Democracy is the basis of our national existence: We can not afford to fail

Surely, we can find an acceptable chief election commissioner among our retired bureaucrats/judges/eminent citizens. If Sri Lanka and India could find highly credible Dayananda Dissanayake or BB Tandon, respectively, to head their Election Commissions, so can Bangladesh. All we need is the political will of our leadership. Every minute that we are wasting is precious. The continuation of the current void would only encourage people to assert their power and we have seen their fury at Kansat and, most recently, at Phulbari. Before the situation goes out of hand, our ruling party, which currently holds all the cards in their hands, should start the political dialogue with the opposition parties. The sooner they start, the better they will do.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

JUST months before the ninth parliamentary elections, we find ourselves in a dangerous bind. There is a sharp divide between the ruling four-party alliance and all opposition parties over the holding of the elections. The opposition parties have pointed out the detailed election engineering and politicization of all institutions by the ruling alliance to manipulate the election results. They have asked for reforms of the Caretaker system and the Election Commission, before they would take part in any election. The ruling party has refused to concede, and all efforts for a dialogue for the resolution of the disputes have so far drawn a blank.

People from all walks of life seriously doubt whether any free and fair election can be held under the present circumstances. How did we reach this impasse? If our immediate neighbour West Bengal or civil-war devastated Sri Lanka could hold free and credible elections, why can't we? Why did we fight for our independence then?

Every nation has a raison d'etre for its independence. United States fought for its independence to uphold the principle of "no taxation without representation." India's reason for seeking independence from the British was "to be free from the colonial and alien rule" and Pakistan's was "to create a homeland for the Indian Muslims."

What was our reason for fighting for our independence? I believe that it was to establish our democratic rights. When present Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan, the Bengalis, who had constituted the majority, had expected that they would be able to determine their own destiny in Pakistan without any domination. Unfortunately, all they received from the Pakistani rulers was total subjugation and deprivation perpetuated on the basis of authoritarian rule by the minority.

The Bengalis thus wanted to protect their political and economic rights, and maintain their linguistic and cultural identity. Bangabandhu gave them the six-point formula to protect their autonomy. The Bengalis gave him overwhelming support at the national parliamentary elections in 1970, the first time that they had the opportunity to exercise their democratic right of "one man, one vote" in Pakistan. The Pakistani military authorities trampled our democratic aspirations and unleashed a war on us. We took up arms and freed our country. It was not a secessionist movement. It was a movement to establish our democratic rights.

It is true that we did not inherit sound democratic institutions from years of Pakistani experience. However, what have we done during the past three and a half decades to establish those institutions? After all, democracy is a political process that needs constant nurturing and care; and even if we did not inherit any sound democratic institution, we could have worked for making some for ourselves.

No constitutional expert can give us a magic formula for all times. Even the mature democracies like British, French or American systems require constant adjustments to meet the changes of time. Some analysts have compared practicing democracy to driving old cars. In both cases, one needs patience and tolerance. Have we shown these two virtues in our national life?

During the past thirty-five years, ghosts of Pakistan have haunted us. Soon after our independence, one of our ranking freedom fighter civil servants had visited Washington DC and wanted to meet Senator Frank Church. The senator, one of our strongest supporters in the US Congress, had received us cordially in his office. Among other things, he had expressed his apprehension that in the absence of sound democratic structure, Bangladesh could come under military regimes. My senior colleague had confidently told him that the people of Bangladesh, who had defeated the mighty Pakistani military, would thwart any such attempt in fifteen minutes. How wrong he was! Bangladeshis had to suffer military and quasi-military regimes for long fifteen years.

The military rulers, who came to power after Bangabandhu's tragic assassination, tried to legitimize their rules through sham elections. New parties were formed which basically included defectors from different political parties and retired civil/army officials and professionals of different categories. The entire election process lost all credibility. What is most tragic is that our judiciary, bureaucracy, armed forces and in fact, all national institutions were politicized to legitimize their authoritarian rules.

Eventually people's power triumphed over the autocratic powers in 1991 and democracy was restored in Bangladesh. The then chief justice of Bangladesh took over as the acting president and conducted the national elections under a neutral interim government. It seems our ruling parties forget that holding of free and fair election is the beginning of the democratic process. It is the means to an end, not an end in itself.

Once the election is over, democracy faces the toughest test: how to incorporate the voice of minority. "The rule of the majority is not democracy," we were taught at the Civil Service Academy in late sixties. Our teacher Dr. Tareque Siddiqui had explained the point very well by citing examples of various authoritarian regimes which had come to power through elections but had lost legitimacy subsequently.

So when our ruling party adopts the "winner take all" policy they, in no time, disenfranchise a large segment of the electorate. It is indeed amazing how a ruling coalition, after getting two-third majority in elections, can lose public support within six months due to this suicidal policy.

If we look closely at the results of our last parliamentary election we may find the answer. At the last elections, the victorious four-party alliance together had gotten 46.5 % of popular votes while the main opposition Awami League had secured 40.1% votes. Since we do not have any proportionate seat dividing system, the ruling coalition got 216 out of 300 seats in the parliament against 63 bagged by Awami League.

It was a landslide victory; but the picture changed as soon as the ruling alliance did not take the opposition parties into confidence. Within a short period of time, the opposition parties, taking advantage of growing public disenchantment, turned the tables against them. From that moment, desperation has set in and the ruling alliance has been trying to perpetuate their rule by any means.

One can understand how socio-economic divides can alienate rulers from the ruled in various countries. But it should not happen in Bangladesh which is one of the most homogenized countries in the world, linguistically, ethnically, and socio-economically. Bangla is our language and ethnically, we are one nation. There is no landed aristocracy or caste system, and the society is pretty much egalitarian. The Bengalis are known to be tolerant and, historically, there were very few instances of communal tensions or riots. Unfortunately, through excessive politicization, our leadership has created this highly polarized society.

The parliament should be the focal point for all discussions. In established democracies, the ruling party consults all parties in the opposition and gets them fully involved in the decision-making process. In our case, the ruling party does not allow members of the opposition to express their viewpoint in the parliament. This prevents the parliament from adopting a consensus on any course of action. The Speaker of the parliament, once elected, should be neutral and the consensus builder. But in our case, the Speaker has been accused of partisanship and, as a result, the entire parliamentary deliberation is turned into a farce.

In the absence of any parliamentary control, the democratically elected government turns autocratic. Party interests very often supercede national interest. Consequently, once there is change of government, all decisions taken by a government, from major to minor, are opened for fresh discussions. After 35 years, we have not taken any final decision on basic issues like office hours, weekly holidays, retirement age and national holidays. All decisions have been based on expediency and ad-hocism.

Now let me turn to the next election. The president, the chief adviser of the caretaker system, and the Election Commission would be directly involved in the election process. The presidency was under some kind of cloud until recently. Hopefully, there would be no fresh attempt to change him at this final stage. He is not above partisanship but for the sake of continuity, he should be retained.

As regards the next chief adviser, the opposition has expressed its deep reservation about the immediate past chief justice, the first claimant, on account of his affiliations to the ruling party and the position that he had taken on Bangabandhu murder case. If he is not acceptable, he should be persuaded to step aside. There are clear provisions in our constitution to find an alternative judge or a consensus candidate to head the next caretaker government. If we do not resolve it ourselves now, then surely the donors would exert their pressure. In case of Pakistan they had even sent their chosen representative, Moeen Qureshi to head the caretaker government in 1993.

The present chief election commissioner and his deputies seem to have lost confidence of all opposition parties and civic bodies on account of their bungling in the preparation of voters' list. The voters' list is so faulty that people from all walks of life are apprehensive that it would not be possible to hold free and fair elections under their stewardship. Surely, we can find an acceptable chief election commissioner among our retired bureaucrats/judges/eminent citizens. If Sri Lanka and India could find highly credible Dayananda Dissanayake or BB Tandon, respectively, to head their Election Commissions, so can Bangladesh. All we need is the political will of our leadership.

Every minute that we are wasting is precious. The continuation of the current void would only encourage people to assert their power and we have seen their fury at Kansat and, most recently, at Phulbari. Before the situation goes out of hand, our ruling party, which currently holds all the cards in their hands, should start the political dialogue with the opposition parties. The sooner they start, the better they will do.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary.

What the United Nations needs

Let us never forget that the United Nations will only succeed as a recourse for all and not the instrument of a few. It must amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard, and serve as a canopy beneath which all can feel secure. As our great second secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjold, put it, the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell. That it has, so far, but not all the time and not everywhere.

SHASHI THAROOR

THE United Nations is a 20th-century organization facing a 21st-century challenge -- an institution with impressive achievements but also haunting failures, one that mirrors not just the world's hopes but its inequalities and disagreements, and most important, one that has changed but needs to change further.

This is the pre-eminent task that will confront the next UN secretary-general, a post for which I and three others so far are candidates. We need reform not because the United Nations has failed, but because it has succeeded enough over the years to be worth investing in. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." The United Nations, where I have worked for the last 28 years, is no exception. If we want to change the world, we must change too.

The single greatest problem facing the United Nations is that there is no single greatest problem -- rather, there are a dozen different ones each day clamoring for attention. Some, like the crisis in Lebanon, the Palestinian situation and the nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, are obvious and trying. Others we call "problems without passports" -- issues that cross all frontiers uninvited, like climate change, drug trafficking, human rights, terrorism, epidemic diseases, and refugee movements. Their solutions, too, can recognize no frontiers because no one country or group of countries, however rich or powerful, can tackle them alone. The key to all of them is strengthening the capacities of both the United Nations and its members. Here's how:

Make democracy a priority: There is much at the United Nations that must continue -- our excellent work in humanitarian relief and crisis response, and in social and economic development, to take a few examples. But we must make a greater effort to promote democracy and good governance as key ingredients of development. We now have a Democracy Fund to help us do that, financed not just by the rich West but by countries like India. To that end the United Nations must also stand up for human rights everywhere, ensuring that the new Human Rights Council fulfills its responsibilities more effectively than the over-politicized Human Rights Commission it replaced. And we must not let conflicts reignite when peacekeepers have left: we must strengthen the newly created Peacebuilding Commission to ensure that conflict gives way to development and the creation of democratic institutions so that peace is truly sustainable.

Bolster the ranks: We have to make a difference where it counts -- in the field, not just in the conference rooms in New York and Geneva. No task is more important than reinforcing the United Nations' operational capacity -- to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals (a set of promises to improve the lives of billions by 2015, which for the most part are not on course to being met), to mount effective peacekeeping operations (which currently take too long to deploy and are uneven in quality) and to respond urgently to humanitarian crises. (I know from my own experience with refugee work that we are doing well there, but can become the gold standard for emergency relief.) As head of the United Nations, I would strengthen the international civil service, eliminating the nepotism and cronyism for which we have sometimes justifiably been blamed. And I would work together with Washington on the unfinished business of management reform, especially to ensure ethics, accountability and transparency, together with truly independent audit oversight.

Prioritize and streamline: The United Nations must be more sharply focused on areas where it has a proven and undoubted capacity to make a difference -- when major humanitarian disasters strike, peace must be kept or territories administered. But where others have the capacity, the resources and the will to keep the peace -- NATO in Afghanistan, the European Union in Bosnia, though not yet the African Union in Darfur -- the United Nations should bless their efforts. And where the task, like enforcing peace in Iraq, is clearly beyond us, we should let wars be fought by warriors, not peacekeepers.

Heal wounds: There's a great danger of the East-West divide of the cold war being replaced by a North-South divide at the United Nations, as developing countries resist what they see as a rich-country agenda. The new secretary-general must urgently combat this. I would focus on building issue-based coalitions to deal with specific practical problems (things like management inefficiencies, procurement policies, information technology, outsourcing) that have little to do with ideological politics.

At the same time, let us never forget that the United Nations will only succeed as a recourse for all and not the instrument of a few. It must amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard, and serve as a canopy beneath which all can feel secure. As our great second secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjold, put it, the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell. That it has, so far, but not all the time and not everywhere. We can do better. Indeed, at this time of turbulence and transformation, we must.

Shashi Tharoor is undersecretary-general of the United Nations.

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Naguib Mahfouz: An appreciation

The Professor, as Mahfouz was widely known in Egypt , remained active, receiving friends and admirers in his home for spirited literary discussions. His modesty was legendary, his devotion to his literary work exemplary and his influence extraordinary, particularly for a man who never traveled outside Egypthe did not even attend the Nobel ceremony. His lifelong concern was his beloved Egypt , and how its two great civilizations -- Pharaonic and Islamic -- contribute to a unique and independent national identity.

LAILA LALAMI

THE story of Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz is the story of modern Egypt itself. Born in 1911 in the Gamaliya district of Cairo, Mahfouz witnessed the last days of British colonial rule and Ottoman influence, the nationalist struggle of Saad Zaghloul, the reigns of King Fuad and King Farouq, the military coup of 1952, the establishment of the republic, Gamal Abdel Nasser's takeover in 1954, the Suez Canal crisis, the rule of Anwar al-Sadat, the Camp David accords of 1978 and finally the brutal dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

An avid reader, Mahfouz had a lifelong passion for the history of ancient Egypt, particularly its pharaohs:

Akhenaten, who rejected pantheism in favor of monotheism; Menenre II, who ruled briefly at the end of the sixth dynasty; Khufu, who built the great pyramid at Giza; Nefertiti, Akhenaten's wife and mother-in-law to Tutankhamen.

Mahfouz found inspiration in his country's history, both ancient and recent, and in its transformation into a modern nation. His first three novels (Mockery of the Fates, Rhadopis of Nubia, Thebes at War) were historical works about ancient Egypt. He portrayed Khufu as a man struggling against his destiny; he imagined Menenre as falling in love with the Nubian courtesan Rhadopis; and he depicted Egypt's fight for independence from foreign invaders.

After the mid-1940s, Mahfouz's interest shifted to social realism. His masterpiece, the "Cairo Trilogy" (Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street), written in 1952 and published in 1956 and 1957, portrayed three generations of an Egyptian family struggling against an autocratic ruler, the patriarch Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad.

In trying to get out from under Jawad's thumb, his children and grandchildren successively turn to capitalism, communism, and Islamic fundamentalism. During the 1960s and 1970s, he experimented with other literary forms, such as modernism, symbolism, and even romance. In 1983 he combined his passions for ancient and modern Egypt in the ambitious and yet-untranslated novel Before the Throne, in which all of Egypt 's rulers, up to and including Sadat, are brought before a court presided over by Osiris to be judged for their actions.

Like Emile Zola, Mahfouz chronicled the lives of the most ordinary of his countrymen: peasants, workers, housewives, shopkeepers, prostitutes. Like Fyodor Dostoyevsky, he set most of his novels in one beloved cityCairo, in his case. Like his elders Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim, he took on the role of national storyteller. He was exceedingly prolific: more than thirty novels and as many screenplays, thirteen collections of short stories, a handful of plays and numerous articles and columns for the newspaper Al-Ahram, which also published many of his novels in serialized form.

Mahfouz was capable of taking a firm stand at the risk of his popularity. He criticized Nasser at a time when the statesman received wide support not only in Egypt but also throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, he famously approved of the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel, a position that resulted in the banning of his work in some Arab countries. Still, he continued to be read widely in the Arabic-speaking world, and translations of his work into English (via a half-dozen translators, which might explain why his work reads differently from book to book) brought him a worldwide audience, culminating in the Nobel Prize he received in 1988.

Mahfouz's life was not devoid of contradictions. Although he was a man of letters, he also served as director of censorship for the State Cinema Organization, which garnered him criticism from his country's intellectuals. His instincts as a writer prevailed, however, when in 1989 he offered his support to Salman Rushdie after the infamous fatwa on The Satanic Verses. Mahfouz opposed the fatwa as essentially un-Islamic and stated clearly his defense of freedom of expression. But in 1992 he appeared to shift his position slightly, saying that, while the fatwa was intolerable, Rushdie's novel was "insulting" to Islam.

Why Mahfouz, who in 1959 produced a novel (Children of Gebelawi) that portrays God, Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as mere mortals, should have found The Satanic Verses to be offensive is a bit of a mystery. In any case, Islamic fundamentalists, bent on waging a culture war, turned against Mahfouz, precisely because of Children of Gebelawi. In 1994 he was stabbed in the neck and as a result of his injury he was unable to hold a pen or a pencil in his writing hand.

But the Professor, as Mahfouz was widely known in Egypt , remained active, receiving friends and admirers in his home for spirited literary discussions. His modesty was legendary, his devotion to his literary work exemplary and his influence extraordinary, particularly for a man who never traveled outside Egypthe did not even attend the Nobel ceremony. His lifelong concern was his beloved Egypt , and how its two great civilizations -- Pharaonic and Islamic -- contribute to a unique and independent national identity.

With the death of Mahfouz, Egypt has been deprived of its greatest living writer and of its last icon of the twentieth century, and the world has lost one of its most humane literary figures.