

Why should Begum Khaleda and Sheikh Hasina talk to each other?

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

A series of articles have appeared in the newspapers recently on the proposed dialogue face- to-face between the two former Prime Ministers. Some writers and politicians cast doubt whether any fruitful outcome would emanate from their talks.

Barrister Rafique-ul Huq mooted first the matter considering that a new dawn could start in restoring healthy political environment in the country if the two national leaders and heads of major parties sit down and talk to each other.

The idea is a commendable initiative as coming from an eminent Barrister who as a citizen of the country has the right to propose such a meeting. Furthermore his standing is greater than others because he represented both the leaders before the Courts at a difficult time of their personal life.

The leaders do not talk about their personal matters or removing their dislike to each other but talk about in promoting representative democracy in the country. There is a mundane saying that interest of a political party comes before self-interest and interest for the country comes before the interest of a political party.

Briefly politics in the country since 1991 was characterised by and large with the following unsavoury practices:

First, the existence of dislike for each other continued unabated between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. They did not speak to each other for years. As a result, confrontational politics prevailed.

Second, if one lady won the election and ran the government, the other lady and her party MPs boycotted the parliament on allegation of the election being rigged and non-cooperation in the parliament by the ruling party.. The issues were raised on the streets and violence would erupt among the supporters of rival parties.

Third, the Prime Minister became an authoritarian leader because of dynastic reasons. One is the wife of slain President and another lady is the daughter of assassinated President and founder of the nation. Hardly any cabinet Minister or MP had the courage to express different views on the Prime Minister's decisions.

Fourth, politics became a big commercial investment because if one would become a MP, it was a gateway for him/her to make money by being corrupt and abuse of power and privilege. If MPs and Ministers became corrupt, bureaucrats were not far behind them and followed their political masters.

Suspected corrupt ministers and MPs were never dismissed or put on trial and corrupt individuals and musclemen moved freely under the patronage of influential politicians. Criminalization of politics became the routine affair. A section of Ministers and MPs have allegedly pampered criminal elements to make money by extortion so long they would bring enough votes for politicians during the elections.

Finally, state institutions became weak and it is alleged that successive governments have appointed their own people in the state institutions. In the perception of public, there was almost a complete breakdown of integrity of some of the state institutions. Bureaucracy became politicized and those who “did not go with the flow” were marginalized.

Given the confrontational nature of politics since 1991 between the two major parties, democratic norms and traditions totally disappeared from ethical standards of most of politicians.

Democracy in the country was dominated by a tyrannical rule of majority and recalcitrant minority. The conduct of both parties has alienated an overwhelming majority of common people and when 1/11 came there was a relief in the country.

But everyone realises that the care-taker government has been a stop gap and elected government has to run the country and therefore politicians have an onerous role to play in restoring representative democracy in the country.

What should they talk about?

It is assumed that the two leaders must have gone through a process of self-analysis and introspection when they were in prison. As Socrates has said that an unexamined life is not worth living.

The leaders must have taken stock of the past deeds of their party’s stalwarts and realised that a new beginning must commence in politics that does not get influenced by abuse of money, muscle and corrupt elements.

Broadly, among others, they need to talk about the following:

- (a) Acceptance of the outcome of a fair election with grace
- (b) Role of ruling party and Opposition in parliament
- (c) No boycott in attending to the sessions of parliament
- (d) Political issues not to be settled on the streets
- (e) Some guidelines for conduct of supporters during hartal
- (f) Revision of the Constitution

A few words about the revision of the Constitution:

The 1972 Bangladesh Constitution provides for representative democracy in which the ability of the elected representatives to exercise decision-making power is subject to rule of law (not merely rule by law) that places constraints on the government leaders on the extent to which the will of majority can be exercised against the rights of minority parties.

The 37- years of governance has demonstrated the pitfalls and misinterpretation of the provisions of the Constitution and some of the amended provisions (such as Article 70) tend to be totally against the democratic norms of the Constitution that they need to be deleted.

What is imperative is that provisions of the Constitution must be made explicitly clear with checks and balances on the separation of powers among the organs of the state—executive, legislative and judiciary. There exists an imbalance between the powers of the President and those of the Prime Minister. This imbalance needs to be rectified.

It does not matter whether their parties or members of civil society initiate the process of talks and if the two former Prime Ministers can arrive at a consensus on the issues above mentioned, it augurs well for the country.

Politics is the art of the possible as Bismarck said. Both the Prime Ministers have served the people and it is always the politicians in all countries who provide service to the community. Politics is the highest call of service to people.