

Emergence of a New Party: A Critical Review

Md. Anwarul Kabir

Evil governance rendered by two major parties since the fall of autocrat regime of General Ershad in 1990 has instilled in the mindset of some members of the civil society the quest for a 'third force' with a view to installing good governance in the country. Realising the urgency of emancipation from the grip of the evil governance, the civil society under the umbrella of CPD, the *Prothom Alo* and the Daily Star has been campaigning for honest and efficient candidates for the national election since 2006. This campaign has been widely acclaimed by the people of all walks of life as the intention of the CPD and its alliances is straightforward – just to form a pressure group of the conscious citizen which eventually would persuade the political parties to nominate honest and efficient candidates in the national election. Presumably, in the present changed political setup of the country some of the overambitious members of the civil society are trying to influence the army backed interim government to assist in floating a new party against the flow of traditional parties, especially AL and BNP.

During the critical juncture of the history of the country when Professor Iazuddin Ahmed was administering the caretaker government with an ill motive, world micro-credit icon Professor Yunus received Nobel prize. His subsequent declaration of floating a new political party 'Nagorik Shakti' instigated ray of hope among many members of the civil society. However, assessing the ground realities the Nobel Laureate's decision of stepping back from his political venture has thrown this section of the civil society into an utmost despair. Another setback that has blown the psyche of the aspirants of formation of a new party is the abortive attempts of some coterie of the government to implement the minus-two theory following the Pakistani model. It has been implicitly understood that the minus-two theory, in other words, sending two apex leaders of the two major parties, namely BNP and AL into an exile was indeed a secret proposition of the aspirants of the formation of a new party.

However, the efforts of formation of a new party is underway as mentioned by Dr. Ferdous Ahmed Koreshi, one of the founder co-organisers of the BNP. Perhaps Mr. Koreshi is working as a coordinator to float the party. It has been also speculated that since Prof. Yunus departed from politics, eminent lawyer Dr. Kamal Hossain may be the chief of the proposed new party. The other major leaders will be dragged from the BNP and AL who have relatively 'clean' images. In this context, so far, names of Mannan Bhuyan, Sadek Hossain Khoka, Saifur Rahman, Tofail Ahmed, Abdur Razzak and some others have been surfaced. The obvious question arises whether these people are really clean or not. However, to the common people the above stated political leaders during their stay in power were also regarded as symbols of corruption. Their possible joining in the new party can be asserted by evaluating the government's discriminatory role in its anti-corruption drive. Although there are allegations of involvement in corruption against these leaders yet the government has not nabbed them like other alleged corrupt leaders. Is not it be considered as double standard of the government's role?

Now the question is how far the aspirants of a new party will succeed? Forming new political parties sitting at the power centre is not unique in Bangladesh as we observe the cases of BNP and Jatiyo Party. But unlike those cases this time political scenario is completely different.

General Ziaur Rahman, when initiated his party BNP in 1978 was at the power centre as an army chief as well as chief executive of the country. At that time in the political arena of the country there existed a grave vacuum of political parties. All the political parties in 1975 were assimilated by a newly introduced party BAKSAL based on the model of the then Soviet Union. It may be mentioned here that among the parties those formed BAKSAL the major and well organised one was Awami League. But ironically, when Zia reintroduced the multi-party system, central leadership in AL was in a severe crisis due to tragic killings of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin, Nazrul Islam, Kamruzzaman, Capt. Monsur Ali along with other central leaders of the then AL. In formation of a new party Zia was able to use this leadership vacuum prudently at national level. By dint of his personal charisma accrued out of his dynamism and financial honesty, as well as full utilization of different government organs including civil administration and armed forces, Zia could successfully give birth to a new party BNP. However, the formation of BNP had not been done overnight and it took more than two years to be a full fledged political party.

After Zia's demise in 1982 General Ershad overthrew President Sattar's short lived government through a coup and captured the state power. Sitting at the power centre he also initiated his party Jatiyo Pary but for this he had also to go a long way. Though Ershad had no personal charisma like Zia still he could successfully form his party by dint of his shrewdness and use of government machineries. However, his party could not get popular mass support and so to install his party at the power centre he destroyed the electoral process entirely and introduced the concepts of '*vote dacoity*' in our democracy

However, one common feature is that both BNP and JP were born in the period of martial law with the leadership of the key person of the martial law administration. But this time emergence of a new party with a determination of winning the election will be not that easy as in the periods of Zia's or Ershad's regimes. In support of this proposition the following arguments can be cited:

1. This time neither the army chief nor the chief executive of the interim government has any political ambition. So, the aspirants of the new party will not be able to receive any direct support either from the government or from the army. Even if the interim government tries to patronise the new party for its growth at the cost of its present impartial characteristic then the nation will again fall into another devastating situation. So, assessing the reality, presumably the government will not play such controversial role.
2. The proposed new party has to complete the formation of its organisational structure at the root level within a short span of time. As the government has pledged to complete the election by 2008, any new party will get not more than one and half a year (considering, holding of the stalled election by December 2008.) and this time is not enough to motivate the people to come under its umbrella. On the other hand, the major traditional parties, especially AL is more organised then ever. This assertion is evident from the fact that when even the high echelon of the AL are facing crisis, at the grass root level the supporters of the AL have full confidence in its leadership. However, some supporters of BNP may incline to the proposed new party but majority of them will be under the main flow of the party if it reforms its central leadership (definitely it would be done for its own existence!). So, it would not be very easy for any new party to get enough popularity to combat the major two political parties in the forthcoming election.

3. Personal charisma is one of the major features for any sort of leadership. Especially for the central leadership this is more than true. The utmost success of AL during our liberation war was achieved due to charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib even in his physical absence in the war. The AL still bears the legacy of Mujib's unique personal charisma. On the other hand, BNP's success in turning BNP into a well organised national level party within short time was possible partly due to Zia's charismatic leadership. One question may arise, the present chiefs of AL and BNP, Hasina and Khaleda have no charismatic characteristics like Mujib or Zia, then why the majority of the political oriented people of the country are united under these two platform? The answer lies in the fact that both Hasina and Khaleda bear the legacies of Mujib and Zia respectively. Besides, their long active movement against autocratic regime of president Ershad had turned them leaders of the people and created their special images.

As we envisage, the proposed new party, perhaps, is going to be crystallised under the leadership of Dr. Kamal Hossain. Though Dr. Kamal is, no doubt, a world renowned lawyer, the key implementer of our constitution and an honest personality still paying due respects to him it can be claimed that he lacks personal charisma which is the required driving force to organize common people under any political platform. This assertion, is based on his efforts to organise his political party Gono Forum, which has received little credibility at the root level. Again as the names those have been surfaced, so far, for the leadership of the to be party are not that clean as the common people expected and some of them even are considered as opportunists, the proposed new party would not be able to generate any special appeal for the common people. So it can be stated that even if the emergence of the much speculated new party becomes true, it would fail to achieve popular support as some members of the civil society are expecting.

In essence it may be stated that success of a political party needs the supports from the grassroots level. Though at present, both BNP and AL are passing through a hard time, still both of these two parties have hardcore supporters at the grass root levels. Besides, though Khaleda's personal charisma as a leader has been distorted due to her ill leadership of the alliance government, Hasina at the grass root level is now more popular than ever. Especially, recent brave return of Hasina from the USA has further increased her popularity both at the national and international level. There is a doubt whether Dr. Kamal Hossain at this stage would be able to turn himself as a powerful competitor of Hasina. In this context, it may be mentioned that the proposed new party presumably will largely rely on the members of the civil society. On the other hand, despite their all misdeeds, as traditional political parties both AL and BNP have been working with the people for a long time. It is true that the civil society has some idealistic philosophies for politics. But the reality is that they assess the situation keeping distance from the common people. This may help in structuring a corporate, but to make a political party popular, wide participation of the common people must be ensured. Sitting at the ivory tower can the civil society succeed in achieving its goal?

(The author is an educationist and freelance writer, working at CS dept. of AIUB)

