

In Defence of Politics



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THE word "politics" is much maligned and stigmatised. It suffers from a huge image problem both in the world as well as in Bangladesh.

It is thought to be corrupt, petty, and devious, and is considered to be synonymous with lying, hypocrisy and opportunism. The phrase "dirty politics" is taken to be an exercise in redundancy, a "crooked politician" a tautology.

This necessarily generates a deep apathy about public life, an enduring distrust of political leaders, and widespread cynicism about the political process. The very idea of public spiritedness, or collective engagement, or civic mindedness—which remains the first premise, the basic bedrock, of democratic values and institutions—is shaken. People begin to withdraw from the public space and become casual about citizen responsibilities. The much-heralded "fourth democratic wave" has already become a trickle, and is increasingly turning into a bit of a messy sludge.

Freedom House, which expressed

We see the information environment being glutted by unfiltered and unverifiable "stuff", sometimes by agenda-driven trolls, which breeds confusion, alienation, and a kind of "manufactured nihilism" (when everything is disbelieved).

There are several reasons why this may be happening. The pathologies of globalisation (drugs, human trafficking, pornography, diseases, propaganda, and mindless consumerism) pose significant challenges to the public good. Technology has caused massive invasions of privacy and has also subjected people to increasingly sophisticated techniques of manipulation and control. The spread of terrorism and the rise of hostility and violence on a global scale which have generated the conditions—certainly the excuse—for a national security state where rights and liberties of the people can be easily circumscribed, can all be held partly responsible for this phenomenon.

But paradoxically, democracy is also being undermined through the use of "democratic" instruments to push an illiberal agenda, particularly in efforts to consolidate established regimes.

This may be achieved through packing, manipulating and "weaponising" the courts of law; through allowing elections but

the messiness and distractions of politics to disrupt that forward march. They can argue, and even demand, that universities should ban "politics".

Indeed, the Parliament itself, supposedly the embodiment of electoral politics, begins to lose some institutional credibility and moral authority. Elections remain questionable. The overwhelming dominance of one party, and rigid partisan control (through Art 70 of the constitution), make the opposition merely ornamental. Moreover, committee ineffectiveness, anaemic attendance, insipid debates (often the use of language that is awkward and un-parliamentary), the preponderance of the business class in its composition (about 61 percent), and its supine relationship to the Executive through which it abdicates its responsibility of providing oversight and balance, suggest to some that the Parliament is perhaps shaping itself as a monument to its own irrelevance.

This development carries several implications, all of them unhelpful to democracy or politics.

First, the Courts are being overwhelmed both because of the political cases filed against regime opponents and, more importantly, because it is becoming the primary source of protection and support for a

2019), limiting loan defaulters from getting any new loans (February 15), mandating that Joy Bangla be the national slogan (December 10, 2019), and providing breast feeding areas in public buildings (October 27, 2019).

It is not that the Courts have developed a newly acquired appetite for issuing certs, writs of mandamus, or *suo moto* rulings. Public interest litigation has a long and rich history. However, this current quickening of its activist pulse is coming from its social conscience, its realisation that the political process has become preoccupied with other concerns and is unable, or unwilling, to honour its mandate or fulfil its responsibilities, and that people are turning to the only institution that is still considered to be the guardian of the constitution and people's interests. The issue is not whether anything the Courts have done is trivial or unnecessary (indeed they are most worthwhile and fully supportable), but whether it is the Courts that should be saddled with this burden.

This question is sometimes raised because of the fact that the Court's primary obligation to dispense justice to litigants may be hampered. There are more than 3.5 million cases in the docket (more than 90,000 pending in the High Courts, and more than 20,000 in the Appellate Division), and the delays in the judicial process can be both frustrating and fundamentally unjust.

Second, since electoral competition has been compromised, democratic institutions and values weakened and normal channels of political engagement disrupted, oppositional "politics" has increasingly sought expression through other means. It has either been driven underground, or into the precincts of religious establishments, or into the streets. The first two breeds shadowy organisations, "enclave extremism" and militancy, and the gradual advance of a religious agenda. The last dislocates civic life, and creates chaos.

Almost all major political movements and mobilisations have occurred through street agitations (Shahbag, anti-quota, traffic safety, and so on), or through the placing of demands in the streets through localised protests. This often creates urban clog, but also generates violence because the establishment has not been able to devise an effective strategy to deal with them. The response, therefore, is simply to retaliate physically through their party supporters, or use the police which try to squelch these movements through corporal excess and aggressive legal shenanigans. The severity of the response obviously creates a "chilling effect" on the exercise of democratic rights and liberties.

This is most troublingly demonstrated in the universities, the throbbing heartbeat of our political tradition. Today, exclusive control of halls and dormitories, imposing various ideological and behavioural requirements on fellow students, insisting on displaying total subservience to student leaders of the party which may be in power, and limiting the space for debate and discussion (where even the suspicion, a whisper, that a student may have affinity with a political organisation that they do not like, may cause that student to be brutalised to death)—have all now become features of university life. The elected Vice President of the university student union is routinely beaten up or threatened. Traditionally revered authority figures such as teachers can be insulted and physically pushed around, and even Vice Chancellors allegedly subjected to demands (sometimes for monetary pay-offs) that would have been considered outrageous at any other time. How can this not reflect, or affect, politics or democracy in the country?

Third, the profit maximising compulsions of free-market capitalism with its inherent tendencies towards predation, exploitation, machination, monopolisation, corruption and violence, have faced some challenges, and been compelled to make some reforms, not because of the sensitivity and humanitarianism of the oligarchic

class, but only through popular resistance, people's struggles and political mobilisation. It is through such means that worker's rights (including the right to form unions, collective bargaining, living wages, safety in the workplace, and so on) have been gradually advanced, and demands for women's equality, health care, truth in advertising, economic justice, ecological balance, consumer rights, and issues of sustainable and inclusive development that improves the quality of life for the majority of the world's population, progressively put forward.

Bangladesh, with a Parliament dominated by business interests, and going through a vigorous and truly impressive growth spurt, requires some political counterbalance to a few signs that are as evident as they are ominous. Otherwise, the yawning inequalities that we see, the vulnerabilities of women and the minorities, the fragility of the rule of law, the anxieties about rights and liberties, about proper educational atmosphere and the shrinking of public space, about the disregard for environmental protections, and the collapse of moral values will worsen, and become progressively dangerous.

A push-back against politics is a turning away from people's basic demands. It indicates an embrace of "growth" measured in aggregate terms, rather than the pursuit of "development" which has a moral imperative associated with it. In this situation, Bangladesh does not need less politics, it needs more.

But first, we have to re-define the notion of "politics" itself, and in some ways rescue it from the Machiavellian rut into which it has been condemned.

Politics is not an amoral exercise where the means do not matter and the ends are selfish and desperate. It is NOT a zero-sum game where every question is considered a provocation, every criticism a challenge, and all opposition an existential threat which has to be eliminated. It is not about capturing the machinery of the state so that one group may benefit from its resources, and use it to punish those it dislikes. It is not about petty partisanship, opportunistic alliances, empty clichés, sycophantic hyperbole, and endless spectacle. And it is not even about having elections, because elections may be a necessary condition for democracy but not a sufficient condition for democracy; it can lead countries, as some "hybrid regimes" are proving, into the "tyranny of the majority".

We must remember that the idea of politics has traditionally involved public service, transparent processes, and high ideals. In Socratic terms, it was about establishing justice; in Aristotelian terms, about instilling civic virtue; in Mill/Benthamite or Utilitarian terms, about securing the greatest good for the highest number; in Marxian terms, about pursuing distributive fairness; in Jeffersonian terms, about protecting the inalienable rights of the people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; in Hannah Arendtian terms, it encompasses both an action and a celebration of human agency; individual autonomy, personal freedom.

It is THIS notion of politics that we must assert, and citizens must reclaim. The politics of conviction, not of convenience; the politics of the public good, not personal interest; the politics of establishing the rights of the people, not protecting the privileges of the few; the politics of the healthy competition of ideas and policies among patriots, not a confrontation between enemies; the politics of encouraging the better angels of our nature, not pandering to the worst demons of our psyche.

Those who seek to delegitimise politics today, perhaps unknowingly, disregard the foundational principles on which this country came into existence. To forget our past is to forego our present, and forfeit our future. Perhaps it's about time we realised that politics is too important to be left only to the politicians.

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such soaring optimism about democracy in the early part of the century when it reported that the number of democracies had grown from 46 in 1974 to 76 in 1990, to 126 by 2000, began to refer to the 2006-2016 period as the "decade of decline". The Intelligence Unit of The Economist also reported that the average global score in its annual Democracy Index has fallen from 5.48 in 2018 to 5.44 in 2019, the worst score since 2006 when it had started charting the health of democracy in the world. Consequently, a democratic "recession", or "backsliding", or "exhaustion" is being felt throughout, and being manifested in various ways.

We see the muscular presence of authoritarian-style leaders who are cavalier about, if not contemptuous of, the rule of law, constitutional provisions, historical precedents, or ethical norms. We see the use of rhetorical strategies and policy initiatives driven by division and hate, as well as group mobilisations against the "other" based on narrowly defined and aggressively trumpeted identity markers. We see declines in voluntarism, voting rates, party affiliations, community engagement, open-minded platforms for debate and discussion, and levels of institutional trust. We see the gradual breakdown of "social consensus" which results in hyper-polarised political environments where competitive politics and notions of political pluralism (which included the habits of tolerance and restraint) become increasingly problematised.

maintaining effective control over the process and outcome; through retaining the semblance of press freedom while completely dominating the discourse, where egos and sensitivities are stretched so wide and thin that the slightest felt deviation from that narrative is supposed to "hurt" or "offend" some sentiment or the other (religious, nationalist, ideological, institutional or individual) to justify harsh reprisal and compel self-censorship; through utilising "populist-nationalist slogans" and the manufacturing of "useful enemies", or "under-cut civil society, the rule of law, institutional autonomy, and so on.

In Bangladesh, these tactics are being increasingly apparent and worrisome. It should be pointed out that the notions of "politics" and "democracy" are integrally intertwined. An assault on one is necessarily a threat to the other. Consequently, when we vent our frustration about politics, it gradually leads to clouding, if not jeopardising, our democratic hopes and inspirations.

Surprisingly, this is done most regularly by politicians themselves. They can say, without a hint of irony, that they don't do "politics", they only serve the people, or that any criticism of the establishment is merely a reflection of conspiratorial "politics", or that they will not allow others to play "politics" with a given issue. They can present a false contradiction between the dynamics of "development" and the imperatives of "democracy", and say that they are committed to delivering the first and will not allow

variety of initiatives and causes which, in other countries, are addressed through a political process involving executive/bureaucratic or legislative/policy leadership.

Earlier, these kinds of judgments and directives would be few. For example, the Courts had ordered that manholes and sewer lines in Dhaka be covered (August 2, 2016), that school bags weigh not more than 10 percent of the body weight of children (December 7, 2016), that doctors write legible prescriptions (January 9, 2017) and so on.

But lately, the Courts appear to have increased the pace and range of its engagements. For example, the Courts have addressed various issues and made important interventions, banning single-use plastic products in coastal areas (January 6, 2020), shutting down illegal brick kilns (November 27, 2019), not allotting any public lands that may damage forests (January 2, 2020), ensuring that universities follow the Grants Commission procedures on granting PhDs (February 4, 2020), forming anti-ragging squads (January 12, 2020), providing counsellors at educational institutions (January 5, 2020), holding that gambling is illegal (February 10), getting unfit vehicles off the roads (February 12), ensuring better traffic signal management in Dhaka (January 20), seeking the rehabilitation of street children (December 18, 2019), removing contamination in packaged milk (July 5, 2019), providing safe drinking water (July 25, 2019), not allowing water-taxi services at Gulshan-Badda lakes (December 19,

QUOTABLE Quote

JOHN STEINBECK
(1902-1968)
American novelist

There's more beauty in truth, even if it is dreadful beauty.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Beach cover
- 5 Beach setting
- 10 Witch
- 12 Friend of Wendy
- 13 Take it easy
- 14 Church feature
- 15 Santa - winds
- 16 Box opener of myth
- 18 Kitchen storage
- 20 Fellows
- 21 Convene
- 23 Worker in a colony
- 24 Island garlands
- 26 Hart's mate
- 28 Hightailed it
- 29 Cut
- 31 Hosp. parts

DOWN

- 1 Throw away
- 2 Concert setting
- 3 Pitcher Ryan
- 4 Genetic stuff
- 5 Reach across
- 6 Grasped
- 7 Padded footstool
- 8 Hit from behind
- 9 Wandering
- 11 Put into words
- 17 Supporter's vote
- 19 "I don't need the details," for short
- 22 Foils
- 24 Wyoming city
- 25 Trap
- 27 Roadhouse
- 28 Correct an online comment
- 30 Zoo beast
- 33 Unmanned plane
- 34 Reunion attendees
- 35 Chophouse order
- 37 Subsequently
- 38 Painter Holbein
- 42 Naughty

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

HELPERDIN ASHIF
OVERDO SHOE
PEDALS CONE
GEEZER
CATS ONTAP
AMISPANDORA
BIG ICE DID
INHALES DER
NOTSO ISLE
ESTEEM
JANE ARABIA
ADDS RIGORS
MOS SCENES

BETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

THE MEN POSTED A VIDEO OF YOUR SPEECH AND IT'S TRENDING

I CAN BE QUITE INSPIRING

DOES HE KNOW IT'S A "BLOOPERS" SITE?

DON'T TELL HIM, WE'RE BETTER OFF WHEN HE'S HAPPY

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WATCH THIS, WANDA!

WHEN DO YOU LOVE DADDY?

WHEN DO YOU LOVE MOSQUITO BITES?

YES

MINE STILL COUNTS!