

Hundred Days of BNP-Jamaat rule: A Period of Anarchy and Economic Disaster

Begum Khaleda Zia's 60-member cabinet started its rule with a populist stunt. Imitating the American practice, she promised to implement a series of crash programmes within the first hundred days. The common people could hardly imagine what kind of a disaster awaited them during these hundred days. It was a period of unprecedented repression and violence, break down of law and order and near-collapse of the economy. Indeed, darkness seems to have descended on the country. Whereas the Awami League government left a confident nation and a booming economy, the self-confidence of the nation seems to have disappeared within this short time. Sheikh Hasina's government completed its five-year rule with economic growth at nearly six percent and inflation fully under control at less than two per cent. The common people could afford the daily necessities of life such as rice, pulses, oil, salt and spices because while their income gradually rose, the prices of these essential items remained stable during the entire period. Indeed it is recognized by the common people, in retrospect, that it was the best years that the country has had in its history. Even during the last days of the Awami League government, the GDP was growing at the rate 6.6 percent, inflation was mere 1.53 percent, industry was growing at 9 per cent per annum, export growth was at 11 per cent per annum and revenue collection of the government had surpassed all previous record. Yet the BNP-Jamaat government seems to have made a mess of the economy within this short period. Lawlessness and repression and economic suffering for the common people have created a suffocating situation in the country.

Let us begin this review with law and order situation in the country.. One has only to turn the daily newspapers to read the gruesome reports of murder, rape, extortion and other acts of violence and terrorism. In fact, immediately after the October 1 election a campaign of victimization and persecution against the Awami League leaders and activists was launched across the country. Even innocent people were not spared if the BNP-Jamaat activists believed that they had cast their votes for the Awami League. Never before the nation had witnessed a campaign of terrorism of this magnitude. In committing these barbaric atrocities the BNP-Jamaat activists and the Jubadal, Chatradal and Shibir members seemed to believe that the rigged election had given them the license to murder, plunder and rape without any restraint. The most unfortunate aspect of these atrocities was the refusal of the Police to stop the violence on innocent citizens. Even more worrying, the Police refused to register cases of murder, loot and rape if the accused happen to be members of the ruling alliance. Thousands of Awami League leaders and activists were forced to abandon their hearth and homes because of false cases filed by the BNP-Jamaat leaders against them. The headline news of January 28 of 'Prothom Alo' vividly illustrates the plight of 1100 Awami League leaders and activists of the Chandanaish than of Chittagong who had to flee from their homes because 47 false and concocted criminal cases were filed against them. There are thousand other cases of similar nature all over the country.

The religious minorities were the chosen victims of the BNP-Jamaat government. In a pre-meditated of campaign of murder, plunder, rape, arson and intimidation, the

minority communities- Hindus, Buddhists and Christians-have been targeted by the BNP-Jamaat government. Heart-rending stories of these atrocities, including shocking cases of gang-rape, have been reported in the press almost daily. The BNP-Jamaat government's aim is to grab the land of the members of the minority Hindu community and also to punish them for voting for the Awami League. Hindu families, in fact, several thousand of them, have been forced to abandon their home and leave for an uncertain future in India. The presence of two Taliban ministers in the cabinet and the support for the militant fundamentalists by this government is an acknowledged fact. Why did this government come down with such a heavy hand on the noted journalist and Human Rights activist Shahrier Kabir? They were angry because Kabir wanted to expose the true character of the Khaleda Zia government by documenting the atrocities against the members of the minority communities. From 10 October when Khaleda Zia assumed power, over five hundred political murders have been committed and more than three thousand persons have been injured. More than 1300 women have been raped. The victims are all either supporters or members of the Awami League or members of the minority communities. There have been numerous cases of destruction of temples and churches. The attack on the Hindu temple in Shankhari Pally of Dhaka received wide coverage in the news media but the BNP-Jamaat government played it down as a minor incident. The religious minorities in Bangladesh are suffering from a sense of insecurity under this government. Hitler's Germany targeted the Jews; BNP-Jamaat has targeted the Hindu community. Fascism is raising its ugly head.

The BNP-Jamaat leaders and activists are all on a wild spree to capture all the critical points where organized extortion takes place. For example, all the bus and truck terminals and ferry ghats have been 'captured by BNP-Jamaat' musclemen. No contract can be awarded freely. Armed cadres of Chatradal and Jubadal as well as BNP control the entire process. In fact, internal fights between BNP leaders and activists including MPs for grabbing contracts are reported in the press everyday. A leading BNP MP who is also president of Chatradal was arrested under pressure of strong public demand because of his mafia-style extortion and violent activities. After the public outcry subsided a bit, he was quietly released on bail despite serious allegations including murder charges against him. Student dormitories have been 'captured,' one by one, re-introducing violence and terror in the campus. To the utter shame of this government, even public toilets are being grabbed by the BNP thugs with the connivance of the party stalwarts.

The economy of the country has nose-dived under this government. More than a thousand garment factories have closed down in the last six months throwing over half a million workers-mostly female workers-into unemployment. Increase in fuel price has shut down thirteen hundred factories in North Bengal. General signs of distress are visible in many parts of the country. Footsteps of famine are reported from some northern districts. The Government is borrowing recklessly to pay the salaries of the officials; the Annual Development Plan has been slashed by Taka two thousand crores; the housing sector is at a standstill. Prices of gas, electricity, water and petroleum products including diesel have been sharply increased. Taka has been devalued and the consequent surge in prices has started. Increase in the prices of essential items of daily life including bus fare is putting unbearable burden on the common people. Increase in fuel price has pushed up

trucking cost leading to protests from the business community. In fact, almost all the sectors of the economy are badly affected by the recession that has hit the economy. All this has happened in the last hundred days! Aimless and inefficient macroeconomic management and break down of law and order has produced this disaster. The government of Khaleda Zia seems to have no plan or programme to cope with the crisis to lead the economy out of the slump.

The administration, including the Police force, has become ineffective due to the witch-hunt that is going on from day one of the BNP-Jamaat rule. Morale of the government officials is at its lowest possible point. Hundreds of officials have been sacked on the flimsiest ground of being pro-Awami League. Offices are passing their days in total uncertainty about their job and career prospects. The sole criterion for job security and prospect of advancement is blind support for the BNP-Jamaat alliance.

Freedom of the press is a source of pride for Bangladesh. During the five years of the Awami League government the press was absolutely free. Privately owned television stations were permitted by the Awami League government. The nation hailed the liberation of the electronic media from government control. It is however a matter of great concern that the private TV stations are being controlled by the government in the martial law style. Telephone calls from the Hawa Bhaban decide the contents of the TV news. Owners of these stations are threatened with the cancellation of their license if they deviate from the official line dictated to them. When Sheikh Hasina, as the Leader of the Opposition, wanted to address the people in a TV broadcast, the government twisted the arms of the owners to stop them from giving her the opportunity. Today the news telecast by private stations are a carbon copy of the BTV news. Newspaper owners are being threatened with withdrawal of credit facilities unless they toe the BNP-Jamaat party line. Government advertisements are being used to reward or punish newspapers on the basis of their editorial policy. In order to punish the Daily Janakantha for refusing to toe the government's official line, electricity connection to its office and press was cut off. The muzzling of the free press including the electronic media are ominous signs of the rise of a fascist system in the country.

The list of failures of the BNP-Jamaat government to fulfill its propaganda stunt is so long that BNP-Jamaat's propaganda blitz has backfired. The nation is deeply worried about the deliberate attempt by the government to foist a fascist system on the country by eliminating all opposition. The campaign of intimidation and terror is designed to demoralize the Awami League and its supporters so that the corrupt and inefficient regime can hold on to power by hook or crook. The fascist character of the regime was evident from their attempt to deny the people their democratic right to hold public meetings and rallies and take out processions. In fact, recent Police attack on a peaceful procession by the Awami League has exposed further the fascist character of the regime. Former Home Minister Mohammad Nasim and former Agriculture Minister Motia Chowdhury were brutally beaten by the Police without any provocation. This has shocked the nation. The decision to withdraw the security personnel from the residence of the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina also shows the government's contempt for democratic norms and values. Obviously they have removed the security personnel in

order to facilitate attack on Sheikh Hasina by the killers of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Their evil design is no secret to the people of this country. However, the people of Bangladesh have dealt with dictators in the past. They will resist any attempt to take away their fundamental rights. Indeed, given the glorious history of successful struggle by the people against autocracy and reactionary politics, the people's resolve to resist this fascist regime will grow stronger with every passing day.