

Full Text of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's statement

In the name of Allah the most merciful and the most beneficent

Dear friends

Assalamu Alaikum!

At this moment of national crisis I want to share a few thoughts through you with our countrymen.

The time has come today, when we must choose between democracy and autocratic rule.

All of you are aware of the situation obtaining in the country. A tragic succession of events have taken place in the last few years. The Rana Plaza collapse which killed over a thousand workers not only stunned the nation but shook the conscience of the world. The share market scam has driven 3.3 million small investors out on to the street. The scandals involving Hallmark, Destiny and the Padma Bridge not only reflect the unimaginable scale of corruption in the country but also have tarnished our image abroad.

Eminent personalities of the country are alarmed by the harassment of the country's only Nobel winning institution Grameen Bank and our only Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus as well as the abject humiliation of recognized citizens of the country such as human rights activist Adilur Rahman Khan and journalist Mahmudur Rahman who have been interned in jail.

In the last few years the pages of our history have been drenched by the blood of our citizens.

The indiscriminate attack on the Hefazat rally, the Pikhana massacre, unabated extra judicial killings, the abduction and enforced disappearances of Elias Ali and Chowdhury Alam, the murder of labour leader Aminul and many other political leaders and workers have shaken the nation to the core.

People are denied justice due to the interference in and politicization of the judiciary. The killers of the journalist couple Shagor - Runi and Upazila Chairman Sanaullah Noor Babu of Boraigram, Natore have not been brought to justice. The powerful get the court verdicts as per their desire quickly. Convicted murderers get Presidential pardons. The rule of law is a far cry. The administration and police are used for narrow partisan purposes. Terrorist activities of the student and youth fronts of the ruling party have become a matter of agonizing concern for the peace loving citizens of the country.

Our image has been tarnished by the seizure of property of the Hindus and Buddhists, and attacks on their places of worship. National unity has been jeopardized. It has now become more urgent than ever before to consolidate national unity and restore confidence among the people. We must all of us together build national unity, irrespective of whether we are Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or Christians, people from the hills or the plains, rich or poor. We have to become one unified entity. We must unite for the sake of democracy, to free ourselves from uncertainty and most of all, to effect change.

The people of Bangladesh are inherently democratic. They have sacrificed a great deal for democracy. We are proud of this fact. To protect our democracy we have no other alternative but to open the door for a peaceful transfer of power through the holding of a free, fair, credible and competitive national election. How and why that door has been shut is well known to you. I do not want to enter into the details of that now.

Friends present

You are all aware that the BNP, its 18 party alliance and other opposition parties along with the great majority of people have been vocal in their demand for a neutral, non-party, poll-time government. We have taken this movement forward in a peaceful manner basically through mass contacts and campaigns. And all of you know how those peaceful and law abiding programmes continue to be obstructed. Yet, in the interest of peace and considering the sufferings of the people we did not go for any hard and long term agitation programme. We always hoped that the government would respect the demand of the people and respond positively towards the expectations of the international community. But their rigid stance and the aggressive retaliatory attitude towards the opposition and the people have frustrated these hopes.

The Prime Minister addressed the nation on the 18 October, 2013 in the backdrop of the impending general elections. There was universal expectation that in line with the hopes and wishes of the people of the country that her address would contain a clear statement about the formation of a neutral, non-party poll-time government through discussion and mutual understanding. But this was frustrated. This has become evident from the comments and reactions of a wide spectrum of conscious citizens and representatives of political parties.

The Prime Minister has outlined in her speech a long list of developmental achievements under her government. I will not comment on this. How much the nation has progressed or not is well known to our countrymen. Suffice it to say that ordinary people can well understand from their day to day experience the extent of peace, safety, security and economic well-being they are enjoying along with the fruits of development. But as is her custom the Prime Minister has delved into the past and quite untruly criticized our government.

I would like to comment briefly on this. She has alleged that terrorism and militancy spread during our time. People know how terrorism and militancy took root during the preceding Awami League regime. Unprovoked terrorist and militant attacks on the musical event by Udichi in Jessore, the New Year programme at the Ramna park, the CPB public meeting in Paltan, several political gatherings, the Ahmedia mosque in Khulna, the Christian church in Baniarchor. It was indeed during her time that a very powerful bomb was found in her own home district of Gopalganj. No proper investigation of any of these incidents was conducted. The opposition party was invariably blamed and its leaders were arrested and harassed while the real culprits were shielded.

Terrorism and militancy during the Awami League regime spilled over during our time. But we were able to identify the militants, to ban their organizations and activities, to capture their leaders and to try and prosecute them. It was under our government that they received the death sentence which was later carried out. We were able to destroy the militant networks by concerted efforts. To tackle this menace we created the elite force called RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) which earned widespread success and fame. RAB was never used against any opposition programme nor for any party or political purpose.

To strengthen our preventive operation against militancy and terrorism in our predominantly Muslim country we also used the services of the Islamic religious teachers and Imams to create and spread awareness against this evil. On the other hand restlessness and confrontation in the society has increased due to the Awami League government's wrong policy of identifying militancy with the peace loving religious organizations and religion based legitimate political parties. This has adversely affected the drive against militancy.

I want to emphatically state that Bangladesh is an important partner in the international fight against militancy. My government initiated this cooperation. We will not only continue the current level of this cooperation, but will explore ways and means to expand it with other countries and institutions as an active member of the coalition for the war against terrorism. We have to remember that terrorism is a threat to peace, stability, sustained economic development and foreign direct investment. Over and above this, terrorism and militancy endangers national interest and brings disrepute to Islam, the religion of the majority of our population. It is a transnational crime that threatens the quality of life of our own citizen and those of the world at large. We are committed to ensuring that Bangladesh territory will never be used for domestic, regional, international or any other form of terrorism.

In this respect I want to say few more words to my countrymen.

South Asia is home to almost one sixth of the world's population. We are linked by geography, common rivers, history, shared cultures, language and a sense of identity. None of the countries in this region can move away or remain isolated from each other. That is why if we form the government in future with the support of the people we will reach out to our neighbours and expand upon current relationships as well as explore new ways to establish closer relationships in political, economic security, cultural, and social sectors. I believe that peace, stability, security and regional cooperation is the foundation for promoting and developing an enhanced quality of life for all citizens. It is also the essential element for making the dreams and common aspirations of the people of South Asia a reality.

We cannot deny that problems between neighbouring countries have existed and will exist in the future. This is no different than other regions of the world. I believe firmly that such problems are not so intractable that they cannot be resolved through honest dialogue and constant exchange of views while respecting mutual interests. At the heart of resolving these differences is not simply government to government contact and communications, but rather it also encompasses people to people relationships.

If we can form the government in future, we shall represent the people rather than a party. We shall implement policies that introduces the next generation to a higher standard of living and towards developing policies that result in sustained development in all sectors of society.

Today's world is a global society. Countries and regions can no longer exist as isolated islands; rather we must be contributing members to the global society. Instability in Bangladesh affects South Asia. Instability in South Asia affects the world. That is why we will adopt such policies that ensure domestic as well as regional peace, stability and security. Our government in the future will work to ensure that Bangladesh and all our neighbours positively contribute to a peaceful and secure global society.

Our country is a great nation with a proud history and even brighter future. One common factor we all share is that regardless of one's cultural, ethnic or religious affiliation we are all Bangladeshi citizens and entitled to equal protection under the laws and Constitution of Bangladesh.

Of particular concern to us are some of the most vulnerable citizens of Bangladesh, our ethnic and religious minorities. Unfortunately they have not always enjoyed equal protection under our laws and there have been instances when religious minorities have faced persecution including attacks on their houses and places of worship. This must stop. Under our Government all citizens will be guaranteed equal protection and individuals who persecute minorities will face the full weight of the law.

We have called for the establishment of judicial committees to investigate atrocities against minorities and under our government such committees will exist and will vigorously investigate any and all instances of attacks on minorities.

Tolerance and restraint is civility, and for us to achieve our greatest height, we must live in a civil society where differences are not only accepted, but are welcomed and valued. We must have national unity through our diversity. Our future depends on a Bangladesh where all citizens regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation are guaranteed equal opportunity to realize their dreams and to live in a peaceful and secure environment, free of threats to their personal security.

I have said this many times and am saying this again that we do not consider any citizen or group in Bangladesh as minority. Our undifferentiated identity is that we are all Bangladeshis.

The honourable Prime Minister in her address to the nation has spoken many ills about me, my government, party, family, and my political office. I do not wish to make any counter statement. Despite facts and evidence I will not raise any allegations against the Prime Minister, her family members or relatives. I believe enough is enough. The people of Bangladesh don't want to hear any of this any more. We have to come out of this poor culture. In the light of the expectations and aspirations of the nation, and the demand of the time we have to introduce a new trend in politics. The time has come to change and improve the political culture. Someone has to start it. Today, I stand before you with the call for that change. Of course, there will be political differences between us. We must change the way we debate these differences and insist on civil discourse rather than personal attacks. We must debate the merits of philosophies and positions on critical issues facing Bangladesh. Personal attacks serve no useful purpose and the citizens are the ultimate losers because the business of governance takes a back seat and only results in political stalemate and inaction.

I am aware that just doing lip service will not be enough. People of Bangladesh have heard the promise of change in the past as well. That is why today I want to initiate that change by saying something very emphatically. I announce in unequivocal terms that I forgive those who in the past have unfairly treated me and my family and have made personal attacks and continue to do so. We shall not take any vengeful steps against them even if we form the government in future. I assure you that I will look ahead focus on the business of providing a brighter and more secure future for Bangladesh. I do not have time and will not spend time focusing on the past and on retaliation. I hope we can all work together to build a prosperous, peaceful and secure homeland for the future generation. I welcome the ideas and the participation of all those who have in the past been against me.

No one political party has a monopoly on good ideas. For Bangladesh to reach its true potential and for our citizens to prosper, we need and must have the active participation and benefit of ideas from all political, ethnic and religious segments of society. Our government will be a representative government of all Bangladeshi citizens. Our government will be a government of talent and merit, a government of national unity. I am giving an open invitation to those who can contribute to society, to those that can bring good repute for the country, to those who are honest and capable, to those who can develop plans and implement them and to those who can provide leadership, to join and work with our government of unity irrespective of ethnicity, political or religious beliefs.

To err is human and I have no hesitation to admit that we have made mistakes in the past. At the same breath I would like to say that we have learnt from those mistakes. We are better prepared to take Bangladesh towards a brighter, more stable, and prosperous future.

I agree with the adage – “if you fail to learn from history, history will repeat itself”. We will therefore not repeat the mistakes of the past.

We all know that the whole country now is eagerly awaiting a change. To ensure the continuity of the democratic process and for a peaceful transfer of power there is no alternative to a credible, free, fair, competitive election participated by all parties. That is why we had raised the demand for a neutral, non-party, poll-time government. With the support of all opposition parties and the people this has coalesced into a national demand. Unfortunately, however, whatever the honourable Prime Minister has said in her address to the nation is not aligned to the hopes and aspirations of the people. Because it will not ensure a credible, free, fair national election participated by all parties.

The Constitution she is referring to has been amended by her government them at will and has led to the present crisis. She has blocked the road to credible elections and created the way to deprive the voting rights of the people. She has not clarified who will head the all party election time government proposed by her. This has resulted in growing concern among the people that she is inviting the opposition to participate in an uneven competition by keeping power in her own hands, keeping the MP's in place and keeping the administration in her tight grip. This is not acceptable to the people. She has left no room for any discussion on the popular demand for an election time non-party neutral government and has made a proposal convenient only to herself.

The only advice she has sought from the opposition parties is a date for the elections. The nation is frustrated by her statement. I still feel that the matter can be resolved through discussions. The sooner this is held the better. That is why, in line with the hopes and expectations of the people, I would now like to place on behalf of the BNP and 18 Party Alliance a specific proposal for consideration by the Prime Minister.

In 1996 and 2001 under the non-party and neutral Caretaker Governments two credible elections were held which were participated by all parties. The Advisers of those Caretaker Governments were praised by all for their neutrality. The Awami League won one of those elections while BNP the other. I am proposing that from those 20 Advisers the ruling party can propose five names and the opposition another five. They will be the Advisers in the forthcoming election time government. I propose that on the basis of a consensus between the government and the opposition parties a respected citizen of the country can be chosen to be the Chief Advisor of the interim government.

I hope the honourable Prime Minister will accept my proposal in the interest of peace, stability and democracy. I hope she will take effective steps to hold discussions between the two parties quickly on this matter.

I am making a fervent appeal to the honourable Prime Minister to take the initiative to form this government through the constitutional process. I would like to add that before the current Parliament is dissolved and if it is felt necessary the interim government can be elected in the same way the President, the Speaker and the women MPs are elected.

I believe this nation which is capable handling disasters will soon be able to be free from the political crisis. I have offered this proposal with that end in view. We do not want confrontation. We want compromise. Not autocracy but democracy. We want to leave behind the culture of violence, of a killing frenzy using oars, bamboos and machetes, burning passengers in buses by spraying gunpowder, stripping office goers during hartal and publicly humiliating them. The people of Bangladesh are anxiously looking forward to be free from the uncertainty and for a change. Come, let us all respond positively to that expectation.

Thank you all.

Allah hafez. Bangladesh Zindabad.