

International Day of Democracy

Democratic principles are more relevant than ever during Covid-19

THE International Day of Democracy has been observed around the world on this day since 2007 to promote and uphold democratic principles, including respect for human rights, inclusiveness, accountability, and transparency. This year we observe this day in the midst of a global pandemic, when it is more urgent than ever to remind ourselves and our governments of our commitments to safeguarding these values in our collective battle against Covid-19.

Unfortunately, since the onset of the pandemic, we have witnessed democracy taking a backseat around the globe, as governments have restricted human rights and fundamental freedoms, clamped down on dissent, censored media, restricted access to public information, and increased digital surveillance of its populations under the guise of tackling the pandemic. In Bangladesh, too, there have been systematic attempts to curb the free flow of information, with successive directives of the government to medical professionals and government employees to not speak freely to the media. The latter have also been directed to not like, share or comment on social media posts that are critical of the Bangladeshi government. Meanwhile, the draconian Digital Security Act has been used indiscriminately during this period to target critics of the government's handling of the health crisis. The ministry of information has reportedly established a cell to monitor all media including social media platforms to check whether "rumours and misinformation" about Covid-19 are being circulated.

While we understand the need and importance to fight against misinformation related to Covid-19, we strongly believe that it is only possible through the functioning of a free, responsible and independent media. Citizens have the right to exert their demands from—and express their dissatisfaction of—public institutions and representatives. That is the very basis of a democratic polity. Curbing the free flow of information only creates panic, provides fodder for misinformation and erodes people's trust in already flailing institutions. The pandemic and its after-effects are far from over, and the government's insistence on downplaying the gravity of the situation can have disastrous impact on the citizenry.

The theme for this year's observance is "Democracy under Strain: Solutions for a Changing World". Staying true to this year's theme, we urge the government to ensure inclusiveness and transparency in the policies and programmes that it undertakes to offset the negative effects of the pandemic and truly reach those in need. The voices of the affected populations must be taken into account at all stages—from design to implementation; after all, the true spirit of democracy requires that citizens, and not political elites, take the driver's seat in designing solutions for an egalitarian world.

Most rural households lack digital access

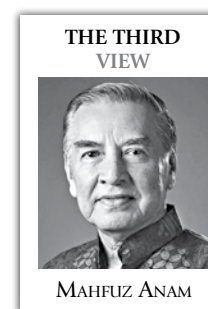
Reducing the digital divide crucial

DESPIITE the government's enthusiastic approach towards a digital Bangladesh, it appears we still have a long way to go. It is concerning that nearly three-quarters of rural households in the country have low level digital access and skills, according to a recent study by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) titled, "Digital Literacy in Rural Bangladesh", which surveyed 6,500 households. The study is the first of its kind to develop a Digital Literacy Index (DLI), illustrating the current state of digital literacy in rural Bangladesh. In recent years, Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in digitising many of its public services to make them more accessible and cost-effective, but it appears that this continuing "digital divide" among the rural and urban households threatens to deter the successful expansion of our e-governance. The study reveals that rural households are still lagging behind in adoption and use of e-services due to lack of proper access to information and communication technology (ICT) and the skills required to operate digital devices.

It further shows that about 49 percent of the households have no access to a computer and 54 percent do not have access to the internet. Although 96 percent of rural households own a mobile phone, a majority (59 percent) do not have access to a smartphone. Only three percent pay bills via mobile, six percent use computers for productive activity, 20 percent use the internet for functional activities like reading news, online training, etc., three percent have online shopping experience, and less than one percent earn through online activities. The study categorised rural households into four different classes, according to digital access—none, low, basic, and above basic. 72 percent of households were found to have low access and only four percent had above basic access. Digital access is one of two aspects of digital literacy, the other being the skills that enable people to use these tools to effectively communicate, seek information, and solve problems. When it comes to problem-solving and actual efficacy, the percentage of households who possess the requisite skills is staggeringly low.

Although the issue of the digital divide created during this pandemic has been discussed in the media, we are yet to see any comprehensive plan from the government to tackle the problem. Not to mention, online education remains completely inaccessible to many students because of poverty, poor internet connectivity, high internet charges and a lack of necessary equipment.

The authorities and the policymakers must sensibly design innovative interventions which will be favourable in making information technology and connectivity available across every rural community to bridge the existing inequalities.



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

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Even after endless extensions, hearings and a plethora of notices, the BNP government did not move on the issue. It took the caretaker government to establish the

Judicial Services Commission in 2007. The present government is yet to finalise the service rules regarding promotion, posting and disciplinary action. On the contrary it has filed a Review Petition regarding the implementation of the Directives given in the Masdar Hossain judgement.

Hence, till now—21 years after the original judgment—the service rules for the judicial officers concerned have not yet been finalised and, as such, bureaucratic control over judicial officials continue.

As for the Supreme Court, articles 95(2)(c) of the Constitution contemplates enacting of a law for the qualification of judges for appointments. It has not yet been enacted. This lack of rules allows the government to have a big say in the appointment of judges.

Recently the legislative branch has been dragged into this time-old tussle between the executive and the judicial branches of the state by the 16th Amendment to the Constitution empowering the parliament to remove judges of the Supreme Court abolishing the provision of the Supreme Judicial Council which was empowered to perform this task. This amendment was later thrown out by the full bench of the Supreme Court creating tension between the highest court and the parliament and further clouding the path of judiciary's independence.

To put it simply, the formation of an independent judiciary that guarantees all fundamental rights of all citizens, strengthens all institutions of accountability—like the Human Rights Commission, Anti-corruption Commission, etc.—throws out all repressive laws that curtail rights guaranteed by the Constitution, uphold vigorously all laws that guarantee and protect the basic rights of the people, further expand the fundamental freedoms that give pride of place to multiplicity of views is a work in progress with a far greater part of the road remaining untraversed compared to how much we have come. Perhaps, a metaphor for our democracy's journey.

If "work in progress" is what we say for our judiciary, about our parliament, we can say "work in regress". For, the parliaments from 1991 to 2006 were far more boisterous (not necessarily substantive) and exchanges on the floors of the House far more contested (not necessarily constructive) compared to what we have now. The opposition today is neither equipped nor politically motivated and appears to lack the energy

to play its constitutionally prescribed role. Today's parliament is virtually without any opposition.

Is it good for democracy? Is it good for Sheikh Hasina's government? Is it good for Bangladesh's future? We wonder.

In my view the finest hour of the post-Ershad parliament was when it started. Many may have forgotten that the parliament, which later became a sorry example of itself because of frequent boycotts and suicidal resignations, was the very institution that saw a magnificent example of working together of the treasury and the opposition benches. They worked together to bring back the parliamentary form of government which was turned into a presidential one with the promulgation of BAKSAL and later continued by the military governments of General Zia and General Ershad.

Very rarely in the history of parliamentary democracy does a majority party (BNP) accept an amendment proposed by the opposition (AL). This is exactly what happened within the first few months of our first parliament following the restoration of democracy. It was a brilliant example of foresight, political compromise, and working together of our two major parties that came together, along with many other opposition parties, to topple autocracy in the late eighties.

What followed this hopeful start was a gradual widening of the gulf between our two major parties that ended with political rivals becoming bitter enemies and finally into mortal combatants. And with it dimmed our chances of real and functional democracy.

There were many clear signs that our democracy was heading towards an abyss with political leaders blissfully unaware of the dangers that their own actions were posing.

Nobody knew, save the conspirators, that the worst was yet to come.

Nothing damaged the prospect of democracy as deeply and fundamentally as the attempt on Sheikh Hasina's life on August 24, 2004. With the exploding grenades that nearly killed today's prime minister, whose survival was nothing short of a miracle, the future of parliamentary democracy lay splintered like many who survived that tragedy. In Sheikh Hasina's mind Khaleda Zia was no longer a political opponent, albeit bitter one, but a potential murderer who would not be averse to assassination to consolidate herself in power.

For those who may have doubted the BNP chief's direct involvement with this dastardly act found themselves totally betrayed by the way this national tragedy was handled in which 24 citizens were killed, including Ivy Rahman, chief of AL's women's wing and the wife of Zillur Rahman, a highly respected veteran political leader, later to become president. Practically no attempt was made to hold a credible investigation—strengthening suspicion of the government's involvement—and what we heard on the floor of the parliament dominated by

BNP at that time, was both contemptuous of truth and disrespectful of public intelligence, foreshadowing the shameful "Joge Mia" incident and the farcical judicial inquiry that were to follow.

This event, in my view, killed whatever little prospect there was left for a consolidation of a two-party democratic system for Bangladesh. From now on, it was truly "winner take all" and, literally, let death befall the loser.

A tragic fallout of the intensification of rivalry between Awami League and the BNP was that parliament never emerged as the centre of politics. It was always the streets of the country, especially those of Dhaka, where political battles were fought and the future of the country determined. The focus was not the finer arguments of a policy debate on the floor of the parliament but on the coarseness of slogans shouted at pitched volumes on the streets by people who neither understood the depth of its meanings nor cared for the consequences of their actions. All this was accompanied by police violence against demonstrators whose bitterness grew along with the force of the batons. I think it was Shakespeare who said, "Mischief, thou art afoot", and so it was. Nothing but violence mattered, and with each bitter conflict it further intensified, drowning out reason in the cacophony of claims and counter claims.

So in the last thirty years, our parliament—a most vital component of a functioning democracy—that should have become the most vital institution of debate, oversight, law making and defender of people's rights, transformed itself into an institution with no vision of its tasks and no intention of representing the "will of the people", abandoning the voters to the mercy and caprices of the executive.

So, if democracy is to be measured by the work of a parliament, we do not seem much to write home about.

The moral edifice of the executive branch emanates from the fact that it is elected by the people through a free and fair voting process that is beyond question. It is the free and fair nature of an election, that lies at the heart of any government's legal and moral authority. More the election becomes a contrived affair, more the legitimacy of the government comes into question.

Unfortunately we never took the need for authentic elections seriously. It was always like a game played by the major parties who would utter pious words of public benefit and adopt the most unethical means possible for private "win". Elections were only free and fair if we won it and never remotely so if we lost. No amount of transparency, accountability and proof of precautionary measures would convince us about the fairness of an election if, god forbid, we happen to lose it. The focus was always on capturing power and never on credibility of the process. Thus buying or intimidating voters, influencing officials and in the end even staffing ballot boxes were never

too immoral for us to adopt which, in its present incarnation, gives pride of place to the police who seems to have emerged as the "deciding factor".

We never concentrated on perfecting the electoral system but always on manipulating it. Starting with influencing the selection of members of the Election Commission to the appointment of staff of its secretariat, everything was a fair game if it could assure "victory". This resulted in election commissions always being vilified by the opposition no matter how hard it tried to hold elections of an acceptable standard, preventing the growth of powerful and truly independent election commissions like in India.

Today one can say without hesitation—or should one say with a lot of it—that we have an enormously powerful, perhaps disproportionately so, executive branch in comparison to the other two pillars as discussed above. The historically tested idea of balance of power between the three pillars of a democratic state stands imperilled in Bangladesh with unforeseen consequences for the country.

The executive branch is far more centralised than it has been ever before and has enormous amount of tax money at its disposal to buy its way into or out of anything. Combining populism with arbitrary power and being able to use the coercive power of the state in an unbridled manner has added to the oppressive nature of the executive branch and has greatly enhanced its ability to goad public opinion towards a prescribed end.

Global disrepute of previous champions of democracy has paved the way for the emergence of authoritarian governments. Fake news, post-truth and irresponsible use of social media have given a life time opportunity to dictators to question the credibility of independent and professional media. Sadly, governments today are able to ignore the pledges they make to their people and through diversionary populist slogans that changes the focus of public scrutiny away from the government and into issues of race, colour, ethnicity and religion.

With a judiciary still in the process of getting out of the stranglehold of bureaucracy, and too weak to question boldly why its independence is being delayed; with a parliament that seems to have lost its way and full of self-doubt about its place in the Constitution; and with an executive branch that is too eager to circumvent laws for its own gain, too disregardful of rights of the public, too dismissive of the abuse of power by state agencies, too taken up by its own rhetoric of success, too eager to ignore corruption, too oblivious of the need for accountability for its own good, too contemptuous to allow dissent, democracy in Bangladesh continues to remain a distant dream.