

Building a Consensus in Bangladesh Politics: Scope and Constraints¹

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I. Introduction

Sidhu blwi (Mokllesur Rahman), was a highly civilised and decent human being who believed in a political culture of tolerance and consensus rather than confrontation. It is thus appropriate that this memorial lecture should address the building of a workable political environment in Bangladesh which today appears far removed from the civilised political discourse which motivated *Sidhu Blwi's* political life.

Today the political environment in Bangladesh has become so confrontational between the ruling Awami League (AL) and the principal opposition party in the *Jatiyo Sangslwd*, (National Parliament), the BNP, that our very parliamentary system has become deadlocked. This confrontation has escalated from small issues of a procedural and administrative nature into a confrontation over a vital issue such as peace in the *Chittagong Hill Tracts* (CHT). In a Parliamentary democracy the lack of consensus on key political issues could jeopardise the viability of the democratic system. To the public at large the basis for such a confrontation is difficult to comprehend since the political dividing line between the two parties appears rather narrow, even on as vexed an issue as the cm. It is argued in this paper that political dividing line in Bangladesh is indeed rather narrow and does not justify the confrontational mode of politics which drives our principal political parties. The search for consensus is thus not entirely unreal and demands an element of vision by the leadership of both parties where issues of substance are distinguished from issues of style which today appear to dominate our political culture

II. Areas of consensus

The narrowness of the political space between the two principal parties may be seen by reviewing a number of areas, where an element of consensus has already emerged between the AL and BNP. Some of these areas are discussed below:

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1. *Parliamentary Democracy as a form of government*

This was proposed by the AL and accepted by the BNP who then moved a constitutional amendment to this effect in 1991 in the Fifth *Jatiyo Sangshad* which was supported by the AL.

2. *The modality of elections through a caretaker government*

The BNP government initially strongly opposed this demand but then eventually conceded to the two year political mobilisation in support of this issue from the Opposition, led by the Awami League. The system of a caretaker government has been incorporated into the constitution by the BNP in March 1996. The BNP will presumably be the beneficiary of the amendment when they contest the next general election, under a caretaker government headed by the last retired Chief Justice rather than under an incumbent Awami League administration.

3. *The separation of the judiciary from the executive*

This was a commitment of the BNP administration but they did little about it during their tenure. A bill effecting this separation is reportedly under presentation to the *Sangshad* by the present AL administration. Hopefully when the bill is placed in the House by the AL administration it will now have the full support of the BNP.

4. *Autonomy of TV and Radio*

This too was a commitment of the BNP when in opposition but they did nothing to validate their commitment when in power. The Awami League is expected to bring legislation on this subject before the *Sangshad*, based on the recommendations of the *Asafudowlah Committee*, which was presented to the Prime Minister some months ago. However not much is heard of this report today or of any legislation being prepared to bring about autonomy in the media. If such a bill were to come before the *Sangshad* it should now have the full support of the Opposition. After all, it is the Opposition which usually needs and wants to rescue the TV and radio from its subservience to the incumbent administration.

5. *Decentralisation of the Administration*

This too was a bill placed before the House by the BNP administration after they thoughtlessly dissolved the *Upazilla* Administration without putting anything in its place. The failure of the BNP administration to bring the work of the *Nazmul Huda Committee* to a conclusion and to pilot a bill through the House left Bangladesh without a coherent system of local government for the last 3 years of the BNP administration. The Committee headed by Awami League MP, Rahmat Ali, on Local Government, has submitted its report to the LGRD Minister who is expected to place a bill on the floor of the *Sangshad*. This legislation should have the full cooperation of the BNP. Meanwhile legislation on the *Union Parishad* and *Gram Parishad* has been prepared and placed before the *Sangshad*, though in the absence of the Opposition from the *Sangshad* it has not been voted upon by them.

6. *Economic Reforms*

Here the incumbent Finance Minister (FM) has committed his administration to carry through reforms already underway not just in the time of the BNP but from the early days of the Ershad Administration. This continuity in the reform process is not surprising since the reforms under successive administrations share the same parentage, having emerged from the womb of the *Bretton Woods Institutions* (BWI), the World Bank, and IMF in the early 1980s as part of their global agenda of structural adjustment reforms. It has been the privilege of each successive FM in Bangladesh to nurture this infant, as it grows in years, to enable it to reach adulthood. It is however to be seen whether the present FM can more effectively continue his predecessor's task of nurturing the reforms to maturity or will merely end up with a dwarf or even a monster. After all, if reforms are misconceived this could contribute to great hardships for the people and political turbulence. But this issue about the merits of the reforms is not the subject of serious discussion today since both parties support the BWI sponsored reform process.

The main point about promoting reform~ with a common parenthood is that the inter-party debate is no longer over the fundamentals of the reform design but about the quality of the nurturing role and occasionally over the method of childcare. Once both the present and past FMs acknowledge the share parenthood of their reform agendas, debate over childcare modalities can be conducted in a quite constructive and even amicable environment. In such a process the present FM can always remind his predecessor of the fact