

Pragmatism prevailed over utopianism: was it a tactical retreat?

Mozammel H. Khan

In the last few days two significant events took place in the political arena of Bangladesh. In the first incident, Professor Yunus, the nation's sole Nobel laureate, retreated from his plan to form a political party and he had informed the nation his decision through an open letter exactly the way he did earlier when he told the nation about his intention to join politics. The second incident was the triumphant return home of Sheikh Hasina to a rapturous welcome by thousands of adoring supporters.

Since Prof Yunus's open letter to the nation declaring his intention to form a political party, there were mixed reactions from the members of the civil society, newspaper's contributors (not all of them are columnists) and the people in general. I was one of those who took a reserved opinion of his moral right (predominantly due to his sheer indifference to the battered human rights situations in the last five years) to join politics and was very skeptical of his potential success as a politician. My 'An open response' (DS February 18, 2007) to his open letter concluded with the following: "We have two types of politicians: one with firm conviction, the other with sheer opportunism. In response to your call to help with the formation of a political party, in addition to many who failed to secure a berth in either of the existing political camps, I can visualize the latter group flocking into your camp in large numbers as they may not be willing to ride on the sinking ship anymore. Another group of our citizens, which always stays on the sidelines during the hours of need of the nation, but was attuned to your unfortunate comment characterizing all the politicians as being corrupt and devoid of any political conviction, will be clapping your arrival to the domain where controversy is a name of the game." Professor Yunus's latest open letter that outlined the reasons behind his retreat broadly attested the validity of my assertions.

Members of a section of our society who always stay on the sideline are skeptics and are infected with utopia. These are the people, who never played any role during the struggle for multi-pronged reforms of the electoral process of the then opposition alliance and since 'one eleven', they have metamorphosed themselves as the arch advocates of reform without giving an iota of credence to the political alliance that created the opportunity for the second CTG to carry out the reforms in tune of the wishes of the people. These people were never seen around when octogenarian intellectual like Prof Muzaffar Ahmed, pragmatist Hafizuddin Khan or unswerving SM Shahjahan were braving the scorching heat of the street to reaffirm their all out supports for the reform demanded by the political alliance. Moreover, there is a general propensity to blame the politicians as a whole for the current reprehensible affairs of the State. In the process many of the civil society members, in effect, are evaluating Sajib Wazed Joy and Taerque Rahman with the same equation, placing Dr. Reza Kibria and Nasser Rahman in the same cluster and Faruk Sobhan (AL nominated candidate of the Commonwealth SG) and Salaudding Quader Chowdhury (BNP-Jamat nominated SG candidate for Islamic Conference Organization) in the same berth of mental (in)capacity. They are equating lapses of AL government of 1996-2001 with the despicable era of BNP-Jamat rule of the past five

years and blaming the ‘two ladies’ equally for all the ills that have been inflicted on the nation.

It is beyond any comprehension how the current CTG whose prime asset is Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed himself, took the very impulsive decision of issuing a press note barring Shiekh Hasina from returning to her homeland, who by all calculations should be the strongest ally of its reform agenda. The contents and the languages of the press note do not add up to the determined and articulate speeches of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, the best ever delivered by any of our head of government in decades. It was likely that the imprudent decision was guided by the views of the utopians, who believe reforms, in their own definitions, of the political parties are not possible keeping these two ladies in the helm. The decision makers might have extrapolated that the people would be dancing in the street as soon as the press release was issued and Sheikh Hasina would be cowed down. Apparently, it did not happen. The adverse national and international reactions against depriving any one of her inalienable right and Sheikh Hasina’s triumphant return amid cheering of thousands corroborated the merit of the reversal of the government’s decision of withdrawal of the ban of her return to her homeland. Until then it was naturally hypothesized that the pragmatists have prevailed over the utopians.

The hypothesis, however, has suffered an apparent and immediate set back with the news that the government has filed legal suits against thousand of people who spontaneously gathered around to greet their beloved leader, in the pretext of violating the emergency order. Emergency order did not restrict its citizens, not limited by numbers, to greet their loved ones in any place within the geographical boundary of the Republic. The inner spirit of the suspension of the fundamental right of assembly as enshrined in article 37 of the constitution is to ensure security of the state and people, and maintain discipline in public life. Under the present context, it is aimed at preventing people in group demonstrating against the government’s popular policy of electoral and administrative reforms, reform of the constitutional institutions such as ACC, PSC and the judiciary and its drive to punish the corrupts, who had hay days over the years. Thousands, those who spontaneously gathered, braving scorching heat of *Baishakh* to have a glimpse of their dear leader, through their actions did not indulge themselves in any such affray that is likely to undermine the essence of the emergency order. Likewise, members of the law enforcing authority showed their utmost prudence as friends of the people they are supposed to serve without any slack to ‘ensure security of the state and people, and maintain discipline in public’. To utter dismay, those police officers instead of receiving commendation, have been censured and disciplined. This brings back the reminiscences of the atrocious days of BNP-Jamat rule where in a similar mode thousands of unnamed people were sued for demanding uninterrupted supply of electricity. Here again it does not add up since the home ministry is under the control of the CA, the principal vanguard of popular standing of the current CTG.

The primary focus of the CTG should be to create a level playing field for every political party and individual who would be likely stakeholders in a future free, fair and credible election. In the process, the pro-reform political parties and their leaders and specially the leader of the most popular one, who spearheaded the campaign for reforms in both

parliament and streets, must be the principal ally of the process. However, at times, the government's actions and comments of a particular adviser, not an icon by any account to lecture the nation, are portraying politicians in general and her, in particular, as adversaries. Many a time, it seems that the confusing and dictated reform agenda of the political parties are formulated with 'back calculations' keeping the intended end result in mind.

It has been the pragmatists, both home and abroad, not the drawing-room sitting idealists, who have actively contributed, that included the arduous task of the generation of international pressure, in derailing the proposed farcical election of January 22, and the present CTG is the outgrowth of those concerted and multi-faceted endeavours. The pragmatists cannot afford to see its prime mission derailed to appease any individual or group. The CA has judiciously chosen one of the finest individuals as his press spokesman. He will render himself and the Republic an impeccable service if the responsibilities are only delegated to him to brief the government policies vis-à-vis politics and the process. This is an indispensable necessity to uphold the credibility and the consistent policies of the CTG. In real world pragmatism, not the utopianism, rules the day. Is there any reason why we should be different?

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convener of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.