

# The same old wine in a new bottle

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It has been 227 days (as of today, 26 August 2007) since the caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed took over (on 11 January 2007). Contrary to the Constitutional obligation of holding elections in 90 days, it will remain in power for more than 700 days by the end of 2008, when the general elections are scheduled to be held as they say till now. What a mockery of the Constitution and the people!

Nowhere in the country's Constitution is a mention made of such an unprecedented form of government. Notwithstanding, such a prominent Constitutional expert as Dr. Kamal Hossain has enlightened us that it is a Constitutional government since it enjoys public support, and our Constitution mentions the sovereign power of the people (something which Jamat-e-Islami and its fundamentalist allies have never recognized). Since it assumed power, the government has been referred to as 'army-backed caretaker government' as opposed to Dr. Hossain et al's conception of the incumbent government. If one is to go by their reasoning, s/he will have to treat the army and the people as being synonymous. However, the majority does not think so, particularly against the backdrop of the unfortunate events that took place on 20-22 August.

There's no denying the fact that the majority of the country's population supported the incumbent government when it assumed power at a critical juncture, thereby saving the country from an imminent catastrophe. Its sail to power is attributable to the country-wide mass-upsurge the pro-liberation political parties and individuals of the country organized, demanding the cancellation of the 22 January farcical elections that were to be held under the Iajuddin-led caretaker government, which was subservient to the four-party alliance headed by Khaleda Zia and Motiur Rahman Nizami. After the assumption of power, the first and foremost responsibility of the incumbent government was to rescind the 22 August elections. Except for the four-party alliance, all the democratic forces deemed its assumption of power as a success of their movement and built Himalayan expectations around it at that moment.

After coming to power, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and General Moeen U Ahmed expressed the conviction that they believe in the spirit of the liberation war and want to document its true history, try the war criminals, officially recognize Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as father of the nation, fight against terrorism and corruption, and ensure the independence of the judiciary and media, thereby earning accolades from home and abroad. However, if what happened in the last seven and half months is anything to go by, one discovers with chagrin that no initiatives have been taken to implement most of the pledged programmes, and a handful of programmes that are being implemented are of a dubious nature. Despite having more than a hundred central and district leaders and thousands of activists of both BNP and Awami League arrested on charges of terrorism and corruption, the government has not laid a hand on any top leaders of Jamat-e-Islami yet. The top notches of the administration are

literally sweating day in and day out to prove that Jamat is the only corruption-free political party of the country, let alone nab its leaders.

The incumbent government is not half as concerned about the incidents of terrorism and corruption in the recent past as those of a decade ago. The four-party coalition government, for understandable reasons, concealed the incidents of the seizure of ten truckloads of lethal arms and ammunitions in Chittagong. The incumbent government is, for arcane reasons, following in the footsteps of its predecessor. Those responsible for the routine assaults on religious minorities, and the arrest and persecution and killing of secular democratic forces and freethinking intellectuals during the tenure of the coalition government have, none of them, been put to the dock yet. Besides, the unthinkable price hike, severe deterioration of law and order as well as human rights situation, failure to face the floods, power and fertilizer crisis, and the process of shutting down mills and factories thereby turning workers into vagabonds have made a huge dent on the popularity of this government. The 20-22 August skirmishes between law enforcing agencies and general students and common people, mayhems on the streets and destruction of public and private properties attest to this fact.

Like the past military and fascist regimes, the incumbent government has chosen to tread the same old path of mass-persecution rather than seeking to find out the reasons behind the mass agitations and grievances that are indeed attributable to their failure. As in the past, an Indian conspiracy and a homegrown plot to harm the image of the government and the country have been smelled in the recent anti-government agitations. Known for their devotion to secularism and democracy, five distinguished academics from the University of Dhaka and the University of Rajshahi have been held responsible for the 20-22 August incidents. Four of them were arrested at midnight on 22 August without being shown any warrants of arrest. Joint forces told them that they would talk to them for some time and took them to unknown places, where they interrogated them for 30 to 40 hours without producing them to the court. A couple of days later, on 25 August, they were produced before the court and taken on remand for four to ten days. Horrifying stories were published in some newspapers, quoting intelligence sources, about the five arrested academics and some other distinguished colleagues of theirs conspiring against the government. The government's list of persons responsible for the 'plot' to dethrone it includes my friend Professor Muntasir Mamoon. According to government-sponsored news reports, the plot was designed in the Indian High Commission in Dhaka a month ago and billions of taka was spent to cause the student community to stand against the army. More than ten thousand people have been made accused and over a hundred cases have been filed against the fictional conspirators in various police stations. Anyone may now be arrested and shown on the list of ten thousand.

I remember a Persian proverb that I read in a write-up of illustrious writer Syed Mujtaba Ali. To translate it literally, 'If you're eating *pilau* (a dish made of rice boiled in soup with spices) in your dreams, why exercise austerity in putting *ghee* (kind of butter)?' At the news of accusing over ten thousand people in the 20-22 August

incidents, I feel like saying, ‘Why accuse ten thousand only? Why not 150 million and turn the whole country into a virtual prison?’

During the tenure of the fundamentalists-war criminals-infested four-party coalition government, whenever a bomb attack was launched (invariably by pro-Jamat militant fundamentalists) or an agitation was staged against the government, the latter instantly blamed it on Awami League or India without even initiating a probe. In November 2001, I was arrested for my writings and my initiative to produce a film on the government-sponsored persecution of minorities. The intelligence department got pro-government newspapers to publish hair-raising stories about how I, in collusion with Indian intelligence, had sought to taint the image of the coalition government. It has been six years ever since, and yet they have not been able to issue a charge sheet against me in the court. And investigation is still going on! Exactly one year later, notorious militant Mufti Hannan and his other *Harkatul Jihad* abettors launched a deadly bomb attack on three cinema halls in Mymensingh. However, the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government, as usual, instantly blamed it on Awami League and India even without initiating a probe, and got a dozen Awami League leaders as well as Professor Muntasir Mamoon and me arrested. I gave the court a detailed account of how Professor Mamoon and I were tortured during interrogation so that we would issue a statement linking Awami League and India to the attack.

As regards Professor Mamoon, the police report in the Mymensingh bombing case said, ‘The accused is a terrorist of a deadly nature, and if he is set free, he will perpetrate more such attacks and intimidate the witnesses.’ During the proceedings of his bail case, the High Court asked the public prosecutor if anyone had ever seen Professor Mamoon roaming the streets or the Dhaka University campus brandishing a pistol or a bomb. It goes without saying that the answer was in the negative. Afterwards, the honourable judge said to the public prosecutor, ‘When bombs were blasted in Mymensingh, Professor Mamoon was in Dhaka. Is there such a powerful remote whereby someone staying in Dhaka can hurl a bomb as far away as in Mymensingh?’ The public prosecutor had no answer. Having censured the government for filing a false case against Professor Mamoon, the judge dismissed the case. As they failed to implicate Professor Mamoon, they did not file a case against me on the same charge. Later, they brought sedition charges against me for my interview with BBC Channel 4’s journalists. As the allegation was proved false, the case was dismissed a couple of months ago. However deliberate, false and conspiratorial such cases may be, people like Professor Mamoon and me have been arrested time and again, subjected to inhuman harassments on remand, and made to serve prison terms for months on end. That is how the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government would spite anti-fundamentalist liberal writers, journalists and academics. We could survive it all. However, secular humanists like Professor Humayun Azad and journalist Manik Saha had to quench the coalition government’s thirst for blood by laying down their lives.

We watched the 20-22 August incidents on television and read about them in the newspaper. I am an eyewitness of what happened on the street in front of Titumir

College on 22 August. The way employees from roadside shops and garments workers from Mohakhali area came out on the street in support of the aggrieved student community is unprecedented. On that day, I heard angry passers-by making comments mainly about the galloping price hike. I wonder in spite of finding core reasons of people's grievance our intelligence agencies are discovering conspiracy of India and secular intellectuals as we observed during Pakistan days.

Finance Minister of the coalition government led by Khaleda-Nizami, M Saifur Rahman, would not even understand *monga* (kind of famine). Similarly advisers of the incumbent government do not know how price hikes affect people's lives. Rather, they claim that the prices of essentials are lower in our country than in any other countries of the world. Are the advisers aware of the fact that half a day's wage of a labourer in Europe or America is higher than a full month's salary of a labourer in Bangladesh? Since coming to power, this government has continued evicting hawkers and slum-dwellers, and shut down mills and factories, thereby turning workers into vagrants.

The government ought to realize that it cannot escape public wrath by inventing an Indian-sponsored anti-government plot in the face of common people's grievances. This is how the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government and all other Pakistan-loving governments of Bangladesh invented an Indian link to the people's movements in the past. Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia, the then editor of The Daily Ittefaq and father of the garrulous adviser Barrister Moinul Hossain, was a prominent journalist of the country. In his columns, he would often write one of his favourite clichés – 'That same old tradition is still going on!' Despotic rulers could never really fool people with the help of such eerie stories in the past. Only the policy makers of the government and their sycophants can say why the same old mistakes are repeated. From 1948 to 1971 the Pakistani rulers sought to foil any kind of anti-government agitations in Bangladesh by raising the bogey of Indian links, and since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, successive pro-Pakistan governments have only followed in their footsteps. On 23 August, I saw on BBC a native of the old part of Dhaka ventilating his frustrations, 'We aren't a bunch of fools'. If only the government could realize this fact! Bangladesh is neither Burma nor Pakistan. The people of this land liberated the country by fighting a bloody war and sacrificed three million lives for secular democracy. They should not be treated as a 'bunch of fools'.

26 August 2007