

# Democracy in decline?

Dr Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University (USA) and a Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council. In this interview with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, professor Riaz talks about the old and new challenges to democracy and whether democracy globally is on the retreat.

Historian and author Yuval Noah Harari said during a Ted Talk that in the past few decades, the common story propagated was that "the economy was being globalised, politics was being liberalised and the combination of the two would produce paradise on Earth." That did not happen, leading many people globally to question our existing democracies and democratic institutions. What is your opinion on that?

I tend to agree with that. But the point is that democracy unfortunately is in decline. Over the last years and decades, or if I use the Freedom House's indices, then for the last 14 years, we have been experiencing a decline of democracy. If we look at the world now, almost 61 percent of the global population live in a situation that Freedom House calls "partly free" or "not free". During this period, we have seen a deterioration of democratic institutions. So anyone who predicted paradise on Earth, at this point, would be devastated.

But the trend was clear for the last 16 years. If we talk of the economy, the neoliberal economic policies that has created this world has already revealed the inadequacies, bankruptcies and hollowness of the economic policies pursued. That raised questions about globalisation, but globalisation of a certain kind I would say, not necessarily the concept, because we do live in an interdependent world. Take for example the environment. What you do in Dhaka, Bangladesh, would affect me here living in a small US town.

With respect to the questioning of

democracy, democracy as a concept as well as in statecraft now faces challenges. Yet, we need to understand what is the alternative and how did we arrive here. We arrived here because of the rise of "charismatic/populist leaders" and the debilitation of democratic institutions—democratic backsliding, i.e. state-led debilitation of democratic institutions.

Just because people are questioning democracy doesn't mean that they want authoritarianism. What it actually means is that they want better democracies.

You have mentioned the rise of populist leaders. But should we not also question democratic institutions, because in democracies we are supposed to have these checks and balances along with different branches of power—legislative, executive and judicial—that are expected to hold each other accountable?

They are not functioning properly because of institutional decay. One thing is alienation from the people. And the institutions have been captured by a small group of people.

Populism by definition is not right-wing or undemocratic. But the rise of the populists that we have seen in the last few years is right-wing populism. Why did that happen? One is the rise of identity politics, which has its own limitations. I am not opposed to all identity politics. But what has happened is that identity politics has been abused to create an "us versus them" situation. This binary has been created for the benefit of a very few people. And why has that been possible? That is where the institution part comes in. The institutions have



Dr Ali Riaz

failed, or partly failed, to deliver to the people, leading to this situation.

You mentioned the US, but recently a court in the US ruled that the mass surveillance exposed by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden may have been unconstitutional. So you still have the judiciary or other branches of government holding the executive accountable. If we return to our country, what is your analysis of how the different branches of our government have performed, if you look at history?

When Bangladesh moved from the presidential system to the parliamentary system, it shifted all the president's power lock, stock and barrel to the prime minister. This created a path for constitutional authoritarianism. And I have been speaking about this since 1993. I was afraid that this kind of

power has been put on the plate of the prime minister—it doesn't matter who is the prime minister—because that kind of power can "practically" undermine the importance of the legislative power. Not only is the prime minister part of the legislative body, but also the head of the executive. Hence you are giving the majority of the power to the executive.

Then, of course, there is a lack of democracy within the political parties, and an absence of a political culture of tolerance. Whoever goes to power forgets that they too will be in the opposition, because they think this is a perennial thing and is going to go on for eternity.

And frankly speaking, I am afraid to even talk about the judiciary, because I don't know who is going to tell me that I have actually crossed the line. Because I don't know where the line is. The citizens don't know. The separation between the judiciary and the executive that should have been done a long time ago never happened. And the saddest part is that an unelected government tried to do it between 2007 and 2009. What a pathetic thing! Something that should have been done by the people's representatives was not done by them, but attempted by an unrepresentative government, which did not work.

Executive power grab has been done in a fashion that has not only weakened the legislative body but the judiciary as well. And that is where the problem is, and where we have seen the inadequacy and failure of the entire democratic practice—that would have allowed us to get to a position where we could say, "okay, we are on the path to democracy". Instead, Bangladesh is digressing from

the pathway of democracy, and we have seen it become a hybrid regime.

Aside from the failure of these historical democratic structures, we now see new challenges arising—mass surveillance, for example, and how that generally discourages dissent. But how can democracy exist without dissent?

The dissent question has another element, that is the freedom of expression and freedom of press. Dissent itself seems to be seen pretty much as seditious.

And dissent has been stopped by various other means—which I call "franchising the violence". If you say something on social media, the supporters of the ruling party will actually troll you, harass you, vilify you, etc. And that is being done while the government is taking a step back. Look at the Digital Security Act of Bangladesh. What is happening with all the cases? The government is actually not filing most of the cases—it is filing very few. It is being filed by others, often the party's operatives.

What does this franchising of violence create? It creates a situation where people are afraid of talking, it creates self-censorship, which practically is a part of this democratic backsliding. Controlling information and providing misinformation are detrimental for democracy and they are basically being done under the patronage of the government or the state.

This is an abridged version of an online episode of Star One on One, a live video interview series, from September 19. The full interview can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/dailystarnews/videos>.

## We need to be innovative when developing Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

UNDER the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), all countries are supposed to develop their respective National

Adaptation Plan (NAP) according to a prescribed format provided by international experts. Many countries have already embarked on preparing their NAPs for some time, but Bangladesh has only just started its own. It is now imperative for Bangladesh to consider carrying out its NAP, but not in a business as usual (BAU) way.

Let me start by explaining what BAU would be like. First, it involves hiring a consulting company who would then deploy a number of national and international individual consultants to be assigned to write various different chapters of the final report. The Bangladesh NAP is being run by the Department of Environment (DOE) on behalf of the government and funded through UNDP. They have recently selected the consulting group for the assignment and have also held a workshop to initiate their work. This is an excellent start.

However, it is important that we realise that Bangladesh in 2020 is a very different country in terms of its knowledge and actions on adaptation to climate change, which are far more advanced than they were 10 years ago. Many different activities have already taken place in the country and many more are taking place now. Just to mention one example, Bangladesh will now be hosting the South Asian Regional Centre of the Global Centre

on Adaptation (GCA). Hence, it is important that the NAP that has just been started should aim to build on what is going on, avoid duplication with any ongoing activities and seek to find synergies with them instead.

Thus, the many consultants who will be given individual assignments and terms of reference must have teamwork under a strong leader as their first priority. What we should not end up with (which is often what happens) is that the individual consultant writes their own report and then the team leader has to put everything into a final report, which usually does not use much of what the individual consultant has contributed. Unless they work as a team with strong leadership from the team leader, it will be BAU.

Another way in which we need to move away from BAU is in ensuring that there is good consultation across different government agencies and ministries, as well as non-governmental stakeholders including civil society, private sector, academia, media and youth. Also, local level inputs from grassroots groups should be ensured as much as possible. Fortunately, this is one aspect in which Bangladesh has a lot of experience to build on and I am confident that this will be done effectively within the time and budget constraints.

The most fundamental way to change from BAU is to consider the Bangladesh NAP as an investment rather than a time bound project. This will require a paradigm shift in approach, as the project mentality is hardwired and difficult to break unless everyone agrees to do so.

This means that the exercise of preparing the Bangladesh NAP should not be regarded as writing and sharing a report, followed by leaving that report on a shelf where nothing much happens with its recommendations, which is the

fate of many such reports. Instead, the emphasis must be on seeing the NAP exercise as an investment in enhancing capacity building capabilities across the country in a way that will continue even after the NAP is completed. There is a need to focus on post-NAP actions and how to sustain them over time.

Why is this needed and how can it be done? The reason why it is needed is that Bangladesh has already made significant recognition across the entire

training institute to include courses on climate change that don't only focus on the problem but also stresses on how that particular profession can help the country adapt. The aim should be to ensure that within the next five years, each and every professional training institute in the country has a robust climate change course which ensures that their graduates are climate change literate and can contribute towards making the country more resilient.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

society that climate change is one of the most important risk factors which everyone needs to learn about, and every citizen needs to be empowered to be able to adapt to those risks as quickly as possible. There is no more need for awareness raising about the problem, but we must focus rather on capacity building actions to enable and empower all citizens to be able to adapt. Capacity building is the number one priority and at a scale that reaches every citizen eventually. The NAP thus has the opportunity to start this process.

How can this be initiated? There needs to be an analysis of all the different professions and their respective training centres such as for civil servants, local government officials, planners, bankers, civil engineers, foresters, lawyers, and even the military and police, to enable each and every professional

to ensure that over time, every Masters graduate in Bangladesh is well aware of the Bangladesh Delta Plan, which of course will include a significant element on adaptation to climate change in it.

Similar tailor made courses can be developed for undergraduates in universities and colleges around the country.

The final target group—and this is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list—are the youth not studying in university or college, who also need to be brought into the climate change learning loop. Here, a new opportunity has opened up under the newly launched GCA Centre in Dhaka where they will be developing a global Youth Adaptation Network (YAN) with chapters in every region of the world and also in some individual countries. Bangladesh has been selected to be the first country to develop the national YAN chapter and this is an opportunity for the young girls and boys of Bangladesh to become climate change leaders of the future.

The final point to make regarding the role that the NAP exercise can play, is not to say that it can do everything needed within a short space of time, but rather that it should aim to leave behind a lasting legacy in terms of enhancing capacity building capabilities of as many institutions as possible, instead of focusing on simply writing just another report.

I am quite sure that the government, UNDP and the consulting team are well aware of these challenges and opportunities and will be able to make the most of them. Bangladesh has a reputation for being a pioneer in tackling climate change and we should ensure that our NAP is also a pioneering exercise and not just BAU.

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**SIGMUND FREUD**  
(1856-1939)  
Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis.

*One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Wanderers
- 7 Stairs alternative
- 11 Spain setting
- 12 Diabolical
- 13 In conclusion
- 14 - fide
- 15 Some messages
- 16 Permitted
- 17 Lip
- 18 Monsieur's wife
- 19 First person
- 21 Failure
- 22 Audible shock wave
- 25 Good, to Georges
- 26 Suit piece
- 27 Sights
- 29 "Not another word!"

**DOWN**

- 1 Ohio city
- 2 Bush's successor
- 3 Buttes' kin
- 4 Craftsman
- 5 Pickling herb
- 6 Utter
- 7 Bridge answer
- 8 Green hue
- 9 Low number
- 10 Gilt, say
- 16 Gentle ones
- 18 Spiked weapons
- 20 Seedy bars
- 22 Neighbor of Ethiopia
- 23 Just for fun
- 24 Desdemona's husband
- 25 Multi-spouse crime
- 28 Trait carriers
- 30 Reversed
- 31 14 pounds
- 32 Gave an edge
- 34 Fallon's predecessor
- 36 Question of method

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

T	A	C	K	S	A	S	H	E	S
A	V	A	I	L	B	E	A	C	H
L	A	T	T	E	B	A	T	H	E
E	T	C	I	D	O	C	O	E	
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T	R	I	S	H	A	B	I	D	S
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S	C	E	N	T	S	A	T	E	S

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT