



Protecting the gains of the ‘second liberation’

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By *Dr. Ahmad Ahsan*

In my [previous column](#), I mentioned that the “second liberation” of August 5 restored our citizenship, overthrew a violent authoritarian rule, and halted economic disaster. But clearly, the journey has only begun. The all-important task now is to sustain these gains.

The government has announced six commissions for critical reforms in that spirit. These commissions—looking into electoral, constitutional, anti-corruption, judiciary, administrative, and police reforms—are headed by some of the best people with long dedicated work in these areas. These are all areas where reforms chosen wisely and implemented effectively will put Bangladesh on a just, equitable development path.

In parallel, a high-powered [white paper committee](#) has been tasked to examine the

experience of the previous government's rule to understand what went wrong with its economic management and identify the lessons for the future. While oligarchs and political cronies became wealthy, the economy plunged into a macroeconomic crisis, lost its competitive edge, reduced job growth, and became excessively concentrated regionally and in the hands of a few powerful people.

The economist in me hopes that the committee will highlight the critical importance of providing far more autonomy, authority and resources for critical financial management, evaluation, data collection and research institutions, such as the CAG, IMED, BBS and BIDS, so that the integrity of data and research is uncompromised, and that they are made available timely.

Even more profoundly, I hope they will point out that providing high-quality public services, support for small and medium businesses, and generally a good investment climate and good governance in our towns and villages will be impossible under an excessively centralised political economy. In sum, achieving the SDGs will require decentralising and devolving political, administrative and economic powers to urban and rural local governments. Only that can truly unleash our people's creative spirits and entrepreneurial energies.

The interim government has done well by tying the work of these groups to a tight frame of delivering their reports within three months. It is an ambitious target, and there will be a need to consult. However, a short period will require these groups to focus on the core issues and write crisply. Then we can have national conversations around their reports.

There are, however, four areas of profound challenges that require a more proactive approach. Unless these are met, the gains of the second liberation are in danger of being lost in economic instability and social unrest.

That is not speculative thinking. Economic and job growth and poverty reduction will slow without a quick return to stability. Bangladesh took nearly 20 years after independence to regain the per capita incomes of 1970, mainly due to political instability. Economic growth took off only by restoring democratic constitutional rule and legitimate elected governments that could back and sustain Saifur Rahman's vigorous fiscal and trade reforms.

So, what is to be done now?

First, sustaining the gains of August 5 requires not letting the economy falter. Yes, we have inherited a “mess,” an endangered economy. Proper steps are being taken in fiscal, financial, education and other matters. But the voice of the private sector, which employs most of our workers, earns our foreign exchange and produces most of our output, must be in the cabinet. Let a labour leader be also included to get the voice of the workers. But the economy’s day-to-day concerns must be heard from those directly involved. Yes, this enlarges the size of the cabinet. But to protect the gains of the second liberation and the success of the interim government, the economy—jobs and welfare of the people—deserves the highest consideration.

Second, we need a more forceful approach to restoring law and order. Yes, Bangladesh is undoubtedly in a unique post-uprising aftermath where the police, the primary weapon of suppression under the past regime, lack confidence and morale and are mostly unseen. Yes, it is also true that the law and order situation could be far worse, given the circumstances. Yet, these are inadequate arguments that undermine the interim government. If entrepreneurs and workers perceive a lack of understanding and lose confidence and security, economic activity will decline as factories close down, exports fall and jobs are lost. Social unrest will follow.

For starters, we need undivided attention. The current arrangement under which one adviser has both home and agriculture portfolios is extraordinary and needs change. The coordination between the justice and home ministries needs improvement. The filing of dubious cases indiscriminately to imprison members and fellow travellers of the past regime diminishes this government’s credibility. We are not talking about forgiving leaders of the past autocratic government and party. They must bear responsibility for their decisions and actions that caused widespread mayhem. However, murder cases have been filed against ordinary people where the accused are known to have been far away from the crime scenes.

Let me give a specific example. The former planning minister, Prof MA Mannan, is an upright man. He tried to speak the truth in office, sometimes subtly, to point out wrongs and mistakes. Because of his truth-telling, he was removed from the cabinet in January. He is, in fact, someone who needs to be consulted about his experience, but he was arrested last

month on an absurd charge of murder (he was [granted bail](#) on October 9). Even the students and people of his area protested on his behalf.

Then there was the question of assaults on indicted prisoners on the way to the courtroom. It did not require rocket science to stop such misdeeds, and it has been done. But there have been several incidents of lynching across the country, which erode confidence.

The government has taken the sensible step to endow army officers with magistracy powers, but it is unlikely that it would be enough given that they lack the necessary training and experience. A corps of police and RAB officers with integrity and experience can be formed as a special task force working with the now magistracy-empowered army to tackle crime and disorder swiftly. They can also subdue violence with dialogue and firmness, but with minimum force. The UN has been requested to provide the necessary training to the police force. Other bilateral partners can also be requested. But we need urgency.

Third, a more realistic approach is required for much-needed constitutional reforms. There is broad agreement about the critical parameters of the new political order we seek. These include providing much stronger checks and balances to power and enshrining civil and human rights with the full force of the constitution. Other ideas floating around are proportional representation, bicameral houses, with proportional representation in at least one of them; term limits for heads of government; freeing parliamentarians from the yoke of Article 70 in the case of non-budget and no-confidence motions; strong parliamentary committees and oversight especially in the area of financial management; and a political parties act that set up transparent and democratic codes of conduct.

It is worth highlighting that the need to move ahead with decentralisation and devolution in the country is missing here. Bangladesh is one of the most centralised countries in the world, where local governments control less than 10 percent of public expenditures compared to more than 20 percent share of local government in other lower-middle-income countries. Our cities and towns are in a mess because our mayors lack budget and authority. And yes, they also lacked accountability to the people under the last regime.

Fourth, that brings us to the crucial matter of process here. Should we rewrite a new constitution or make amendments to the old one? Writing a new constitution will, rightly,

invite considerable controversy over issues that may be peripheral to the urgent, forward-looking tasks at hand. There will be the question of validity. A few pointed amendments that can implement reforms and then be put to a referendum may be a more manageable path.

Let us be blunt here: a new constitution that risks removing the separation between the state and religion and between the state and ethnicity could potentially create second-class citizens in Bangladesh. That will be tragically contrary to the spirit of the Liberation War, where hundreds of thousands of martyrs gave their lives for freedom and equality. The spirit of an inclusive, equal society is also at the heart of the anti-discrimination movement of the students and people who brought in the second liberation. A new constitution that does not recognise these truths will lead the country to backwardness and regress.

We cannot afford to lose our rich syncretic history and culture that made this land generously welcome migrants and visitors. If our people are to prosper, we need the embrace of the world: we need massive amounts of foreign investment for jobs, global market access, and the technology it will provide. We need other countries to embrace our workers by providing them with jobs abroad. We need a constitution and a country that unites its people in a liberal, open and equal society that the world will embrace.

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