

HARTALOTICS: Consensus on Intolerance and Conflict?

by Imtiaz Ahmed

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ONCE again, Bangladesh politics seems to have renewed its pledge with much of its history. BNP has called a hartal on the 18th. And politics of conflict is definitely on the rise. Contrary to the general (South Asian) wisdom, nothing seems to change, in Bangladesh politics. We have been sucked into an era of political standoff. If not political standstill! Indeed, so sensitive and polarized is the situation that intellectuals, scholars, politicians, the public, have all become intolerant and disrespectful to opposing views and dissenters. The entire political discourse is pervaded by an attitude that is best described in the form, 'Let me be the 'King' and I will set it right!' But self-righteousness has always been a vocation of the weaklings. It cannot be an exception when it comes to politicians and political pundits of Bangladesh.

The debate for rectifying the situation has also been strong and loud. Much of it, however, has been restricted to either finding 'good people,' both within the so-called partisan and non-partisan sections of the state, or bringing about reforms within the existing political system. The idea has been that if certain things are 'added' to the political system and if 'good people' were brought into the political process, the face of Bangladesh politics would change. Little attention is given to the fact that the political system and political process reproducing Bangladesh politics are interrelated — dialectically, historically, as well as politically.

In this context, I have two submissions to make. First, the political system and political process that we have in Bangladesh are structured to reproduce intolerance and conflict. And secondly, changes in one will not ipso facto bring change in another. Put differently, both the political system and political process require a thorough restructuring before political stability and a long-lasting democratic practice could be contemplated in Bangladesh. Let us have a closer look.

The Construction of Hartalotics

What we have in Bangladesh is not 'politics' but hartalotics! If the former, following Gramsci, stands for 'conscious action in pursuit of a common social goal,' the latter (I would argue) is mostly self-seeking but irrational venture marked by intolerance and (violent) conflict. The self-seeking part is not that troublesome, in fact, there are many vocations (money-lending, for instance) whose principal task is to 'serve thyself!' The troubling part is the irrational side of the venture and the accompanying intolerance and conflict.

Few will dispute the fact that no government or regime in Bangladesh came into being without the use of coercive force. This is as true for military regimes as for civilian (democratic) regimes, although the organization of coercive force in each case was of qualitatively different nature. Military regimes used guns and tanks to seize governmental power, while the predominantly civilian (democratic) regimes came to wrest power, electorally, of course, following protracted strikes, hartals, car-smashing and the rest. Incidentally, the coercive part is true not only with respect to the transition of the civilian to the military regime or from the military to the civilian regime but also, and more importantly, from the civilian to yet another civilian regime. Such use of violent means, of one kind or another, for regime formation does indicate that there is something unique in the organization and reproduction of Bangladesh politics.

One such, particularly the civilian's use of coercive force, got translated (no doubt, with a great amount of pride) into people's struggle against anti-people activities. But so long 'people' were of two types, either socially or politically, there was no problem with the notion of 'people's struggle.' Examples of the latter ranged from the pre-independence struggle against the British and the post-independence struggle against the military. The former stood for the colonialist-colonized dichotomy, while the latter depicted the military-civilian dichotomy. So nobly have these struggles been discussed and routinely illustrated elsewhere that they hardly require special treatment here. What is far more problematic is the identification of 'people' when the 'struggle' is between and amongst civilians and that against all classes. 'People's struggle,' in such instances, translates down to being merely partisan struggle. But that is not all.

There is something mesmerizing in the word 'struggle' or (the Bengali equivalent) *laurai*. Almost like chanting mantras, we regularly hear the slogan: *laurai, laurai, laurai chat, laurai kore bachite chail* And all political parties utter this slogan, or its variation, whenever an opportunity is provided to them. What has struck me most is a recent banner, posted by a governmental agency in one of the over-bridges in the Dhaka city, saying: *juborai lorbe, sonar Bangla gorbe!* Mark the word, *lorbe!* I understand that *laurai* is used here in a different sense. But then, how differently can it stand from the *laurai* in the streets?

Slogans are good indicators for recognizing the precise nature of hartalotics. There are many that readily explain the

state and status of the latter. I will, however, limit myself to only a few of them.

**Neta tumi eglye cholo, anra acchhi tomar shathe.* I have always found this slogan bordering on fascism, urging the cadres to follow the leader (hero or heroine, whichever may be the case) under all circumstances.

**Jalao, Jalao agun Jalao,* or its variation, *amader dabi na marie, jolbe agun shara deshe.* Apart from the violence it endorses, little thought is given to the fact that 'fire' knows no face. The burning of the whole country could, indeed, defeat the very purpose of the struggle!

**Ekti guli cholley, patta guli cholbey,* or its consequence, *diyechhito rokto, aro debo rokto.* Both these slogans indicate the centrality of terror and killing in our politics. This could also be referred to as the politicization of terrorism or its inverse, the terrorization of politics. Both, however, would indicate the special position of *mastans*, *godfathers*, and the like, in the organization and reproduction of political life in Bangladesh.

One possibly could go on forever with these slogans, but the above few, I believe, ought to be sufficient in depicting the precise characteristics of hartalotics. In fact, there are four critical elements making up hartalotics, each of them holding a central element of its own:

Leader-centric: I believe Vivekananda once pointed out that there is a tendency amongst South Asians to 'worship' heroes and heroines. One could see a semblance of it (of course, not in its entirety) in political leaders' place and position amongst their respective political cadres and supporters. Interestingly, this has been routinely reproduced for no other reason than the very lack of democratic process within parties and organizations. I will have more to say about this later.

Mastan-centric: This is almost an outcome of the first element. In the absence of a democratic process within the party or the organization, the leader (if he or she is not already one) must fall back to mastans to gear up and ensure his/her support. Often mastans themselves would cleverly back a person and wait for return favours later. In circumstances like this, once the leader is made, it becomes impossible for the latter to ignore the power of the mastans. The leader is otherwise trapped to favour the mastans, keeping the other within one's reach! This is also something that has direct bearing on people's representation, something to which we will return later.

Street-centric: I guess for the functioning of hartalotics this is obvious. One must not miss the point; however, that in a large measure it is also an outcome of the first two elements. The leader-mastan combination plays the best when it comes to streets. What other places are there for practicing demagoguery and mobocracy both at the same time? But streets have also become a central part of Bangladesh politics for reasons of centralized development and the corresponding concentration of population in fewer cities. This is also something to which I will return later.

Political society-centric: This could also be referred to as government-centric, the last but not the least of the four critical elements that make up hartalotics. *Jalao, Jalao agun Jalao* is a good indicator of terror and fascist intentions, it does not indicate, however, as what actually is to be burned. In fact, in almost all cases governmental or public properties are prime targets of such burning and smashing of things. There is a colonial legacy to this, however. Let me explain.

Two critical things emerged from our erucic politics: the colonialism. First, colonialism gave birth to a polarized political milieu on a national scale. This is best reflected in the struggle between the colonial government and colonized subalterns. At a particular moment of history, this took the form of a struggle between the 'colonial' and the 'nationalist' forces. Secondly, in the face of polarization, colonized subalterns could do little or then resort to violence in the campaign to redress wrongs done by the colonial power. And it is indeed in the midst of violence and polarized politics that colonized subalterns finally got rid of the colonial power. But then something else also got transferred.

In the wake of the struggle against colonialism, the area that is commonly referred to as the 'civil society' also got polarized and violent. Put differently, civil society in colonial South Asia, unlike that of the West, could no longer boast of its civilizing and consenting roles. In fact, colonialism reconstructed civil society to such an extent that the latter soon got into the business of organizing and reproducing violence and intolerance in the like of a political society. This reconstruction tainted political parties, voluntary associations, intellectuals, media, schools, and sports clubs, all that civil society represented.

Put in the context of our discussion, hartalotics is devolving a civil society with civilizing and consenting roles. It is no wonder, therefore, that we find President Justice Shahabuddin commenting thus:

Political parties, here as elsewhere, formulate public opinion and mobilize public support for gaining control of the state machinery. But political parties here do not hesitate to adopt any means, fair or foul,

to achieve this objective of power-capturing. They use students, industrial work-force and even religion for political purpose. There is hardly any congenial atmosphere for pursuit of knowledge in the educational institutions from where all moral values and education itself are fast evaporating. Labour wings of political parties are seriously hindering industrial development on which the very survival of this populated country depends.

Non-payment of heavy amounts of bank loans has disrupted the financial and banking system of the country. Law cannot touch the bank-defaulters as many of them are themselves law makers belonging to both the Government and the Opposition in the parliament.

Indeed, with civil society having no consenting or civilizing roles, the power of both

promise, Radio Bangladesh and BTV in the very first day of the new regime change faces, speeches, even music and songs, but, interestingly, to the liking of the new regime only! While supporters of the new regime obviously get excited, they fail to understand that Radio Bangladesh and BTV have been driven not by any democratic will but by the age-old structure of governmentality. Indeed, with yet another regime change, faces, speeches, even music, and songs, will change once again. Put differently, by way of changing things to the liking of the incumbent, the power and policy of the governmental machinery remain unchanged!

Even at a very micro level the situation remains the same. Let me give you an example. We are all familiar with 'regime change' (if I am permitted to use the phrase) in Dhaka Univer-

such a candidate would be politically more effective in view of her or his community-centered access in the majoritarian parliament. This is an interesting development, and it is particularly found amongst the heavily deprived tribal communities. What this practice does is that it effectively reproduces and further solidifies the power of the majority community. The very recognition of the fact that the majoritarian candidate will have greater access in the majoritarian parliament only strengthens the argument that the said parliament is nothing but 'pro-majoritarian!' As such, the fate of the tribal community remains fated as before.

Equally problematic has been the use of the coercive machineries of the state, particularly the police and military, against sub-national unrest.

Hartalotics, Globalization and Non-Governmentality

Counting hartal has now become something of a game. In fact, no one is sure as to the exact number of hartals in recent times. The leader of the opposition recently came out with a figure of the number of hartals observed by the Awami League when it was in the opposition — 173. The opposition leader, however, shied away from mentioning the figure of BNP-observed hartals. I guess if one counts both local and national hartals, the figure for the past one year would be around 40 if not more.

I will not go into the cost of



A Dhaka street scene during hartal.

state and society has come to wrest, symbolically as well as practically, in the political society or government! It is in the context of this centric element that people's representation has become illusive, if not redundant.

Representative Governmental Representation

In the midst of the power of 'supreme' leaders, mastans, street fighters and the coercive machineries of the state, the electors and the elected have both come to share a common destiny. Neither the electors can realize their demands nor those who represent them nor the elected can fulfill the wishes of those who have voted them to power. Representation, other wise, is in serious crisis. Let me explain.

In the light of the population growth and the number of voters in Bangladesh, one Member of Parliament (MP) represents on the average a little over 189,000 voting citizens (1996 figure). Incidentally, adding non-voting citizens (children and minors in particular) would make this figure even higher. Such a representation makes a mockery of democracy for it is impossible for an MP to meet in person and represent those who have voted for him or her to power. Consequently, 'intermediaries' (ranging from mastans, corrupt officials, hired goons, and the like) end up having the real power as both MPs and the people, albeit for different reasons, become dependent on them. Representation must reckon with the fact that it is neither MP nor the people but self-seeking intermediaries who do the representing! Unless a way is found to correct this situation, governments will always suffer from misrepresentation. But this is only a part of the problem of representation.

Representation, for reasons of history and structures, suffers from a precise governmentality. That is, both representatives and the represented share the same 'mentality' — relying on the government or championing the cause of the authority to reproduce things. Largely arising from the colonial legacy, governmentality has not only made ordinary people weak and dependent but also created grounds for the excessive (miss) use of power by governmental machineries. An example or two will make this clear.

Take the instance of Radio Bangladesh and BTV. The officials working there know precisely what is to be aired and televised! While there is always an expectation that with the change of regime, radio and television programmes will also change since newcomers in the government always promised change when they were in the opposition. And somewhat keeping with this

insofar as members of the majoritarian community man such machineries and their 'task' thoroughly governmentalized, members of the minority or sub-national community always look them upon with suspicion. Needless to say, the protracted use of the coercive machineries of the state not only empowers the latter, over and above other institutions, but also de-civilizes conflict resolution.

I have yet another example of governmentality, the most pertinent one from the standpoint of both civil and political life. This refers to the very power of the police. While it's a common knowledge that automobiles must not drive on the wrong side of the road and must have red lights at the back switched on at night, few police vehicles would be found following these rules, by have always asked myself, why this is so? Only recently I got an answer from a former student of mine who is now a police officer: 'We like to govern, but not to be governed!' But then, can one govern without having the experience of being governed?

Governmentalization of the police force is further, and more easily, noticeable in the attitude of the latter towards the

such hartals. In fact, I find them quite 'insulting'. The very fact that the cost is regularly calculated in mere economic terms shows the state of mental bankruptcy towards rectifying the situation. This is because 'economics' has a tendency of putting everything in numbers, which only goes to suggest that like money or capital the (economic) loss from hartals could be recovered in times ahead! Hartals are also not merely political acts, where one political party competes with the other for the support of the general masses. I have already referred to the fact that even as a form of struggles it is now mostly devoid of non-partisan people. What is hartal then?

I think it is high time to understand one thing very clearly: hartal, at the present historical juncture, particularly following the civilization and democratization of politics in 1991, is no longer a political good, it is a social evil. I say this not only because of the arrival of a democratically elected Parliament (no doubt, an important reason for getting rid of hartal for good) but also, and more importantly, because of the suffering of the masses — socially, physically and, above all, mentally. Truck drivers, woodcutters, road-builders, and many like them having sleepless nights for not knowing whether they would be able to earn enough to feed themselves and their children on the day of hartal; I found a youngster, age seven at the most, not knowing how to cope with the reopening of his school; I know of a doctor who lost faith in people after failing to help a non-partisan school-boy struck by a tear-gas shell; I found mothers searching wildly milk and other necessary items for their children on the night before hartal; I know of a brilliant student who could not take any longer the uncertainty brought about by hartals to his life and therefore decided to migrate to a developed country. Accounts like these are endless, all pointing to the fact that hartal are more than calculations of politics or economics. As a cause of people's suffering — social, physical, and mental — hartal today is nothing less than a morally reprehensible activity.

The last account is a critical reminder of the fact that hartal's organization, and development, extends beyond the territorial limits of the country. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a noted diasporic scholar, saw a direct link between the state of politics in developing nations and the reproduction of diaspora in the West: I do not think it is incorrect to say that much of the new diaspora (in the West) is determined by the increasing failure of a civil society in developing nations (emphasis mine).

While one may debate as to whether the 'failure of a civil society in developing nations'

is the cause of 'diaspora' in the West, it is a fact that many Bangladeshis decide to migrate because of the state of uncertainty prevailing in the country. In fact, so open has this issue of international migration become that recently one Immigration Consulting Firm had put an ad in a daily newspaper with the following statement: 'Two reasons why our decision to migrate to Canada is right: 1. Better income from same effort. Better medical facilities. 2. Better education for your children.'

I found two things very amusing in this ad. One is the frequent use of the word 'better', and the second one, the subject of children's 'education.' Although the ad does not play fool with hartalotics by calling it a good reason for migration, there is enough in the words 'better' and 'education' to suggest that the thought of hartalotics was far away from the promoters of the said ad. I must hasten to say, however, that developed countries' practice of 'legal migration' is in a way a safety valve, less people suffering from uncertainty in developing countries all decide to migrate, and that by all means, fair or foul.

There is good reason for donors, therefore, to become somewhat restive with the state of hartalotics in Bangladesh. Put differently, donors would very much want 'development' to succeed in Bangladesh, particularly the kind that would ensure the residence of the population within the territorial boundaries of the state! Of course, getting proper and timely returns for their investments are no less a priority. Hartalotics, for that matter, is no less a concern for the donors as it is for the recipient.

But if hartalotics has paralyzed the government, particularly its developmental sector, the same is hardly the case with the non-governmental developmental sector. Indeed, for reasons of sheer effort (which includes making for the lost hartal-time), a better salary and, above all, ingenuity of certain individuals, non-governmental organizations have fared much better in developmental activities. In fact, their success has been so astounding that now often one hears of non-governmentality as the key to Bangladesh development.

Conclusion: What is to be Done?

How does then one go about transforming the state of hartalotics in Bangladesh? There is, of course, no easy answer to this. One meaningful approach would be to seek solutions in all the areas mentioned above. I will, however, limit myself to four broad tasks with one or two sub-tasks between them.

Democratizing Political Party: There must be proper elections, from lower to upper bodies, in each and every political party. And now that we have a very effective and proven 'model' before us, let these party-elections be conducted by 'neutral persons' who are not members of the party. Taking cue from the recently established Indian practice let the Election Commissioner make such elections binding not only for renewing registration but also for participating in local and national elections of the country.

Moreover, let there be binding rules for all political parties regarding the number of years a card member can hold post within his/her party. In fact, the leadership must not be allowed to remain in office more than two (four years) terms. This would not only ensure a steady growth of leaders in the party but would also keep the party from being monopolized by some self-seeking individuals. At the same time, rules ought to be enacted which would bar MPs, once they are elected, from holding office within the party. This would, in fact, allow MPs to work for the nation and not be chained to partisan activities.

Decentralizing the Parliament: Parliament needs to be decentralized. I have already mentioned problems with representation. Moreover, 330 MPs deciding the fate of more than 120 million people not only seems obnoxious but also makes them vulnerable to corruption, as accountability of the MPs becomes less transparent. The way out is to have several parliaments, with at least one at the divisional level. There may be a common structure (i.e., a federal parliament), but it will have lesser power compared to the parliaments in question. There is no doubt that such parliaments, apart from making MPs more transparent and thereby more accountable, would mellow down the cause of regional, local and ethnic dissenters.

In order to begin this task, however, let the one-chamber Parliament be first made into two — Upper and Lower Houses. If other South Asian countries can have two Houses, I see no reason why Bangladesh would be legislated by just one. The present parliament could easily be made into a Lower House, as for the Upper House, the best would be to follow the 'model' of the interim government. 'Neutral persons' would then have a more lasting role and also a little longer than three months!

Democratizing governmental power: This essentially refers to the task of empowering civil society. To cite one example, the government alone has delegated to itself the

task of seeking a resolution of the sub-national conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. As a result, the task has become limited in the activities between the government and the conflicting party, or more precisely, the PCJSS. But the 'government' is not the whole state nor does it include the civil society, whereas the 'problem' definitely involves the whole state, including the civil society. Unless the latter is empowered and made to participate actively and freely, seeking a resolution of the conflict would not only be difficult but also meaningless. This is true for other areas where the government is the only party vested with the power to resolve problems.

I will cite another area, albeit a qualitatively different one, where de-governmentalization is a pressing task. I am referring to the excessive governmentalization of Dhaka City. Let me explain.

Article 5, para 1 of Bangladesh Constitution states very clearly that 'The capital of the Republic is Dhaka.' This is followed by a second paragraph which states that 'The boundaries of the capital shall be determined by law.' Apart from legalizing the privileged position of the City of Dhaka, the article suggests that it has the power of determining its boundaries if it chooses to do so. Alas, such power is wanting in villages, where the majority of the exploited Bangladeshis live! Such power of the Capital City, sanctioned none other than by the Constitution, makes it obvious the kind of policies and practices that is bound to follow. Indeed, the internal and external relations pursued by Bangladesh suffer from a precise Dhaka-centric management of things. Put differently, centralized development has served Dhaka and so has Dhaka served and reproduced centralized development. Frankly speaking, the concentration of population in the City of Dhaka is the net outcome of this convenient relationship.

It is not surprising, therefore, that hartalotics is most effective in the City of Dhaka. As the seat of the government, it has become the envy of the non-governmentalized millions. Political parties, mastans, troublemakers, and the like, therefore, face no problem in getting fresh recruits for destabilizing the city. I do not see an easy way out of this, particularly now that it is on the way of becoming a mega-city. But if hartals are to be stopped in Dhaka, de-governmentalizing, and correspondingly, decentralizing its power is a must. One important way to start the process would be to convene the Parliament at a place outside Dhaka at least once a year.

Democratizing the Senses: The task here is to organize and reproduce a culture more receptive to tolerance and non-violence. This is particularly urgent in view of the fact that both political and civil societies, as discussed earlier, have become thoroughly polarized and violent. One vital area is education.

In our eagerness to project the past and in keeping with the reality of being oppressed by undemocratic regimes, we have created an education that hardly reflects democratic norms: tolerance, non-violence, and the like. Ironically, the very practices of dominating and dominating and dominated souls. For reproducing democracy, or more precisely, democratic minds, what we need is a democratic education (with spirits of tolerance and non-violence ingrained in it) and an education which champions democracy. This is, of course, no simple task. A beginning could be made by making our education relevant, that is, true to its place and people. In the field of domestic science, for example, a beginning could be made by restructuring the current (Westernized) curriculum of politics and having it replaced with hartalotics. On a more humorous note, may be, what we need now is a Department of Hartalotics!

The last task relates to audio and visual media. Radio and TV have a vital role to play in reproducing democratic culture, particularly in Bangladesh where over 65 per cent of the people cannot read and write. There is already now a demand that Bangladesh Radio and BTV be made independent. In this connection, I must stress that I see the demand as a non-starter. In fact, I would go all the way in saying that let the government and the parties in power use the existing radio and TV stations as they please. I have no problem with that. What are required instead are a straight-forward and an honest demand for more and more private radio and TV stations, equipped with the freedom to display creativity! And let this creativity be harnessed not just by political parties and corporations but by cultural and literary bodies, colleges, universities, NGOs, even religious and linguistic minorities. Let each of them have their own radio (and where possible) TV stations, so that they could project their views, their visions, their music, their very self-being in the making. The bottom line here is that let democracy prevail not only in what we read but also in what we hear and see!

I have no hesitation to say that anything less than this would continue to reproduce hartals and the dismal state of hartalotics.

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