

Too late for BNP to afford a fair election

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The must-awaited dialogue that has been taking place between the Secretary General of the main component of the ruling alliance and General Secretary of the principal constituent of the opposition alliance has dragged on. If the comments of a few senior leaders of the two sides bear any merit, it does not foretell any good news for the people who are keeping their fingers crossed for the fruitful outcome of the dialogue which is supposed to pave the way for a free and fair election. The Prime Minister in her uninterrupted crusade against the opposition is publicly accusing them for indulging in conspiracy to come to power through the back door and asking them to take part in the election if they have the trust on the people. Her speeches absolutely ignored the dialogue that her secretary general is carrying out with his counterpart of the opposition camp, from which the whole nation is waiting to hear the news of the shy of relief. Even yesterday (October 11), the PM categorically said that the would-be chief adviser of the next caretaker government and the incumbent Election Commission (EC) are completely neutral for conducting the forthcoming elections. In her valedictory speech in the parliament on October 4, she said, “days of rigging elections are gone as people of the country are very much aware about of their rights of franchise. There is no way to change the results as voters are much aware, contenders are powerful and observers and media remain active”. Her lectures sidetracked the story of how the Dhaka-10 by-election was won in the heart of the capital city itself in spite of numerous blatant evidences of vote riggings published in the print and electronic media and in broad- day-light presence of the local and international observers. It was probably the standard bearer of fair election for the PM who went out of her way to facilitate the ‘winner’! In the same speech the PM, probably for the first time, acknowledged that the 1996 election under the caretaker government was free and fair, which squarely contradicted her five-year of ceaseless accusations as the opposition leader that the election of 1996 was rigged by the AL. Even her party’s MPs took the oath only under international pressure.

In a democracy, the ruling party runs in the election more on its records than promises. Unfortunately, in the alliance ruled Bangladesh, the records were created, not on the good governance but on the committed misdeeds of the government. This government has put its hands on every sphere of the state resulting its systematic destruction. The extent the civil bureaucracy and judicial organ of the state has been politicized that it would be difficult for any future government with noble intention to practice good governance. Corruption in every nook and corner of the government has reached such a stage and has been rewarded in such an extent where the power secretary becomes the rule and the quitting power minister becomes the exception and in the alliance ruled Bangladesh, rule always prevailed over the exception. It was so ironic that the people never saw any refutations of allegations made against the alleged corruptors, when it appeared in the print media, including in a few highly respected and well-circulated ones, whose printed words carried tremendous values to the general people, who in a free and fair election,

hold the power to seal the fate of the politicians. If one browses through the statistics of corruption disclosed by the former State Minister of Power Anwarul Kabir Talukder so far his ministry, the most crippled sector of the country, is concerned, when he took over the office, he does not need to be briefed by the added stories of corruption from the government's adversaries. Even the national carrier Biman is on the verge of dysfunction with the ulterior motive to own privately by the vested group.

One might wonder why the alliance government, following its massive victory in the last election, resorted to the route of misgovernance or no governance rather than the one to earn the trust of the people. The hypotheses that could be put forward are as follows. The previous AL government, in spite of its failures to control a handful of its terrorist godfathers, had a number of remarkable successes to its credit, such as self sufficiency in food, control of prices of essential commodities, water treaty, CHT peace treaty, successful management of '98 flood, non-politicization of judiciary (Justice Aziz and Justice Jainal Abedin were confirmed by the AL government), and to a great extent the civil administration (neither of the IGs of police had AL affiliations) and the non-partisan Head of the State . There were no specific godfathers, as it exists today, of corruption or alternate seat of governance during the AL rules. There happened no Kansat, Fulbari or Shanir Akhra in any part of the country. People, in thousands, did not take to the street at the wee hours of night to demand the essentials of life. It was not only believed by the AL leaders that they would be returned back to power in any fair election, people in general had the similar perception. With this conviction in mind, AL did not try to play with the CTG and the EC. The only member of the EC who was allegedly a participant of the 'janatar manch' did nothing in his tenure that would create any controversy to undermine his constitutional responsibility. The AL supporters in general believed, in addition to anti-incumbency factor, it was the CTG's bias and the inaction of their non-partisan president to prevent that bias deprived them of the victory. In fact, some of the actions of the CTG chief, including his writing a book and presenting the same to the PM and availing of his five years of hospitality in the state guest house, especially after the election, added extra strength to their beliefs. It seemed that the BNP policymakers, deep in their mind, believed in the accusations of the AL labelled against the CTG and took the lessons from their 'mistakes'.

From the very first day of their victory, BNP started doing what the AL did not do. BNP activists did not reciprocate the generosity showered on them by their adversaries in their moment of despairs in 1996. Quite to the contrary, the unprecedented prosecutions and persecutions of the AL supporters by the activists of the ruling alliance had no parallel in our history, with the long term objective to cripple the opposition for good. They have amassed huge wealth through unbridled corruption, putting the country on the top of the TIB corruption list for five years in a row, as money plays an important role in the election and created an alternate source power to control everything that matters to the next election. They even replaced their own man with a loyal one from the Bangabhaban as soon he started behaving like the President of the Republic, not of the party. They have manipulated the EC by the putting their own men in the body. These people are not only blindly partisan and devoid of ethical values; they even lack "the same sense of Honour as the rest of us". They have amended the constitution with the malicious objective to put

a particular individual at the helm of CTG to avoid the similar debacle as faced by the AL in the last general election. Earlier I wrote two pieces lauding Justice K M Hassan as a decent gentleman, albeit a staunch Zia loyalist, the perception that I grew through my limited encounter with him while he was our Ambassador in a country where I was a university professor. I am on the verge of re-evaluating my evaluation about him, painfully observing that Justice Hassan is keeping the whole nation hostage by insisting himself, through his silence, on the agenda that his former party's bosses have so viciously manipulated. In fact, his inability of public declaration of his relinquishment, which the whole nation is anxiously waiting to hear, only added wind to his opponent's sail of mistrust. Justice Hassan will do himself a service if remembers that his constitutional privilege to serve the nation has neither been divine ordained nor by inheritance; the constitution has been tempered with to put him in line for succession.

Yes, Mr. Tom Daschle, in North America, Europe or even in our very neighbourhood in India, past political affiliation should not be a barrier in holding a neutral position of the state. However, would you find in your country where a retired chief justice, in spite of the lack of trust of the bulk of your countrymen, would not feel embarrassed to accept a position that would pilot the most arduous democratic journey of your nation? In fact, resolution of this single issue would pave the way for the solution of the other problems. A strong and neutral chief of the CTG would be easily able to reconstitute and reform the election commission, exactly the way Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed carried out in 1990 and Justice Habibur Rahman did in 1996. It is not the outcome of the dialogue (which looks very bleak at this time), but only the love of Justice Hassan for the country, not for his former party, that could save the day. It could prove disastrous for the BNP, since it might be too late for the BNP to afford a fair election, but would provide the much-needed respite for the nation. Time is running out very fast for Justice Hassan to make the much-awaited decision. If he fails, the country, by all probability, will plunge into a deep turmoil. If that happens, it may not be as much as Khaleda or Hasina, but a retired chief justice of the nation's highest court by the name of Khandaker Mahmud-Ul Hassan who will be unequivocally blamed for leading the nation into that irreversible catastrophe.

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