

YEP TALK



We approached the young professionals with three questions:

- What is your perception of Democracy?
- What you will do if you were the head of the government?
- What are your views regarding politics in the country?

1. It is fortunate (at least for myself) that YEP Talk posed the question "perception of democracy" as opposed to "what is democracy" because even though both are difficult and complicated the latter is far more so. That notwithstanding, in my perception the existing democracy of our nation is centered to a large extent on the actions of our politicians and thus I have limited my observations at this regard.

1. Democracy is the ability to listen and accept someone else's point of view.

2. Democracy is the ability to admit to one's mistakes.

3. Democracy is the ability to overcome the past.

4. Democracy is the ability to protest in Parliament without walking out.

5. Democracy is the ability to call peaceful strikes without affecting the livelihood of others.

In short, democracy is about responsibilities.

2 I imagine if most of us were responsible heads of government we would have to tackle difficult problems such as decentralisation, administration reform, corruption, poverty alleviation, industrialisation and so forth. Solving these is easier said than done. What is important, however, is the need to provide the nation with a sense of hope. Good leaders do not always have the solutions but they have the ability to motivate others to search for answers. Good leaders also take risks.

3. Unfortunately, politics in Bangladesh seems to have reached a level that does not inspire much confidence in me. If the South Africans can come to reconciliation, if the Palestinians and Israelis can come to agreements (even if they are at present not being followed), then why can't our political parties enter some form, any form of meaningful dialogue?

Safi Rahim Khan is an NGO professional.

Why The Head Turns Upside Down?

Rafi Hossain

WITHIN two weeks of the YEP TALK'S appearance we have started receiving numerous phonecalls, letters and many personal opinions from different categories of people. They are also assuring us of all sorts of supports and assistance from them. Many of them have questioned about the upside down pasting of a head in the letterhead of our page. Was it done by mistake? No. Then why?

One year back when the YEP FORUM members first gathered at the British Council to start their activities — they were criticized the next day in many daily news papers saying the young professionals are criticizing everybody.

Yes, we do criticize when we see the brutal killing of a meritorious youth like Rubel at the hand of the police without any reason, when we see justice has been delayed for Rubel's murder, when we notice the female students of universities suffering from insecurity in their own campuses, when they are

assaulted by the fellow students and teachers as well and yet the leaders keeping astonishingly silent about all these, when we see unplanned extension and expansion of the capital city, the unbearable traffic jam, murders, hijacking, rapes all paralizing our lives everyday but remain unnoticed by the leaders — we can not help criticizing. We have never said that whatever done by us is correct. We bitterly criticize our own doings and we would be doing it always — as we want to learn by our mistakes. We want to go forward.

When the world is moving fast we can not go backward — we won't suffer from any day dreaming.

We believe this dark period will be over soon. We would be able to say that everything is moving forward at its normal pace — a golden period will revive. Why are we so optimistic? Because we had seen twice, once in 1988 and again in 1998 — during the disastrous floods — how people face the calamity with vigour and courage, how optimistic and energetic our people are to start afresh.

We can do it and we will do it. The Bangladeshi people have the potentials to move fast. All we need is a group of lively, energetic and progressive people who do not suffer from any prejudice. A group of people who will bring hope among us — to dream about the future, who will have the drive to implement each plan.

We invite everybody sharing our dreams and faith to work together. All our efforts are heading towards that goal.

We have done a survey among the young professionals recently. It was found that none of them wants obstacles like HARTALS. Each of them wants a working environment where both the govt and opposition party will co-operate each other. Of course the oppositions need to be allowed to do constructive criticism. Everybody wants clean politics for the development of the country and its people.

No more destructive activities — we want reforms to rebuild our motherland.

It is also the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies. For politics has polluted the atmosphere of the country. There is no congenial situation in most of the campuses of universities. Now student politics is controlled by some terrorists who are nothing but the "Cat's paw" of the shrewd politicians. So students should be free from such nasty-rotten politics which can give nothing but blood of their own brothers. But I never support students should not think over politics of the country. In fact, they should remain conscious of politics.

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Practice of Democracy: As we see it & As we want to see
by Syeda Nasrin Akhter

IT is said that democracy starts from home. If we just look into our own homes — we would be surprised rather shocked discovering the sort of democracy we are practising in our own lives. What do we do as a member of our own family? The dad does not bother about others' opinions, the mom who is too concerned about the welfare of her 7 years old daughter — just does not realize that the 8 years old maid, working for them deserves a little more care and attention — to have some time to play — to watch TV, moreover to be sent at least to a local school. The child who is being born and brought up in this kind of atmosphere hardly or never realize that the little fellow of his/her same age can be offered a little friendlier atmosphere — where they would feel at home.

When the children notice their parents taking interest in social work or joining politics only for personal benefits and publicity what exactly they learn from their parents? What would they themselves be able to offer to the society when they grow up? These children do not see any sense of responsibility among their parents and does not feel any sense of duty to

We are being taught a negative kind of politics when we are students. The general belief is that only self-seeking persons would join politics. It is not the field for the bright students. The meritorious ones will only join secured and bright jobs. As the political arena is a chaotic place, the general tendency is to avoid it. Question arises, if the young and meritorious ones always avoid politics — who would shoulder the responsibilities of re-building the nation? We are very familiar with the character of politics here. Young people are to come forward to make politics clean. Let the old parliamentarians be busy in floor crossing and shouting at each other. We only want young and ideal politicians to come forward with revolutionary ideas to lead the nation. We would certainly not remain only critic of the society.

We know that the overall situation can only be called frustrating. Shouldn't we look for a person who would take lead to start afresh?

Who Will Lead the Country?



Democracy & the political status of Women

Advocate Tureen Afroz

THE word 'Democracy' is the most emotionally provocative in a century of democracy. The 20th century that we are living in has marched a long way to the present time. It has become the most inspiring rallying flag. Today political systems that differ widely are almost always described as democratic and the word is used in a bewildering variety of contexts.

On one hand, it is treated as a 'form of government', on the other, as 'a way of life'. Originally being a political principle, the notion of 'Democracy' has been steadily increased to include social, economic and ethical ideas as well. Thus we have 'Liberal Democracy', 'Social Democracy' and 'Totalitarian Democracy'; the word is also used in non-political contexts, as when people speak of 'Industrial Democracy'. The confusion has further increased with the concept of 'Controlled Democracy' in Pakistan or 'Guided Democracy' in Indonesia.

However, with the development of the concept of democracy emerged the notion of 'democratic states'. The Glorious Revolution of England (1688), the French Revolution (1689), the American Revolution and the discourses of the great philosophers-writers all contributed to the growth of democracy. The main principles of democracy that emerged were those of equality, popular sovereignty, liberty and fraternity.

The countries of Europe took four centuries to establish first a strong State, then internal security and law and order, then a sense of nationalism and finally democracy. But in Asia today, as Gunnar Myrdal (Asian Drama, Vol. II) points out, these four political revolutions are telescoped into one and people hope to consummate them in their own life time.

Democracy recognizes the worth of a human being. It rejects the right of one or few to rule over others. Dewey said, "The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacity of human nature, faith in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and co-operative existence. Accordingly, people develop a sense of confidence."

Austin Ranney and Wilmore Kendall in 'Basic Principles for a Model of Democracy' (Empirical Democratic Theory, pp. 41-63) have said that the minimum characteristics of a democracy are (1) Popular Sovereignty, (2) Political Equality and (3) Popular Consultation and Majority Rule. Similarly, E. E. Schattschneider (The Semi-sovereign People, pp. 141-142) identifies that the essential element of the democratic process is 'Socialization of the conflict' that is in some way involving the widest numbers of people in the decision.

However, like the door to a storehouse, the door to political participation in the decision making is frequently locked for women. Women represent half of the world population, yet they

have been treated as if they were a minority. Throughout the history of mankind, women have suffered from discrimination simply because they were women. Their struggle for equal rights and ensuring full political equality, in the real sense is still going on.

In 1776, the U. S. Declaration of Independence proclaimed all men to be equal; neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights recognized women as free and equal citizens. The women had to fight for securing the right to vote as the Fifteenth Amendment granted black men only but not women, black or white — the right to vote. It was not before 1917 that the American women acquired the right to vote by the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the nineteenth century electoral reforms failed to tackle one great question, the enfranchisement of women. Female suffrage was largely settled by the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which allowed women over 30 to vote. Later on, the Representation of the People Act of 1928 had given votes to women of 21.

Article 11 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states:

"The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be granted and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured."

While ascertaining the political status of women in Bangladesh where the democracy is still in its infancy one realizes women's place is of only relative importance. Her function ultimately turns out to be to make possible, by the bearing of sons, the unbroken carrying on of the sacred family tradition. There still exists a cynical disbelief in the power of a woman to guard her own purity. She must have external guards and recognized guardians, be it father, brother, husband or son. She is given no chance to develop self-independence. What is a girl, after all, but a drain upon the family resources one who subtracts from, but never adds anything to the family fortunes? Therefore, the birth of a female child is still bewailed as a misfortune.

Women of Bangladesh do know that they are not as free as it is possible for self-respecting women to be. If they had ever heard of freedom, they failed to admire it. The majority of them, even if offered unconditional freedom tomorrow, would refuse it, because they would not know what to do with it.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for men and women. It guarantees equal protection of law for all

citizens (Article 27), equality of opportunity (Article 29) and further guarantees that the state shall not discriminate any citizen on the ground of her gender (Article 28(1)). Moreover, Article 10 of the Constitution clearly states:

"Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life."

Therefore, the Constitution poses no obstacle to the participation of women in the political process. But the socio-cultural realities barred women from participation on equal footing with their male counterparts.

The Bangabandhu Government first initiated the process of integrating women in the mainstream of development and at the decision making level. Two women were included in the Cabinet in 1973. In the parliamentary elections of 1979, of 2,125 contestants only 17 were women. Only three women members were elected from territorial constituencies. The only favorable condition for women politicians was the provision of reserved seats in the parliament. Presently there are 36 women including 4 in the cabinet and 30 indirectly elected women members of the parliament out of 330 parliament members.

Women's participation in local electoral politics was also minimal before some time. The number of elected female chairpersons was 1 in 1973, 4 in 1977 and 1984, 1 in 1988 and 15 in 1992. In order to secure a minimum representation of women in the Union Parishads and Pourashavas, three seats are reserved for women in each of these local government bodies. Presently 13,879 women are holding different representative posts in the Local Government.

Despite significant developments, women's participation in the political process is afflicted with some major problems. These include inadequate women leadership, lack of political discourse on women's issues and lack of appropriate and adequate organizational arrangements within the political parties, lack of strong national women's organizations, lack of mobility, terrorism, misinterpretations of religious scriptures and women's inertia. Moreover, age-old tradition, orthodox social norms and conservative values, economic dependence and illiteracy have contributed to all of them.

In the International arena, human civilization aimed at peace experienced the shameful tragedy of two World Wars in the 20th century. It was claimed that the two World Wars were fought in the name of democracy and to "make the world safe for democracy". In today's free world, the fruits of democracy are hardly shared with the women. My heart bleeds when I see that women had to travel all the way from Mexico in 1975 to Copenhagen in 1980, to Nairobi in 1985 and then to Beijing in 1995 to demand for a share in decision-making and to remove

inequality in power sharing.

Women of the world are still chained to poverty, unequal access to education, training, health care and property, inhuman physical violence and mental torture, fundamentalist and discriminatory social and religious norms and culture. At times I wonder when Rousseau claimed "Man is born free", did he necessarily precluded women? Or my words echo like those of Shelley when he poses, "Can man be free if woman be a slave?"

It's now time for men to confess that women have been unjustly exploited and unreasonably limited in their opportunities. Men should stop making sexist jokes portraying women as flighty, disorganized, incompetent and insensible parasites to the society.

We should realize that 'Democracy' is not merely a form of government but rather it demands the existence of a democratic state and a democratic society. A democratic government can not be a true democracy if it does not have a "democratic way of life". A democratic attitude to life means faith in the principle of equality of all men and women and the recognition of individuality of every human being.

As mankind enters the 21st Century, it should be ready to meet the challenges of political democracy as well as ethical, social and economic democracy. All evil elements of gender discrimination, exploitation and sexual oppression should be removed from the society at the earliest.

When we say, "all power belongs to the people" if we mean only the male segment of population we will always remain weak as a nation, as the half of the world population consists of women, who are systematically denied of their rights, freedom and power. Democratic empowerment of women is a necessary condition to enter the second civilized millennium.

We can never be radiant with the pride of attaining real democracy unless and until we can ensure a "democratic way of life" in every plateau of our activities. Let us free our mind from all the age-old notions of gender discrimination starting from our home perimeter to the national and international extent. Women should be encouraged to take part in decision-making at all levels of life, be it micro or macro level. We have to practice the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, first in our domestic domain and then move to the outside world. Let us all learn to value the decisions of the female members of our family be she our mother, sister, wife or daughter. Let them have a 'say' in all the decision making.

Otherwise, the notion of 'Democratic Society' will remain as a fantasy only. Democracy that stops at the doorstep of our personal life, to my opinion, is a form of moral, social and political hypocrisy.