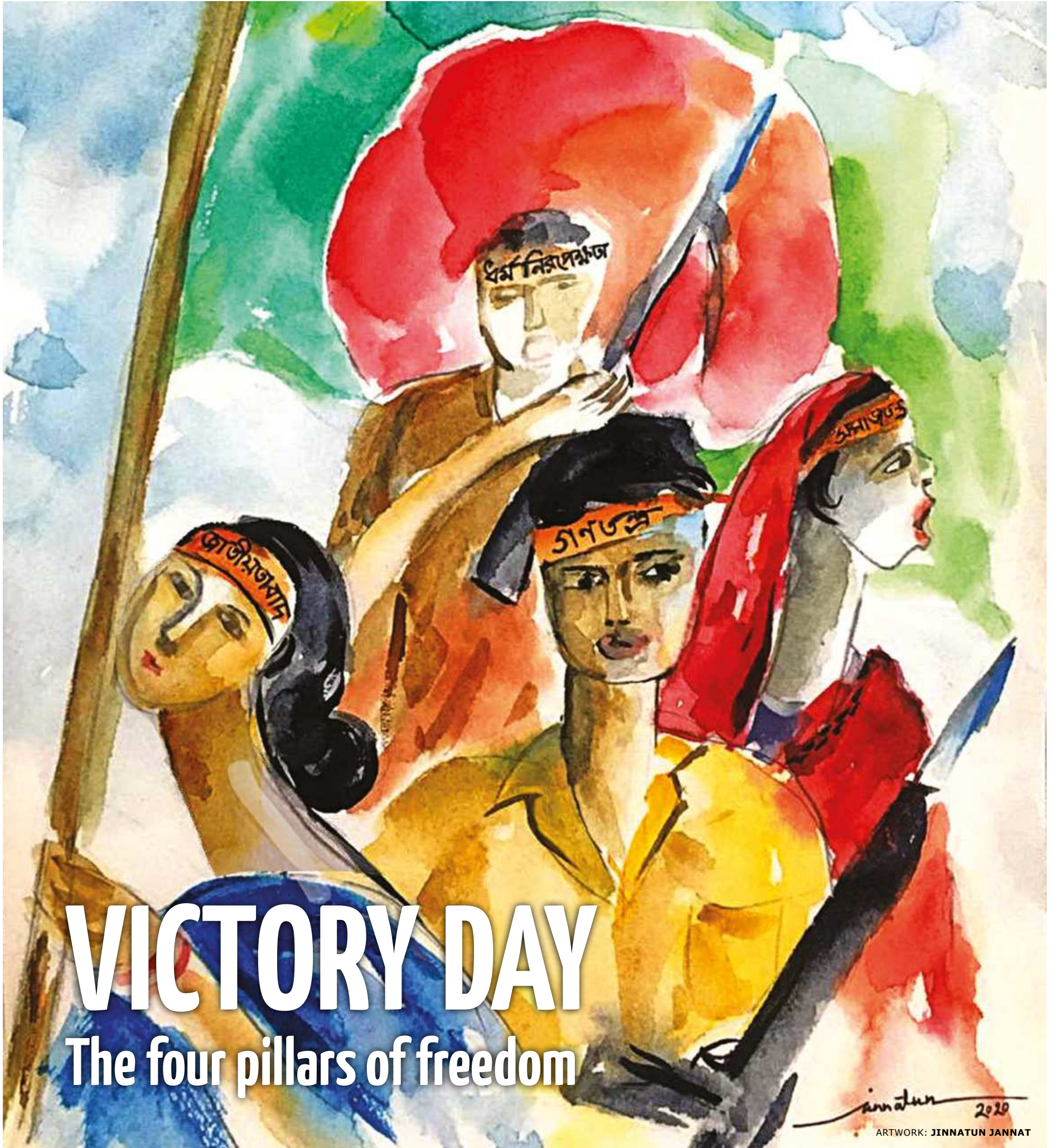


The Daily Star

VICTORY DAY

SPECIAL

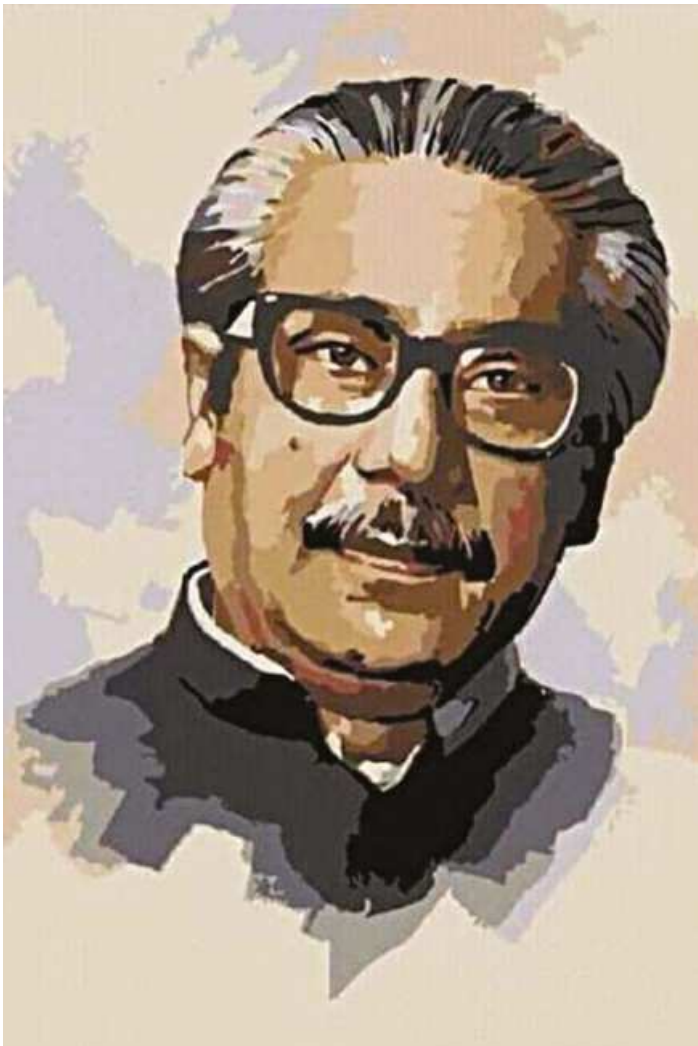
WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 16, 2020, POUSH 1, 1427 BS



VICTORY DAY

The four pillars of freedom

Jinnatun 2020
ARTWORK: JINNATUN JANNAT



Artists of Bangladesh Charushilpi Sangsad (BCS) created this portrait and installed it at Milan Chattar, TSC intersection on the eve of the 43rd National Mourning Day.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It is difficult to encapsulate in words the full spectrum of emotions that are inspired by the ushering in of Victory Day every year—unfathomable joy at the liberation of our country and the final blow to the shackles of Pakistani tyranny; immense pride in the valiance of our freedom fighters and all those who contributed to the independence movement and gave hope to the people of Bangladesh; respect for the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who led us in this untiring struggle, and all our national leaders who laid the foundations of an independent nation; and sorrow for the lives that were needlessly sacrificed and the suffering that was endured, so that we could live in a liberated Bangladesh.

This year's Victory Day is all the more special because it falls in Mujib Borsho, the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, and is also our final stepping stone into 2021, the 50th year of independent Bangladesh. Now more than ever, we find ourselves looking back at how this great leader gave us the strength and courage to fight our oppressors and achieve independence. However, his role in the shaping of Bangladesh did not end there—the foundations of Bangladesh were laid out by Bangabandhu in the form of the Constitution. On October 12, 1972, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took the floor at the Constituent Assembly, he famously said, "A state without a Constitution is like a boat without an oarsman," and laid out the founding principles that delineated both the rights and the duties of the citizens of this newly independent state—nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism.

In this Victory Day supplement, we focus on discussions of these founding principles and their current state, all the while remembering the oarsmen who brought us this far and gave us the great gift of becoming citizens of an independent nation. It is our hope that the younger generations will be guided by these founding principles in their efforts to build a liberal, tolerant and democratic Bangladesh.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor and Publisher
The Daily Star

Secularism in Bangladesh: The troubled biography of a constitutional pillar

AHRAR AHMAD

The ubiquity of the word "secularism" (it is mentioned in more than 75 of the world's constitutions as an ideal the State promotes, or an organising principle that it affirms), and the passionate discussions it generates throughout the world, sometimes distracts us from the fact that its origins are relatively recent.

It was only after the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries; after the bloody inter-denominational conflicts in Europe, or the clashes between ecclesiastical and temporal authorities, which eventually led to the sovereignty of the State (occurring between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815); after Jefferson's famous "wall of separation between Church and State", and Voltaire's "privatisation of religion" found a welcoming environment in the American and French revolutions in the late 18th century, did the idea of secularism become well entrenched in European literary and political consciousness. The English writer George Holyoake was the first to use it in a systematic manner only in 1851. It was during the French Third Republic (1870-1940) that it was declared to be the "defining ideology of the State".

Not only is it a relatively new concept, it was also delimited by geography. It was essentially a European phenomenon, both in terms of the intellectual tradition that generated it, and the military conflicts that necessitated it. Hence for the rest of the world, which did not share that reality, it was a foreign concept where its relevance was dimly understood, its meaning fuzzy, its embrace clumsy.

It may be argued that the idea of "democracy" is similarly alien. But democracy was easier to explain, it animated the anti-colonial struggles, and it was reflected in some concrete practices and institutions that were identifiable and populist. Secularism was not. But, more importantly, while democracy did not challenge deeply held commitments and values, secularism problematised the core of their belief systems, and sometimes even their identity. It should be pointed out, as Karen Armstrong has done, that the notion of "religion" understood in the West, is subtly but substantially different from what the Arabic word "*deen*" or the South Asian word "*dharma*" connotes.

It was expected that the road to secularism would be rocky in South Asia, perhaps more so in Bangladesh. There were pre-existing tensions between Hindus and Muslims (mitigated to some extent by Sufi teachings, some syncretistic cultural practices, and the moral economy of the peasantry) which were aggravated by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 that conflated class and religion and sharpened earlier divisions. There were the machinations, and sometimes the confusions, of the British. There was the emergence of a middle class in both communities (a little later, and weaker, for the Muslims) which led to a competition for political power and economic favour from the British, and provoked the self-conscious exploitation

of religion, the creation of the dreadful "other", and the divergence of the faith communities. And finally, there was the Partition of India in 1947 which appeared to confirm the primacy of faith as the very basis of personal and national identity.

Nonetheless, its journey in independent Bangladesh began in some optimism and apparent clarity. The constitution of 1972 unambiguously accepted secularism as one of the four foundational pillars of the State. This was entirely expected. This followed the logic of linguistic/cultural nationalism that had challenged the earlier Pakistani formulation, as well as the defeat of the Pakistani military which had pursued an overtly religious agenda. They lost. While the other pillars, such as democracy and socialism, were going to entail further negotiations and struggles, this issue, it was felt, had been settled. That confidence was seemingly misplaced.

Secularism was not killed with Bangabandhu's brutal assassination in 1975, but it was dealt a crippling blow. The subsequent leadership did not pursue this ideal with the courage, commitment or the charismatic authority that he had represented. Religious groups and leaders, who had remained defensive and tentative initially, were allowed and, at times invited, into the political arena, gradually began to assert their presence, eventually emerged as critical players in bargaining-based and alliance-oriented "democratic" arrangements, and steadily pushed back against earlier secular guarantees. Even its location in the constitution became far less settled than had been originally assumed.

In fact, the 5th amendment (1979) removed secularism from the constitution, and the Divine invocation (Bismillah-Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim) was inserted at the beginning. By the 8th amendment (1988), Islam was declared the "State religion". In 2005, the Supreme Court invalidated the 5th amendment (not on the religious question per se, but on the unconstitutionality of the Martial Law that had been promulgated and hence all laws, acts and amendments passed at the time were deemed to have been automatically nullified). In 2011, Part II, Article 8 of the 15th amendment restored secularism as a fundamental principle of State policy, and Article 12, Part II specifically indicated the elimination of communalism, the non-privileging of any religion, or any discrimination based on faith. However, in Article 2A, Part I, Islam was retained as the State religion, and the invocation remained unchanged. Thus, the constitutional position of secularism became a bit murky.

The increasing influence of the religionists was reflected in other areas as well. First, in education, Prof Abul Barkat reported that between 1970 and 2008, the number of alia madrasas increased from 2,721 to 14,152, and the number of qawmi madrasas went up correspondingly. By 2015, the government indicated the existence of 13,902 qawmi madrasas (though, largely because of definitional imprecisions, some estimates could be several times higher).

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



Secularism in Bangladesh: The troubled biography of a constitutional pillar

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Moreover, in 2017, the qawmi madrasas, which had always resisted any government interference in terms of academic substance, quality or control, was able to get its Dawrah degree recognised as equivalent to an official MA degree.

These forces, spearheaded by Hefazat-i-Islam, were also able to influence the curricula of the official education system. In 2017, as many as nine chapters were quietly deleted from school textbooks (which included contributions from Lalon, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Sarat Chandra, Satyen Sen, Humayun Azad and Rabindranath Tagore) and substituted them with more religious-minded pieces (from Shah Ahmad Sagir, Alaol, Golam Mostafa, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Habibullah Bahar). Similar other texts were added. Further changes were demanded and remain under consideration.

Second, such groups, and others emboldened by them, carried out various acts of repression and violence against religious minorities. Odhikar (a Human Rights based organisation), reported that between 2007 and 2019, 12 people belonging to minority faith communities were killed, 1,536 injured, seven abducted and 19 raped, while 62 pieces of land and 40 houses were grabbed, 1,013 properties and 390 temples were attacked, and 889 idols damaged or destroyed. It should be pointed out that the victims were mostly Hindus, but also included Christians, Buddhists, and Shia and Ahmadiyya

adherents. Minority organisations report numbers that are understandably higher.

A large number of minorities have felt compelled to leave the country. According to the official census reports published by the government, in the 1951 census (i.e., after the early exodus forced by the Partition), Hindus were 22 percent of the population of East Pakistan. By 1961 it had come down to 18.5 percent, by 1971 to 13.5 percent, by 1991 to 10.5 percent and by 2011 to 8.5 percent. Some of this may be partly explained by economic and family factors, but it would be quite implausible to deny that the atmosphere of threat and vulnerability they faced did

dramatic and dangerous manifestations of Jihadi militancy. But, they can be, and have been, largely contained. The much greater threat, more insidious and more far-reaching in its consequences, is the creeping advance of religionists in the country through a process that has been deliberate, organised and strategic.

It must be emphasised that there is a distinction between the concepts of being “religious” and becoming a “religionist”. The first refers to a commitment to personal piety, rigorous practice and spiritual salvation, the second indicates an interest in attaining political power, dictating government policy and

and examples, and a turning inward among Muslims.

Reinforcing this anti-secular backlash here has been India’s unfair and selfish pursuit of its interest (in relation to Bangladesh), and the increasing bigotry and viciousness it has displayed against Muslims. Moreover, financial patronage and Salafi indoctrination flowing in from Arab countries provided support and direction to the religionists. Finally, the stereotypical dismissal of religious people as backward, misogynist, violent, one-dimensional and unpatriotic has been arrogant, counter-productive and polarising. Instead of helping the cause of secularism and democracy, it has only strengthened its enemies.

But, more importantly, the leaders of supposedly secular parties in Bangladesh have probably been complicit in creating this Frankenstein. It is not a question of apportioning blame, as the parties are now childishly doing. Almost all parties had probably tended to this poisonous plant (perhaps some more readily than others), and helped it to flourish through compromise and accommodation.

It may be argued that compromise is part of the democratic process, and hence should be supported. But compromising what, and with whom, is relevant. This was the fatal fallacy of the (in)famous policies of “appeasement” pursued by the Allied powers in dealing with Hitler. Throughout the 1930s he consistently violated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles—building his armed forces, remilitarising the Rhineland, stopping reparation payments, reuniting with Austria through the Anschluss, and finally claiming the Sudetanland (at that time a province of Czechoslovakia). The Allied Powers, desperate to “secure peace for our time” once again, gave in. Hitler not only occupied the province, but the entire country. And then he demanded Poland, and invaded it in 1939. World War II, preventable earlier, became inevitable.

“Appeasement” was destined to fail. To a bully, a compromise is a capitulation. It does not make the problem disappear, it only encourages the next demand. The religionists kept on steadily advancing their agenda (affecting the constitution, education, public policy, free speech, etc.). The parties in power did not confront them. In this sense, our “Sudetanland moment” was perhaps the removal of the Lady Justice statue from the High Court premises. That crucial “victory” may have paved the way for the unimaginable and unforgivable audacity of the religionists in defacing Bangabandhu’s sculpture in Kushtia, and demanding that none others be built.

If we care for Bangabandhu, the spirit of our Liberation War, our obligation to our own constitutional principles, and our commitment to democracy, we must be bold, decisive and resolute to protect secularism in order to consolidate democracy. A Faustian bargain with the religionists may provide political gains that are illusory and temporary, but moral losses that are substantive and permanent. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, those who forsake their constitution for the sake of power, deserve neither.

Dr. Ahrar Ahmad is Professor Emeritus at Black Hills State University, USA.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

not contribute to this migration.

Third, these groups have also been successful in creating an intimidating environment that has caused a “chilling effect” on free speech. They have assassinated secular and atheist writers and bloggers, attacked teachers and editors, and threatened artists and performers on the pretext that their religious sentiments and sensibilities had been hurt or offended. Even the suspicion or accusation that someone had done so may lead a Hindu principal of a school to be forced to do sit-ups in front of an entire assembly of students and citizens, or a person being burned to death.

The Digital Security Act vastly expanded the arsenal of weapons available to the politically or religiously hyper-sensitive. With its sweeping generalities and lack of clarity about the meaning of “religious sentiments” or what constitutes being “hurt” or “offended”, legal harassment was added to public humiliation and physical attacks as a relatively safe and seductive tool in the service of intellectual and religious intolerance.

It must be pointed out that the most serious and worrisome challenges to our democracy do not come from wild-eyed, bomb-throwing fanatics who can attack a cultural programme celebrating the Bengali New Year’s Day and kill 10 people (April 14, 2001), cause more than 400 simultaneous explosions in 63 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh (August 17, 2005), or slaughter 28 people, including 17 foreigners in an upscale Dhaka restaurant (July 1, 2016). These are

dominating the public discourse. The first is perfectly compatible with secularism, can embrace modernity and scientific progress, and peacefully co-exist with other faiths and persuasions. The second is skeptical of science, judgmental about other faiths, and ready to retaliate against any questions about their own. Secularism is integral to, and a precondition for, democracy, while religionist absolutism is a threat.

This does not mean that secularism automatically ensures democracy. History is replete with examples of very secular authorities being cruelly illiberal and authoritarian. This only refers to the fact that unless there is tolerance for other ideas, respect for other faiths, acceptance of questions and criticisms, openness to science and evidence-based enquiry, trust of the will of the people (and not merely the assertions of dogmatic clerics) to make right decisions and judgments, and a strict separation between the private sphere of individual faith and the public space for civic engagement—unless these “secular” values and practices are upheld, democracy cannot be sustained.

The secularist argument, hence democracy itself, has been under considerable stress. The anxieties and uncertainties created by technology and global dislocations, the increasing inequalities everywhere, world-wide conflict particularly the instabilities in the Middle East (and the feeling that Islam is under siege), and the corruptions and inefficiencies in so many countries, have all contributed to a widespread skepticism about the West, a hostility to its traditions



“Secularism does not mean absence of religion. Hindus will observe their religion; Muslims will observe their religion; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions. No one will be allowed to interfere in others’ religions; the people of Bengal do not want any interference in religious matters. Religion cannot be used for political ends... the politics of communalism will not be allowed.”

BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN
during parliamentary debates in 1972.



From 'socialism' to disaster capitalism

ANU MUHAMMAD

"The demonstration of superfluous consumption amidst mass hardship must be eliminated. Thus sumptuous hotel dinners, the exhibition of costly jewellery and dress, and the display of surplus motor space speeding past long queues for heavily overloaded public transport, to mention only a few, must be limited severely." — Professor Anisur Rahman, Member of first Planning Commission, 1974.

Capitalist growth is very much visible in Bangladesh now. The nature and quality of capitalism deserve much investigation and analysis. However, the direction of this form of economic growth contradicts aspirations built up during the Liberation War. The people of Bangladesh struggled for an independent state to have a different development paradigm from that of Pakistan. The declaration of independence summarised aims for independent Bangladesh in three words: equality, social justice and human dignity. After independence, commitments and principles described in the constitution recognised this spirit of the time.

One may be surprised to see that the Constitution of Bangladesh still holds the following commitments: "Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation—a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens" (preamble).

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has attained significant growth in terms of GDP, capital accumulation, resource creation, infrastructure and so on. Nevertheless, with all these good numbers, the country continues to run in the opposite direction of the commitment to establish a society that is "free from exploitation" with "rule of law", that ensure "fundamental human rights and freedom", "equality and justice", and "political, economic and social security for all citizens".

The constitution further stated that: "It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens—(a) The provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care; (b) The right to work, that is the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage having regard to the quantity and quality of work; (c) The right to reasonable rest, recreation and leisure; and (d) The right to social security, that is to say to public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other such cases." (Article 15)

Where do we stand now? Nobody can deny that there is a complete mismatch between constitutional pledges and the real development path.

Officially, five year plans are supposed to be the guiding document of the country. To date, we have seven such documents. Out of seven five year plans, the First Plan, in many ways, was different from the others. First,



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

that plan declared an ideological position to break with the past and to follow a "socialist framework", although there remain large gaps between declared objective "socialism" and corresponding strategies. And second, it was prepared not by bureaucrats and hired consultants but by economists, who joined not merely for their professional careers but as a social responsibility, although they afterwards described their efforts as a failure.

Economist Dr Nurul Islam, the first deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, recalled his experience and examined the reasons of the failure in his book *Development Planning in Bangladesh* (1979). He pointed out that, "A Planning Commission dominated by professional experts and headed by academic economists and not by civil servants was already a break with past tradition." However, problems began when it became clear that the planners "overlooked the fact that the political leadership had no firm conviction in this respect".

Islam also argued that "there was the choice; on the one hand, of severe austerity... this in turn would have required a degree of ideological motivation, not discernible in post-independence Bangladesh. On the other hand, there was the option of seeking a large inflow of foreign aid from the rich, powerful nations, which brought with it certain restrictions on the freedom of action in political and economic decision-making. Bangladesh opted for larger foreign aid."

Therefore, the later period of the first plan experienced the erosion of "unrealistic idealism" and the growth of new social forces that were non-existent earlier. Islam identified the decisive players in the following years. He said, "By 1974 there were some who earned high profits in trade, speculation and construction and other service activities; they were joined by foreign aid agencies as well as foreign private corporations..."

We can see the gradual shift of the government's approach if we go through budget speeches and government policies.

Tajuddin Ahmed, the first finance minister of the country, outlined the governments' line of action in his first budget speech in June 1972. Tajuddin seemed to be very optimistic in "laying the foundation of a sound and dynamic economy" and "to lay the foundations of a socialist society, free from exploitation". Time showed that his wishes were never fulfilled. The old management system, along with old forces, proved to be immune to any fundamental changes and the question of building a "socialist" economy became rather dry. This scenario was reflected in the budget speech of the same Tajuddin in 1974, which was a testament of failure and frustration. His expulsion from the cabinet was an indication of a fundamental shift of the direction of the economy.

The first conference of the Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) was held in 1974. By then, "faith in the capacity of the economists and their tools to shape the economic destiny of the nation was shaken" and there was an "atmosphere of national disappointments and frustration."

Dr Mazharul Huq, the then President of the BEA, in his presidential address, questioned the validity of using the term "socialism" while doing the opposite. He clearly said that the ruling party was incapable of leading the country towards that direction. He observed that "plundering", conspicuous consumption and shameless "sinful expenditure and festive programmes" were the main events of the day. He even extended his criticism to the Planning Commission and the First Five Year Plan. He said that the Plan was simply a prototype of the Fourth Five Year Plan of Pakistan, and despite the rhetoric of socialism, this was not at all a socialist plan.

The subsequent plans abandoned "idealistic" visions, objectives and practices to adjust with the rising new forces in society.

In fact, after independence, Bangladesh failed to alter the social power matrix that had prevailed in the Pakistan period. The structures and hierarchies of civil and

military institutions, created and developed during British and Pakistani rule, were kept intact. Similarly, the legal and judicial systems remained untouched; and the land administration, despite land reform measures taken in 1972 and 1984, remains unchanged till today.

After the formation of the Bangladesh aid consortium "on the same lines" as the Pakistan consortium, the World Bank (WB) captured the authority over development policy formation. Bangladesh became a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) too and engaged in its negotiation process. These two organisations practically built the skeleton of reforms which appeared formally under Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) that became operational since the mid-1980s. They also succeeded in building a strong support base among economists. In 1985, Rehman Sobhan, member of the first planning commission, wrote about the supporting role of the economists in this policy domination—"we should have no illusions that any significant run down in technical assistance programming which finance these consultancies would have significant repercussions on the livelihood of many



"Capitalism was a way of holding the masses in bondage to exploit them. Those who believed in socialism could never subscribe to any form of communalism. On the whole, they disapproved of the exploiting class."

BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN
The Unfinished Memoirs

economists... economists have never been so busy in aid financed research and where their standards of living have become closely interlinked with the aid regime."

Things worsened after that. Martial law, direct or disguised, continued until 1990. That was the period of expansion of the repressive machines of state, polluting politics, institutionalisation of corruption, rise of communal politics, formation of a new super rich class and beginning of structural adjustment programmes. Since 1991, civil governments have been in power, but continued the same policies and practically strengthened the accumulation process.



Towards multiplex horizons of nationalism

AMENA MOHSIN

As Bangladesh steps into 50, the people of this country can rightfully be proud of a rich heritage of her story—a story of struggles, movements for emancipation, autonomy, liberation and independence. For many of us who have experienced 1971, it is an intensely personal, emotional and political moment in our lives. I consciously use the word “moment”, as time had frozen for many of us.

Returning to a free, independent Bangladesh in December 1973 after being interned in Pakistani camps for over two years, Bangladesh to me epitomised the land of freedom, a land where I will not be held behind barbed wires with electricity passing through them from time to time, a land where I will be free to receive my education, as my school days came to an abrupt end due to our internment. My days in the camps were in essence a longing within me to come back to my own land, Bangladesh. For me, home and homeland acquired a meaning of freedom—freedom from fear, freedom to speak out, a sense of being at home where one can be one's very own self. This selfhood held varied faces and layers of identity and memories. In my imagination, I had created my land of freedom and independence—Bangladesh. I distinctly remember that the nationalist songs that we could hear on radio in a programme broadcasted by Bangladesh Betar, *Probasho Bangali*, made me cry so many times. My generation has all the reasons to be emotional and proud of 1971. We witnessed the birth of a country

out of a genocide.

A genocide is not only about human persecution, torture and miseries, but it has a history behind its making. Institutions, policies and languages are constructed to carry out this crime against humanity. One of the worst genocides in history took place in 1971, where religion was used as a weapon. The state of Pakistan was supposedly created as a homeland for the Muslims, based on the two-nation theory. The Bengalis were considered as “impure”, “lesser Muslims”, or “Hindus”.

In the making of a genocidal discourse, the process of “othering” is critical. The labelling began right after the creation of Pakistan in August 1947. In March 1948, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Father of Pakistan, declared in the premises of Dhaka University that Urdu and only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan. The Central Minister for Education in Pakistan equated Bengali alphabets with Hindu gods and goddesses and suggested that Bangla be written in Arabic script; Bangla script written in Devanagari script was equated with Hinduism. The playing of Rabindra Sangeet was banned. The Bengalis took these as direct assaults on their culture, and the seeds of Bengali nationalism were sown through the Language Movement. Political and economic deprivations and exploitations of the Bengalis in East Pakistan by the Pakistani ruling elite constituted an integral part of this process. It was a politics of othering, alienation and exclusion in the name of nation building.

Interestingly, despite the nationalist movements waged by most of the post-colonial states for liberation and independence, they failed to liberate themselves from the western understanding of nation and nationalism. Consequently, ethnic and sectarian conflicts emerged as ethnic boundaries did not necessarily match the political boundaries, but the quest was to carve out a “nation” out of a people. India has witnessed ethnic and sectarian conflicts in North-east India and Punjab, and Kashmir remains an ongoing conflict. Sri Lanka faced a bloody civil war between its Sinhala and Tamil population. In neighbouring Myanmar, the genocide committed by the Myanmar state has led to the exodus of 1.1 million Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh. This politics is garbed in the name of nation, nationalism and indeed, national security.

Bangladesh, which can boast of a homogenous population of 98 percent constituting of ethnic Bengalis, has had its share of ethnic conflict. The Hill people of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) failed to identify themselves with either Bengali or Bangladeshi models of nationhood that the country has experimented with. The consequence was over two and a half decades of insurgency in the CHT that ended with the signing of the CHT Accord on December 2, 1997. However, the accord has not been fully implemented, largely due to built-in limitations within the accord and lack of political will of the state. Peace remains an unfulfilled dream in the region. The removal of secularism as one of the state principles in 1977 and the later adoption of Islam as the state religion in 1988 has turned people of religions other than Islam into religious minorities. Bangladesh today has ethnic minorities and religious minorities. Although in 2010 secularism was reinstated in the Constitution, Islam remains the state religion.

The majority minority dichotomy, although unfortunate, is not surprising. It is inextricably linked to majoritarian democracy, which is practiced in Bangladesh. It results in political parties leaning towards the majority for electoral politics at the cost of democracy, democratisation, governance and institutionalisation of institutions. Major political parties have adopted uni-versions of nationalism and nation. Yet people have multiple identities, which cuts across religious, ethnic, linguistic, gender and economic lines. With the surge of technology, identities may be formed along digital lines in future.

Points to ponder are, if our politics and politicians are listening to the many voices that were and are there; are they listening to the aspirations of the future? Even a look at our culture and history tells us a different story. Rabindranath Tagore's *Amar Shonar Bangla*, *Ami Tomae Bhalobashi*, (my golden Bengal, I love you), which was adopted as our national anthem, had provided solace and inspiration to the people of this land in 1971 and continues to inspire us through all adversities. Tagore celebrated the diversity of human races for social harmony. He was a strong critique of “nation” and nationalism—according to him, nation and nationalism robs the people of its plurality and organises them mechanically; he looked at Indian history as one of social life and attainment of spiritual ideals.

Nazrul, the “national” poet of Bangladesh, sang songs of equality,



“This country does not belong to Hindus, nor does it belong to Muslims. This country is for those who will consider it to be their own. This country belongs to those whose hearts will fill with joy at its achievements. This country is for those who will shed tears for its sorrows. This country belongs to those who have given everything for its independence, and will do the same in future.”

BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN
during a public speech in 1972.

harmony and unity. He wrote in his *Sammobadi*—*Gahi Shammer gaan, jekhane ashia ek hoye geche shob badha baebodhan, jekhane misheche Hindu-Buddho-Muslim-Christian... ei hridayer cheye boro kono mondir-Kabah nai* (sing the song of equality, where all the obstacles and differences have merged, where Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian have come together... there is no greater temple or Kabah than this heart).

Our famous nationalist song by Gauri Prasanna Mazumder describes the beauty of this land through different gazes—*Bishwo Kobir Sonar Bangla, Nazruler Bangladesh, Jibanader Ruposhi Bangla, Ruper je tar nei ko shesh, Bangladesh* (Bishwo poet's [Tagore] golden Bengal, Nazrul's Bangladesh, Jibananda's beautiful Bengal; there is no end to the beauty of Bangladesh).

The song speaks of the multiversity of gazes and languages through which a land and its people may be seen and described; or more importantly, how the people want to be seen and be described. Let Bangladesh discover its glory in its heritage, its pride in the multiversity of its cultures and people. Let the posterity fly high and touch the multiplexes of nationalism that transcends the western understanding of nation with its many exclusions and move towards an inclusiveness that captures the imagination of the lived lives of its people; so that 50 years from now and at the 100 years of Bangladesh, someone will look back and reflect on the proud journey of Bangladesh as a land of multiplex.

Dr Amena Mohsin is Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED



Democracy: The journey that has taken a wrong turn

ALI RIAZ

If one must identify the fundamental premise of the founding of independent Bangladesh, it is democracy—we can claim that democracy was the *raison d'être* for establishing the country. The proclamation of independence, which promised equality, human dignity and social justice, was written amid a genocide and heroic resistance against the murderous Pakistani Army, but its significance for the future was not lost on its framers. The document says this is a product of “mutual consultation” among people who have been given “a mandate”. Those who penned and pronounced it clearly laid out the source of their legitimacy—will of the people expressed through the democratic process. The document reads—“We the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh, as honour bound by the mandate given to us by the people of Bangladesh whose will is supreme, duly constituted ourselves into a Constituent Assembly”. The background of this document and events that led to the war require no elaboration, because the history is being told every day. A particular narrative has become part and parcel of the official discourse. But what needs to be reminded is the text itself on two counts, what was promised and what was the source of the courage and conviction of the founders of the country. The latter is more pertinent today as the nation celebrates the 49th anniversary of the victory of the war of independence while the very fundamental premise of this declaration has been hollowed out. The mandate that the document refers to was earned through the election of 1970, an inclusive process which was elusive

until then in Pakistan. The promise of the inclusivity laid out in this document was codified in the Constitution as democracy, as one of the state principles.

But unfortunately, in the past decade, not only has the country moved further away from the principle of democracy, but the trajectory is also quite alarming. The gradual erosion of the quality of democracy has turned into backsliding over time, leading to the establishment of a hybrid regime. The pathway was paved over a long time and in an incremental manner.

In the first two decades after independence, democratic practices were trampled by political and military leaders, as the country experienced one-party state and military rule. However, the 1990s offered hope that the country has begun to move in the right direction. After the downfall of an autocratic ruler, there was a high degree of optimism. Citizens expected that a new era would usher in. Some of the essential features of electoral democracy—a competitive, multiparty political system, universal suffrage, regularly contested free and fair elections and significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning—became the defining features of the Bangladeshi polity.

The electoral democracy was deficient in many ways. The independence of the judiciary and respect for civil rights were the most palpable although all political parties repeatedly expressed their firm commitment to these. Two major parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), conveniently forgot their pledge to the people when they assumed power, but it was expected that the country will gradually build the institutions which consolidate democracy. A culture of forbearance will emerge, and democratic norms will be adhered to. Instead, the nation witnessed the erosion of democracy as power became concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister—through constitutional and extra-constitutional measures; although the parliamentary system was restored after 16 years, parliament became a dysfunctional institution; and partyarchy—that is partisan control of all institutions of governance from administration to law enforcement to judiciary, became the practice. Politicisation of existing state institutions permeated society and civil society organisations.

By the middle of the decade, political parties were hardly vocal about their commitment to civil liberties and independent judiciary as their ideals. Instead, rhetorical acceptance of the principles of democracy with limited space for the opposition and media became the defining features. The institutions which would have allowed democracy to thrive were deliberately stunted while power of the individuals grew. These are markers of semi-authoritarianism. Questioning the legitimacy and patriotism of the opponents and allowing the attempts to physically annihilate the rival created an environment where all competitions were viewed as existential struggles.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

The pernicious polarisation based on exaggerated notions of differences and contrived schisms betrayed democracy. Irony lies here that such divisions were created in the name of nation and democracy.

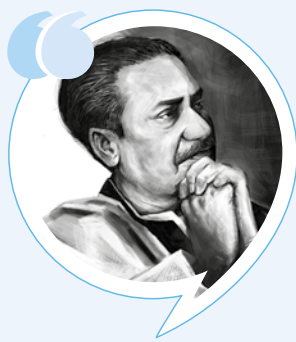
The facade of democracy continued until its inherent flaws gave way to the events of 2007-08. The promissory coup, a term coined by eminent political scientist Nancy Bermeo to describe military intervention claiming to restore democracy, didn't succeed in achieving its pronounced objectives. One can provide a long list of factors which shortened the life of the military-backed government, but at the heart of it was the lack of a mandate to govern, let alone lead the nation. Post-2008 could have been different had the ruling Awami League adopted a vision to democratise instead of trying to ensure a system which will allow them to remain in power in perpetuity. The hybrid system of governance, that is an alloy of democratic and authoritarian traits, was in the making well before the 2007 soft coup, but the pace of it accelerated after 2010, when the caretaker system was scrapped unceremoniously. The ruling AL increasingly became dependent on the coercive apparatuses and the partisan state institutions. As it happens with any hybrid regime, election became a mere ritual to gain juridico-legal power; the question of inclusivity and

democracy, gaining a mandate through a transparent process, became the obvious casualty. The engineered elections held in 2014 and 2018 are the most obvious examples of abandonment of the most fundamental element of democracy. Election by itself is not democracy, but there is no path to democracy without free and inclusive elections to acquire a mandate to govern.

The question then is, what structural issues have pushed Bangladesh towards a hybrid regime instead of liberal democracy or continuing a fragile democratic system? Deficiencies such as the absence of respect for civil and political rights notwithstanding, four structural weaknesses contributed to the backsliding. These are the absence of a balance of power, a lack of an accountability mechanism, a lack of consensus on the regime transition process, and an independent judiciary.

When the country reinstated the parliamentary system in 1991, it packed the power of presidency and the prime minister together in the office of the Prime Minister; thus the office became all-powerful with little oversight and almost non-existent accountability. This was the source of the rise of a *de facto* Prime Ministerial system. Coupled with the constitutional provision which preclude the Members of the Parliament to vote

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7



“I would like to say categorically and unequivocally that, our country will be a democratic, secular and socialist country. In this country, the labourers, peasants, Hindus, and Muslims all will be living in peace and harmony.”

BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN

at the first public address at Suhrawardy Uddan upon returning to independent Bangladesh on January 10, 1972.



From 'socialism' to disaster capitalism

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

We may pinpoint some of the steps/incidences under the reform/development processes that we witnessed in the last four decades as:

(1) Big public enterprises were dismantled; large mills were replaced by export processing zones, shopping malls and real estate; (latest events in this series are the closure of remaining jute mills and closing operations of six sugar mills). (2) Export oriented garments factories became the mainstay of manufacturing. (3) Permanent industrial jobs were replaced by a temporary, part-time outsourced insecure work system. (4) Migration from agriculture to non-agriculture, from rural areas and to semi-urban or urban areas, from country to overseas increased. Desperate attempts by many unemployed youth to find jobs overseas created human trafficking. Remittances sent by migrant workers appeared as the lifeline of the economy. (5) Energy resources and power were systematically privatised. Electricity became a costly commodity, and costs for the productive sector have increased. (6) Land grabbing, occupying public spaces by private business, and deforestation have created environmental disasters and uprooted many. (7) Privatisation of public goods/services and common property gained momentum. (8) A number of environmentally dangerous projects such as the Rampal-Matarbari-Bashkhali-Payra coal-fired power plants and the Rooppur nuclear power plant are being implemented without considering long run impacts for people and nature.

In this one-eyed development model, people's ownership over common properties is practically denied, lack of worker's rights is severe, environmental blindness and structure oriented approaches remain dominant in development projects, manufacturing myth to rationalise harmful foreign "aid"-ed and/or investment projects is part of development advertisements, institutions are made crippled to serve ruling groups, and lack of accountability and transparency become permanent features



ILLUSTRATION: JINNATUN JANNAT

of the system. That is why construction costs of roads, bridges and other projects in Bangladesh are the highest in the world. The whole model takes the shape of disaster capitalism.

During this period, the economy showed consistent growth in national income, significant rise in exports of garments and remittance income, expansion of microcredit and NGO network, and increasing urbanisation and rural-urban-overseas migration. It is evident that NGO credit operations helped non-farm activities to grow in the rural areas, like small trade, small money lending, small scale handicrafts and rickshaw-vans. But many studies revealed the limits of microfinance as a tool of poverty reduction. This has rather shown the face of "neoliberalism for the poor".

So, despite high growth, Bangladesh

remains a country featuring a significant level of poverty, rising inequality and vulnerability. With the primitive nature of capital accumulation and rise of the new super rich class, violence and grabbing of common properties have risen with GDP growth. Increase of the super rich in the country has occurred at one of the highest rates in the world. This is the obvious outcome of a disaster capitalist process.

Therefore, it is not surprising when we see growing resources but increasing deprivation, dazzling cities with increasing slums, construction booms with the worst level of pollution, high rise buildings with poor safety records, big projects to destroy ecological balances, resource plunder and its outflow with increasing inequality and vulnerability. Conditions of public services, i.e., public healthcare, public education, safe drinking water, public transport

and public security are getting poorer besides increasingly expensive projects of development. State responsibility for providing these services to citizens is not recognised in this model. This is more exposed in times of crisis. Absence of social security, full rationing of food and weakened public healthcare systems have left millions of people in new poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This journey to go against constitutional commitments and the spirit of the Liberation War could not be possible only by state forces, since it needs social support and ideological hegemony. Behind this, the role of the intelligentsia and opinion makers have been very crucial. This section usually comes from the middle class. The expansion of the middle class has been an important phenomenon in the last few decades. Affluence among a section of this middle class has mostly been an outcome of privatisation of social services, foreign aided projects and expansion of the service sector, in addition to increased opportunities of corruption. Options before the middle class to keep its status, and to climb the ladder to graduate to a higher income group are linked with the dominant mode of accumulation. Beneficiaries of privatisation of education and healthcare belong to a section of teachers and physicians. Career plans of the youth rely mostly on the commercialised service sector or other corporate capital. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the middle class, in general, becomes friendlier to grabbers, corrupt persons and rent-seekers, and neoliberal functionings of the state.

The shift from the promise of a society free from exploitation, discrimination and autocracy, a system of freedom, equality and justice, to a system that can be called lumpen or disaster capitalism, along with repression and discrimination, contradicts not only the Constitution but betrays the sacrifices of millions of people. That was not the dream of the people who fought for freedom and independence in 1971.

Anu Muhammad is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University. Email: anu@juniv.edu

Democracy: The journey that has taken a wrong turn

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

against their own party and the PM also holding the party chief position, the rise of constitutional authoritarianism was only a matter of time. The executive branch had amassed power and used the legislature as merely the rubber stamp. The temptation to rig the election to ensure a super majority lies here. For a viable and functioning democracy there are three kinds of accountability—vertical, horizontal, and societal. Vertical accountability is the election system, while horizontal accountability of the government comes from a network of relatively autonomous powers, which are often the constitutionally mandated organisations such as the anti-corruption bodies; societal accountability is to the citizens' associations. While elections were held regularly, none of the other accountability mechanisms were present.

The civil society organisations were either politicised or vilified as the enemy, thus gradually losing their ability to hold the political elites and the government institutions accountable. An effective regime transition process requires trust among the stakeholders—the citizens, the political parties, the electoral commission, and the civil service. But the fraudulent elections held until 1990 had created a deep distrust about the electoral commission and the incumbent government. The acrimony between political parties after 1990 accentuated the distrust.

The unique solution to this was the introduction of the Caretaker Government (CTG) system in 1996 and holding elections under its supervision. This also offered an acceptable mechanism of vertical accountability. But the annulment of the CTG system, in a single stroke, removed the two things—

the only system of accountability and a peaceful system of power transition. This was a serious blow to the fragile democracy and pushed governance in a complete reversal. The independence of judiciary is the *sine a qua non* for the rule of law, protecting the citizens from the excesses of the executives. Also, it would serve as a check on other co-equal branches of the state—legislature and the executive. Without these the democratisation process failed to achieve success, instead the country moved from electoral democracy to a hybrid regime, which belies the essence of the proclamation of independence.

Ali Riaz is a Distinguished Professor of political science at the Illinois State University, a nonresident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council and the President of the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS).



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED



Bangladesh War of Independence

Celebrating Glorious Payback to the Nation

FAUJDARHAT CADET COLLEGE (FCC)



On 16th December 1971, people chanted, raised the flag, families embraced in celebrations, filled the streets like never before throughout Bangladesh. But this victory came at an enormous cost. "Responding to the Call of Independence" by our **Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**, through rain, hail, cold, mud, bullets and mortar, Old Faujian (FCC Alumni) Freedom Fighters along with all those who fought for the nation pushed all odds and obstacles towards victory. Some of them did not even care to embrace martyrdom for their beloved motherland. It was too costly but a great victory. Old Faujian patriots embodied the timeless virtues of our nation, honor and courage, strength and valor, love and loyalty, grace and glory. It is our duty to preserve the Independence that they presented us almost half a century ago. Everyday we renew our sacred obligations to memorize the fallen heroes on the soil where they rest for eternity.

“They signed away their tomorrow for our today”

“



- 01 Maj M. A Khaleque (B 01) 02 Capt AKM Nurul Absar (B 02) 03 Mosharrar Hossain (B 03)
04 Lt Anwar Hossain Bir Uttam (B 07) 05 Badiul Alam Bir Bikram (B 07) 06 Capt Shamsul Huda (B 07)
07 Mufti M Kashed (B 08) 08 2nd Lt Rafique A Sarkar (B 10)

Vision, Planning and Sponsored by:
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GALLANTRY AWARDS

Bir Uttam

Lt Anwar Hossain Martyred

Bir Bikram

Badiul Alam Martyred

Lt Gen (R) Abu Saleh Mohammad Nasim (B 05)

Kamrul Haq Swapan (B 07)

Maj Gen (R) Inamuzzaman Chy (B 10)

Bir Pratik

Col (R) Abu Taher Salauddin (B 04)

Maj Rawshan Yazdani (B 06)**

Maj Gen (R) Syeed Ahmed (B 08)

Maj Gen (R) Syed Mohammad Ibrahim (B 09)

Lt Col (R) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir (B 10)

Capt (R) Humayun Kabir (B 10)

VALIANT FREEDOM FIGHTERS

Wing Commander (R) Waliullah (B 01)

Abdur Rab (B 02)

Prof. M. Mujibur Rahman (B 04)

Maj Gen Ashraf Hossain (B 06)**

Lt Col (R) Md. Ghulam Zakaria (B 07)

QM Ali Anwar (B 08)

Flt Lt SM Iqbal Rashid (B 08)

Syed Abdur Rashed (B 09)

Lt Col (R) AM Mukhlesur Rahman (B 09)

Prof. Kaiser Hamidul Haq (B 10)

Prof. Azadul Islam (B 10)

Maj (R) Hashmi Mustafa Kamal (B 10)

Ishraq Ahmed (B 10)

AFMA Harris (B 11)

Prof. Shahriar Huda (B 11)

Maj (R) Syed Munibur Rahman (B 11)

Maj (R) Syed Mizanur Rahman (B 11)

Maj (R) Didar Atwar Hossain (B 11)

Abdur Rahim (B 12)

Capt (R) Ahsan Aziz Shelley (B 12)

Ibrahim Adel Khan (B 12)

Saifullah (B 12)

Belal Uddin (B 13)

Anis Quadri (B 13)

Captain (MM) Nazrul Kamal (B 13)

Shawkat Amin (B 13)

Prof. Syed Jamil Ahmed (B 14)

Captain (MM) Abdur Rahim (B 14)

Lt Gen (R) Mollah Fazle Akbar (B 15)

Col (R) Mahmudur Rahman Chy (B 15)

K R Masud (B 18)

Kazi Rakib Uddin Ahmed (B 02) Former Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh. He served as Zonal Administrative Officer Mujibnagar Government in exile.

B - Batch **Deceased