

We are worried

WE ARE worried. We are worried after the interim government says that there is no need for the citizens to be worried about its tenure. We are worried because people are still in the dark about the intention and the terms of reference of the interim government. An interim government everywhere in the world is a transitional government under provisional leadership to manage a period of transition after the collapse of the government or the state the like of which has happened here after weeks of protests for the month of July and the five days of August. Aspirations for a truly representative government that is elected democratically through free, fair, participatory and representative elections have always accompanied the nation since the birth of Bangladesh. The struggle continues for a government elected this way to govern the country. The interim government that has now been installed — in a situation that the student protests culminating into a student-mass uprising against the authoritarian of the Awami League towards the end of July and in the beginning of August resulted in — should not forget to honour the birth-time aspirations of Bangladesh and the democratic values that have come along with it.

Despite the enormous sacrifice of the students and people in July–August that has resulted in the overthrow of the government of Sheikh Hasina after about a decade and a half of the authoritarian rule that has left hundreds of people dead, thousands without justice, a far higher number of people tortured and jailed and the whole nation repressed and reeling from constraints, the incumbent government should realise that the process that has brought it began 15 years ago. This is not the end of it and this is not the beginning of it. We are, therefore, worried that this interim government has not yet announced its tenure and its agenda—political, economic and otherwise. When some journalists have asked a couple of advisers to the interim government about the tenure, they are seen to have given a reaction that is reflective of apparent resentment. The words that the government speaks mostly suggest that it is intent on effecting reforms that could take years. But we should think about democratic reforms that the aspirations of the people have embodied. We should know of the reform agenda that the government has on its platter. We should also know how the mechanism for the accountability of the interim government would work, for an interim government, however popular it is today, cannot continue without accountability. Given the background of the members of the interim government, we hardly find any political mind at play. The tenure of the incumbents should, therefore, be clearly defined. The government should step on a path towards an elected government without much delay and leave the all-pervasive reforms that this government is talking of to an elected government that is to come.

The interim government must, therefore, immediately make public its terms of reference and agenda, announce the tenure of the government and let people know of the width and breadth of the reforms that it has on its platter.

Containing food inflation must be high on agenda

A SLIGHT decrease in prices, largely because of an improved supply and a halt in extortion on highways and at markets, comes as a relief amidst the food inflation that has pushed the poor and low-income people into a tight spot. Prices of vegetables decreased by Tk 10–20 a kilogram in the capital on August 9 while prices of chicken and eggs also decreased slightly. Traders also expected prices to decrease as students continued inspecting markets and market manipulators were not active and extortion remained suspended. There are, however, reports that a new group has begun pressuring traders at several kitchen markets for extortion. In such a situation, the decrease is hardly likely to be sustainable unless the government takes steps against food inflation. Food inflation and food insecurity are two major concerns that people are now faced with. The recent food security update of the World Bank put Bangladesh in the red zone for the past year. The update, covering a year from May 2023, says that the persistent high food inflation has pushed the large majority of low- and fixed-income people into food insecurity.

Bangladesh is placed in the red zone with 18 other countries, where the food inflation ranged between 5 per cent and 30 per cent. In Bangladesh, food inflation, keeping to the conservative Bureau of Statistics figure, remained more than 10 per cent for the past year. Independent studies, however, estimate the food inflation to be double the BBS figure. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies estimated food inflation in June at 15 per cent against the official figure of 10.42 per cent. A South Asian Network on Economic Modelling survey report in March said that moderate and severe food insecurity had increased sharply over two years. The report, which focused on the impact of inflationary pressure on households in April–November 2023, said that high food inflation had led 70 per cent of households to change their food habits involuntarily. A high inflation has continued to erode people's purchasing power since mid-2021 and the number of the new poor has continued to rise. The food insecurity situation is believed to be caused primarily by the erratic nature of food prices on the domestic market, which the past government lamentably failed to address. The government took a number of measures, but the market remained in the hands of manipulators.

The interim government needs to realise that the student movement was supported and joined in by people who were constrained by inflation, corruption and social injustice. The authorities must, therefore, prioritise the issue, ensure an adequate market supply, break syndicates and end extortion on highways and markets for good. The government must also enhance social safety programmes to cover all vulnerable people.

A NEW BEGINNING

Lessons from Nelson Mandela

by Md Mahmudul Hasan

MOST people in present-day Bangladesh, including myself, belong to the post-1971 generation. We have only heard and/or read about the war that saw the birth of our country in 1971; we did not see or experience the liberation war or the jubilation over the victory that followed.

Unfortunately, we have also not seen people of Bangladesh reaping the expected benefits that independence from foreign domination is supposed to provide. Liberty, equality and justice for which people of our land fought in 1971 are still a mirage on the distant horizon for most of us. What is more, our educational, social, economic, political and other critical institutions and government agencies have largely been destroyed over the years. And unsurprisingly, they have had very little to contribute to meeting people's hopes and aspirations.

For a long time, a section of our politicians, academics, writers, public intellectuals and media personalities and influencers kept seeing and interpreting the events of the 1971 war and its legacy through the lens of their own political beliefs and identities. They used the 'spirit of 1971' and related terms such as *muktijuddha* (freedom fighter) and *razakar* (traitor) to create divisions among us. They converted these terms into *muktijiddha* and *razakar*—on whomsoever they wished on the basis of their partisan biases and group affiliations.

A certain political party and its spinoff intellectuals seemed to have at their disposal a miracle machine that helped them make inside-out changes. The machine allowed them to turn a *muktijiddha* into a *razakar* and a *razakar* into a *muktijiddha*—all based on their arbitrary, politically-motivated judgments and intentions. They capitalized on the naivety and ignorance of the gullible among us and made the rest of us confused and lost in a quagmire of controversies. By perpetuating distrust and disunity among us, they weakened the fabric of our nation. Our country slid into a moral abyss of corruption, exploitation, abuse of power, erosion of trust and the debasement of ethical values.

Our job recruitment processes have been riddled with bribery, nepotism and party favouritism. Graduates who otherwise qualify for jobs are excluded from the sphere of influence. Conversely, the corrupt and inefficient ones have been favoured, promoted and enabled to climb into positions of power. Sadly, often such practices have been draped in the spirit of the 1971 liberation war.

In workplaces, honest and efficient people have been marginalised, sidelined and excluded from the sphere of influence. Conversely, the corrupt and inefficient ones have been favoured, promoted and enabled to climb into positions of power. Sadly, often such practices have been draped in the spirit of the 1971 liberation war.

BANGLADESH Images like dry flower from my notebook

by Saeed Naqvi

BANGLADESH was created behind my back. Since I was a reporter with the Statesman, I was surprised that it was being kept away from the Bangladeshis. When the Right Rai was producing brilliant photographs and Peter Hazelhurst of the Times, London, was well on his way to winning the reporter of the year award in the United Kingdom. Why was I being held back?

Light dawned with a call from Ram Mohan Rao, defence ministry [of India] spokesman the retired as principal information officer who was in touch with editors about war coverage. He had spoken to my editor and requested me to be at the defence ministry within hours. An army vehicle would drive selected foreign correspondents and a handful of us to the western theatre where a fierce battle was shaping up in Chhamb.

This 'contingent' assignment had come my way because after deep deliberation, the editor and the defence ministry came to the conclusion that it would be dangerous to send me to the Bangladesh theatre: I might be mistaken for a Punjabi/Pakistani Muslim and killed.

To look establishments a while to realise that the emergence of Bangladesh had radically altered the geography of the subcontinent.

The partition of India in 1947 had created two nations, India and Pakistan, in a hostile competition with each other. The two nations drew global attention on sub-continental issues, like Kashmir, for instance, from their respective perspectives.



—New Age/Sony Ramary

Our students (mostly from under-privileged backgrounds) go to colleges and universities to study and to build a bright future for themselves and for us all. Unfortunately, they are the worst victims of the unjust system that has been in place in our country for decades.

Until recently students in Bangladesh were mistreated at campuses and dormitories. They were beaten up for not attending political programmes and for not doing the bidding of 'cadres' (ruling party student thugs). We have a generation of students who have lived in fear at campuses and dormitories, and university administrations have hardly lifted a finger to come to their aid.

Our graduates face discrimination in the job market. Unemployed, they see their poor parents and other family members suffer starvation and hardships. Their inability to help their near ones has remained a source of frustration and face-hiding shame for them. Many of them eventually leave the country and do menial jobs in foreign lands. Again, at our airports, they are vulnerable to harassment and extortion.

Stories of our follies and failures are unending. But what is pathetic is that most of our academics, writers and intellectuals have remained largely quiet about all such inequities and injustices. For example, in their journalistic pieces and media appearances, there is a big elephant in the room—the predicament of students at campuses and dormitories. They have not done enough to mitigate the sufferings of their own (underprivileged) students at the hands of the thugs of student organisations. Instead, some of them

use their leverage mainly to access the corridors of power and advance their own selfish interests.

The vulnerability of our students to political oppression reached new heights during Sheikh Hasina's 15-year long autocratic rule (2009–2024). Her so-called student organisation Chhatra League remained a dreaded name, and torture of ordinary students at the hands of its members became commonplace.

Students' pent-up anger and frustration were bottled up inside them for a very long time. Having little support from their father-like teachers or others, they took their freedom from oppression and discrimination in their own hands. This heralded the glorious anti-discrimination student movement that resulted in the end of Sheikh Hasina's despotic and blood-thirsty rule.

In the weeks leading to her resignation and cowardly flight from Bangladesh, Hasina launched a crackdown (mass slaughter) which resulted in the death of over four hundred young people in the span of a couple of weeks. Thousands of bullet-hit young people are still in excruciating pain in hospitals and some are still succumbing to injuries.

After decades-long suffering of the people of Bangladesh, Hasina's fall from power marks a new beginning for Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, it is important to discuss our failings in post-1971 Bangladesh and what we can learn from Nelson Mandela's rule of post-apartheid South Africa. This may help us make post-Hasina Bangladesh a success, not a repetition of post-1971 follies and failures.

After taking his oath as the president of South Africa in 1994, Mandela said this to a jubilant crowd:

'We enter into a covenant, that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity—a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world... Never, never, never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another, and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.'

In apartheid South Africa, the indigenous black majority suffered unspeakable horror and atrocities at the hands of the settler white supremacist minority. Once apartheid rule was over, Mandela sought to protect the rights of both black and white populations and prevent a relapse into old discriminatory practices.

In post-1971 Bangladesh, we failed to adhere to the virtues of benevolence, magnanimity and altruistic sentiment. Duped or driven by vested interests, a section of our intellectual elite spent much effort sowing divisions among us. In post-Hasina Bangladesh, let us remember Mandela's words and make a strong resolve to foster unity among us. We should begin with promoting decency, fairness and justice in conducting our affairs. Importantly, we must be vigilant so that Hasina-style misrule can visit our land never again.

Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is professor of English language and literature, International Islamic University Malaysia.

cial in the Prime Minister's Office, invited some of us to his room and switched on the only official Bangla TV that was available. Other officials — Hansmukh Shah, Rajamani — soon joined us.

They were keen to find out how the official media played up the visit, particularly the transfer of grains.

Hours passed and there was no story. Maybe, it has been slotted for prime time? That too passed. Eventually, a tepid mention of the visit was made, but no mention of grains.

Two attitudes stood out. Eager as the Indians were for demagogic gratitude, the Bangla side was equally determined to deny the Indians that.

Remember what we learnt from our elders: do good and forget.

Prime minister Inder Gujral, always thinking out of the box, sometimes without reading South Block too well, invited me to accompany him to the India, Pakistan, Bangladesh summit he had worked hard to organise in Dhaka in January 1998.

Well, on this trip I found myself with friends but all from Bengal: Nikhil Chakravarty, Tarun Basu and every Chatterjee, Mukherjee, Sen, Ghosh within hailing distance. There was method in the composition. I was included quite simply to provide a Muslim flavouring to the Indian team.

No sooner was the press delegation past immigration and customs, when a cheerful almost ecstatic group of journalists lunged at the exit from the customs hall and got mixed up with the visiting journalists, hugging each other. 'Basu re basu', 'Ki khabar', 'Shalo, bhalo' and other Bangla greetings I do not know.

Never in all my life have I felt more lonesome with my Islamic identity the

prime minister of India had thrust upon me for the trip.

Linguistic regionalism trumped Islam by a long shot. Was not this precisely which smashed the two-nation theory in 1971 when Bangladesh was born.

On the way back, I could never forget an expression of extreme satisfaction etched as a permanent smile on Tarun Basu's face. The fellow was carrying a large ice box filled with lish from the River Padma, enough to open a small fish kiosk outside his house in Chittaranjan Park.

During Christmas and New Year, one's social popularity can be gauged by the number of greeting cards on the drawing room cornice. Whenever I received a greeting on tasteful art paper in neat handwriting from Dr Muri Manohar Joshi in mid April I accepted it as one of Dr Joshi's exquisite eccentricities.

Wisdom dawned when I found myself in Dhaka on April 15 for a most spectacular celebration of Pehela Baishakh, our/their ancient New Year.

The maiden was a riot of colour — men in colourful kurtas and women in saris of all hues. There was no forehead without a bindi. At a lunch party in the residence of famous editor Mahfuz Anam, celebrations were on an unimaginable scale. His wife stood at the entrance with a tray full of bindis which she placed on the foreheads of all the women among the guests who entered.

In the distance, a lovely voice sang Rabindra Sangeet interspersed with Nazrul geet which, unlike Tagore songs, are ironically rich with 'Bandav, Durga, Kali, Shiva.

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Opinion

<https://www.newagebd.net/post/opinion/242222/lessons-from-nelson-mandela>

<https://epaper.newagebd.net/11-08-2024/8>

A New Beginning: Lessons from Nelson Mandela

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Our job recruitment processes have been riddled with bribery, nepotism and party favouritism. Graduates who are otherwise qualified but with no substantial political linkages or connections, or are unable to pay bribes, have had little opportunity to enter suitable employment. The absence of much-needed values of diligence, honesty and meritocracy has driven our country to the brink of collapse.

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