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The task before Sheikh Hasina

The job before Sheikh Hasina Wajed today is a gigantic one. She happens to be leading a political organisation which has had the glory of playing a paramount role in the shaping of Bangladesh's history, beginning with the movement for autonomy in the sixties and stretching to the struggle for independence in the early seventies. The Awami League was able to fulfill its historical responsibilities with flying colours under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the men who have since come to be known as his close associates. And once the country stood liberated, it was for the Awami League to take the road to disaster. It is to Sheikh Hasina's credit that in the ten years since she returned from self-imposed exile, she has injected vigour of a kind into a political party that to all intents and purposes was under onslaught from different quarters. While it would be too far-fetched to suggest that she has effected a metamorphosis in the fortunes of the party, it would be quite proper to state, at this stage, that she has certainly transformed the Awami League into the popular organisation it once was, until tragedy came its way in 1975. Today, the party symbolises the nation's opposition, officially and in every other sense; and Sheikh Hasina, many would like to believe, is the alternative— assuming of course that all goes well— to the people who govern the country at present. The sadness, at once an embarrassing and bitter one, though, is that it is Sheikh Hasina herself who now appears to be causing damage not only to her own personality as one of the country's leading politicians but also to the future of the Awami League itself. The plain truth is that she cannot afford to make mistakes.

And yet she has committed a blunder that may already have cost her party dearly. There is no denying the truth that politicians are free to discuss their nations' politics with foreigners, notably diplomats and aid-giving agencies. But what one finds difficult to come to terms with it is the fact that a politician, no matter how highly placed, should arrogate to himself or herself the right to ask diplomats and donor countries to take up issues of a clearly internal nature with the host government, one that has been elected by the exercise of the ballot. Which is why it is our opinion, as it is of others, that by writing to diplomatic missions in Dhaka and the donor agencies about the attitude of the BNP government towards the opposition, and specifically the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina has only raised a storm that was absolutely unnecessary. The result — and this is something that must be pointed out without ambiguity of any sort — is that it has disappointed many. And among those many are

people who have always tended to identify with the Awami League brand of politics. Let us be clear about the import of Sheikh Hasina's views on the political situation. She has a point when she speaks of democracy not yet being able to take firm roots, and she is also entitled to her belief that much of what is going wrong today can be attributed to the manner in which the Khaleda Zia administration has been functioning. Democracy is yet a long way off, and this despite the truth that a democratically elected dispensation — and here we mean both the ruling party and the opposition — is in place. The thought must not be lost sight of, however, that the growth of democratic institutions is a matter greatly dependent on time and the spirit of tolerance. At this point in our history, both time and tolerance are in short supply.

This is where Sheikh Hasina matters once again. As leader of the opposition, it should be her endeavour not to do anything, or allow anything to be done by people in her party, that may put a brake on the onward movement of the Awami League. The gigantic nature of the job Sheikh Hasina faces is simple: she needs to turn the Awami League into an electable organisation. She ought to take a cue from Britain's Neil Kinnock, who has, in the past few years, patiently pulled up the Labour Party to a position where it can today claim to be a credible alternative to John Major and his team. The Awami League chief would do well to understand that an organisation which stays out of power for sixteen years runs the risk of getting out of tune with the skills of administration. And when one adds to that blunders of an incredible nature — the letter to the missions is one — the political party in question takes a sudden downward slide in its fortunes. It then remains for the leadership to help the party claw back to respectability. The bottomline today is that the Awami League has been embarrassed by its leader. We would venture to suggest that those who advised Sheikh Hasina towards taking the step she has already taken clearly did not remember that politics is an arena where one does not antagonise people. Or raise questions about the maturity of politicians. It is a calling that has the politician combining dreams with pragmatism. Sheikh Hasina Wajed must today intellectualise her politics, in the interest of the nation she aspires to govern one day.