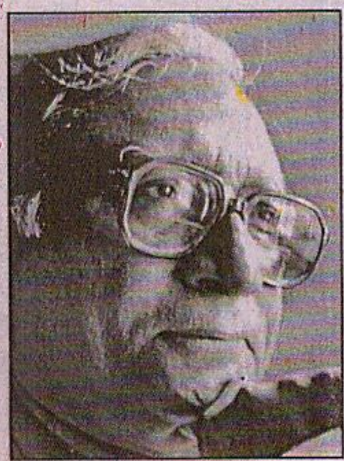


# Role of opposition with a purpose

No one beyond the two parties, who represent the ruling class, has any reasonable chance of electoral success. Tradesmen and retired bureaucrats are nominated and get elected, treating the election as a trading investment. The silent political worker in the constituency cannot expect to be nominated, if he is not rich enough to compete with the gate-crashers.



SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

**T**HE opposition is as it does, it opposes, and that is precisely what it is expected to do. And in a democracy it is indeed essential to have an opposition, for without it democracy cannot stand, let alone move ahead. A thesis presupposes an antithesis, should it hope to reach a synthesis. But the fact remains that the opposition is not always allowed to function properly. A more primary question, of course, is in whose interest does the opposition work.

Politics is essentially a power game, and the political opposition seeks to get into state power through the next election, if and when it is held. We hear of multi-party systems, but what we really have in most countries, including Bangladesh, is a two-party system, and the party not in power ought to, and does, oppose the policies and operations of the ruling party. The objective is to gain public support. But what is the basic motive? Is it to promote public welfare or to win public support? The two can, of course, go together. But sadly, oftener than not, they do not. The aim of the opposition remains winning the elections rather than changing the lot of the people.

In a parliamentary system of government the opposition gets down to work right from the moment it has suffered an electoral defeat. It sets up a shadow cabinet and nominates members to serve on the various committees created by the parliament. The opposition begins to stalk the government exposing government failures and weaknesses offering its own solutions. The elected members try to remain close to their constituencies lest they should lose favour with the public. This is what should be the modus operandi of the opposi-

tion. In Bangladesh we have had the two-party system ever since the so-called parliamentary system came to have its place in the governance of the state. When the government of India act, 1935 gave a quantum of governmental power to the provinces, elections were held on the two-party system, the parties being the Congress and the Muslim League. The Congress, we recall, was created at the initiative of a retired ICS officer, not without encouragement from the Viceroy himself. The purpose was to have the semblance of an opposition, loyal to the government. Later, the Muslim League came into existence, and the two political parties began to fight one another - at first gently, later fiercely. When Pakistan came into being, we expected a viable parliamentary system to be developed. But it did not. The opposition in the Assembly was weak, because its representation on it through the Congress was, as expected, meagre. The ruling class displayed no willingness to hold a general election, and did not allow it to happen until 1970. The 1970 election was virtually a swan-song; because the state disintegrated the very next year, the ruling junta having decided that it would do everything necessary, including perpetration of genocide, to keep Awami League, its enemy, out of power. After the establishment of Bangladesh, elections, have, though not regularly, been held; but none of these has been accepted by the losing party. Cries of fraud, irregularity and interference have been raised by the opposition, and almost without exception, the opposition has found the results unacceptable, and, consequently, they have remained more active in the streets than in the parliament. In a word, the parliamentary system has not worked in our country, owing mainly to the failure of the electoral system to work satisfactorily.

But is the system working elsewhere? No, not everywhere. Not certainly in the USA, which country claims to be the greatest defender of democracy and upholder of democratic principles. George Bush won in his first term through controversial judicial intervention and in the second through manipulation of jingoism and non-secular sentiments. True, John Kerry had thrown a challenge to Bush, but the voters did not have much to choose between the two. Kerry

prided himself on his record of participation in America's imperialist aggression in Vietnam and had failed to oppose Bush's invasion in Iraq. Kerry's patriotism is really another name for Bush's downright imperialism. The difference is that of a pseudonym and a name. In the UK the New Labour is nothing more than a slightly left leaning conservative party and Tony Blair has hardly any challenger from within his fold. The election in Ukraine had to be repeated without solving the problem of general acceptance and continues to threaten the country to break into two halves.

In our country we have seen despotism usurping state power; but those elected to power have not been democratic, either. In fact, elected despotism has, at times, tended to be worse than unelected despotism to the extent that it has worked with greater self-confidence, pluming itself on the gaining of electoral mandate. In the same manner as the des-

potic British rulers had set up the Indian National Congress as an opposition loyal to British interests, have the martial law regimes in both Pakistan and Bangladesh found it useful for them to create dummy oppositions which were expected to be, and have indeed been, obedient to the rulers, making elections farcical exercises.

The 'democratic' elections we are having now, one after another, have more blemishes than strong points. Elections, moreover, have turned into prerogatives for the rich and the privileged rather than a right for the voters. No one beyond the two parties, who represent the ruling class, has any reasonable chance of electoral success. Tradesmen and retired bureaucrats are nominated and get elected, treating the election as a trading investment. The silent political worker in the constituency cannot expect to be nominated, if he is not rich enough to compete with the gatecrashers. Election within the parties them-

selves is non-existent, and the office-bearers are handpicked by the leadership.

What is worse is the emergence of family-leadership in the two major political parties. Neither of the two leaders heading the two parties has risen from the rank and file, they have inherited their positions and are now seeking to set up their sons as political heirs to the seats they occupy. General Ershad fell not through an election but because of a mass uprising; but the fact that he still remains a factor in electoral politics is a testimony, if any be needed, to the hollowness, almost irrelevance, of the existing electoral system.

We, of course, cannot claim to have a democratic culture in the country, worthy of its name. Blind loyalty is what the leadership expects; and criticism is seldom, if ever, tolerated. Of the many kinds of hunger we suffer from, that for power is the most ugly and cruel. Anyone who gets power, political,

bureaucratic or economic, not only abuses it, but also clings to it, throttling, if necessary, all opposition.

Democracy, it is also to be remembered, cannot, nor is it expected to, function in isolation. Dhaka University, for example, was granted by the government a democratic constitution of its own. The constitution has not worked in the manner it was expected to, owing to interferences - sometimes visible, often invisible - by the government and an appetite among some teachers, not many in number but certainly very influential, for governmental favours.

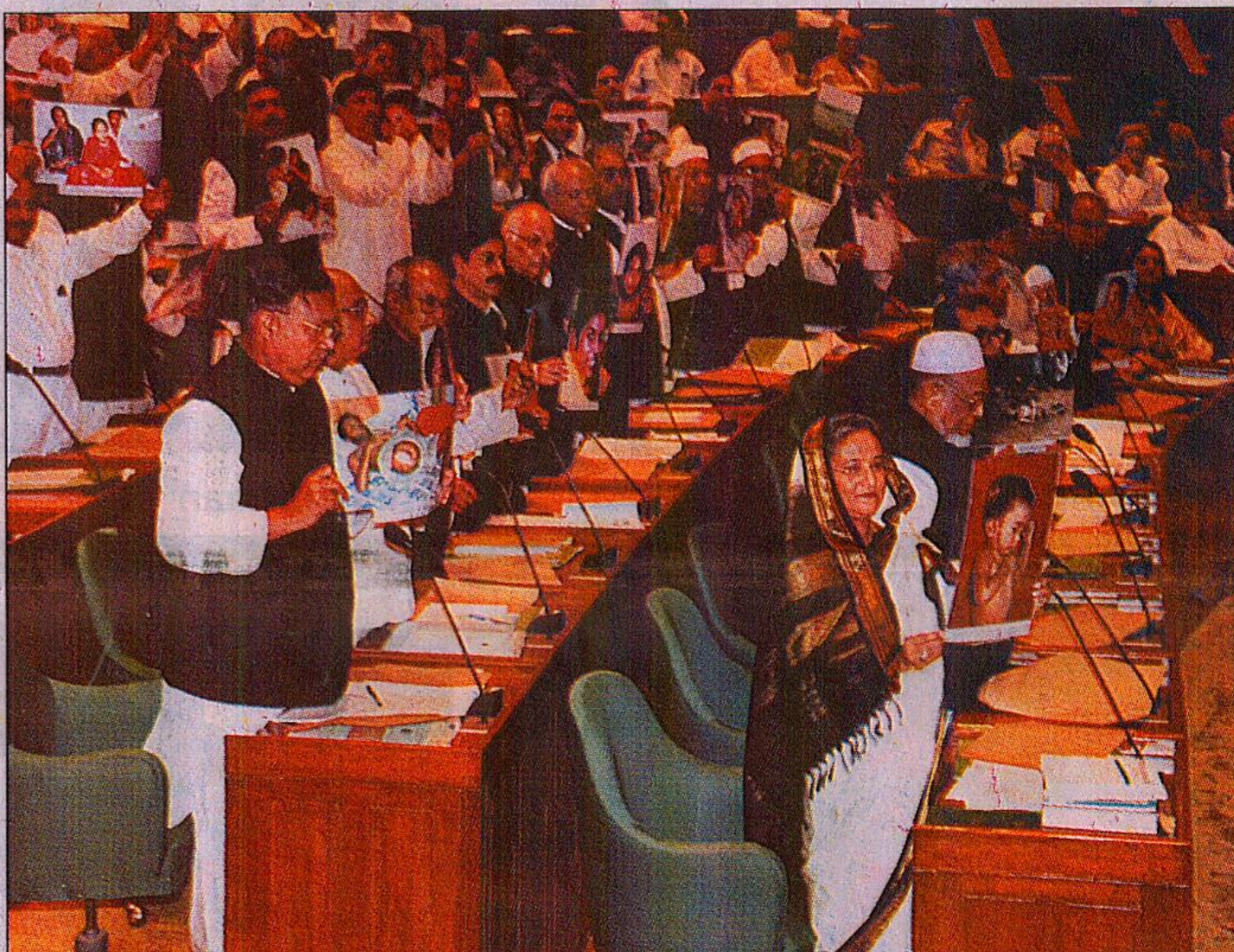
As a cure to electoral malpractices, the curious system of caretaker government has been devised. That system has also been subjected to criticism by the Awami League who want further improvements to be introduced. Looked at objectively, caretaker government is an insult - particularly to the politicians seeking to

gain power through election, and, also, by implication, to the people who are obliged to choose them as their representatives. In putting up with this non-party governmental machinery the politicians admit that they cannot be trusted with the task of conducting a general election. And yet the same politicians take over the entire state power when they are elected. The public is also put to shame. For they elect such persons as by their own admission are untrustworthy. How can it be denied that a people is known by the representatives it chooses?

The fact of the matter is that the government as well the opposition is made of the same stuff. They are not the best persons in the society, and yet they are the most powerful and, because of the office they hold and the publicity they get, serve as role models for the people. The government uses and abuses power; the opposition tries to get it, with the same objective of using and abusing it. Far from making the government accountable through debates, criticism, offer of alternative policies and principles, the opposition tries to pull, ineffectively though, the government down. The cause of the people lies neglected. The government oppresses the public in as many ways as it can, and the opposition, instead of standing beside the public, initiates such agitational programmes as are likely to add to public misery, causing little or no damage to the government as it is.

What we need, therefore, is very clearly opposition not so much to the party in power as to the ruling class itself. That, and not the election seekers, will be the real opposition - opposition in the interest of public welfare not for promoting personal gains. And it is this opposition which is lacking in the country, contributing to our helplessness and despair. This opposition will be expected to work toward democratisation of the state and society. Democracy in this context would mean more than the right to vote and choose, as is often the case, between lesser of the two evils. Even free and fair elections are not enough, democracy would require decentralisation of state power, equality of rights and opportunities, and governance by elected representatives at all levels of society. Society itself needs to be transformed, so that exploitation of the many by the few is made difficult, if not impossible.

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## Pitfalls of our democracy



SHAH ABDUL HANNAN

**B**ANGLADESH began its journey as a democratic state with the introduction of the national constitution in 1972. However, following the adoption of the constitution, democracy in Bangladesh was undermined by several interruptions.

Democracy has taken firmer root since 1991 when Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed became the Caretaker President of the country. Since then, three elections have taken place; the first in 1991, followed by a second in 1996, and the latest in 2001. This period witnessed the rise and fall of three governments. The first government, that of Khaleda Zia ruled from 1991 to 1996. Then the government of Sheikh Hasina was in power from 1996 to 2001, followed by the return of Khaleda Zia to power in 2001, who remains in

office at present. Of course, in between the tenure of these governments, caretaker governments were formed and led by former Chief Justices of the country as per our constitution. The first Khaleda Zia government was preceded by the caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

In this brief article, I will delineate the basic features that have characterised our democracy since 1991. I will also discuss some key issues that urgently demand contemplation and resolution.

The most important issue is that of holding fair elections. We find that the twin phenomena of money and muscle continue to wield a serious and embarrassing degree of influence over our elections. It is true that the elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 were recognised to have been held properly. However, it is common knowledge that the use of money and muscle plagued these elections to varying degrees, which sometimes the Election Commission was unable to restrain, let alone eradicate. For instance, the Election Commission has been unable to implement the restriction on expenditure. Thus the issue of fair elections is a core issue for national contemplation and reform in view of the widespread public perception mentioned above. I believe several steps can be taken to help rectify this situation. One is the strengthening of

the Election Commission by granting it full independence, as in India. The neutrality and the independence of the Election Commission in India remain undisputed.

However, we in Bangladesh find that the relationship between the Election Commission and the government is sometimes quite strained. In several instances in the past, serious disagreements arose between the ruling party and the Chief Election Commissioner or Election Commissioners. Thus, this issue needs to be handled with care in the future. Not only should the Election Commission be independent, but also, the selection of the members of the Election Commission, if possible, should be made through consensus among the major parties in the country. Electoral laws need to be changed in line with India as stated above. As in India, asset declaration of the candidates must be made compulsory. Electoral irregularities, if there be any, should be investigated quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, as things stand currently, any inquiry into complaints of election rigging entails so many steps that in most cases, no decision can be taken during the entire five year term of an elected government. This naturally encourages continuation in attempts to influence elections

through intimidation, coercion, and financial clout. What is needed is that the complaint is taken very seriously and decisions rendered within a very short period of time - no more than six months. Each stage in the process should be strictly defined by time limits and no more than one or two appeals should be allowed. If this can be done and if ten/twenty members of Parliament lose their seats, this will serve as a good lesson for all the other members and the frequency with which electoral irregularities occur is likely to decrease over time.

My next point concerns the caretaker government. Our democracy is in a way regulated by the caretaker gov. and the caretaker concept enshrined in the constitution. This resulted from a lack of faith in the incumbent government to hold a fair election. There is a general consensus that, given our national context and past records, it is better to hold elections under a caretaker government than under a party gov. Thus this concept of caretaker government has been accepted by the people fully and should be sustained. Certain amendments can be made in due time should there be a general consensus among the major political parties on the substance of the amendment. Otherwise, the caretaker provisions should not be touched since any such act is likely to cre-

ate further problems and harm our relatively fragile current state of democracy.

A feature of our democracy is complete press freedom. We can proudly say that we have more press freedom than any other country. What we must be cautious about is that we do not abuse our press freedom and ensure that there is a genuine attempt at fair reporting, accuracy, and a professional impartiality in the news. While it is understood that an editor or a reporter cannot be absolutely neutral and naturally has values, beliefs, and certain prejudices of his/her own as a thinking and feeling human being, it is imperative that journalists, more than anybody else, must at least ideally and constantly strive to attain that elusive state of objectivity or "value-free" praxis in reporting, writing, and framing. Anything less harms democracy and constitutes a grave injustice. People have the right to know the truth, not cleverly crafted or tilted or sensationalised news.

Another regrettable feature of our democracy is the politicisation of the civil services and various appointments at every level throughout the country including the academic arena. Whoever comes to power, by and large, tends to appoint individuals who are known to them or who support them. This is extremely

inappropriate. While such an allegation cannot be proven as such, this is a widespread public perception and this is what one hears from the ordinary people time and again. Not even appointments in the Public Service Commission (PSC) are free from nepotism. This leads to politicisation of the administration, bureaucracy and various other appointments of significance and in no way enables a truly democratic dispensation.

Our democracy is also partly complicated and frustrated by repeated hartals called by the opposition. This phenomenon is quite peculiar to Bangladesh, which does not occur on such a scale in any other country. A few hartals were acceptable in the past, but in my view, this is no longer acceptable, for the costs far outweigh the benefits. While freedom of expression is a basic human right and a marker of pluralism, tolerance, and civility, the particular local "hartal" form of such expression has proven to be destructive to our economy, which hinders the building of civil society. It does not help enhance the political process in any way and is clearly not an effective means of bringing about a change of government. Additionally, the culture of hartal is frustrating the public and ruining the image of our country abroad. Our political parties must find a way to stop

repeated calls for hartals. We clearly need a law to regulate and redefine the practice of hartals. Such a law should take shape through debates in the parliament, and if possible, with the consensus of the parties in the Parliament.

Boycotting of the Parliament is yet another problem of the same genre. Some boycotts continue for months, some for the whole session, and some for a few days. This devastates the prospect of democracy in the country. The parliament in our country is boycotted for rather trivial or petty reasons, which are magically and emotionally translated into monumental concerns by those involved. Given the numerous outstanding problems our country faces, we no longer have the luxury to indulge in a politics of wounded pride. It appears to me that parties in opposition, whichever parties these may be at any particular time, practically wait for an opportunity to quit the Parliament. A group can walk out for an hour or perhaps even a day to register protest concerning a particular issue, but the parliament should not be boycotted for longer than that. Our honourable Members of the Parliament are there for a particular reason, to do a particular job, to represent particular segments of the public, and to get certain concrete

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*Our political parties must behave in a democratic manner, in a manner befitting elements of civil society. They should hold dialogues with each other and this they clearly did not do over the past few years. They must make a genuine, concerted effort to shun money, muscle and politicisation of the various national services.*