

# Decriminalisation of politics: Challenge of an uphill task

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## Local leadership

In recent times, the disturbing phenomena of criminalisation of the political process has attracted substantial attention in the media and other concerned quarters. In this regard, one considered view is that in order to correctly diagnose the different dimensions of the fearsome uneasiness that now pervades our polity, one has to understand the dynamics of the above mentioned phenomena.

At the highest level of representative government, we have the honourable members of parliament whose primary role is legislative. The issue that becomes relevant here is what proportion of time of the honourable members is spent on law making? Some are of the opinion that in the 300 seats of parliament we, in fact, elect 300 executives. In saying so, one is not oblivious of the reality that in a parliamentary form of government the elected prime minister is the chief executive, and ministers as colleagues are also executive, as is the practice in the system. What, however, should engage our attention is whether the legislator is evincing more interest in matters developmental whose actual execution is an executive function, to the detriment of law-making, and whether such a scenario is giving rise to dissatisfaction at the local level? Also whether such dissatisfaction has harmful effect on the political process, leading ultimately to dishonest and unethical practices.

Many are of the view that one big obstacle to the flowering of local leadership lies in the excessive interference by higher level leaders or representatives in local socio-economic activities. The progress made in strengthening local government does not generate adequate optimism despite our having excellent recommendations in this regard. Consequently, local leaders are tempted to resort to illegal practices, having failed to achieve the desired recognition. Such frustrated leaders often become touts to maintain their leadership in a desperate situation where their continued existence comes under threat. In the ultimate analysis, the ordinary people fall victim to this polluted process for obvious reasons.

There is no doubt that greater involvement and empowerment of local leaders in the decision making process of developmental matters will help achieve satisfaction of such leaders. This would also contribute in the nurturing of local leadership and creation of a positive political culture, thereby gradually lessening the harmful effects of criminalisation. People at local level will at least get some relief, to start with, and it would not be too much to expect that local leaders will start becoming conscientious and responsible. However, reaching such a stage will not be easy because decentralisation of authority will not suddenly gather pace. One has to look at the

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opposing views about the type of local government at the police station/upazila level.

## Electoral politics

It is now generally accepted that the election-oriented political culture provides incentive to explicit illegal practices. During elections, a large amount of unaccounted money comes into circulation, and it has not been possible to effectively halt that. A large chunk of such money is spent for the musclemen or thugs for whom election time is booming business at almost no investment. Such thugs are required for malevolent activities like intimidation of voters, particularly the vulnerable ones, deactivating polling agents, creating tension near election centre to discourage voters from turning out, directly or indirectly keeping the polling booth under control, etc. There is never a dearth of miscreants for committing such mischief because requisition or demand is there and, as such, supply remains steady on account of ready cash and quick

payment. The election-time thugs operate in both urban and rural areas and find it convenient to display their might in centres which do not attract publicity. In this connection, let us remember that casting of vote in our parliament election is completed in one day, for reasons which may be discussed, but the fact remains that in such a situation the miscreants get an edge.

Experts are of the view that it is very difficult to make the electoral politics honest and transparent because display of honesty in such a situation cannot be expected to be spontaneous. Things become explosive when the opponent has musclemen in plenty or controls organised manpower. To illustrate, in our situation a lawyer or doctor or teacher with a reasonable income may find himself in a nerve-shattering experience when he is contesting a transport owner or an industrialist.

In such a situation, if unfortunately, the former has to level it up vis-a-vis his opponent, he has to have the so-called black money support to make up the deficiencies. The resultant pollution becomes inevitable. Therefore, if dishonest practices in the electoral process is not tackled in an exemplary manner prevention of the aforementioned pollution will be impossible.

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## The identity issue

Observers of the political scene are of the view that the personal and professional credentials of the politician is central to the subject under discussion. In this regard, the layman, in view of his experience, may wonder whether politics is a profession or a vocation or simply a social service. One considered view is that although some political parties may have full-time cadre of workers who are on the party's payroll, in a democratic society, politics cannot be a full-time occupation. According to this view, while in power, holders of office shall be adequately compensated by the state, although the compensation may not prove to be satisfying for a capable professional. But then that is the price one has to pay for being in public service. The important issue here is that after one ceases to hold power one goes back to the parent profession or occupation. In other words, it is expected that politicians are in definite profession or occupation and have means to support themselves.

How close is our political scene to the proposition described above may be the subject matter of serious discussion. Do we witness people in the political scene whose true sources of income cannot be ascertained? One has to bear in mind that parasitic leadership can neither inspire nor help in the creation of healthy political culture. These issues should be discussed seriously by the political parties

themselves because barring honourable exception, politicians with income that can be accounted for command respect. One must add here that simultaneously there must be adequate check to ensure that affluent politicians do not become promoter or protector of vested interests. In order to maintain societal balance it has to be ensured that coterie interests do not dictate the party. One recommendation would be to enlist people of different profession or occupation for the party and to attract educated and honest people to the political mainstream.

Reaching a goal as above shall be extremely difficult because no vested interest will voluntarily make room for others. In our present situation only the bold and strong political leaders can take determined steps that may catapult the educated and honest people out of their somnolence and inertia and inspire them to join the political mainstream. Time has come for a qualitative change in politics, but are we receiving helpful signals from the bold and the innovative?

The situation does not generate sufficient hope but we can not be oblivious of the fact that "politics is the art of the wise people" and that politics is all pervasive.

## Financing political activities

It is widely believed that in conducting and managing the affairs of major political party, and particularly during election campaigning, unbelievably large funds that includes black money are spent. Such spending is leading us to a perilous course. There was a time when the wealthy would remain behind the scenes and quietly take his reward later, but in the altered scenario a good number of questionably wealthy are entering the centre stage of mainstream politics, consequent to the unholy nexus between black money and power. This has to be arrested, otherwise the political leadership will be bereft of merit and morality.

We may follow the example of western democracies in creating election fund of the political party. This will, at the least, bring some clarity about the sources of the fund. It is not very difficult to keep the election expenditure within reasonable limits if we can ensure stern enforcement of electoral laws, backed by judicial firmness, executive determination, and ingenuity. The lure of black money during election time is understandably massive, but if politicians, particularly the legislators, do not want their political foundations to

be tainted by illegal or criminal deals then political process must have financial discipline and sanity. This would be a painful experience, but is considered essential to sanitise politics.

## The tenure of power

The most powerful executive in the world, the president of the USA holds office for four years as against our chief executive whose normal tenure is five years. Our experience shows that while the first year of power is somehow one of lesser tension, the subsequent years are becoming ominously violent and acrimonious. The parliament is losing warmth and liveliness due to non-participation of major opposition party. The sad truth is that during the last two years of power, the opposition is becoming menacingly desperate, while the government becomes increasingly insensitive and indiscreet. As a result of these extreme situations, the political scene is witnessing violence and confrontation wherein the key players are the criminals and thugs. To instigate or commit violence one needs the criminals, and to confront them you need another set of thugs. This is a never-ending process that can be halted by well-meaning politicians. Can we think of fixing the tenure of our parliament to four years? Such refixing may be fruitful in reducing frustration and preventing clashes in the political field.

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