

DHAKA FRIDAY JANUARY 14, 2005

# Winner takes it all

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**T**HE different stages of political development in Bangladesh appear to be characterized by, as they say, "winner takes it all" syndrome. This phrase would be appropriate in the sphere of games and sports. Even in this area, there are trophies for the loser sometimes called runners up. In the sports arena again, the behaviour of both the winner and the loser are guided by what is called sportsman spirit. This spirit implies that defeat should be accepted with grace with a resolve for renewed efforts to win in the next round. No complaints are made in public by any of the members of the team that loses. The same spirit is found in the political arena in developed political systems. When Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost to the Congress, its leader conceded defeat with grace. The same scenario was there in the last elections that George Bush had won in the United States of America (USA).

**Bangladesh situation**  
In case of Bangladesh, the reverse is the case. "Winner takes it all" dominates the political scene of Bangladesh. Political analysts have tried to explain this scenario in different ways. These include (a) lack of continuity in democratic development, (b) underdeveloped nature of political system and (c) lack of foresight and vision on the part of political leadership etc.

The reasons cited above are not mutually exclusive. Rolled into one, they all add up to the opprobrious label of 'immature democracy' that is used to describe the stage of political development in Bangladesh. The element of lack of political continuity is often identified as the single largest contributing factor that has impeded the growth of healthy democratic tradition in Bangladesh.

The earliest break came from the introduction of one-party rule in 1975. This, however, was a short-lived experiment that was supplanted by military rule. In the

former case of one-party rule, it was more or less "winner takes it all" syndrome. The second break with the continuity of the democratic system was through martial law that re-enacted the experiences of the first martial law of 1958 in the then Pakistan. Emulating the example of 1958, the soldier turned into politician, obtained 'legitimacy' through 'referendum', set up his own political party and ruled the country until killed by some of his junior colleagues in 1981. The only silver lining in the dark cloud, as is often claimed, is that the political development that ensued led to the return of multi-party framework of politics. However, its deleterious effect on social and political development has not been subjected to rigorous research.

Late Borhanuddin Ahmed, in his book titled 'The Generals of Pakistan and Bangladesh' (1993) provides some observations in this context. After saying that "Bangladesh was dragged into the middle ages by one stroke of General Zia's proclamation", Ahmed quotes from Williams Graham Sumner. It reads "To err in prescribing for a man is at worst to kill him, to err in prescribing for a society is to set in operation injurious forces which extend, ramify, multiply their effects in new combinations throughout an indefinite future".

Indeed the process of indefinite future started and came to be consolidated with the second martial law of 1982. The same old style of soldier turned politician reappeared in the name of democracy and development. The nine year rule of Ershad witnessed continuous political unrest that eventually culminated in his overthrow by what is often called "The people's power".

**The road to indefinite future**  
It is necessary to elaborate in this context how to err in prescribing for the society leads to indefinite future. In both the cases of

martial law, the citizens of Bangladesh heard in the form of a refrain that the soldier would return to the barracks. The opposite had happened. Actuated by the "winner takes it all" syndrome, both the military leaders looked for continuous stay in power for which they floated political parties that consisted of, in the language of an analyst, "political neophytes". In the process, the quality of politics as a sound and established system of governance has been compromised. Public interest is sacrificed for private ambition, which sets in motion

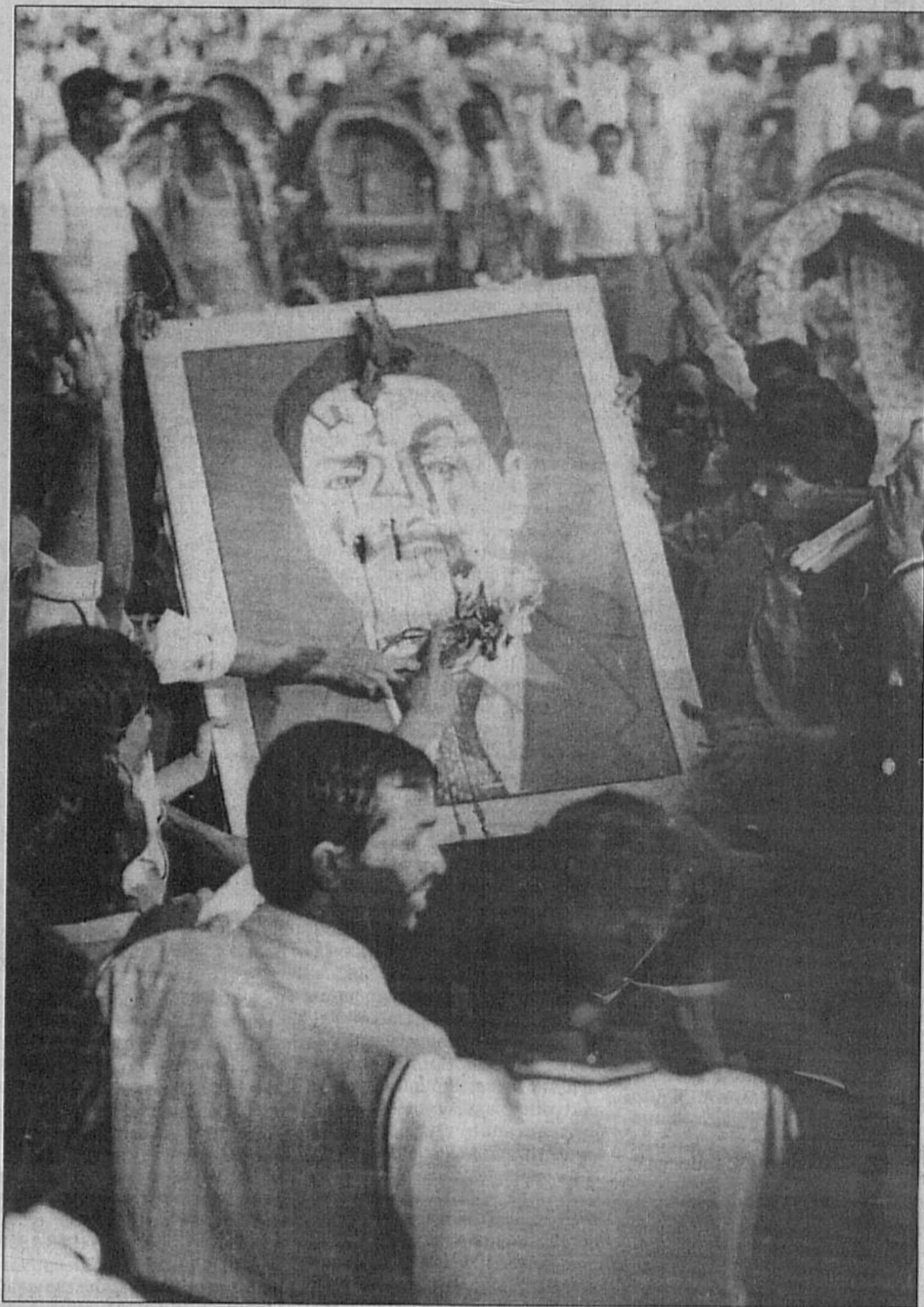
the process of decadence of society leading to an indefinite and unstable future.

A Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) stalwart, who was also a stalwart of Jatiya Party (JP) in yesteryears, analysed how during the days of first martial law, laws were abused to serve the interests of the military leaders. The analyst mentions how Ziaur Rahman used the Political Parties Regulation later to his advantage. The specific actions include (a) exploiting the factionalism that existed within some of the parties, (b) delaying granting of licenses to make a strong bargaining position and (c) defining prejudicial activity to put restrictions on political parties. Prejudicial activity was defined to include restriction 'to generate or foster any personality cult around any person, living or dead', 'foreign aided parties', 'underground activity' and 'armed cadres' etc. The analyst observes that "in formulating this law, Zia followed the Political Parties Act, 1962 as framed by Ayub Khan".

The same analyst gives a graphic account of how Ershad succeeded in causing defections and splits in the Awami League (AL) and BNP in the United People's Party (UPP) and in Ganatrantic Dal, and the Muslim League. It was in this process that both Zia and Ershad had erred in prescribing for the society that created conditions for indefinite future for Bangladesh. The process of decadence in politics, for which seeds were sown in 1975, started. "Winner takes it all" syndrome spread like a cancer in political parties, big or small with the exception of some left-wing political parties. Some politicians, since 1975 have been behaving much like chameleons. The overriding objective is to hang on to power and not to work in public interest.

**End or beginning to indefinite future**

In December 1990, when Ershad was forced to quit by people's power, many in Bangladesh and abroad thought that the end to indefinite future is in sight. The major political parties such as the AL and BNP held out public promises to institutionalise democracy. There was an end to presidential form of government and return to a parliamentary form of government. Public promises to institutionalise democracy and a return to parliamentary form of government notwithstanding, the end to indefinite future still remains a fiction rather than a fact. This situation appears to



have been further exacerbated by what appears to be a beginning to a seemingly inexorable process of decadence of institutions of the state. Much of this process of decadence of institutions of governance are attributable to the "winner takes it all" syndrome.

**The political psyche**  
The political psyche of the powers that were, are or perhaps will be in future appears to remain inextricably fixed on finding "our men or women" inside bureaucracy and in judiciary.

"Our men or women" inside Jatiya Sangsad (JS) can be identified based on party affiliations. How do you identify "our men or women" in bureaucracy or in judiciary? Is there a need to do it given the fact that a party, which commands majority support inside JS forms the government? Yet it is being done as evidence from the media appears to point out.

**Decadence of institutions**

"Winner takes it all" syndrome is exemplified by (a) rigging in elections, (b) total disregard of

views of opposition parties and even of the media, (c) using coercive powers of the state for narrow partisan interests etc. The combined effect of all these led to a continuing state of confrontational politics that still persists. The deep-seated mistrust between major political parties led to the birth of non-party caretaker government in 1996. This was agreed between and among political parties in the hope that elections would be free and fair under such a government. Even this institution is

now thought to be not impartial and fair. There are demands for reforms although the roadmap to reform process is yet to be clearly identified.

The desperate bid to win the support of 'our men and women' in civil service resulted in their large scale shuffle and reshuffle with every change of government. Worse still, attempts to abuse rules of promotion and established administrative practices further confirmed the institutional decadence of the executive organ of the state. It has been further exacerbated by forced retirements of the 'politically undesirable' or postings as officer on special duty (OSD).

To make matters worse, judiciary, in particular higher judiciary has been made controversial because of lack of prudence and good judgement in matter of selection, appointment and promotion of judges in the higher judiciary. The appointment of 19 additional judges to the High Court division is one glaring instance among few others that preceded it in the form of supersession of senior judges.

**The Problem of overpoliticisation**

A visiting Japanese citizen, who visited Bangladesh, is on record saying that the problem of future of democracy is the state of overpoliticisation. Indeed, politicisation of other institutions of the society such as lawyers' associations, labour unions, cultural associations, farmers' associations and student associations are a fact of life, too visible to be ignored. These parallel politically motivated institutions emanate from the "winner takes it all" syndrome.

**Efficacy of political reforms**

During the past few months or so, there has been some debate on political reforms. Much of the media and civil society organisations (CSOs) have been advocating for political, constitutional and electoral reforms. It is felt that these will be necessary but not sufficient to ensure democratic governance.

The important factor that is necessary will be to effect a change in "winner takes it all" syndrome to make way for a bipartisan spirit in taking decisions on all matters of public interest. It is a combination of such actions that may end the indefinite future.

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# Proportional Representation: Benefits, challenges

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**P**ROPORTIONAL representation or PR system in elections as a measure of increasing representativeness and accountability of the governments is gaining wide acceptance among the major democracies around the world. A large number of European democracies like Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark, along with Japan, Russia, Israel, Australia and New Zealand have already adopted PR system to ensure the representative nature of their elected governments. The US and the UK are facing increasing demands for introducing electoral reforms in favour of PR. The basic principle underlying proportional representation is that all voters deserve to be represented in the legislature in proportion to their strength in the electorate. Riker (1988) defines PR as "an electoral system in which, insofar as is arithmetically possible, seats are assigned to a party in proportion to the votes cast for it. Ideally, for each constituency, the ratio of

votes cast for a particular party to the total votes equals the ratio of the number of seats for that party to the total number of seats in the body." While there are various forms of proportional representation including party list systems (Norway), mixed member systems (New Zealand), and single transferable vote systems (Cambridge, Massachusetts), the general goals of all are the same. The key advantages about PR are that it "leads to better governance, based on greater engagement, and to representative decision making. PR allows for the election of more representative councils, assemblies or parliaments in which the members largely reflect the political views of the electorate as represented at the ballot box. Such representative bodies allow for a diversity of views which can be fed in to the decision making process. PR can also allow for a greater diversity of representation from different communities." (Jonathan Wallace, 2002) Given the magnitude of unfulfilled expectations of the people of Bangladesh under the successive

democratic governments, it is worth examining whether introducing a PR in elections would lead to better governance and a system of greater accountability.

**The Question of Voting System**

One of the major complaints against the traditional plurality-majority or first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system is that sometimes the result bears no relationship to the proportion of votes cast. For example, consider a one hundred seat legislature in which party A received just more than fifty percent of the vote in fifty-one districts and party B received all of the remaining votes. Party A would have a majority in the legislature with just over twenty-five percent of the popular support. In the contested districts where Party A won, all of the votes cast for Party B were "wasted." Thus, proportional representation can indeed increase the confidence of the voters in Bangladesh as there are more chances of their votes being truly counted in the formation of the parliament. A number of scholarly researches on national elections

identified that proportional representation (PR) is associated with higher levels of electoral participation. Various estimates found 7-12 percent increase in voter turnout in countries with PR systems (David Brockington, 2004). This indicates the ability of PR to increase the confidence of the voters. But a greater problem for the Bangladeshi voters is that they often do not find the party nominated candidates suitable for representing their interest in the parliament and hence remain alienated from the decision-making process. Thus, probably Open Party List Voting, a variation of the PR system, would be more effective in terms of truly increasing the representative nature of the government, as this system allows voters to express a preference for particular candidates, not just parties.

**Proportional Representation and an Effective Parliament**

Would the introduction of proportional representation encourage a more effective parliament in our country? On one hand, it can definitely increase the

confidence of the both the politics and the parties on the election system. Since parties share of seats will be more or less proportional to the actual amount of votes they have received, it will at least be a little bit difficult for them to complain about "subtle" or "gross" malpractice in some specific constituencies. Another important contribution of the PR system in Bangladesh can be that it could encourage the participation of smaller 'third parties' in the national elections, since the system would ensure their representation in the parliament proportionate to the votes they receive. Such 'empowerment' of the third parties can indeed, to some extent, enhance the accountability of the major parties to the parliament and to the polity. However, one of the central criticisms against PR system remains that it often produces unstable coalitions and legislative gridlock. This accusation is based on the tendency of PR elections to encourage the participation of a larger number of smaller parties than FPTP and thus to produce

often put a small party in the position of "king maker." It can decide which larger party it joins to form a legislative majority. Thus, it can be a small party, not the voters that really decides who wins the election. This is especially a problem when a small party bypasses the party that received the most votes to form a ruling coalition with the party that came in second place.

To control the potential instabilities resulting from proportional representation, the political parties must demonstrate a degree of maturity in their actions, commitment towards the democratic system and the ability to look beyond their narrow political interests. Success of PR systems in various European democracies has been a direct result of such political maturity. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, it is difficult to expect such responsible behaviour from the political parties. Thus, fragile coalitions, increased use of money and muscle power to "buy out" the smaller parties and resultant political violence

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