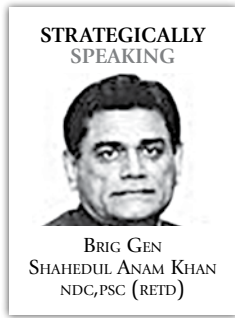


INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

What is the health of our Republic?



BRIG GEN
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observance of the International Day of Democracy.

"It has been a terrible decade for democracy" scholars aver. "The world is now in the 13th consecutive year of a global democratic recession. Most troubling of all, democratic institutions have proved to be surprisingly brittle in countries where they once seemed stable and secure. On the other hand it has been good decade for dictatorship. The global influence of the world's most powerful authoritarian countries has grown rapidly. For the first time since the late nineteenth century, the cumulative GDP of autocracies now equals or exceeds that of Western liberal democracies."

Regrettably, populism and ribald tribalism, propagating exclusivist politics have come to dominate liberal politics. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblitz in, "How Democracy Dies", answer the question themselves. Extrapolating the enabling conditions to situations in many regions and countries, may suggest that the prevailing condition are the precursor of the end of liberal democracy. President Putin struck an ominous note at the G-20 Summit in June last year when he uttered that "modern liberalism" has become "obsolete."

On this day, a deep look at the state of our republic is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when the nation is observing the Centenary of the Father of the Nation, whose guiding principle in life had been democracy and all the important ingredients that make it a compound whole. As the People's Republic of Bangladesh, so appropriately named by the framers of

our constitution, it was the people who were to be the master of their own fate. Are they?

Democracy has had a bumpy ride in Bangladesh from the seminal stages of its emergence. The multi-party parliamentary form was replaced through a legislation that sought to subsume all other parties, dispartate as they were wont to be, into one entity. But because of the violent change brought about by the brutal murder of Bangabandhu, a most tragic event in the nation's life on 15 August, 1975, one cannot tell whether the political experiment would have been successful, if at all. But suffice it to say that the one party political dispensation, whatever may have been the motive behind its formulation, may not have reflected the psyche and political grain of the nation.

The military and pseudo military rule that followed the assassination of the Father of the Nation set the political clock back by several decades. No military rule can bring good for a nation. It destroys political institutions and changes the character of politics. New parties are floated, and fringe and religious elements are sponsored to combat the established political parties. In our case, a military ruler was replaced by another, violently too. And in both the situations, under Presidents Zia and Ershad, a new party was floated while in power that carried the elections and ruled the country.

It might surprise outside observers of Bangladesh politics to see the pseudo military regimes survive as long as they did, at least that of General Ershad, given the innate aversion of the Bengalis to military rule. The situation speaks volume about the fickle character of the current genre of our polity to whom principles, morality and values lose out to expediency and the urge to survive in politics. Military rule was aided and abetted by the active support of a section of our politicians and some political parties. Dilating on the feature would consume more space than a newspaper's page can afford. Suffice it to say that since the day when some politicians of

the ruling party walked over the bloodstained body of the Father of the Nation and his family members, to join the cabinet of Mushtaq, military and supra political changeovers have had political acquiescence of sorts. Military rulers are encouraged when their illegal takeovers that topple an elected government are not met by vigorous opposition by the politicians. The 1986 elections under Ershad had not only given a lease of life to the Ershad regime but validated his

system, a caretaker system, had to be introduced to conduct the elections. Unfortunately, when the nation had hoped to have seen the end of military involvement in politics, the political turmoil in 2006-2007, gave an opportunity to the then Army Chief to intervene, albeit indirectly, to set up a caretaker government backseat driven by the military, under which the 9th Parliamentary election was held.

While in our country people have the luxury to enjoy democracy for

growing apathy of the public towards election has been admitted by an MP, once a minister of the current AL-led alliance government, and still part of it. People are now being offered a binary choice, between democracy and development, as if they are mutually exclusive. Our politicians may have forgotten, if ever they were aware of it, that, "democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health."

We are constrained to repeat what we have said many times in the past that in countries where members of parliament do not depend on popular mandate, people become irrelevant. Rules are framed and laws are enacted to benefit a coterie. It no longer remains participatory but becomes a "democracy" by the few and for the few. Our leaders have failed to deliver an egalitarian society to the people, where the interests of the greater majority of the poor and middle-class would not be sacrificed at the altar of the interests of the minuscule minority. The interests of the "great body" have been forfeited by the obligation to serve the interests of the few that command the major wealth of the country. That, one feels, would never have been possible if our democracy would not have been divested of its spirit.

It might be worth ending with a historical anecdote. At the conclusion of the US Constitutional Convention of 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked by a lady whether America would be a monarchy or a republic. He had replied, "A republic... if you can keep it."

Our founding fathers had given us a republic. There was a new dawn in February 1991 after fits and starts and the painful interregnum of around 15 years from August 1975. What is the health of our Republic given to us by the founders? That I leave to the readers to answer.

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Democracy has had a bumpy ride in Bangladesh from the seminal stages of its emergence.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

political existence as well, and that would not have been possible, without participation in the election held under his auspices.

But be that as it may, the nation witnessed another watershed moment when Ershad was toppled by a popular movement. Parliamentary democracy reflecting the true spirit was resurrected after a hiatus of 16 long years in February 1991, but for most of the time till the caretaker-conducted elections in 2008, the parliament remained largely dysfunctional due to the opposition boycott of the parliament. Mutual distrust of political parties was so extreme that a new

only one day every five years, the day of election, even that was not accorded to them fully in 2014 and 2019. Since then, the parliament has been operating without a genuine parliamentary opposition. Post-2014 saw a unique arrangement of government when a few main opposition MPs were made a part of the ruling party cabinet, largesse for their role, and a happy arrangement with nobody to seriously hold the government to account.

The consequence has been the regression of democracy in the country as well as, sadly, erosion of the people's trust in the process of election. The

Challenges to Democracy: Old and New



ROUNAQA JAHAN

THREE decades ago, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and overthrow of military regimes in different countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, we

were all talking about the "third wave" of democracy. Bilateral and multilateral organisations were busy providing technical expertise to emerging democracies to advise them about strategies to strengthen their fledgling democratic institutions. It was assumed at that time that transition to democracy will lead overtime to democratic consolidation or deepening of democratic experiences, if we strengthen horizontal and vertical accountability of institutions such as the parliament, judiciary, human rights commission, anti-corruption commission, election commission, political parties, free media, civil society, etc.

But after years of production of strategy documents and training of parliamentarians, judges, government officials, NGOs and political leaders in the form of workshops and study tours to observe good democratic practices, we sadly realised that, in many of these emerging democracies, the process of democratic institutionalisation or consolidation has not happened. Instead of functioning as an accountability institution, the parliament is becoming a rubber stamp of the executive. The judiciary is losing its independence. The election commissions, the anti-corruption commissions and the human rights commissions are not able to stand up to the pressure of the executive. Political parties are not practicing democracy internally, nor are they promoting democracy in the country. Instead, they have turned into instruments of patronage distribution to supporters and intimidators of opponents. We then discovered that no amount of technical advice or funding will actually improve the functioning of these institutions. The key to democratic consolidation is "political will". But we had no easy answer as to how we can create that political will, which would enable us to foster democratic practices.

Experts and observers of democracy had started writing about backsliding of democracies from the mid-1990s. Fareed Zakaria wrote in 1997 that half of the democratising countries of the world are turning into illiberal democracies and warned that illiberal democracies are fast becoming a growing industry. From the early part of the current century, surveys, conducted by various national and international

organisations, found that in many of the emerging democracies, though regular elections are taking place and there is no military rule, checks on the powers of the executive have been limited. In many countries, the executive branch has interfered with the independence of the judiciary and bypassed the parliament. Elections are not free and fair, and the regimes in power are using various methods, some blatant and some subtle, to manipulate the electoral outcome in their favour, so that the voters are not given a choice to elect their representatives in truly competitive elections. Political parties have failed to represent the interests of the citizens and have been captured by powerful special interest groups. Party politics and electoral processes are getting mired in black money, criminalisation and political dynastic rule. Once elected to office, regimes are increasingly becoming autocratic, suppressing fundamental freedoms, flouting rule of law, indulging in a game of "winner takes all" and demonising all critics and criticisms.

In recent years, studies of democracy have turned their attention to this emerging trend of what is being termed as "autocratisation". Democracy surveys began to measure not only levels of democratisation but also levels of autocratisation of different countries. They also identified different "waves of autocratisation". While the weak emerging democracies, where democratic consolidation or deepening never took a strong foothold, fell prey to the "first wave" of autocratisation, what started worrying democracy observers is the growing level of autocratisation in countries such as Turkey, Hungary and the Philippines, where rulers were elected through a relatively free and fair election.

Concerns about the future of liberal democracy reached a new height after the election of Trump in the USA, Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil. The V. Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute, which has been carrying out annual surveys of countries measuring levels of democratisation and autocratisation, suggests in its latest report that we are now entering a "third wave of autocratisation"; that for first time since 2001, the majority of the countries in the world are undergoing some form of autocratisation. Almost 35 percent of the world's population now live in autocratising countries and the number of liberal democracies has declined from 44 in 2008 to 29 in 2018.

The V. Dem report identifies three new challenges for democracy. First, more and more governments are trying to control or manipulate the media, and civil society; the rule of law, and the credibility of the electoral process is eroding. Second, there is toxic polarisation in public spaces where society is getting divided into

distrustful and antagonistic camps; political leaders are using hate speech and respect for opposite views, and public reasoning is declining. Third, digitalisation is enabling the spread of disinformation and compromising the electoral processes even in "consolidated" democracies such as in the USA. The V. Dem report identifies media censorship and repression of civil society as early warning signals of heightened autocratisation.

The high hopes about the future of democracy that we all shared three decades ago have now dissipated significantly. We have now realised that by putting too much focus on only one aspect of democracy—rule by civilian political leaders elected through regular elections—we have neglected to uphold other equally important aspects of democracy i.e. rule of law, fundamental freedoms, independence and neutrality of the judiciary and other institutions of horizontal accountability—an open pluralistic civil society, free mass media, freedom of expression and so on. As a result, it has been relatively easy for many "minimalist" democracies to backslide into autocracies.

However, it is the election of Trump in the USA and Modi in India that came as a rude awakening to the supporters of liberal democracies across the world. After all, the USA is supposed to be a consolidated democracy with well-established checks and balances between the three branches of the government and guaranteed fundamental rights including press freedom. Nobody expected a US president to accuse respected media outlets such as the CNN of spreading "fake news". In India after enjoying freedom for nearly 70 years since independence, the press and civil society are facing the threat of government control under Modi.

The sudden onslaught on fundamental rights in these two long established democracies have underscored the relevance of the old adage that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty", that the future of democracy cannot be left in the safe keep of the rulers, even popularly elected rulers; that all democracies are works in progress and we need to constantly fix democracy deficits as soon as they emerge and not let them mount to a level when significant sections of the population feel disenfranchised and think that democracy is not working for them.

Bangladesh: old and new challenges

Our journey since we joined the "third wave" democracy club in 1990 has not been smooth. Organising free and fair elections, a first step towards democratic transition has always been a challenge for us. In the last five decades since independence, no incumbent regime lost elections when they were

organised under their management. The only time incumbents lost power were in cases where elections were organised by non-party caretaker government (NCG). But the NCG system was abolished in 2011 and since then the elections organised under the incumbent regime have lost credibility.

Our parliament never emerged as an effective accountability institution. From 1991 to 2006, when there was a sizeable representation of the opposition in the parliament, the opposition decided to abdicate its parliamentary functions boycotting most parliamentary sessions and engaging in agitational street politics. And since 2014, there has been no credible opposition in the parliament. The opposition's capacity to agitate on the streets have also significantly weakened due to repressive measures taken by the government.

Since the 1990s, in all global surveys measuring the strength of democracy, Bangladesh has always scored low in two key indicators—rule of law and civil and political rights. The only indicator where Bangladesh was doing relatively better in the 1990s was the "voice" indicator, which measures freedom of expression, free media and free civil society. But in recent years, even the "voice" indicator is showing signs of decline and that is a worrisome new challenge. As the V. Dem report points out, censorship of media and shrinking of civil society space are early warning signals of further slide to autocratisation.

The two other challenges the V. Dem report identifies as new are, in fact, not new in Bangladesh. As noted already, we have always struggled to establish a free and fair electoral system. We have not been able to generate confidence that our laws are being enforced following due process. For a quarter of a century, our human rights organisations have been recording the number of extra-judicial killings. Over the years, these incidences have not declined, rather they only show an upward trend.

Again, for nearly a quarter of a century, we have lived with toxic polarisation in our public spaces. In the 1990s, for a brief period, we thought we may witness the emergence of a two-party system and regular rotation of power between them. But the parties decided to go on a confrontational and exclusionary path. Losing an election not only meant loss of power but often legal harassment, imprisonment, loss of property and even loss of life for the leaders and workers of the losing side. In 2004, a grenade attack on an opposition rally killed and injured many leaders and workers. The main leader (current prime minister) narrowly and miraculously escaped death but no attempt was made by the regime in power to properly investigate this criminal act. Over the years, our

electoral democracy has become a high-risk enterprise where only the very rich and very brave can dare to participate.

The latest and gravest challenge to our democratic aspirations is the increasing pressure mounted by the government as well as its supporters to control and manipulate the freedom of the media and civil society. The new Digital Security Act has created apprehension about the possibility of its arbitrary use which has led to a lot of self-censorship. There has been a chilling impact on freedom of expression.

Popular resistance and political will

While the V. Dem report paints a rather depressing scenario about the future of democracy globally, it also identifies some rays of hope. It underscores the rise of citizens' resistance to autocratisation and movement for civil and political rights in different countries. Indeed, as the autocratising trends have been on the rise since 2009, so have the trends of citizens' resistance against autocratisation and unjust governance. Recently, we have witnessed prolonged citizens' resistance movements in Hong Kong, Sudan, Tunisia, the USA and India. "Black lives matter" movement in different cities in the USA have continued despite the Corona pandemic. The protesters in Hong Kong and Thailand are back on the streets. The ordinary workers who protested for months in Shaheen Bagh in Delhi all through the cold winter of 2019 were sent home only after the lockdown following the pandemic. But protests by other excluded groups who face unjust treatment by governments, such as the migrant workers, have continued in India.

However, mere citizen's protests are not enough to create the political will for greater democratisation and remove the deficits of democracy whether in the long established or in the emerging ones. Sporadic and unorganised protests cannot sustain pressure for fundamental and long-term reforms that are needed to make democracy work equally for the under-privileged, less wealthy and excluded groups of society. Over the past many decades in many democracies the wealthy liberals have not championed quality public sector provisioning of education and health services. The corona pandemic has exposed the unequal and unjust system we all live under in many democracies which needs fundamental overhaul. We can move towards creating a political will for change only when the disparate sparks of resistance in various countries can build a sustainable organisation and leadership and persist with long term commitment.

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