

Musings on Democracy in Bangladesh

by Khurshid Hamid

If Bangladesh is to evolve into a decent liberal democracy, democratic processes must be given a chance to lend legitimacy to government institutions, nurture individual responsibility and accountability, and promote a shared sense of civic identity.

A weary (Bangladesh) out of sight
Is tugging gently at the night
Uncovering a restless race;

Three-quarters of these people know
Instinctively what ought to be
The nature of society
And how they'd live there if they could.
If it were easy to be good,
And cheap, and plain as evil how,
We all would be its members now;
How readily would we become
The seamless live continuum
Of supple and coherent stuff
Whose form is truth, whose content love,
Its pluralist interstices
The homes of happiness and peace....
How grandly would our virtues bloom
In a more conscionable dust
Where Freedom dwells because it must
Necessity because it can,
And men confederate in Man.

But wishes are not horses; this
Annus is not Mirabilis;
Day breaks upon the world we know
Of war and wastefulness and woe,
Ashamed civilians come to grief
In brotherhoods without belief,
Whose good intentions cannot cure
The actual evils they endure
Nor smooth their practical career
Nor bring the far horizon near.
The New Year brings an earth afraid,
Democracy a ready-made
And noisy tradesman's slogan, and
The poor betrayed into the hand
Of lackeys with ideas, and truth
Whipped by their elders out of youth,
The peaceful fainting in their tracks
With martyrs' tombstones on their backs,
And culture on all fours to greet
A butch and criminal elite
While in the vale of silly sheep
Rheumatic old patriarchs weep.

W.H. Auden, arguably the greatest poet of this century, wrote the above lines long ago and in another climate—the 1930s—and Bangladesh has been substituted for Asia in the first line. But the overarching universality of his poetic insight throws klieg lights nearly three quarters of a century later on the societal perturbation obtaining in I-had-a-dream Sonar Bangla today.

Much has been written on Bangladesh's democracy becoming dysfunctional, with apathetic and cynical people sniffing something rotten in

the state of Denmark and not knowing what to do about it. Much less has been written about the root causes for this dolorous mayhem, and still less if you exclude pious sighs about remedial prescriptions.

Bangladesh was created through the third largest voluntary upsurge for freedom and democracy in this century, with three million or thereabouts lives being lost for "it is the cause, it is the cause." (The other two were the socialist revolutions that brought about the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China through

the loud cries of the ordinary people for democratic freedom, later corrupted by the dictatorship of the proletariat as per the diktat of the Party, but that's another story.) The late quintessential Renaissance intellectual Andre Malraux called the liberation movement of Bangladesh "the last noble cause left for mankind."

Within a scant three years and a half in an irony most foul to our martyred millions, who made the supreme sacrifice to rid the country of the uniform, Bangladeshis in uniform usurped the governance of the country. And for a long, long benighted decade and a half the military dictators short-changed the people by dishing out various types of counterfeit democracy. Towards the end of 1990 another loud cry of the ordinary Bangladeshis drove the last military dictator into the wilderness.

A historical point to ponder. The first military ruler who acquired no reputation for personal cupidity during his reign has left behind the legacy of a formidable political party, which almost half the voters voted for, in subsequent fair elections. The second military ruler who acquired notoriety for the Midas touch in all his dealings during his regime has left a rag-tag splintered political party, condemned to be in the periphery of politics in the country for the foreseeable future. Believe it or not, honesty does pay even in the politics of Bangladesh.

Two major and almost of equal strength political parties emerged after the general—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League—in an impartial election under the democratic novelty of a Caretaker Government. The BNP had the first innings and now the Awami League who are still battling. Both the democratic Governments have been of the parliamentary form, have had and have slender majorities in the house, were elected on minority first-past-the-post votes, and all prognostications are that the two parties will trade places in governance every five

years. All the foregoing are vital indicators of true-blue functional Westminster democracy, as we know it. And yet in sooth I know not why I am so sad, it wearies me, it wearies me, about the genre of democracy in our country and resort to poetic lamentation about it.

The primeval cause of the malfeasance of our democracy is precisely because all the changes towards freedom and democracy in Bangladesh have been brought about through the loud cries of the ordinary people. In other words all big politics in our country have been about big movements. There was the Pakistan movement, there was the State language movement, there was the 6-point demand movement, there was the anti-military dictator Ayub Khan movement, there was the autonomy for and later the independence of Bangladesh movement, there was the liberation war (the mother of all movements) of Bangladesh, there was the anti-military dictator Ershad movement, there was the anti-vote-hijacking election movement by the opposition Awami League, and now there are the sundry movements by the opposition BNP still to gather much momentum. Ah, what a cornucopia of political movements, my countrymen!

Politics in our country alas, it appeared in the past and still appears, was and is happening when tens of thousands of people are herded by bus into mammoth public meetings, or tens of thousands take to the streets—all chanting lusty slogans. Or much too frequent harlots are imposed by the Opposition. These take place almost always in the name of non-negotiable demands. But movement politics is inherently unstable, ephemeral, and geared towards publicity. None of the movement politics in Bangladesh were institutionally tethered and therefore had no great staying power.

Max Weber has famously defined politics as the patient baring of hard boards, and it follows that building and sustaining decent institutions is at the

heart of the democratic matter. And political movements don't do that—they don't build those ties of trust, reciprocity, accountability, and mutual self-help over time. No, but institutions, sturdy but resilient institutions of democratic civil society, do. These institutions are by definition based on both giving and receiving—creating a structure of expectations and moulding reasonable and decent ways to meet those expectations.

So far for the plodding certainties of Bangladesh politics enumerated above. But how do you implant democratic institutions in Bangladesh? There are two divergent views on exportation of democracy. Alexander Herzen, a Russian radical philosopher, takes a more particularist approach believing that democratic institutions were the product not of logic, nor of grand ideas, but of history, grown over time like a fine variety of rose, adapted perfectly to the condition of the local clay.

Voltaire rejects this view of democracy. He makes an optimistic diagnosis that democratic freedom is rooted in institutions and that these institutions could be successfully transplanted overseas. It might look as if coconuts could grow only in tropical climates; but, given care, he thought they would grow anywhere. Parenthetically it may be noted that great man's own efforts at cultivating pineapples in France came to nothing.

On democracy, however, history has vindicated Voltaire more than Herzen. The political coconuts have taken root. More and more of Europe, since his time, have doffed their authoritarian mantles and successfully adopted liberal democratic institutions, and towards the end of the present millennium more and more countries of the sections and third worlds are flashing their report cards of democratic governance. The United States' energetic promotion of democracy abroad to create a stable and relatively peaceful world order has given an exponential fillip to this trend.

But tarry a little, Herzen cries out for his pound of flesh. It seems that exporting the empty outer shells of the democratic coconuts is easier said and done, but to transplant the flesh and kernels of the democratic coconuts, which comprise liberal institutions, the rule of law and the rights of the citizens, proving a much tougher nut to crack. Fareed Zakaria about a year and a half ago has warned that the United

States' magnificent obsession with ballot box democracy has led to the rise of the hydra-headed "illiberal democracies", that is states that hold free elections but do not honour the rule of law and the rights of their citizens, that sans this constitutional liberalism democracy is prone to abuses of power and rivalry and conflict, and certainly does not lead to the oft-heralded democratic peace. Does Herzen have the last laugh? No... yes, perhaps a Mona Lisa smile.

If Bangladesh is to evolve into a decent liberal democracy, democratic processes must be given a chance to lend legitimacy to government institutions, nurture individual responsibility and accountability, and promote a shared sense of civic identity. Elections and yet more elections must be held.

As Alexis de Tocqueville has put forward the classic argument for democracy in America: only many small-scale civic bodies enable citizens to cultivate democratic virtues and to play an active role in the drama of democracy. Such participation turns on meaningful involvement in some form of community, by which is meant commitments and ties that locate the citizens in bonds of trust, reciprocity, mutuality, and competence for the task at hand.

hopefully each one will be better than the one preceding it; the press freer, the electorate better educated, and the elected representatives more willing to pay heed to their constituents. The illiberal democracy and abuses of power we are presently witnessing will itself create demand for the institutions and practices that check governmental misdoing, and the current malaise will prove to be a way station along the road to a more enlightened form of governance. The ship of democratic liberalism in Bangladesh must be built while sailing on the tempestuous waters of history.

Constitutional liberalism is a long uphill grind because it requires the good faith of such a wide range of actors, or example, in the realm of criminal justice alone, reform requires an independent and highly educated judiciary, competent public prosecutors, an active defense bar, well-trained police, humane corrections staff and an appropriate prison infrastructure, and most importantly all the players imbued with

boy-scout honesty—all of which require substantial investments in universities and professional academies and decent staff salaries. Again the last thing an illiberal but democratically elected regime wants is an independent judicial system—an anathema to unfettered power. The physical and financial costs of creating and sustaining this system are overwhelming, and it will take years to develop fully.

True democracy ideally fosters the reconciliation between the state and society. Individuals win the respect of the state if they inculcate the habit of informed voting. States win the respect of its citizens if they have a say in its governance. And thereby civil society gains a foothold in states that have suffered long histories of paternalism and authoritarianism.

By civil society we have in mind the many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture—families, mosques, neighbourhood groups, trade unions, self-help movements, volunteer activities of all sorts. Historically

about what the political philosopher Hannah Arendt called the "elementary problem of human living together."

Civil society in Bangladesh should be nurtured at the grassroots by virtuous-minded men and women. The United Nations and the World Bank it has been said sponsor chimerical good governance initiatives, most of which simply don't work, but partly it is true their results are not instantly measurable. They should instead focus their attention and much more resources towards developing grassroots civil society associations in the country, which I consider to be inclusive of but not limited to the celebrated NGOs. Only then will institutions germinate and the rose of constitutional liberalism flower in the local soil, and the state of Bangladesh become peaceful and benign.

En passant may I touch upon the democracies of India and Pakistan? India touts herself as the largest functioning democracy in the world, but Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru opted for a strong central government when the salient theme of his vast empire was for a loose confederation of decentralized states. Against his own English liberal instincts he thus denied his countrymen a constitutional liberal culture and set the nation on the path of an illiberal democracy. Pakistan was inherited by bourgeois politicians who inevitably gave way after some years to the military generals. Her subsequent stabs at democracy mongering have been quixotic at best, and she is presently arguably the most illiberal democracy in South Asia. Illiberal democracies have a long record of conflicts and wars with each other, and we may have to bear with more Kargils in the future. Genuine democracies in antipodal contrast are distinctly pacific, and it is only when the two nations will evolve toward civil and liberal democracies, like Europe's states did about the middle of this century, that they will be able to, like Europe, overcome their perceived or real security dilemma and render war among themselves unthinkable.

Finally, I-had-a-dream Sonar Bangla I envision a fabled land of common sense, fairness and good manners, governed by decent genteel ladies and perhaps genteel men, with liberal views, where liberty, humour and respect for the law always prevail over the radical search for the perfect human governance.

As a tedious, dear reader, if in my meditation above I have made you feel that I am really testing my own views on democracy in Bangladesh, not telling you what to think, I shall deem myself eminently successful.

The author is the former Bangladesh Ambassador to Italy and Switzerland.

Kashmir Dispute Needs to be Addressed Politically

by Brig Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd)

One should remember that mistrust only breeds mistrust and that it is the denial of political rights and fundamental human rights that sows the seeds of insurgency and separatist movements in a community or a state.

THE Kargil conflict is over. Many sympathisers both within and outside Pakistan would ruefully say that what a small determined force of Pakistan army with the sprinkling of some die hard Kashmiri militants and Afghan Taliban gained on the high hills of Kargil but thrown away by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the negotiating table in Washington. There is no denying the fact that the Kargil operation was a military feat par excellence on the part of the Pakistan army. But could the outcome of this feat have been anything other than a total war between India and Pakistan in the event of Pakistan not pulling its forces back from Kargil? In that case Pakistan would have likely bled more than India both militarily and economically, given the fact that India is a much larger country with more resources and bigger military power.

Nawaz Sharif could not have possibly done any better. He did what he could. He made a dash to China, Pakistan's professed ally. And then he went to USA, the only superpower left in the world. He could not garner any support for any escalation of the border conflict with India. For the time being, the existing Line of Control was considered sacrosanct. The fact is that Pakistan cannot take Kashmir by force from India. By the same token it is also a fact that India cannot retain Kashmir by force alone.

It is difficult to say whose brain-child the Kargil misadventure was. Many precious lives have been lost on both sides. In economic terms, the loss has been staggering given the fact that both India and Pakistan are poor countries. They need foreign aid in billions of dollars every year to raise the living standard of their people—to meet the basic needs of education, healthcare, housing, communication, job opportunities etc. India can however justify its losses as it has regained the territory. But what has Pakistan gained? Was the spilling of blood, to quote the Pakistani columnist Iqbal Sehgal, the "sending of the

flower of (Pakistan's) youth to their death without a justifiable return", the spending of crores of money in prosecuting this military venture worth the upshot it produced in the end? No. There is hardly any morality and legitimacy behind the Pakistani military effort. May be Pakistan tried to make a Kosovo out of Kashmir after seeing the NATO intervention in the Balkans. But the Kashmir scenario is different from Kosovo, India is not Yugoslavia or for that matter Serbia nor is Jammu & Kashmir the like of Kosovo even if we admit that Kashmiri militants are fighting the Indian army and para military forces for a long, long time.

Most of the progressive minded and educated people of Kashmir know for certain that their fate in Pakistan will be just like that of "Azad Kashmir", the Pakistan-held Kashmir, where Pakistani "write reigns supreme. The people of Jammu & Kashmir, given the right of self-determination will most certainly not opt for joining Pakistan. They are not fighting the Indian army and have not suffered so much for becoming another province of Pakistan. They are fighting for an independent Jammu & Kashmir which neither India nor Pakistan will be well disposed to.

Kashmir dispute is the legacy of the faulty partition of British India in 1947. The ground on which Mr Jinnah sought to create Pakistan i.e. the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of British India, is devoid of rationality and pragmatism to say the least. Religion alone cannot be the basis for the creation of a nation state. Besides, how could you possibly uproot all the Muslims living in different parts of India and carve out a territory where all these Muslims with their diverse ways of life, ethnic background, language, culture, mores, ethos etc. can be welded into a single nation? With almost one-third of the Muslims left behind in India and many issues unresolved, the creation of Pakistan in 1947 was itself faulty in conception and mate-

rialisation. But Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah accepted this Pakistan as offered by the British and became its first Governor General. He was lucky not to live long enough to face the myriad problems his misconceived Pakistan was pregnant with. The situation called for great political sagacity and statesmanship of a very high order which, unfortunately, neither Mr Jinnah nor the successive political leadership of Pakistan was endowed with. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 was nothing but this historical aberration being put right partially.

Can Pakistan wash its hands of Kashmir? Sanity and realism are for the affirmative. And the sooner she does it, the better for her and for this South East Asia region. Neither India nor the international community will give Kashmir on the platter to Pakistan. Even the Kashmiris themselves would rather stay with India than join Pakistan. But can India forcibly maintain its hold on Jammu & Kashmir? The answer is No. Kashmir dispute needs to be addressed politically. The solution lies in India recognizing the ethno-religious sentiments of the people of Kashmir and agreeing to give constitutional guarantee for more devolution of power in this war-ravaged state. Let the people of Kashmir feel that they stand to gain in terms of economic development as well as social and cultural uplift by remaining a part and parcel of the largest secular democracy that India is and professes to be. Let the people of Kashmir enjoy full political rights to develop their state to its full potentials and feel that India's well-being and prosperity is their well-being and prosperity as well and vice versa.

If the people of Jammu & Kashmir could enjoy peace and relative freedom and live a life to suit their own genius under the British, an imperialist power, there is no reason why under a democratic dispensation, they should feel subjugated, exploited and discriminated against politically, eco-

nomically, socially and culturally. To me, late Sheikh Abdullah, the Lion of Kashmir epitomized a modern progressive Kashmir. He stood for greater autonomy for this Muslim majority state and least political interference from New Delhi. Had the political leadership of India heeded the call of this great leader, Kashmir would have remained a paradise of peace and prosperity.

Devolution of power is the crying need of the hour. Today, it is the only political prescription for developing a country into a united, strong, vibrant, modern, progressive and democratic one. If Kashmir unrest and similarly all separatist movements in other parts of India have to end, the government of India will have to come out with a bold epoch-making constitutional change guaranteeing maximum autonomy to its various states based on the model of the United States of America. One should remember that mistrust only breeds mistrust and that it is the denial of political rights and fundamental human rights that sows the seeds of insurgency and separatist movements in a community or a state.

On the other hand more liberalism and decentralisation of power leading to effective self-rule is apt to foster the bonds of union and mutual confidence between the central government and various states and regions. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Bangladesh has taken a bold step in giving a substantial measure of representative local government to the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts through the historic peace agreement concluded by the present government. In my view, it is only a United States of India and not the present Republic of India which, through a genuine democratization of the entire political structure of the country with pronounced accent on devolution of power, can effectively stem the tide of seething discontentment, insurgency and secessionist movements in Jammu & Kashmir in particular and in India as a whole in general.

Dr Shahadat Ullah: A Tribute

by Dr Quazi Mesbahuddin Ahmed

DR ABUL HOSSAIN SHAHADAT ULLAH, former Member, Bangladesh Planning Commission passed away on June 13. The impact of his death reached me late, on June 30, to be precise. I was suddenly very shocked for I used to revere him so much.

It was a passel of guests in a semi-official gathering in Bethesda, Washington, DC. A lady from Bangladesh was narrating to someone her exasperation with senseless delays in finishing her work-load in Dhaka's working environment—she and her family suddenly had to visit Shahadat Ullah and ultimately even had to grieve the latter's death. The gossip was very near me. I kind of stopped the conversation and surprised the lady peppering her with questions relating to reasons of Shahadat Ullah's death. So I knew that Shahadat Ullah succumbed to a motor neuron disease which had resulted in muscle loss and his inability to eat and digest.

I called Mrs Shahadat Ullah at Uttara, Dhaka the following day and also sent a condolence message to her. I knew from her that Shahadat Ullah's overriding complaint before his death was that he was almost unable to write because of muscle loss. And I understand, from my long association with him, that not being able to read and write was something akin to death to him.

Shahadat Ullah possessed a rare physical structure: tall and slim, bony jaw, pointed nose and brilliant eyes. Entering the then East Pakistan Planning Department in late 1970, I was the youngest officer there, an Assistant Chief, and was assigned to work under Shahadat Ullah, then Deputy Chief but acting as Chief Economist. I immediately noticed the gentleman boss weaved with high-powered glasses and he held up reading materials either before his eyes or bent his head down over the table. This particular image of Shahadat Ullah working hard with his head bent over his office-desk must have

been very familiar to all his friends and colleagues alike.

Shahadat Ullah was an economist heart and soul, expansively specializing in issues of the Bangladesh economy. He was a referee for anyone stumbling with the practical issues and problems of the Bangladesh economy.

Yes, Shahadat Ullah was a pedant in all of his positive senses, a very passionate worker, and an archetype development planner. He spent most of his career in the Planning Department of erstwhile East Pakistan and the Bangladesh Planning Commission. He was considered to be a vast swath of the Planning Commission created in 1972. Yet he had not learnt to show arrogance to any of his colleagues, seniors or juniors. The early years of the Bangladesh Planning Commission were full of strife. Its superior position was openly resented and gleefully attacked. In an environment of institutional weaknesses in civil bureaucracy having meaningless pomp and glory, less work and more talk, there would have to be a scapegoat. And the scapegoat was the Planning Commission, the envy towards it apparently being stoked up by its founding giants themselves. Shahadat Ullah, who was a dedicated worker, did not join this fray. Off he went in the middle of 1972 to pursue his Ph D degree at the Harvard University.

He was neither a fighter nor an acquiescent follower: of his superiors in the government service. The more enlightened civil servants of any rank generally used to respect him. The arrogant ones had no patience for a professional around them. But the mounting debt of gradually losing contact with any sort of professionalism was so high that they had to rely on Shahadat Ullah whose cachet was intellectually-oriented hard work. Many a time he suffered equally at the hands of civil servants and profession-

als alike. How much did he once lament to me that his stay in the Harvard was not allowed by his professional bosses in the Planning Commission to be a leave with pay from the government service for which there was a provision. On his return from Harvard in 1975, he was forced to remain away, now by the all powerful civil servant turned adviser, from his own habitat of plan formulation and be the Chief of the Power and Energy Division of the Planning Commission. There he steeped himself in the intellectual reading and writing on renewable and non-renewable energy prospects of Bangladesh.

In 1983, in a select meeting of the Planning Commission, he remarked that food aid should not be counted as investment in the country. On this occasion, he was almost ridiculed by the chief boss of the Ministry of Planning, Shahadat Ullah produced a very brief paper the following day in support of his contention. No one could refute his argument. Once, while negotiating a credit with the World Bank personnel in Washington, DC, Shahadat Ullah reportedly objected to the spelling of a word in the agreed minutes. He was not listened to as it was possibly a half-penny matter to everybody else. Undaunted, Shahadat Ullah bought a dictionary from the sidewalk of downtown Washington, DC and showed to the World Bank people that his way of spelling was legitimate tool.

I have seen, and also heard from many of his colleagues about Shahadat Ullah's indomitable love for books. His pastime was reading philosophical writings and often quoting from those in general discussions with his acquaintances. This he also sometimes did with the visiting multilateral or bilateral delegations. I remember that IMF Article IV negotiations with him used to be very tense. As always, the IMF has a very stereotyped position regarding a country's macro-

economic performance. And often some members of the IMF team used to be too young to have known for some length of time the visiting country's many peculiarities in the economic arena. The encounter of the IMF team with Shahadat Ullah therefore sometimes appeared to be following a roller-coaster ride. But there never was any wilt of interest shown by IMF to engage in discussions with him.

In the early 1990s, when Shahadat Ullah was long gone from the Planning Commission, I heard some officers criticising him for not adequately training junior officers so that they later could shoulder responsibilities better. In my opinion, this criticism is grounded in elementary economics of supply and demand. I cannot imagine that diligent officers working with Shahadat Ullah could escape his notice. For during the early phase of preparation of the Second Five-Year Plan, I saw Shahadat Ullah calling even Research Officers in his room if they were found better equipped to deliver the goods. Shall I say it takes two to tango?

In the early 1980s, the government introduced several cadre services in the country. It fell upon BCS (Economic) cadre officers to man the Planning Commission. This struck Shahadat Ullah as a bad decision. He believed that the Planning Commission, regardless of its size, should be a professional institution ideally working as an advisory body for the government. His junior colleagues in the Commission during that period used to resent that position. Loathsome of any open conflict with colleagues and much more detesting all union activities among officers, Shahadat Ullah used to maintain a low profile.

Extracts from "Liberation and Beyond" by J N Dixit could not be published today under unavoidable circumstance.

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

