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What is to be done?

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[This article is based on a discussion paper written for the *Mridubhashan* Roundtable Discussions held on the 28th of March, 2005. This was the first in a series in which it is hoped that concerned citizens will meet to discuss the present situation in Bangladesh. I have drawn upon yesterday's discussion to add some points to the paper that was presented. For details of the Roundtable discussions please refer the next issue of the weekly *Mridubhashan*.]

Most observers will agree that the current condition of Bangladesh – as reflected in the slide into lawlessness and the climate of impunity, State acquiescence to the growth of terrorist power, open corruption and maladministration, growing inequality, and the politicization and breakdown of some of the key institutions of the country - reflect more than just incompetence on the part of the current Government. There appears to be a concerted effort to undermine the foundations upon which our Republic was established. In recent months there has been growing recognition of the need to develop a coalition of interests aimed at halting the current downward spiral and thwarting those who would seek to challenge the fundamental beliefs which underpinned the creation of our State.

There is generally little divergence of views as to what is wrong in our country today. The only groups that deny that there is a problem are those blinded by party loyalties and those driven by mercenary interests (i.e., those who are gaining financially from the current regime). There have been endless seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions on our nation's problems and the key issues have been quite clearly identified by now. What I feel has been lacking in many such discussions is a sense of direction as to the way out of the current national crisis. There is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness within large sections of our citizens, given the magnitude and the breadth of problems we face. Where do we begin?

There is a joke going around about a meeting between the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and Singapore. The Singapore PM tells our PM that if he was given the chance to run our country he could turn it into Singapore in ten years. That's nothing, our PM smilingly replies, "Give me the chance to run Singapore and I will turn it into Bangladesh in ten days". Jokes apart, this highlights a valid point: it takes a long time to build institutional structures and a system of governance, but these can be destroyed very quickly. Of course, Singapore is a city-state without a genuine pluralist democracy, so there is no suggestion that it's example should be copied without question. However, Singapore has certainly developed a system of governance that has features we could adopt in this country. We should also draw upon international "good practice" - perhaps looking to the Scandinavian countries, Canada, Australia and New Zealand that are widely recognized as models of governance and citizen's rights.

There is a serious crisis of confidence in this country. Ordinary citizens have become bitter and cynical about the Government and to some extent politicians in general. I am not worried so much about people's lack of awe for politicians. This is probably a good

thing. In both the United States and Australia, for example, ordinary people have a healthy dose of cynicism about the rulers in Washington and Canberra. What is worrying is the total contempt that people in Bangladesh have developed – particularly in the past three years – regarding those who run our Government. People are not surprised when senior Government leaders are caught lying outright, or make preposterous statements denying responsibility for their actions, or are openly accused of corruption. It is worrying that some of these leaders have made a travesty of the concept of “public service”, bringing the entire system of governance into disrepute.

The cynicism and sense of partisanship that now pervades this country has reached levels where I would argue that it is difficult to name even twenty persons that are respected and trusted by a large majority (say three-quarters) of our citizens. Reputations are purposefully attacked by partisan groups and everyone’s integrity is questioned. Who are the “heroes” and role models of our society – the Bill Gates, Stephen Hawkings and Steven Spielbergs – whose success and achievements inspire us to excel in our fields? Every nation has its own heroes and this choice does reveal something important about the national character.

There have been political leaders that inspire adulation – Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, John F. Kennedy and Nelson Mandela for example – but these examples are rare. I noted a newspaper report the other day that the Speaker was discussing the need to introduce legislation making it possible to prosecute people (for “contempt”) who criticize legislators. Mr. Speaker, there are some things you just cannot obtain by decree or law – and the people’s respect is one of them. There is a question that small children used to be asked in the United States, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The answer commonly was “President”, “Governor” or “Senator”. The problem is that in Bangladesh we lack political leaders we even respect, let alone regard as role models. Can anyone imagine a child in this country saying that he wants to be like Messrs. Mannan Bhuiyan or Jamiruddin Sircar when he grows up?

How are the desired changes in our system of economic and social governance to be achieved? What would be the possible modalities for change? There are a few lonely voices calling for approaches that go outside the current political framework but I do not think this has wide popular appeal. I fear that any attempt to do so wastes the energies of otherwise sincere people. It helps no one to reject reality in the pursuit of some unattainable ideal – and I would refer those who believe in the necessity of revolution to the lyrics of the song by that name written by Lennon and McCartney.

I would suggest that any serious attempt to tackle this country’s problems cannot by-pass the existing major political parties of the country. These parties have many faults but we must work to improve them rather than reject the products of the democratic process. Of course it will be essential to guard against any attempt to subvert the voting process to ensure that the will of the people is accurately reflected in the electoral process, but that is another issue.

However, other stakeholders – smaller political parties, civil society, our universities, professional groups – can certainly play a more prominent role in the process of change. The smaller parties in particular have a chance to shape the future political landscape if they can put forward innovative answers to the nation’s problems. In the battle of ideas

that lies ahead there will be electoral rewards for those capable of “thinking outside the box” and articulating the will of the people in an effective manner.

Who would support the planning and implementation of necessary reforms? There may be a role for independent commissions, research agencies and perhaps even scope for collaboration with international NGOs working in the legal and governance areas. We need to consider what would be the future role of local research institutions and NGOs in this process. How closely, for example, is their independence from the Government compromised through consultancy work, funding and other arrangements? Primary school teachers may be a powerful potential force for change. These individuals already play a critical role in our society (particularly rural society) as leaders and opinion-makers and they must be at the forefront of any serious effort to inculcate values of democracy and tolerance in our society.

There is a need to go beyond the urban elites for opinions. The vast majority of our people may not have had the same opportunities for higher education that the privileged few in this country have had, but I do believe the innate common sense of our ordinary citizens will yield constructive ideas for reform. A way must be developed to ensure that wide public participation in debates and consultations on the reform agenda. Given the size of our country this may be a messy and difficult process but that is what genuinely participatory approaches require. One supplementary method would be to use opinion surveys to systematically gauge public opinion and assess reform priorities and directions.

The most difficult thing is to identify the problems we must focus on initially. It is important to pick an area in which progress will bolster all other the efforts to rejuvenate and reform the institutions of our country. No one individual can have all the answers to our problems but I would like to present a few ideas for consideration. I will suggest a few possible areas we should focus on in the discussion that follows, the order reflecting both their priority and their amenability to short-term solutions

1. The Election System: Most would agree this is the most important issue facing the country today. Ensuring that the people’s will is accurately reflected in the electoral process is essential if people are to retain confidence in democratic processes. Clearly the existing system is too susceptible to manipulation through the channels of the Chief of the Caretaker Government, the Election Commission, and a partisan President. What is the nature of the solution? Perhaps it is the development of institutional checks and balances or the provision of independent authority to the Election Commission. Or is a more radical temporary solution the answer? Additionally there are numerous serious flaws in the mechanics of the voting, vote counting and results-reporting process – these are all serious issues. Also, what should be the role of the security agencies in the election process?
2. Legal Reform: When the Law Minister of Bangladesh publicly defends the practice of extra-judicial killings, even the most biased observer will have figured out that we do have a problem here. The unfortunate situation of a stream of judges being “embarrassed” has also created serious concerns. Is there any guarantee of justice for our citizens? Will killers be allowed to escape with impunity? There must be a place we can turn to for relief and protection when all other national institutions have failed us, and it is the courts that must play this

role until our other institutions recover. Legal reform must receive recognition as a political priority. There are various projects focusing on legal training and infrastructure issues – to this I would add a proposal to raise judges’ salaries very substantially. Initially we may have an “adverse selection” problem – some legal officers may not have joined the profession for all the right reasons, so that some recipients of the high salaries may not, strictly speaking, be deserving of them. It is important, however, to at least get the market signals right.

3. The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Bangladesh under the BNP-Jamaat-i-Islami Government: the Government’s “mysterious” failure to recognize this phenomenon (until very recently) and the intention and capability of the Government to deal with this menace are matters of grave concern.
4. Local Government Reform. I believe that genuine devolution of financial and administrative authority to elected local governments represents the only sustainable way of developing truly representative and accountable institutions of governance in Bangladesh. This will mean an end to the Dhaka-centric system of government that currently exists. The dilution of the authority of elected public representatives at the national levels is bound to be resisted, but such an initiative would be popular. The conventional wisdom is that jurisdictions of about 6 million people are among the best governed as this size makes it practical to have high levels of participation, responsiveness to citizen’s needs and accountability (see: World Bank, *Government That Works*, Dhaka, 1996).
5. Reform of Campaign Funding: The current hypocrisy of campaign funding must come to an end – the sources of funding must be made more transparent and realistic spending limits for parliamentary campaigns need to be introduced. Why are the types of people we now see in Parliament the only ones that can prevail under the current system of political contests? It is said that a nation gets the Government it deserves, but surely no nation deserves to have people like Messrs. Saifur Rahman, M.R. Nizami or Khondokar Musharref Hossain as MPs? How can more people genuinely committed to public service enter Parliament – is there no way of checking the tendency of it becoming a “millionaire’s club”? Incidentally, my father had written about this phenomenon some years back, but perhaps the sense of public dissatisfaction with this situation is not that strong. How do we ensure that honorable people become willing to go through the bruising (and dangerous) process of becoming a Member of Parliament? Is there a need for an Upper House composed of those who have already distinguished themselves through a record of public service?
6. Educational Reform: a long-term issue, where I feel we need to address the need to improve teaching performance in the public educational system and strengthen the teaching of English. It may also be time to consider modernizing the infrastructure and curricula of the *madrassahs*, perhaps along the lines of what is being undertaken in Pakistan.
7. Administrative Reform: I believe that it is vital to restore the morale of our civil service, which must regain confidence in their role as servants of the Republic. It is important to break the current mentality in which they feel pressured to act as agents of a particular political party.