

Independence Day Special

Building a Democratic State in Bangladesh

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

BAKSLADESH, let us not forget, is not a nation state, nor was it intended to be; although the state came into being through a nationalist struggle for liberation of the Bengalis. Overwhelmingly, the population of this new state are Bengalis; but that does not, and should not, negate the fact that there are other nationalities, small though they are, who are not Bengalis and who have been living in this land for ages. Bangladesh was visualised as a secular democratic state, guaranteeing equality of rights and opportunities to all its citizens, security in respect of basic human rights and governance through elected representatives at all tiers. It was both wrong and unjust, therefore, to ask every citizen of Bangladesh to be a Bengali, as was done by the Awami League leadership in 1972. Ironically, the directive was reminiscent of the Pakistani rulers asking the people of East Bengal to become Pakistanis. There was an element of aggressive nationalism in both cases.

To say this, however, is not to justify the BNP position on the question of nationalism, inasmuch as the BNP's propagation of Bangladeshi nationalism is really a subterfuge to thwart the desire of the Bengalis to achieve a secular and linguistic identity. That the BNP did not care much for democracy and secularism is borne out by its removal of secularism from the state constitution and its calling the war of liberation of 1971 the war of independence. The correct position is that linguistically the Bengalis are a nation, but they live in many different states including Bangladesh, and that in Bangladesh they have set up a sovereign state which they would like to be of democratic dispensation. The political state in Bangladesh, its citizens hoped, would eventually create a democratic society. The state question is more important at the moment than the society question for the simple reason that the state is more powerful and influential than the society.

But democracy, like everything else, has its enemies; and two of them have been at work almost ever since the establishment of this new state. These two are inequality among

the citizens and lack of trust in the politico-socio-economic system. The inequality is rising and the trust declining, almost proportionately.

Pakistan fell apart not so much because of geographical separation as owing to regional disparity, with separation contributing to the growth of that disparity. There was, of course, the horizontal inequality of class in that state, but the perpendicular inequality between the two regions was more subversive of unity than anything else. East Bengal demanded autonomy first, and failing to get it thought that nothing short of independence would do. The stop-gap arrangement of parity in representation between the two wings was itself a move to perpetuate disparity, if possible; because 56 per cent of the citizens of that state lived in East Bengal.

The real strength of the freedom fighters of 1971 lay not in the arms they carried, not even in their personal courage and determination but in the unity among the classes against a very fearful enemy. And yet that unity proved to be temporary. Indeed, it had to be. Because each class had its own agenda to pursue; and it was impossible for the rich to get riches without exploiting the poor. And that is what began to happen after independence. In fact, the history of the last 29 years of Bangladesh has been one of astonishing enrichment of the few at the cost of the many. The middle class itself has split, with the minority rising and the majority declining. The growth in the economy has been unashamedly on the capitalist line. During the war the villages had given both food and shelter to the town, but after independence the town came back to its original position with a vengeance, drawing in the agricultural workers to its inhospitable skirts relentlessly for employing them as cheap labourers. Disparity in income continued to grow. Increasingly, things in Bangladesh have been monetized. Today it has become impossible for political activists to get even nominated by the political parties they have served for long, let alone be elected to the national assembly. Money has weakened the very basis of elective democracy.

Political parties themselves refuse to be democratic, internally. Leaders are not elected by the members, they are nominated by the leadership. That the leaders of the two major political parties should have inherited their position, one from her father and the other from her husband, is illustrative of the nature and structure of the political parties themselves. It is in no way less significant that the parties are unlikely to function properly, should the two leaders decide to retire or resign from their position. The top is heavier than the bottom, which is precisely what democratic institutions should not be.

Democracy, after all, is a form of governance based on mutual trust between the ruler and the ruled, and also of the ruled in the state itself. When the country was at war, suffering and misery was inhuman; even then people did not weep for they had the faith that darkness was bound to end and a better future sure to emerge. But as soon as the new government took over, trust in the state began to decline. The factors contributing to this unexpected phenomenon were several. There was, to begin with, the bewildering growth in the greed of the ruling class. Every one belonging to the government party seemed impatient to grab everything they could lay their hands on, which included abandoned property and factories, swamp, trees, rivers, and even women. When the Pakistani hordes laid down their arms in Dhaka, the expectation naturally was that the surrender would be to the joint command, if not to the *Mukti Bahini*. But what happened was grievously disappointing, because not only was the *Mukti Bahini* virtually unrepresented in the ceremony, an impression was also created that the role of the freedom fighters was not of much value. After the war, it was only rational to expect that the war criminals, at least the most heinous among them, would be tried in the land of Bangladesh. But the contrary happened. Ninety thousand war criminals were allowed to leave the country as prisoners of war to find their way back to Pakistan. The collective psyche suffered; and the notion went deep down into the consciousness that justice in the new state

would be difficult, if not impossible, to find. The mistrust gained further confirmation by the gruesome political killings that happened later, with impunity; the most tragic of which was the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with the members of his family.

The listing of freedom fighters was a harmful mistake on several counts. First, it was humanly impossible to prepare even a reasonably foolproof list for the simple fact that most of the people, with the exception of a few, were involved in the war, in one form or another. To make a list of the collaborators would have been much easier and more rewarding. The list would have identified the local criminals and stigmatised them both socially, and politically and confirmed the important fact that except for them all others were involved in the liberation struggle and, also, that the victory was not won by any particular section of the community, but by the entire people working together. This would have denied the collaborators the opportunity to fake themselves as freedom fighters, adding an element of ridicule to the triumph of the people. What is more, the idea of entitling the freedom fighters to material benefits through enlistment was treacherous to the very spirit of the war. No one had joined the war for personal gain; the basic motive was one of sacrifice rather than self-aggrandisement. The atmosphere after independence was demoralising. To add to the process of demoralisation, the collaborators were granted general amnesty and, in many cases,

genuine freedom fighters were put to harassment, particularly by the ruthless operations of the paramilitary *Rakshi Bahini*.

The cumulative effect of all these was a continual erosion of confidence in the ruling class and what has been much more harmful, in the state itself. The vast majority felt alienated from the system, and began to develop an almost cynical indifference to what was happening around them. Misery they would not have minded, indeed they were prepared to make further sacrifices; but they did most certainly find it painful and shocking that the equality in sacrifice during the war should be replaced by inequality in enjoyment, and that riches should be concentrated in the hands of a few despicable plunderers. People felt betrayed. What had happened after 1947 seemed to be repeated, on a greater scale, after 1971.

For these shameful developments the political leadership, and not the people, is to blame. Many of the leaders were absentees during the war, and many others ineffective. This isolation from the people had made the leadership suffer from a lack of confidence which, in its turn, made them unnecessarily rhetorical and aggressive. Trust in leadership continued to diminish. And in 1975 an almost unbelievable occurrence took place. A group of army officers attempted a putsch, and it did not fail mainly because of public indifference to political happenings. After that take-over, the country remained under military rule, of one hue or another, till 1990. Since then we have had

two successive parliamentary governments, but without any substantial change in the character of governance. To put it bluntly, usurping autocracy has been replaced by elective autocracy. Inequality has continued to grow and public trust continued to go down, undermining the very foundations of democracy from within. Mistrust has discouraged investment — moral as well as financial.

THE state created in 1947 had promised democracy, what it gave its people was, by and large, a capitalist economy looked after by a bureaucracy with the twin advantages of invisibility and unaccountability. In fact, independence in Pakistan was nothing more than transfer of power. The state that emerged out of the enormous sacrifice made by the people in 1971 was expected to be fundamentally different. But when the chips were down, positively speaking, the leadership betrayed the people. And the state remained what it was like before, namely, capitalist and bureaucratic. Except for the few, most people had reasons to feel frustrated. Their sacrifices were great, and so were their dreams.

Despite frustration and alienation, people have continued to work hard. Their achievements are few, but these are not unimpressive. In agriculture the performance has been noteworthy. In spite of growth in population and natural disasters, the country has neared self-sufficiency in food. By dint of hard and honest labour Bangladeshi workers abroad — skilled as well as unskilled — have earned admira-

tion. What is more, their remittance contributes substantially to our much-needed and continually-depleted foreign exchange reserve. Their conduct stands in sharp contrast to that of the *nouveau riche* who take pride in sending money abroad. Economically as well as socially, women suffer more than men. Even then they have done remarkably well in almost all walks of life, including the garments sector. That the rate of population growth has come under considerable control is due, not insubstantially, to female awareness. For all these, it is the man in the street and not those in leadership who deserves the credit.

ALTHOUGH hopes were great, people would have felt relieved and looked ahead even if a workable bourgeois system of democracy was set up. But that was not to be. One of the first prerequisites of democracy is secularism, which calls for a separation between the state and religion. People in this land are, of course, known for their religiosity. But in political matters their outlook has always been worldly-wise, because of economic compulsions. It looks odd, but should be understandable if the question of vested interests is taken into account, that the people should be in advance of the leaders in this important respect. By and large, the leadership, we must not forget, came from the former Muslim League, the politics of which was non-secular, indeed communal. And it is not unlikely for those who had been reared in that tradition to find the acceptance of secularism uncomfortable. Then there was the fear, not one but two fears, really. The one was the mistaken notion that the bulk of the population, being religious in temperament, would disapprove of moves towards secularism, particularly because of incitement by the supporters of so-called Muslim Bengal. Then there was the other apprehension that secularism would encourage people to be aware of their deprivations, which awareness would tempt them to fall an 'easy prey' to the invitations of the leftists. It is not certainly without significance that whereas the anti-liberation forces had been granted general

amnesty the supreme leadership of the country had spoken publicly of its intention of shooting the left-extremist Naxalites on sight.

It was typical of the anxiety-neurosis of the ruling classes to proclaim, time and again, that secularism as enunciated in the state constitution was not anti-religion at all and that it only meant that all religious communities in the country will have freedom of practising their own religion. The underlying message was clear: there would be more, rather than less, of religion in Bangladesh than before. And that precisely is what happened in Bangladesh. Over the years the governments have made political use of religion, each successive government outdoing its predecessor.

Democratic institutions have not been encouraged to grow. In Bangladesh, democracy is not practised in the family, where relationships are more or less feudal. It is not available in public institutions where relationships are bureaucratic. Political parties themselves refuse to be democratic, internally. Leaders are not elected by the members, they are nominated by the leadership. That the leaders of the two major political parties should have inherited their position, one from her father and the other from her husband, is illustrative of the nature and structure of the political parties themselves. It is in no way less significant that the parties are unlikely to function properly, should the two leaders decide to retire or resign from their position. The top is heavier than the bottom, which is precisely what democratic institutions should not be.

Both parties lack bourgeois tolerance and decency. Mutual respect is non-existent. And these surely are qualities without which parliamentary democracy cannot work. There is hardly any difference in their economic policy, or for that matter, in their foreign policy, which is characterised, more than anything else, by subservience to the interests of the rich countries and the multinational companies.

THE question that remains is what is the way out? Despair is easy, but must we submit to despair, or stand

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Warmest congratulations to the
Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

and the people of Bangladesh on the occasion of the nation's

29th Independence Day

Wishing the nation
a happy and prosperous
National Day.

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