helped to keep at bay fundamentalism and extremism, including terrorism. These twin dark forces of the present times, fundamentalism and terrorism, have been marginalised and have been held in check, not by police action or by diktat of the state from above, or pressure from outside but by indigenously-spawned social changes from within and below. The World Bank has called it Bangladesh’s ‘Silent Revolution’.

Bangladesh Politics

Alas, these positive elements have not found reflection in the politics of the country. For starters, there exists a profound mistrust between the political parties, particularly between the two major ones, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), and their two leaders, Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia respectively. It was due to this reason that, in 1996, the Constitution was amended to incorporate the concept of the ‘neutral, non-party, caretaker government’. It is to hold office in the interim period between two governments and make for the transition of power through the holding of elections, as no party believe another of its kind would or could hold polls that are free, fair and credible.

Although the system twice worked acceptably (1996 and 2001), and with diminishing effectivity the third time round in 2006-2007, it has clearly not been very successful. Over time, incumbent governments have allegedly sought to manipulate the system by placing ‘sympathisers’ in key positions before the transfer of power to the caretakers. It was such a perception that led the Awami League to announce the boycott of elections scheduled for 22 January 2007. Violence threatened to erupt all over the country. After some hiccups, the result was what is now popularly known as ‘1/11’. A caretaker government, led by Dr

Fakhruddin Ahmed and backed by the military, assumed power in January 2007. It extended its own term to two years, the time-frame required by the Election Commission to prepare fresh electoral rolls and undertake other necessary measures. It was this government that ultimately organised the elections of 29 December 2008 that brought Prime Minister Hasina and the Mohajote to office.

The Road Ahead

The new government is generally seen as secularistic and modernising. In fact, one of its election slogans was 'Digital Bangladesh'. The road ahead for Prime Minister Hasina's government is fraught with multiple challenges. Some key ones are discussed here. These are not placed in any taxonomic pecking order or priority. This implies the need to address them simultaneously. Some of these are linked and understandably cannot be tightly compartmentalised.

Institution-Building

Bangladesh is largely an egalitarian society. Feudalism was eliminated by land reforms and legislations over half a century ago. However, the political institutions failed to evolve into a mature enough state sufficiently capable of containing the pluralist spirit of the populace. Several military interventions did not help. The best way to fund politics was seen to be mobilising resources through the capture of power. Money was required to secure wins in elections and, thereafter, the politician who had spent the amounts to purchase votes needed to make up for his losses. In this predatory 'winner-takes-all' situation, the loser was excluded from all aspects of governance. One of the most urgent future tasks for the government, therefore, is to restore the credibility of the Parliament by getting the opposition a share in governance, for example, by providing it some Committee Chairs. Ultimately, the goal should be to reduce the cost of electoral defeat.

Institutions in society which can assist governance should be strengthened. The Election Commission is a case in point. It must remain effective and independent, for it will be the backbone that will keep democracy firm and standing. The public services that have a long tradition in the subcontinent must be depoliticised, their principal criterion for promotion should be merit and their quality of service delivery should be enhanced. The Public Service Commission should be more autonomous and sufficiently prestigious. Police reforms have been hanging fire for a long time, and the sooner they are initiated the better. In November 2007, the caretaker government, by an amendment to the Criminal Procedural Code, had separated the judiciary from the Executive magistracy. The Executive has strongly resisted this on professional grounds. A golden mean will have to be found.

Corruption

In Bangladesh, there exists a tremendous propensity to want to win elections, for there is so much a victory can deliver. This is what rendered corruption, combined with political muscle-power, pervasive. As Cicero had said 2,000 years ago, "inter arma enim silent regis", meaning "In the face of arms law fell mute".

Obviously, systemic corruption will require addressing. The caretaker government had made considerable headway by setting up a powerful Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The resignation of the Chairman of the ACC has somewhat queered the pitch for the government.

This problem will require skillful handling. Raising public awareness and a change of mindset are necessary. Ultimately, honest behaviour must flow from the dictates of conscience rather than from the fear of the police.

Economy

Though poverty alleviation is increasingly being seen as a success story in Bangladesh, according to the World Bank, 56 million of its people still remain poor. Bangladesh is fortunate in that it has remained fairly unscathed, thus far, by the current global recession. In fact, the situation may have slightly benefited its principal export, ready-made garments, which earn 76 percent of the trade income because it specialises in the lower-end of the market. It continues to earn nearly US\$11 billion a year. The government will need to continue to strive for greater market access, mainly in the United States, where Bangladesh faces discriminatory trade barriers.

The other great source of national income is remittances from expatriate Bangladeshis, mainly workers, of whom Bangladesh has exported over 1.7 million over the last two years. In 2008, they remitted US\$7.9 billion, 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product. This accounted for among the highest share in the world. However, Bangladesh's markets are drying up due to the recession, as evidenced in the announcement in March 2009 by the Malaysian Labour Minister of the cancellation of 55,000 Bangladeshi work visas. New markets have to be identified, skills upgraded, and to keep public opinion satisfied at home, efforts must be made to ensure that workers are better treated in the host countries. In order to study the possible adverse impact of the recession, a Task Force has been set up under the chairmanship of the Finance Minister. It must make appropriate recommendations. Obviously, the Task Force has its work cut out for it.

An aspect of the economy that will require particular attention is energy. Power shortages are routine and efforts at new generation have yielded no substantial returns. A decision will be required, perhaps following a national debate, if the country should go nuclear. Internationally, it should pose little problem as Bangladesh has impeccable non-proliferation credentials. It has already been reported that the Russians have been approached for two 1,000MW nuclear power plants. The gas reserves are now being calculated far more conservatively at 13.54 trillion cubic-feet, so new finds are essential. Indeed, the energy sector will require a huge investment calculated at US\$8 billion by 2025. It will also be necessary to resolve the maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar as offshore drilling will be called for. A National Coal Policy will need to be put in place. In the short term, the Finance Minister has already identified the power sector as problematic. As such, immediately, palliatives such as supply-side management may be necessary.

Food supply will need constant monitoring. Bangladesh needs to produce over 30 million tons of grains annually and keep a reserve of 0.5 to 1 million tons in stock for rainy days. For this to happen, there must be regular provision of inputs such as power, irrigation, seeds and fertiliser (the latter often through external procurement).

Law and Order

Unfortunately, very early into its term, the government confronted an outrageous mutiny in late February 2009 among its border guards known as the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). It was staffed at senior levels by army officers, 55 of whom were brutally killed and a number are

missing. Three separate investigations are in progress and much of the government's future action will depend on their outcome. A minister is coordinating the enquiries. The stated reason for the uprising were said to be demands for higher pay, the BDR's own officer-cadre and its participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions, none of which appear to have been advanced by the BDR's actions. The government must act to calm passions, particularly among those affected. The Prime Minister appears to have succeeded in doing that. The BDR man the borders. The guarding of the border may now be adversely affected and, as such, that lacuna must be filled.

Terrorism is seen as a threat. In this age of globalisation, cross-border or international linkages are easy to establish and the government must remain ever vigilant. The day-to-day law and order situation often becomes problematic. Fortunately, Bangladesh's notorious *hartals* or general strikes have not recurred recently and there is need for the law enforcement authorities to be more active. Rewarding the efficient and reprimanding the deficient is a principle more honoured in breach than in observance. This must be corrected.

Foreign Policy

It should not be too difficult for the new government to carry forward the image of Bangladesh as a positive and constructive international actor. For Bangladesh, what is needed is sufficient manoeuvrability to protect its sovereignty and external support for its development. There is also the felt need to live 'in concord with' but 'distinct from' the powerful neighbour, with Bangladesh being almost entirely 'India-locked'. The Awami League has generally had comfortable relations with India and the first important foreign dignitary to visit Dhaka after the elections was India's External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee.

However, Bangladesh's foreign policy aspirations will require it to seek a high level of international interactions with Southeast Asia and the Far East, Europe, the United States and the Muslim countries. Relations with the United Nations will be key. Not only does the United Nations provide norms, values and standards to conform to, but it is also a conduit to participate in peacekeeping, popular with its armed forces for both image and benefits, and to which Bangladesh has consistently been one of the largest contributors. Interactions with groupings like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Commonwealth are important as they provide Bangladesh with platforms to air its views. As the elected Chairman of the 50 Least Developed Countries, Bangladesh will have to continue to strive for better preferential trading terms for them, mainly in the World Trade Organization.

Governance

Good governance is not something that can be boxed separately as it runs like a thread through all other issues. It is necessary for every element in the government to contribute towards it. The newly-formed National Human Rights Commission, established on 1 December 2008, must ensure that the actions of all state agents are in consonance with acceptable norms and standards so that no one is above the law. Local government, particularly the elected Chairmen of Councils, must be more empowered and, to the extent, possible national law-makers kept away from dealing with development funds.

The practice of holding Cabinet meetings away from the capital, Dhaka, must be continued and, indeed, enhanced. This will help take the government to the doorsteps of the people. The media, as of now, functions unrestrained. There is much truth to Amartya Sen's dictum that a free press and famine are incompatible. Above all, the Bangladesh government, as in the case of all governments, must learn that the essence of democracy is its ability to grasp that it is far more preferable to live with an inconvenient idea than to try and suppress it.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Hasina completes her first hundred days on 16 April 2009. Much of her time in government during this period has been spent consolidating her powers and assessing a daunting 'to-do' list.

There is often talk of the 'Bangladesh Paradox' – the ability of the country to forge ahead at a growth rate of six percent despite its many and varied constraints. This is particularly true in the socio-economic sectors. Bangladesh's experience in such areas as in micro-credit and non-formal education goes to show that the simplest ideas can often effect the profoundest changes.

The great challenge of the new government is to convert this 'paradox' into a 'paradigm', and identify and collate Bangladesh's 'best practices' into a model that could be usefully emulated in many societies of comparable milieu.

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