

The future of democracy

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CONSIDERING the events and the eventualities of the recent past, it may be concluded that Bangladesh is under the spell of terrorism now. Terrorist activities and the associated panic have shaken the confidence of the public. In spite of so many deaths of the alleged criminals in custody due to "heart failure" during Operation Clean Heart and the ongoing so-called crossfire by the elite force RAB, people of the country have started to believe that the government is either not interested or is not capable of providing protection to them.

Many of the politicians may not agree but there exists a feeling among the masses that the politics of our country is presently under the control of musclemen and the corrupt section of society. Extortionists who force people to pay toll for different purposes, the people who manipulate tender bids with muscle power by allowing only bidders of choice to participate and keep out genuine businessmen, the drug dealers, the gun runners, smugglers, etc. all who are engaged in anti-social and illegal activities are joining politics in greater numbers and are rising in the political party structure.

Many from amongst the criminals approach the party in power for joining, primarily for the sake of getting shelter from the wrath of the law enforcing agencies. Interestingly, political parties are also accepting them considering their potential as a source of muscle power and illegal money. Muscle power, black money, associated violence, and intimidation are gaining more and more importance in the political arena.

The shady characters try and get nominations of party in many cases. To win election, these candidates start using muscle power systematically quite a long time before the election date to create an

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environment of insecurity among the voters. The voters are forced to support them or face the dire consequences. These candidates also use huge quantities of black money to lure the voters and to obtain the undue cooperation of the officials connected with the election process.

Influencing the electorate and manipulation of election results are illegal. But, time and again, it is observed that neither the election commission nor the administration and the law enforcing agencies are capable of enforcing the election laws to ensure a just and fair election. Moreover, most of the officials of the concerned agencies are corrupt and can be influenced by bribe money. As a result, a good number of black money holders and musclemen contestants come out successful in election results (at least officially) even without the real support of the voters. The root cause being that the party in power - or for that matter any other political party - does not discourage but rather encourages similar elements to join and prosper within them simply to fulfill narrow partisan interest, compromising the country and the people.

Naturally, once elected they become members of parliament and sometimes ministers with important portfolios. Musclemen politicians are proved very effective for the party in power as ministers in charge of districts. They use violent muscle power and harassment, using the government law enforcement agencies and also private hoodlums under their

control (known as party cadres) to destroy dissidents and ensure support of the inhabitants in favour of the government and the ruling party irrespective of what might be their actual feeling.

The position of district minister was originally introduced for the purpose of coordinating relief operations and disaster management only within a district. But now the post is being used to become the super boss of the entire district administration. This is beyond the scope of jurisdiction of any minister as the position is not stipulated anywhere in the constitution. It is understood that the government is violating the constitution of the country by allowing the district ministers the complete authority over the entire administration of the district.

At the same time the government, to fulfill its own partisan interest, is also allowing these types of district ministers to continue with their corruption, illegal trades, and criminal activities, using their control over the government agencies and the miscreants simultaneously. Under the control of these musclemen politicians and ministers of the government party, the law enforcement agencies and other government authorities are being forced to cooperate with the illegal activities of the criminals either directly or indirectly.

It is very sad to see that under the cover of democracy criminals are slowly taking control of the country. The criminals have already taken the general population including the administration hostage in many

places and are continuing with whatever they desire without any hesitation or fear.

It is accepted by all that a democratic government is a "government of the people, by the people and for the people." As per the above, to find whether government is by the people, the election process for electing the government should be capable of ensuring a free and fair election reflecting the true wishes of the people. As described above, there lies opportunity for manipulating election results in our system. Cases of use of fraudulent practice and muscle power are on the rise with inclusion of more and more criminal elements in the political arena. As such, the Bangladesh government cannot truly be called government by the people. It is apprehended that it would be farthe away from being government by the people in the days to come in case no change in the election process can be enacted which would ensure a free and fair election.

In the constitution of Bangladesh, the responsibility of keeping the government as government for the people has been given to parliament. It is said, "The cabinet shall be collectively responsible to Parliament."

The PM with the entire cabinet is accountable to the rest of parliament. Parliament here comprises of all the other MPs excepting those in the government as ministers, irrespective of their political parties. As such, MPs of government party and opposition party collectively have been given the responsibility as per the constitution to ensure the accountability of the government. In a group all the MPs are supposed to guide and persuade the government to perform in a way which reflects the wishes and desires of the people.

But, clause 70(1) of our constitution bars MPs belonging to different political parties, including the government party, to take a stand against their party position. This has allowed the government scope for having a captive majority in the parliament and an ensured support for all its activities enabling it to avoid any accountability to the parliament.

For a similar reason, parliamentary standing committees, having majority numbers from government side and being chaired by government party MP, have to abide by government guidance instead of scrutinizing the government functionaries. Under the present circumstances, parliament as a whole is unable to force the government to function for the people with accountability for its day to day activities.

In reality, parliament is being used as a rubber stamp to legitimize all the activities of the government irrespective of merit. Importance of parliament for any matter, not to talk

about important and urgent state matters, has become so minimal these days that nobody, either from the government or from the opposition side, even considers it necessary or useful to attend the parliament sessions. At the moment, the limping parliament is being run without quorum and is being adjourned for the same reason. So, the most important institution to uphold peoples' interest in running the government and ensuring democratic governance has become ineffective and is on the verge of becoming completely meaningless.

It may be said, the government of Bangladesh is running without any accountability now. A government without accountability cannot remain a democratic government as it has the scope and tendency to go astray towards autocracy. It is evident, with the passage of time, the government of Bangladesh is losing its democratic character and is becoming more and more autocratic every day. If the trend is not reversed it may lead to complete destruction of democratic norms and practices in Bangladesh.

The criminalization of politics and the politicization of criminality are progressing simultaneously in Bangladesh under a very favourable environment in the absence of a truly democratic government accountable to the people. It is felt that the present system of election needs a through change.

Proportionate system of representation in parliament based on total vote received by each political party as per the list declared earlier may be considered for adoption in our country. The voters would vote for the political party not any particular candidate. A list of candidates would be declared prior to election serially as per their priority by each political party. Only those would be declared elected from the top of the list of a political party as per the proportion of votes received by that party compared to total votes cast to all the political parties. In order to make our system of governance more democratic it is suggested that the member of parliaments be made free of party bindings while in the parliament to decide on the basis of individual merit as per his/her own judgment on each and every issue.

Time is running out fast. The more we delay, the further criminalization of politics and politicization of criminality advances and democracy narrows. This could make the corrective measures more difficult. We must act now to bring some drastic modification in our election system and our system of governance. Without doing so no qualitative improvement in our politics is possible. In the absence of good politics no country can have good governance, and without good governance better quality of life for the people of Bangladesh cannot be ensured.

The author is a member of parliament.

Sewing the seeds of prosperity

SALLY PAXTON writes from Phnom Penh

ALL of us in our different spheres of work are grappling with one of the most transformational processes of our lifetime: globalization. It is a powerful driving economic and social force in our daily lives, but its potential inequity is also one of its most troubling aspects.

When the voices of those directly affected are heard and acted upon, however, globalization can also be a positive agent for change -- if steps are taken to ensure that this happens.

The garment industry offers one of the most publicized examples of the dramatic impact of globalization on economies and people. Global foreign trade in garments almost doubled between 1990 and 2002 -- from \$108 billion to almost \$200 billion -- during a period marked by anti-sweatshop protests. But growth in this industry has just begun. Trade in garments is projected to increase by another \$50 billion this year, and expand to \$320 billion by 2010.

While an increasing share of garments in the international marketplace come from Asia, the costs to the consumer of those garments are falling. Yet there is cause for hope that the future of the workers making them will not be characterized by the "race to the bottom" that many fear.

In Cambodia in 2001, the International Labour Organization (ILO) launched a unique partnership that would have a significant impact on the industry. Cambodia's garment industry, which today employs more than 270,000 mostly female workers and makes up 80 per cent of all its exports, has grown rapidly as a result of US quotas on big producers such as China. Partly due to intense lobbying from unions and anti-sweatshop campaigners, the US government gave trade privileges to Cambodia in return for demonstrated improvements in factory working conditions. It was agreed that the ILO would assist the indus-

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try in making those improvements. The ILO created a team of independent labour monitors to make unannounced visits to garment factories, checking on conditions as diverse as freedom of association, wages, working hours, sanitary facilities, machine safety and noise control. The monitors' checklist, based on Cambodian labour law and ILO standards, covers more than 500 items.

Meanwhile, the Cambodian government decreed that factory participation in the monitoring scheme would be a pre-condition for receiving export licenses. This guaranteed that almost every garment factory in the country would become part of the scheme. The monitoring component is complemented by technical training in which the ILO helps factories continuously improve their remediation mechanisms, as well as enhancing the capacity of trade unions, employer representatives and the government in identifying and resolving issues themselves.

The ILO monitoring arrangements are unique, providing a source of independent information that international buyers can use to make sourcing decisions. This information is becoming invaluable for companies investment decisions in Cambodia as well as helping these companies make social responsibility an essential part of their corporate mission.

Consumers and worker representatives can also access this information. The ILO publishes regular reports naming factories and tracking their progress on suggestions for improvement. The programme's growing reputation for

transparency, independence and credibility has become key to its success.

This unique fusion of public and private sector interests stands to benefit an extremely vulnerable group -- young women workers between the ages of 18 to 25 -- as well as help ensure a brighter future for the families that depend on their support.

Concern over labour standards in poor countries is well founded. Consumers are right to worry about conditions in one of the most poorly paid industries in the world -- an industry producing goods that are linked intimately with appearance and individual self-image. Today, companies with multi-billion dollar brands are keenly aware that they will also be judged by the way their business partners and sub-contractors treat their employees.

Conditions are not perfect in Cambodia. But the country's improved compliance with international labour standards, monitored by an independent body, is offering a competitive advantage that it lacks in other areas. And it is offering consumers and companies a strong reason for choosing Cambodian-made garments and investing in this thriving industry.

Are the interests of consumers who seek affordable products, and the interests of buyers who want to increase profits, compatible with the interests of young rural women who need to find decent work? On the basis of our experience in Cambodia and the results of this unique project, we say yes.

Sally Paxton is the Executive Director of Social Dialogue at the International Labour Organization (ILO).

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