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REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF OUR SOCIETY

Whether we like it or not we are a remarkable society. We have no cause, no genuine leaders, no heroes. We have forgotten our past, we are indifferent to the present, and we have no idea about the future though we shall never publicly admit that. We take public oaths because we have to, not because we believe in them. Some of us wish to become leaders because others have been, not because we qualify to be; we want to be ministers because ministerial power and influence will bring personal benefits, not because we want to serve our country; we want to be in Parliament because the new identification card will open many closed doors, not because our social conscience drives us there. We want greater personal freedom but no moral accountability for our actions. We want to live only for today, why bother with tomorrow's headaches? We are an evolution without a fixed destiny.

The rural majority thrives on residual faith, the urban minority thrives on corruption and the power holders thrive on mouthing rhetorical garbage and vacuous pledges. The villages produce, and the cities consume. Religion yields to secularism, culture yields to commercialization and sacrosanctity to expediency. And all this time we are supposed to be "progressing." If this is the price our society has to pay for "progress," may be we should reconsider, because after eleven years of oligarchic greed and poor government we have "progressed" to the point where internal decay and disintegration has rendered our society sickly.

Before 1947 we blamed the ubiquitous British for every evil in our society. From 1947 to 1971 we blamed the Pakistanis for their exploitative policies in erstwhile East Pakistan. But who shall we blame now for the destruction wrought since 1971? Since we cannot now conveniently point the finger at an external agent for the feeble state of our society; should not we be wise enough to search for the causes elsewhere?

There is little doubt that it is we who have really done ourselves in. Our eleven years of independence is a story of unmitigated conflicts and self-inflicted wounds. It is a story of leaders who have misled; of a nation that has been repeatedly duped by those it

trusted; and of dreams that have been continually shattered. Can we then expect our nation to repose anew its faith and trust on leaders yet-to-be? Which direction should be take? Have we arrived at a critical juncture in our short history and should we then in light of current reflections recast our dreams and aspirations? These and scores of other questions must be asked and answered if we genuinely desire the betterment of our society.

No single interest group however powerful can adequately answer these issues. Nor should these issues, once successfully identified, be seen in the short-term perspective as that would again be myopic and self-defeating. Most important of all, decision-making should not be seen purely as a mechanical process; it should involve some morality and conscience. Today, a national catechism is in order; a rendezvous with our conscience has become a must.

Of the many critical issues that our nation faces today that I am deeply concerned with, only a selected few are highlighted in this essay. I do not propose any ultimate solutions for them, but I do wish to offer my personal sentiments for consideration by the readers concerned with our future.

I

The outcome of the national liberation movement itself can in some sense be considered the premature child of time. Although we were massively exploited by the pre-1971 ruling oligarchies and there were even instances when the Punjabis thought of us as something less than human, political independence from Pakistan was not the bumptious demand of the majority. Mujib never wanted the dissolution of Pakistan; he wanted autonomy, not independence for Bangladeshis. The concatenation of events during those hectic days in March 1971 were beyond Mujib's control and he found himself caught in the vortex of a movement whose inevitable outcome he neither anticipated nor desired.

While there was extreme polarization in the urban centers, the same cannot be said of rural Bangladesh. The nation at large was not prepared for the liberation struggle. The notion of a separate political entity caught the imagination of only the diehard few, while the great majority were uninformed of the significance of the fateful events in the capital. It was only the swift and ruthless military

operations resulting in the massive dislocation of the urban centers that brought home the terror of subjugation, and then the fight for survival became a must.

But it was a strange fight. While much of the Bengali professional army was detained in Pakistan, it was overwhelmingly the civilians engaged in the defense of the motherland. The war seemed to be over as soon as it had started; it was over before the entire nation could be steeled with patriotic commitment not only to full independence but subsequent nation-building efforts, and before every individual could be imbued with the spirit of personal sacrifice for the collective good. However the destruction and sufferings were very real; apart from the physical destructions, it left our normally peaceful society emotionally disturbed and psychologically scattered.

It was a war that brought political independence, but it did not significantly raise the political consciousness of the overwhelming non-urban majority of our society, who were preoccupied with restoring their lives or at least what was left of it. No attempt was made to give government to the people or to make the society the beneficiary of its new rights. Promises became empty words even as the ruling party set on appropriating the entire nation to satisfy its oligarchic greed. The people had no reason to suspect the Mujib government, for it was the part that led the final struggle to uphold the legitimate rights of the Bangladeshis comprising the national majority.

As the nation tended its wounded psyche, the government gave itself the *carte blanche*. And that was the beginning of the great divide; the nation was divorced from its government with the painful result that government's accountability to its people was not institutionalised. The interests of the nation were forgotten and instead the operating principle became: what is good for the Awami League is good for the country. Subsequently it became: what is good for the BNP is good for the country. Nothing could be farther from the truth. That was our original sin when we failed to force the government of the ruling part to hold itself accountable to its people; therefore in allowing it to operate rein-free we may have destroyed any chance for government of the people, by the people, and for the people perhaps for all posterity. Most assuredly, we have not yet paid the full price for that.

There was suffused in us a great hope and oneness of spirit after we had dislodged the shackles of neo-colonialism, but within a short time the nation encountered supreme betrayal from leaders who had promised a Golden Bengal; in just four years the people went from euphoria to utter despair. The stunning reversal of expectations was to leave deep scars in our psyche, and that may explain why we have become so apathetic today. Our people respond to renewed promises of better life with cynicism and contempt.

II

Nationalism, National Goal, National Strategy: Nationalism has always been the cementing force for a nation in peril. Traditionally the force of nationalism was directed at the external adversary to force it to come to terms with the indigenous aspirations, and once that was successfully realised, nationalism ceased to be the same motive force. This is generally true of most countries, the exception being certain socialist countries. In the latter, the leaderships ability to use the force of nationalism, even after political independence, to mobilize their people to unitedly and selflessly work to achieve the priorities of the nascent statehood is indeed a mark of political legerdemain. This of course involved the rigid application of a type of political system that non-socialist states have decried. But while the political and intellectual aspects of human freedom were denied, the social and economic demands that are the primary requirements of any people were largely met.

But in Bangladesh its leadership was not wise enough to recognise the continued validity of such a force in the cohesive rendition of our state; they failed to recognise nationalism as a political tool through which our fundamental socio-economic wants could be secured. Thus a decade of half-hearted political experimentations not only failed to hoist the appropriate structure of government, they also alienated our homogeneous society of one people, one language, one dominant religion and one landmass. And there seems to be no end to political experimentation as every new political leader promises a system better than his predecessors'. But while this trial continues, what happens to the cohesive bonds holding our society intact and the individuals who form the society? Our society in its present form is a vast sea of dishevelled humanity fast losing its cohesion, direction and motivation. For the great

majority apathy has set in. In urban areas a sense of impermanence pervades while for the rural majority life is losing its meaning. For an increasing number the distinction between adhoc existence and helplessness is getting blurred; we are surviving, not living. In this contrempe nationalism has an urgent role to play since we must first ensure the coherence of our society in order to build upon it .

While nationalism has been variously defined by various thinkers, Karl Deutsche's simple definition is perhaps the best: nationalism is the sense of "we feeling"; the "we" identity is not only distinct from "they", it is also more than an arithmetical addition of "I". The "we" identity suggests an integrative whole with a deeply held social and psychological sense of belonging. This definition is important because it not only starts with the self-discovery of a people, it also assumes an organic nature of the nation, specially one whose attempts at achieving progress without disturbing social harmony are constantly vitiated by faction-producing modernising forces.

In our current transition our "we" feeling is disintegrating into a collection of indifferent "I" as we pursue individual material aggrandizement at the expense of social cohesion. The challenge we face is really how to achieve progress without the collapse of our social, moral and spiritual values. In any endeavour national unity must be maintained to preserve the organic wholeness of our society and therefore it is imperative that the "we" feeling must be assiduously inculcated in us. Under the objective conditions of contemporary existence and particularly in view of the economic poverty and the poverty of will that exist today in Bangladesh, there appears to be no option but to massively mobilize and discipline the entire nation in preparation for the national tasks at hand.

And how well that can be done would depend on our *national strategy* which must be bold but realistic. A realistic strategy is not the strategy that will fulfil the aspirations of the dominant interest group as has been perceived by those in power so far. A realistic strategy is one that is formulated in light of national problems and needs. Thus, the complexities of interdependence demonstrated by the intricate link between national and international conduct demand that before any national strategy can be identified national problems should be analysed to provide the context for strategic theorising. Since strategic studies should shift from dealing ex-

clusively with war planning and battlefield execution to dealing with the much wider domain of sociopolitical and economic problems of the nation-state, our emphasis should be on how to devise the most efficient and realistic method of obtaining our national goals given the constraints in political will, resources, technology and time.

What type of strategy we should adopt for our country would necessarily depend on our national goal. Since our national goal should be to build a strong, integrated and viable nation-state *with the widest possible option for independent and unfettered action internally and externally*, we must aim for complete self-reliance in economy and strength. Our national plan devised to translate to reality the dreams and aspirations of our people must be *functionally relevant and utilitarian*. It must be people based so that it will positively contribute to the welfare of every citizen and, at the least, aim to bring maximum good to the great majority most of the time.

Since strategic studies in an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh should be problem oriented, its approach should also be "preventive" in nature. We need to agree with Henry Kissinger that "strategy is the mode of survival of a society" and we must particularly stress the "preventive" objectives of our national strategy which should be: *to obviate* mistakes rather than having to rectify them at the expense of our meager resources; *to prevent* conflicts in our society rather than having to resolve them at great political costs; *to anticipate* the de-stabilizing forces within and without before they destabilize our country.

Since independence the greatest threats to our national security unquestionably emanated from internal causes: proccupation with foreign ideologies and isms without reference to indigenous political culture; destructively parochial politics; inability to accommodate the rights of tribal minorities; civil-military problem: unequal distribution in wealth, power, influence and opportunity; inequality before law; injustice; oligarchic greed and indulgence; immoral and unethical conduct by the economically active sections of the middle class; failure to identify the appropriate growth and development model; willful negligence in the building of infrastructures; non-cooperation and non-coordination among governmental and non-governmental agencies and ministries; obsolete and un-

workable institutional and administrative structures; unnecessary bureaucratic hassle; inter-institutional jealousy and egoism; and massive corruption, to name the most obvious ones. Political rhetorics will never solve these issues, nor will promises to the people restore their confidence in a regime. Bold and courageous actions in the total interest of only the entire nation can make any headway, *although the legitimacy of actions must be maintained at all times.*

One is reminded of the French political philosopher, Raymond Aron, who stated that "strategic thought draws its inspiration... at each moment in history from the problems which events themselves pose". The greatest event for us today is our endeavour at nation-building in which pursuit we expose our country's vulnerabilities continuously. Therefore it should be the task of strategists to acquaint our decision-makers with complete sets of options that specify a definite choice or alternative for every conceivable situation in which our country must act.

Our national goals are defined largely by politics. But just as war is much too serious to be left to the generals, national politics is also much too serious to be left to the politicians or the bureaucrats. What is required is continuous and open dialogues at all levels to collectively measure the strengths and weaknesses of our society vis-a-vis the challenges of nation-building. What is woefully missing are forums for debating national issues, perhaps because people are afraid to participate in open discussions for fear of being branded. It is strongly suggested that the current government must make serious attempts to promote nation-wide public debates on economic, educational, socio-religious, military, and other policies that affect our stability and future. Detailed inter-disciplinary studies must be made of all issues and any implementation must be continually monitored and updated to stay in tune with the demands of time so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past.

III

Morality, Ethics and Social Values: Though we have traversed a whole decade, today we have to struggle to preserve our sanity, our morality and our peace of mind and soul. One very crucial concern that demands society's urgent consideration deals with our morality, ethics and social values. Our society's degeneration in this area is particularly distressing as we nonchalantly pursue

immoral and unethical behaviour paying scant heed even to basic modesty. The collapse of these values has come to such a state that money, power and influence are directly proportional to immoral and unethical conduct, and anyone who wants to remain moral and conscientious must do so at the expense of his economic solvency or political survival. Vertical ascendance is directly proportional to graft and nepotism, and bribery is the only means. The only norms that appear to be important are those that directly bring sordid aggrandizement whatever the social cost to the nation.

Morality, ethics and social values of a society reflect the way of thinking of the whole people. However, a society in transition is quite often buffeted by competing values, with the ethics of the dominant political group tending to impose upon the social matrix. It is therefore necessary to understand those forces that affect changes in the values, norms, and mores of society.

In a Third World country like Bangladesh the ruling group often inordinately affects the moral and ethical conduct of the society. There exists for instance a distinction between the morality of the majority based on traditional values and that of the ruling coterie whose basis is political expediency. Thus the 'political morality' that legitimizes the actions and norms of the ruling coterie is distinct from the 'social morality' of the non-ruling majority, since the value systems differ between the rulers and the ruled according to the perceptions and priorities of the two. The greater the gap between the value systems of the two groups the greater the fissures in society and greater the tendencies towards socio-political and economic disintegration.

Thus, when a cabinet minister renounces smoking foreign cigarettes or publicly discloses his total wealth, with one hand on the Holy Quran, he does so merely because it is politically expedient. His conscience does not bother him when he puffs foreign cigarettes in private or amasses in a short time unaccounted wealth by mortgaging his oath to society; all this is a part and parcel of the political morality that operates today in Bangladesh. When one thinks about the swearing-in oaths taken for some of the highest offices of State and the subsequent abuse of those oaths, one gets a true measure of the ruling coterie's callousness towards values held dearly by society. But for greater society these are moral issues unyielding in urgency and usually immutable in application because they otherwise

stand to undermine all that is held sacrosanct by the great majority.

This unfortunate dichotomy between the morality of the rulers and the morality of the ruled cannot be totally eliminated, nonetheless attempts must be made to modify political behavior and attitude to conform to society's expectations as much as possible. This is however not to suggest that society as a whole must make no attempts of its own to adjust and adapt itself to the political demands of time and environ, for the characters of its citizens when inconsistent with the ends of the State will inevitable contribute to the breakdown of the state and society. Since in most Third World countries the ends of the State reflect the demands of the dominant political group rather than those of its people, soul-searching attempts must be made to bring about convergence of these conflicting demands, failing which political disorder and economic disintegration will inevitably ensure. The better the rulers are able to articulate the people's needs the greater the guarantee of continuity of that leadership and stability in the country. The more the society is adaptable to the demands of time the lesser the disintegrating influence of transitional force.

But this still leaves untouched man's political tendencies that usually give rise to moral dilemmas. According to Aristotle, man is naturally a political animal. Whenever man thinks or acts he is being political. It follows then that problems of morality as they affect him cannot be separated from the problems of his political association. In other words, man's political frame of reference will affect his moral conduct. This is also in keeping with Karl Marx' observation that conditions of man's material existence dictate his consciousness and not the reverse.

Since political association conditions man's morality, we must study at the least the most dominant forms of political association in our country, namely the political parties, to ascertain their affect on our moral fabric. While many other forms of political associations exist, they can all more or less be termed as passive associations because, due to their non-dogmatic or non-bumptious approach, they rarely trigger forces of change. But political parties, representing active political associations, with their rigid structure and ideological commitments demand of their members certain allegiance and behavior patten which is not always wholly consistent with the aims and expectations of society, although the aims and

objectives of a political party need not be inconsistent with those of society's. A party's membership, organization and discipline allows it to project its values and beliefs strongly at any given moment, and therefore for that party to chart a course not in contradiction to society's expectations—politically, socio-economically, morally and ethically—would be desirable. It should be a moral duty of a political party to uphold those social values that are held dearly by society. Since a political party can very often be the agent of change, there is a tremendous responsibility on its part to avoid irresponsible and destructive activities that would undermine the cohesive bonds that keep the society cemented.

In Bangladesh the activities of political parties to date have generally been unfavourable. Far from upholding society's moral and ethical expectations, they have been the purveyors of political greed and lust. Political parties who came to power have not only reneged on their pre-election pledges, their volte-face has created precedence for other parties to do the same.

Political leaders themselves have betrayed their own party principles and platform to satiate their greed for influence and power. Many have become political prostitutes as evidenced by their frequent defections from their original allegiance. This can have only the most alienating impact on the rank and file of any party and ultimately it is society that will have to contend with disillusioned and disenchanted people exhibiting tendencies towards apathy or anarchy, neither being a desirable outcome from the social standpoint.

The political parties in Bangladesh have so far failed not only to bring about constructive changes in society, they have in some respects actually triggered social disharmony and decay; when the politically conscious members of society are alienated, the disruptive tendencies of this group will further undermine the moral values of the society. It is particularly grave in our country where the majority of the population is under twenty.

Besides the conflict between political and social morality, the seeming conflict between tradition and modernism also affects our values and norms. It is generally held that the two are contradictory because one resists change while the other effects change; but this perspective requires revision. Modernism does not

imply a swap with tradition, and it need not come at the expense of tradition either; rather, both tradition and modernity are different periods in the time continuum in which modern values *complement* traditional values thus preparing society to face the challenges of the future. Modernism is not some irrelevant imposition on the social matrix, rather it provides a required re-orientation to facilitate tradition's relevance in contemporary society.

Every society must strike a balance between the traditional and modernistic impulses that act on it. But what is more important than the values *per se* is the *impact* on society of those values. Modernising values cannot be prevented from encroaching upon society, nor should they be. Indeed, modernizing values are absolutely necessary in order to prevent stagnation and bring society upto date in response to changing needs. However, the impact of modernism must be carefully considered because not everything that comes in the garb of modernity is necessarily good or desirable for us. While the advent of modernism cannot be checked, some of the offensive aspects of its value system must be censored; this is best done not necessarily by erecting barriers against it but by strengthening the base of our traditional values that we wish to preserve. While the traditional values form the fundament of any society, modern values when properly guided in their application can reinforce them. However, all values traditional or modern should be re-examined continuously to judge their relevance.

The dowry system for instance once played an essential role in our socio-economic set-up, but today it is a social evil because it downgrades eligible girls to economic commodities with grave social and psychological consequences for those whose parents cannot meet the extortive demands of prospective grooms. Laws banning it have been passed, but no recognizable implementation has taken place. Another related traditional evil is the attitude towards women whose functions are still seen to be confined to the bedroom and the kitchen; thus a large section of our labour force constantly stays home. Any emancipation of women will however have to be preceded by the emancipation of men's minds.

While these unsavory values persist, other essential values such as fear of God; deference to parents, teachers and elders; and respect for laws, institutions and symbols have eroded. There is none in our society we can emulate. We have no statesman to teach us the exquisite art of statecraft, no theologian whose

erudition and wisdom can guide us in the right path, no academician who can push a socially relevant thesis by the force of his intellect, no justice of the Supreme Court who has expanded the horizons of the legal science, and no public figure whose social concerns and contributions can be an incentive to others. Even the poets, dramatists and novelists who are our conscience seem to be moribund, and the students and journalists who are our activists appear to be nonplussed.

Today our moral values are yielding ground to the inexorable demands of expediency. Thus it is increasingly expedient to seek bridegrooms among those who have mastered the art of minting money overnight whether by corruptive practices at home or by securing jobs in the Gulf Emirates, rather than the traditional practice of seeking out men with decent education, with good family background and with proper social upbringing. Indeed it is expedient even to go to 'pirs.' While some genuinely desire spiritual sustenance, for the great many the reasons are non-religious: either they go to seek blessings to make a quick buck or they go out of curiosity or because that is the "in" thing to do. Going to 'pirs' has become such a fad that even criminals find it fashionable.

IV

Failure of Authority: There used to be a time when the public appearance of a cabinet minister was an awesome event for the general public, or the induction of someone into the government service was a matter of pride for his village. Today, neither a minister nor an official commands much public respect. Parents who were revered next to God and teachers who were held in high esteem have also lost their places in the pedestal of honour. What went wrong?

Since 1947 a number of socio-political changes have taken place, and at least two are of primary significance to us: first, the phenomenal population increase and, second, the total failure of every government to maintain parallel developments in socio-economic, institutional, administrative and other necessary services. The combination of the two has resulted in an alarming social maladjustment whose disturbing effects will be felt for a long time.

But the watershed is undoubtedly the years 1970-71 when the war of independence resulted in the massive breakdown of institu-

tions, norms and values. On top of that, our beliefs and faiths could not withstand the mis-rule of a decade and consequently we have not only lost faith and confidence in ourselves but also in our institutions and in all symbols of authority. The greatest tragedy is the loss of self-respect, self-esteem and self-worth which are the bulwark against moral degeneration.

Among the leaders, barring a few exceptions, most who have wielded power have failed miserably in their display of leadership, for they grossly lacked the necessary qualifications: the proper blend of social conscience, patriotic commitment, sagacity and most importantly *genuine personal desire* to serve the nation's welfare and interests. Instead, we had opportunistic, parasitic, self-above-all, political philanderers who displayed not even a modicum of conscience as they effusively spewed forth their treacherous rhetoric and sanctimony to a gullible public.

The members of parliament did no better. They were elected to legislate appropriate laws that would guard the nation's interests from being trampled. But they themselves became the trampers. The process was flawed from the very start because party nomination was granted on the basis of political expediency, even if it meant nominating known criminals. Demagoguery, intimidation and false promises were the standard procedures employed by the dominant political parties to elect social undesirables to the Parliament, and once elected, their main concerns were to uphold party interest at the expense of the nation's interest and to employ the fullest powers of their office to secure benefits for themselves and their kin. There has never been a socially enlightened or a morally conscientious group in Parliament because the members of this group were politically irrelevant to the contesting parties whose only concerns were to win parliamentary seats even if through chicanery and shenanigans. Instead of primarily being a legislative body, Parliament thus was reduced from the status of an august house to a veritable circus, and a very expensive one at that.

Also, the political parties totally failed to present before the electorate any realistic and coherent national policy of government; whatever pre-election political platform the winning parties had, only those aspects that directly benefited the particular party in power were implemented, while the interests and welfare of the nation received lip-service. The parties left and right of center

generally came across as extremists of various degree. The leftists failed miserably because of their inability to adapt their ideologies to the domestic context, while the rightists came across as fanatics of sorts and thus both were consistently rejected by the stability-conscious electorate. In general, all the political parties were adept in cutting each other down and quite inept at expounding panaceas for the problems that plague us. Today neither any political party nor any political leader and claim to be a symbol of authority to the public.

But the cabinet ministers have been the worst defaulters. Since independence only a handful of ministers were truly capable of rendering public service; the rest were extreme opportunists who regularly employed sycophancy, threats and other abuse of power to make themselves the worst parasites in our society.

There is one thing common in all these failings: conflict of interest. We failed to distinguish between the private and public sphere of authority and consequently the distinction between private interest and public interest was lost. Inevitably, public servants employed the authority of their office to realise personal gains rather than to fulfill their job responsibilities. Until a clear-cut distinction is made between private and public interests, the people in positions of authority will continue to default in their responsibilities, with alarming consequences for the entire country.

Theologians are primary sources of authority in societies that are more traditional than modern. But in Bangladesh there is hardly a theologian who has acquired national recognition by his moral or spiritual wisdom. In fact, most would-be religious figures are so shallow in their Quranic knowledge, so parochial in their interpretation, so earthbound in their vision that they are really bigots, and their political activities can produce nothing more than fanaticism which this country must avoid at all cost.

In short, our cabinet ministers, the members of Parliament, political leaders, government officials and other authoritative figures, themselves undermined their own authority and status by their disgusting character and unethical public conduct. It was Confucius who stated in his advice on government some 2500 years ago: "To govern is to set things right. If you begin by setting yourself right who will dare to deviate from the right?" Unfortunately,

many public servants in the highest echolons of government do not subscribe to this view as has been evident from their conduct. The late Zia may have believed in this Confucian principle, but his failure to check the excesses of his cabinet had brought the country to ruin. The current government should take a lesson from that.

V

Appropriate System of Government: What should be the appropriate system of government has more than once been the topic of passionate discussion among politicians, particularly during election campaigns, and also among the literati in the country. During the last election in November 1981, the issue of presidential versus the parliamentary form of government was politically volatile because the former conjured up a dictatorial system which most of the political parties decried and the latter promised a democratic set-up which they demanded. Whatever the merits and demerits of various systems of government, they were politically explosive enough to reveal definite preferences among the politically conscious. Whether the BNP's preference for a presidential form of government, notwithstanding the dissenting view within its ranks, and the Opposition's general stand in favour of a parliamentary form were in light to their perception of what is best for the country or what is best for the individual party in its quest for power is suspect. But it all appears to be a fruitless exercise because the real issue has been totally misrepresented. The fault of mis-government in Bangladesh lies not with the systems so far invoked but lies with the men who abused the systems for their personal gain.

Before we discuss what should be the appropriate system of government for Bangladesh, we should, for the sake of those who desire to lead us, clarify what government is and what its functions are. Confucius believed that government is the art of setting things right. Implicit in it is the assumption that without government all is not well and therefore it requires some structure of authority to set things right. In Confucius, case the art of government was essentially how to preserve the hierarchical order in the Middle Kingdom.

In the more complex world of today, government assumes the presence of a structure of authority that can gauge the quantum of demands and the national potential to satisfy those demands, including the ability to continually monitor the process. More

simply, government is the art of fulfilling basic needs of every individual given the limitations of irreplaceable and finite resources. To govern is an unenviable but necessary balancing act that strives to contain the conflicting demands within society. Thus a more modern definition of government was offered by Charles de Gaulle when he stated that "to govern is to choose between unpleasant alternatives." But the transition from Confucius to de Gaulle is marked by an important difference. In the ancient period government was created to accentuate the powers of the potentate and therefore government existed to serve the whims, interests and wishes of the potentate. Government literally meant governing the subjects who lived at the pleasure of the potentate. In the modern period, government exists to serve the people, to govern the forces that jeopardize national unity. This important distinction has been lost on our leaderships, who saw themselves as modern-day potentates. Consequently, almost every man who wielded power so far did so only to husband the national resources to aggrandize himself rather than to serve the peoples' interests. Therefore the central issue for every potential leader must be his ability to appreciate the *raison d'être* of government.

It must be clearly understood that government exists to benefit the people, not to serve those holding power as has been the case since independence. Once the *raison d'être* of government is fully understood and appreciated the next important issue is the presence of political will to serve. One great impediment to proper government is the mis-application of political will. If that could be righted then the type of system might become less crucial.

After a decade of mis-rule and mis-management it has become customary for us to accuse the system for all failure. But it is not the system of government that is really at fault, it is the men in charge whose personal flaws vitiate the system. It may be immaterial what kind of system we should have in Bangladesh. Whether it should be capitalist or socialist, fundamentalist or liberal, revolutionary or revisionist is not the fundamental issue. The fundamental issue is that whatever the system is, it should be made to work. The United States' capitalist system, notwithstanding the flaws inherent in that system, does work because it can effectively respond to its peoples' multifarious needs. Equally, the Soviet Union's socialist system—more critically state capitalism as her detractors would call it—does work and can also respond to its peoples' multifarious

needs. Both these highly contrasting systems work because the respective leaderships are committed to make them work. Similarly, whatever our national requirements are, almost any system can realise them if genuine commitment from the leadership is forthcoming. Therefore, to redact a system is not sufficient, total commitment to make it work is more crucial. The luxury of choosing the ideal political system must be deferred to the more immediate commitment to make the existing system work.

However, when choosing an appropriate system of government one need not start with any *idée fixe*. There is a need to deliberate on the type of system best suited to us because of at least two reasons: first, the morphology of government should have relevance to the national requirements and, second, the economic requirements of operating a particular type of government should be justifiable in the context of our resource potential.

A general consensus appears to favour the system of parliamentary democracy because most political parties—excepting Awami League that still harbours the desire for BKSALism—claim to subscribe to Churchill's observation that parliamentary democracy may be the lousiest form of government, but neither god nor man has devised a better system. Parliamentary democracy with its promise of participatory politics is intellectually highly desirable no doubt. But there are certain assumptions to be made before this system can operate. Some of these assumptions are that the State is a cooperative enterprise, that all adult citizens are sufficiently enlightened to permit this system to operate effectively, that there is an active national political will to participate continuously in this cooperative endeavour, and that it will be truly representative and participatory.

But how valid are these assumptions? The State has hardly been a cooperative enterprise so far; the adult citizens are certainly not sufficiently enlightened to vote intelligently, and this is most obvious during the parliamentary elections; and there is hardly a universal will to participate in the cooperative endeavour, though the last election demonstrate a universal will to preserve law and order. Particularly suspect is the representative nature of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh where elections are more of contests between personalities rather than contest over substantive issues. In the parliamentary elections for instance, most of the nominees

from a party can win only on the coattails of the political leaders who are voted to power rather than win on their own merit.

Parliamentary democracy can also be a tedious process, too slow for a country like Bangladesh for whom each passing moment is fraught with danger. In such a system, if genuinely implemented, the process of decision making can be very cumbersome. Past experience suggests that the biggest drawback of this system is the tendency of the ruling party towards parliamentary tyranny in view of its usually overwhelming majority strength. The Opposition is slighted or totally ignored and the possibility of it playing a constructively critical role in the deliberations over important national issues is not recognised. The result is that the Opposition loses faith in the parliamentary process and resorts to destructive politics of its own; its best foot forward is non-cooperation and the worst is the active attempt to undermine the government by scuttling all the political efforts of the ruling party. Inevitably parliamentary politics degenerates into "vendetta politics" and national politics gets totally subsumed by inter-party feuding.

Mature and enlightened participation is a *sine qua non* for a healthy democracy to function, but the politics of the past decade leaves little room for optimism. Should we then discard parliamentary democracy? Critics will assert that unless the process is allowed to continue, how will democracy evolve and mature. But how long can this costly process be allowed to continue, particularly when we are running against time? Our treasury is considerably depleted by the massive costs incurred in parliamentary elections and during parliamentary sessions. These costs could be justified only if there was indeed genuine parliamentary democracy. The brief experiments during Mujib and Zia periods were absolutely farcical. Therefore, has parliamentary democracy become a luxury we can no longer afford?

But there seems to be no alternative in the horizon. Dictatorships with which we are very familiar do not, indeed cannot, guarantee political continuity which is absolutely essential for a country's socio-economic wellbeing. Dictatorships inevitably die violent and untimely deaths leaving behind social and political chaos.

Dictatorships also create problems with the western aid donors who selectively insist on a democratic set-up even if it is just

an outward show. And their uncritical emphasis on parliamentary democracy for Third World countries can also go to extremes. They equate parliamentary democracy with stability, assuming that parliamentary democracy that brought stability in the West after scores of years of experimentation will also definitely bring stability to a Third World country steeped in traditional value and behaviour pattern. They are so fascinated by parliamentary forms of government that for them no better system can exist, consequently they become the victims of their own intellectual baggage and ivory tower approach. This leads to the tendency to belittle the fact that in most societies of the Third World stability means hierarchical political order, and that many of these countries experience instability precisely because their traditional political order was supplanted by the superimposition of an alien political order picked out of the classrooms of the London School of Economics and of Oxford.

In a country like Bangladesh where stagnancy easily sets in and people in power get entrenched and become social parasites, violent changes of power is inevitable; but this does not necessarily mean that the country is doomed as is frequently forecast. No one can guarantee western-style political stability in Bangladesh because we are a very young and inexperienced nation-state; this is a fact of life that must be accepted.

Benign dictatorships do make for an efficient government system in a Third World country, and if personal desire of the dictator to serve the country is indeed present then that nation can progress in gaint strides. But this system can never guarantee political continuity. Besides, the idea is rather naive because all dictatorships sooner or later become oppressive. Even Zia's personal honesty, integrity and hardwork could not prevent his potentially "benign dictatorship" from becoming malignant as his cabinet expropriated the fruits of this nation's labour.

Therefore, what should be the appropriate system of government for Bangladesh is clearly a difficult choice, but for starters we must shift our orientation from the West to Southeast Asia and the Far East. The role of religion in Malaysia, the growth and development models in Taiwan and South Korea, the integration between labour, business and government in Japan, the civil-military phenomenon in Indonesia, and continuous social engineering in Singapore are excellent examples closer to home that we must

study. Equally critical are certain blatantly obvious facts that must be considered. We can no longer subject the State to an irresponsible or criminal will. There must be spartan discipline, Maoist perseverance and Hitlerian mobilization capability (minus the racist and expansionist dimensions of course). Meritocracy must replace nepotism and political favouritism, the younger must replace the older and the bolder must replace the inept and the politically decrepit.

VI

Religion and Secularism: In view of the massive failure of most authoritative structures in our society, one final issue of paramount importance to us is the place of religion in our national life. Admittedly, institutionalized religion may lead to fanaticism and therefore religion should be a personal thing as much as possible. But religion has a crucial role to play in the context of the current state of our society because it is today the last bulwark left against social degeneration. Because of our increasing pre-occupation with secularism, religion can and must be our moral guide, particularly since no other force in society carries similar moral weight or influence.

The breakdown of the hierarchical order in our society has undermined many of our traditional values, beliefs and norms of conduct. Parents, teachers and superiors are no longer respected by the young ones and the code of appropriate social behaviour is no longer sacred. In this relative disorder some superior force or authority is necessary to restore order, maintain discipline, and guide us properly. Thus the moral and spiritual authority of religion has become particularly crucial since we can no longer depend on our legal system for social justice, on our legislative system for economic justice or on our executive branch for political justice.

However, religion must be kept separate from politics; that is, there must be separation of religion and state. Statecraft may be guided by religious principles and considerations but not dictated by them.

VII

In conclusion, today our society is afflicted by many problems, most of it of our making. It is we who must get our house in order. Our desideratum requires that morality must take precedence over expediency, continuity must replace adhocism, substance must take precedence over ritual or form and work must replace empty promises. Most important of all, we must never lose faith in ourselves, particularly in the humanity of man. The Swiss-born philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau had believed that man is basically good and kind until society and civilization spoils him. Let us work hard but in a planned way, and hope that the society and civilization we quest for will not spoil us.