

Should CTG Move Its Goal Post?

Dr. Abdul Momen

“Two years for a non-elected government is too long”, says Dr. Doug Telling, Professor of Government at the Framingham State College, Massachusetts. Echoing him the panelists have the consensus that ‘a free, fair and credible election’ must not take more than a year. They argue that the Bangladesh should hold its next general election in December, 2007. They further argue that a non-elected Emergency Government of Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed should hold the national election first and other local and mayoral elections be left for the elected government.

In fact, Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed took the oath of office with the goal to hold a free and fair election ‘within the shortest possible time’. Although 120 days have passed, the political parties have not been allowed yet to resume their activities or campaigning. Instead, the military-backed government is reportedly manipulating breaking up the major political parties of the country namely, the Awami League (AL) and the BNP. Initially it tried to capitalize the popularity of Nobel Laureate Professor Mohammed Yunus to float a new political party. Since that failed now they are reportedly trying with Dr. Kamal Hossain, a former Foreign Minister. Dr. Hossain is a reputed jurist but he lacks organizing ability. His *Gono Forum* did not flourish due to organizational weaknesses. Moreover, Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the largest and oldest grass root political party of Bangladesh is back in the country now and her popular support mushroomed due to government’s ill conceived policies and manipulated cases against her. Now it has become difficult for the AL leaders who were thinking of breaking away from the party, to try for setting up a new party. Therefore, the military generals led by Law Advisor Mainul Hossain have one option; to form the new party with the supporters of the BNP and the LDP, the breakaway faction of the BNP.

Such manipulation and breaking up of major political parties is against the concept of popular democracy and such technocratic adventures hardly succeed. President Ayub Khan of Pakistan once tried to reform political parties and he disqualified many veteran politicians. That did not work. General Yahya Khan presented 303 to end corruption but in vain. General Ziaur Rahman promised to make politics difficult and foisted a Party (BNP) from the Cantonment. Many opportunists joined his party and during the last five years they basically looted the country. General H. M. Ershad also tried to eliminate corruption and jailed and convicted political leaders and businessmen, all of whom flocked to his camp in course of time. For example, Ministers Maudud Ahmed, Murshed Khan and Saifur Rahman were all convicted by him once and exonerated later. He also sacked nearly 400 bureaucrats. However, his eight year rule earned the distinction of the most corrupt government and stayed in that position till overshadowed by the Khaleda-Nizami regime in the new millennium. If any political reform is to be effective and long lasting, it has to evolve within the political parties, not from outside or above.

The last few years’ struggle especially last 2.5 years for improving the politics of the country and end looting, in fact, created an atmosphere like that of the French Revolution to bring about ‘qualitative changes’ in Bangladesh politics and in particular, major political parties. Therefore, the interim government should leave it with the parties and if they intervene too much, the hopes and sacrifice of millions would go in vain. That would be disastrous.

It is painful that although four months have passed, the Fakruddin government failed to provide a road map for the election yet. Since next election is their top priority, their goal post, they should have declared the election dates by now. Brigadier General (Retd) Sakhawat Hossain, an Election Commissioner, stated that none can hold the election in less than 18 months. That is a subjective judgment that has already been questioned by many at home and abroad. We can only remind him that the ingenuity of human beings has been unpredictable throughout history. Great economist Thomas Malthus failed to visualize that the food productivity due to technological advancement could outperform the population growth rate. His prophecy of a human disaster and famine therefore did not come true.

'Closed minds' hardly could visualize the creativity of human brain powers. For example, President Cleveland of the United States stated in 1905, 'sensible and responsible women do not want to vote' or the founder of the Warner Bros Pictures Inc., that produced and distributed thousands of movies, Mr. Harry M. Warner stated in 1927, "who the hell wants actors to talk". Nowadays, sensible women do vote and movie goers always like the actors and actresses to talk.

A great scientist Lord Kelvin, then President of the Royal Society publicly stated in 1895 that "heavier than air flying machines are simply impossible". It was impossible to Lord Kelvin, but not to Wright brothers. We are used to flying jets and planes that are heavier than air. Good news is that Lord Kelvin, however, did not put up barriers to scientific pursuits.

Commissioner Sakhawat Hossain who failed to clarify the allegation against him of misuse of 20,000 tons of rice yet may not be able to develop 'correct voter list with photos' and 'election reform' in less than 18 months. That does not mean that others can't do. Preparation of voter list with attached photos must not take too long. Secondly, if it is linked to ID card preparation it may repeat the failures of the past. Both BNP and AL governments of 1990s manned by senior bureaucrats/technocrats like current ECs failed to do the job even after wasting billions of Takas. The draft reform proposals 'on election process and rules, and prevention of electoral fraud and rigging have been taken from the Reform Proposals of the 14 Party Alliance' and generally have been welcomed. The issue of registration process of political parties needs serious consideration by the political parties. But that is being prevented by the action of the CTG against indoor politics and their meaningless principle of no-contact with political leaders. Such will not improve 'level playing field' nor will create a congenial atmosphere for election. Such will only aggravate fear and uncertainty. Corrupt people and godfathers of terrorism must not be allowed a free field but the screening process should not be a witch-hunting exercise of unlimited duration. Great minds do make mistakes. However, if they have an 'open mind' and if they are honest and committed, they can correct themselves quickly as they did in case of Hasina's re-entry.

Instead of breaking and weakening the political parties and their leaderships and changing the goal post, the interim government should concentrate their hearts and minds in holding the next general election by January 2008. Dr. Ahmed is a competent bureaucrat and his advisors are also competent. Therefore, instead of delaying the main task of holding a free and fair election, they should act together quickly. It is important to remember that they are the last hope for sustenance of multi-party democracy in Bangladesh and we all want them to succeed. Important element is if they lose their credibility, the alternative would be disastrous. Already, signs of doubts are looming and incidence of terrorism is sharply increasing in the South Asian region and under a non-elected government this may boomerang as had happened in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

People all over Bangladesh and friends of Bangladesh abroad welcomed the interim government on January 11, 2007. People also supported its initiative to punish the corrupt people and the looters. However, as they allowed Coco, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's second son who is known as highly corrupt, as a 'bargaining chip' for Mrs. Zia's exile, people did not like it. It is also strange that the Prime Minister who presided over the most corrupt and the most wicked government in the history of the country for five years, has not been charged with any misdeeds, nor have the cases of corruption against her withdrawn by herself been reactivated yet, neither Chief Election Commissioner Justice Aziz that spoiled nation's hard earned money charged with yet. Dr. Iazuddin Ahmed, the current President was responsible for many evils and he has not been approached to solicit apology to the nation yet. People also do not like the government's selective strategy of not apprehending corrupt people, especially former military officers and leaders and workers of the Jamati Islam party. There has been some lip service to the Mukti Juddo but none of the Jamati leaders that tried to cover up the notorious terrorists namely Bangla Bhai and Shayek Abdur Rahman have been apprehended yet, nor the instigators of the attempted murder of Dr. Humayun Azad of the Dhaka University. More importantly, the extra judicial killing by the RAB, a security force of the government, which is known as 'state terrorism', is continuing although at a reduced rate. Reportedly 80 people have been executed without due process of law within the last 120 days of the interim government. The RAB is the 'judge, jury and the executioner'. This cannot be accepted by the civilized

world. Dr. Ahmed's government has not yet tackled the issue effectively and it continues to hurt the image of the nation. No FDI is likely until such state terrorism and political uncertainty are over.

The nation's economy is stagnating due to uncertainty and especially due to an environment of fear. The prices of essentials are increasing sharply making it difficult even for the middle class to make both ends meet. There are also disturbing news of changes and tension in the Armed Forces, who are backing the current Government and such does not augur well for political stability. Before circumstances take a bad turn the Fakruddin government must hurry the process of election. The development partners are getting nervous as they do not like to see the 3rd largest Muslim country get destabilized and follow Pakistan, a headache for many. Therefore, no wonder that Nick Burns, US Under Secretary of State specifically desires the Bangladesh interim government to hold the national election ASAP before it loses its credibility and public support.

Boston, May 11, 2007

Is Bangladesh Government Moving Its Goal Post? Dr. Abdul Momen

“Two years for a non-elected government is too long”, says Dr. Doug Telling, Professor of Government at the Framingham State College, Massachusetts. Echoing him the panelists have the consensus that ‘a free, fair and credible election’ must not take more than a year. They argue that the Bangladesh should hold its next general election in December, 2007. They further argue that a non-elected Emergency Government of Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed should hold the national election first and other local and mayoral elections be left for the elected government.

In fact, a former Banker, Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed took the oath of office with the goal to hold a free and fair election ‘within the shortest possible time’. Although 120 days have passed, the political parties have not been allowed yet to resume their activities or campaigning. Instead, the military-backed government is reportedly manipulating breaking up the major political parties of the country namely, the Awami League (AL) and the BNP. Initially it tried to capitalize the popularity of Nobel Laureate Professor Mohammed Yunus to float a new political party. Since that failed they are now trying with Dr. Kamal Hossain, a former Foreign Minister. Dr. Hossain is a reputed jurist but he lacks organizing ability. His *Gono Forum* did not flourish due to organizational weaknesses. Moreover, Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the largest and oldest grass root political party of Bangladesh is back in the country and her popular support mushroomed due to government's ill conceived policies and manipulated cases against her. Now it has become difficult for the AL leaders who were thinking of breaking away from the party, to try for setting up a new party. Therefore, the military generals led by Law Advisor Mainul Hossain have one option; to form the new party with the supporters of the BNP and the LDP, the breakaway faction of the BNP.

Such manipulation and breaking up of major political parties by civil-military bureaucracy hardly succeed. President Ayub Khan of Pakistan once tried to reform political parties and he disqualified many veteran politicians. That did not work. General Yahya Khan presented the nation 303 to end corruption. General Ziaur Rahman promised to make politics difficult and foisted a Party (BNP) from the Cantonment. Many opportunists joined his party and during the last five years they basically looted the country. General H. M. Ershad also tried to eliminate corruption and jailed and convicted political leaders and businessmen, all of whom flocked to his camp in course of time. For example, Ministers Maudud Ahmed, Murshed Khan and Saifur Rahman were all convicted by him once and exonerated later. He also sacked nearly 400 bureaucrats. However, his eight year rule earned the distinction of the most corrupt government and stayed in that position till overshadowed by the Khaleda-Nizami regime in the new millennium. If any political reform is to be effective and long lasting, it has to evolve within the political parties, not from outside or above.

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