

Making a mockery of democracy

GM QUADER

THE people of Bangladesh have a long history of struggle; struggle against unfairness, disparity, deprivation and discrimination; struggle for secularism, establishment of social justice, and fair distribution of national wealth. History tells us the people never rested until victory was achieved and sacrificed everything possible to reach their desired goal.

They fought against the British rule and played a significant role in achieving independence and the creation of Pakistan. When that victory failed to deliver the desired result of establishing social justice, the people of Bangladesh again took up an armed struggle to drive out more than one hundred thousand well trained and heavily armed Pakistani soldiers from the land.

It is sad to note that each time, the victories could not be sustained by the people. The victory was stolen and the benefits were hijacked by a group of self-seekers, depriving the masses who were the major factor in the triumphs. It is frustrating to witness that this beneficiary class in many cases took position against the people during their movement against colonial or repressive regimes. As such, when the win is taken over by a faction of the defeated forces, the course of history gradually shifts back towards the old path against which the people waged war in the first place.

Let us consider the struggle for independence of Bangladesh. The people of the then East Pakistan demanded to end to deprivation and to receive due share of the national resources. Secularism was not so prominent in the wish list of the people initially. But, when the repressive forces of the then Pakistan nakedly started

abusing Islam for justifying irrational activities, secularism got prominence, and became a popular aspiration. When their reasonable expectations were denied, the people of Bangladesh were left with no other option but armed struggle for creation of a new sovereign country.

It had been the expectation that the new country would deliver a society based on democratic principals of social justice and rule of law where every citizen would be allowed due share without discrimination. Shortly after the victory it started to become clear that the resultant state was far from meeting any of the aspirations of the people.

More than thirty years has elapsed since the creation of Bangladesh. If considered against the expectations of the people, it is obvious that not only have the aspiration not been fulfilled, but that the opposite happened. Though it may be shocking, the reality is that the country is being run now in a way more or less as was the desire of the deposed Pakistani rulers, with the assistance of elements who were once their allies.

This could have never been possible if the country would have run democratically. Democracy ensures the rulers are chosen by the people. Democracy also ensures that the rulers are accountable to the people. Democratic system thus keeps constant pressure on the people in charge for fulfillment of hopes and aspirations of the population. The poor governance after the emergence of Bangladesh clearly indicates the lack of democratic practice in managing the affairs of state.

During the late eighties a mass movement was waged against the rule of military-led governments, blood was spilled and people sacrificed to establish democracy. Parliamentary democracy was thus introduced during the

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early nineties with a pledge to execute all functions of the state in accordance with the hopes and aspirations of the people through a government elected by the people. Accountability of the government to the people was to be ensured through a parliament. Unfortunately for the people, no mentionable improvement occurred even after that. Bangladesh continued to be ruled in the same autocratic way without any trace of accountability to the people, and the natural expectations of the people were nowhere to be reflected in the actions of the government. Interestingly, the country continued to be run by the same or similar elements as it had been with the past autocratic regimes.

In democracy, to ensure choice of the people in selection of their ruler, there must be election process which is free from all sorts of undue influence and fair in operation. Democratic system must also provide effective monitoring and control mechanism to make the ruler not only accountable to the public but also responsive to their hopes and aspirations.

In Bangladesh, the process of putting undue pressure on the outcome of next election results or influencing the national election starts the day a new government ascends to power. The process of election result manipulation continues throughout the entire tenure of a government. In the process, the choice of people in selecting their ruler and of changing the ruler is denied.

The PM, in forming the Cabinet,



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appoints some ministers, in addition to their normal responsibilities, as Ministers in Charge of Districts. There does not exist any provision anywhere in our constitution to create a District Minister and assign him with the authority of a super administrator of the district above all the government functionaries there.

The positions are made with the sole purpose of placing the entire administration of a district under the complete control of the ruling party. All the government benefits, business, property, jobs,

etc are used and misused by the ruling party people to serve their partisan interest with the direct interference of the District Minister.

The PM is also seen appointing advisors giving them rank and status of minister, state minister, etc. At times the advisors are also being provided with the responsibility of running administration of a ministry. There is no provision in the constitution to appoint advisor or to assign them responsibility of ministry or a part of it, except during the tenure of

caretaker government.

Article 19(2) of the constitution ensures effective measures to remove social and economic inequality, to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and to ensure opportunity in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the country.

But the PM has constituted a special office, one prime function of which is to identify different infrastructural and welfare oriented

projects in different sectors as "PM's Priority Projects" on the basis of partisan interest. Money is sanctioned in areas with ruling alliance MPs. Important leaders of the ruling alliance including the PM visit places and ask the people to provide support to the government in future elections to get development funds, which can be considered an effort to influence freeness and fairness of election. The PM is breaking her oath of office and also violating the constitution by using public funds as per her own priority list made on the basis of partisan interest.

The above are mentioned to give a glimpse of a small fraction of the total irregularities of the political party in power, including its important and responsible officials. The opposition also indulges in irregularities. So in the process, criminals with black money and muscle power are getting more and more importance in the election game, and as such, in politics as a whole. In place of free and fair election, the objective has now become manipulation. Success and failure of a person or a party in politics now depends on how effectively and efficiently election process could be influenced to twist the result.

Parliament has been made responsible to ensure accountability of the government to the people. In order to perform that function effectively, parliament must be provided with enough authority and power. But, in reality, the opposite is true.

Parliament is to consist of all MPs from both opposition and treasury benches, excepting the Ministers of the government. MPs are to stand as adversary to the government in parliament. The idea is that Ministers including the PM are to face all the MPs on the floor of the parliament, who by virtue of

being elected directly by the people, would ensure accountability of government to the people through them.

But the constitution bars MPs from taking a position against the party line, which also put a barrier to government party MPs' ability to take a stand against government decisions. The government thus is assured of captive support of the party MPs in parliament. Parliament is weakened due to this provision of the constitution and is reduced for all practical purposes to minority number of opposition MPs only. Obviously, this parliament can in no way enforce accountability of the government.

In the UK, the PM is known as first among equals. This confirms that the PM is an MP and is equal to all other MPs. The only difference is he or she is to be counted as first among his or her other MP colleagues. Why is it so? Because if the MPs are to monitor the actions of the PM and Ministers, they need to be equal to them as a person.

If you compare that to what exists here, our Ministers are considered to be much superior to ordinary MPs. The Prime Minister's position in our country is so high that there cannot be any comparison with it. So who would be capable to see fault in the actions of the government Ministers, especially of the Prime Minister?

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The Katrina apocalypse

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AS one presses the TV remote control, it is hard to take one's eyes off from the evidence of Titanic ineptitude of the federal officials which compounded the devastation of the over 500,000 thousand poor and dispossessed Americans. The multitudes of dead arising from Hurricane Katrina, one of the fiercest ever to hit the eastern seaboard of the US, shows so graphically again, if we needed reminding after the Asian tsunami, the destruction that Mother Nature has at her disposal. In the world's most advanced country, with its most sophisticated storm and flood defenses, the death toll seems surreal.

Katrina left such an indelible signature on the communities in New Orleans, Mississippi, Alabama, and the southern Gulf Coast that generations will remember it with shock. With much of central New Orleans finally cleared of devastated refugees, search teams widened operations to outlying streets, moving from house to house with orders to evacuate all remaining residents who escaped death. Troops in uniform are patrolling the streets, rescuers are hunting for stragglers, and New Orleans looks like a wrecked ghost town as the evacuation nears completion and the authorities direct efforts to the grim task of collecting decomposed bodies in a ghastly landscape awash in numberless corpses.

Even in such a disaster criminals show up with their despicable acts of rape and murder. To restore order, police have shot several people and killed at least two after gunmen opened fire at contractors traveling across a bridge on their way to make repairs. Many mortuary teams already have begun the gruesome task of collecting corpses still floating in floodwaters, trapped inside buildings or abandoned on highways after the devastating storm that deluged the city a week ago. Authorities warn that the death count will rise exponentially. Although some floodwater has drained out of the city streets, a significant amount of New Orleans remains drowned. Federal emergency and city officials predict that water drainage operations will take weeks and maybe months, provided no more rain pours in during the intermittent recovery and rescue phase.

The aftermath blame game and finger pointing have already started criss-crossing the conscience of the nation. The state and local government officials must share some of the blame, but only the federal officials had access to resources that could have made all the difference, but were not mobilised timely to respond to the human misery never seen ever before in US history.

The Chicago Tribune reports that "USS Bataan, equipped with six operating rooms, hundreds of hospital beds and the ability to produce 100,000 gallons of fresh water a day, has been sitting off the Gulf Coast since last Monday -- without patients." Experience and experts tell us that the first 72 hours after a natural calamity are the most opportune window during which prompt mobilisation of emergency resources can and save many lives. Unfortunately, the actions taken after Katrina were anything but prompt and

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Amidst the devastation of Bourbon Street, New Orleans.

befitting the magnitude of the disaster. Newsweek reports that a "strange paralysis" set in among Bush administration officials, who debated lines of authority while thousands died.

The Bush administration's problems in the crisis seemed to crystallize in a dramatic appearance on the NBC program "Meet the Press" by Aaron Broussard, President of Jefferson Parish near New Orleans. Sobbing, he told of an emergency management official (EMO) receiving phone calls from his mother, who, trapped in a nursing home, pleaded day after day for rescue. Assured by federal officials, the man promised her repeatedly that help was on the way.

"Every day she called him and said, 'Are you coming, son? Is somebody coming?' And the EMO said, 'Yeah, Mama, somebody's coming to get you. Somebody's coming to get you on Tuesday. Somebody's coming to get you on Wednesday. Somebody's coming to get you on Thursday. Somebody's coming to get you on Friday.' And she drowned Friday night. She drowned Friday night."

Mr. Broussard angrily denounced the country's leadership. "We have been abandoned by our own country," he said. "It's not just Katrina that caused all these deaths in New Orleans here. Bureaucracy has committed murder here in the greater New Orleans area, and bureaucracy has to stand trial before Congress now."

The larger picture of death is still very bleak. There is no sure way to know or say how many were swept away and had died in the hurricane or were waiting to be rescued after the city's levees burst. One morgue at the St. Gabriel Prison near New Orleans was expecting 1,000 to 2,000 bodies. Hundreds were missing in nearby Chalmette. A week

after Katrina devastated the Gulf coast, New Orleans is still a partly submerged city of abandoned homes and ruined businesses, dead and decomposed human bodies in house attics or floating in deserted streets of misery.

As the effects of the devastation unfolded and spread across the nation, 20 states have already opened their shelters, homes and schools to the hurricane refugees. But transporting such a huge distressed population of New Orleans to other parts of the country has created enormous overcrowding and strains. In Texas alone, where nearly half the victims (over 225,000) are jamming stadiums, civic centers, and hotels, Gov. Rick Perry said the state's capacity was almost exhausted. Thousands of people were also arriving at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas.

As shown on CNN and other TV channels, there were holdouts in the city, unknown numbers of people who refused to leave but were unable to because they had no transport and no money for hotels or motels to stay in. They were warned by officials of dreadful days and months ahead in a destroyed and abandoned city without food, water, electricity, telephone, medical care, and other necessities, only the spectre of cholera, typhoid or mosquito-borne malaria or the West Nile virus await them.

As rescue helicopters and boat crews searched previously populated flooded areas for survivors and officials focused for the first time on finding, collecting, and counting the dead, Michael Chertoff, the Secretary of Homeland Security, warned that Americans must brace for some gruesome sights in the days ahead. "We need to prepare the country for what's coming," Mr. Chertoff said on the "Fox News Sunday" television program. "We are going

to uncover people who died hiding in their house."

It is hard to comprehend that people of the world's most powerful and resourceful nation would find themselves absolutely helpless and at the mercy of a killer hurricane which showed no mercy whatsoever. Bangladesh, which is always open to nature's fury with its near sea level base altitude, has much to experience and learn from the disaster. Katrina killed thousands of Americans, and displaced and dispossessed half a million from their homes. Reconstructions and rebuilding of houses and businesses could easily reach over \$40 billion. The entire nation is giving charitable contributions. A calamity of this magnitude could easily kill millions in the coastal areas of Bangladesh, and property damage would easily impoverish the entire nation. Given our meager resources, we must have maximum preparedness at all times ready to respond to save whoever and whatever we can.

Whenever a nation is in distress or human beings are in misery, it has never mattered which nation and which human beings, Americans have always responded with money, materials, and prayers. In every natural disaster or crime against humanity anywhere in the world, the victims always wait to hear when America is coming.

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Backs to the wall

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WORLD economic headlines these days are all about the United States, China, and India. But only a decade ago Japan and Germany were still in the Big Three. Industrial giants with powerful currencies, dynamic companies and highly productive work forces, the two nations were widely seen as models of capitalism with a more human face, real rivals to the Anglo-Saxon version. At the time no one imagined that their emerging troubles would prove so durable, or that India and China would come on so fast. Japan seemed sure to remain the dominant player in booming East Asia, and Germany the undisputed leader of an ever-widening European Union. What happened next is no secret: economic stagnation set in. The two giants were geared to an older industrial age, with rigid labour laws and antiquated banking systems. Their corporate cultures rejected entrepreneurs, their politicians lacked the courage to force potentially painful modernisation on their complacent and satisfied populations. Japan and Germany lost their technological edge to the United States, their manufacturing edge to Asian upstarts. And as slow as the world was to understand the depth of their slide, so we have yet to recognise signs of a comeback.

Upcoming elections on September 11 in Japan and September 18 in Germany could be remembered as the pivotal moment when these two giants regained their lost momentum.

The stakes could hardly be larger. Japan and Germany still have far more immediate impact on the world economy than the emerging giants, China and India. Together they account for about 17 percent of global GNP, but Morgan Stanley figures that with reasonable reforms, that number could be upped to 22 percent. By comparison, America contributes 28 percent and China a mere 4 percent. In other words, reforms in Japan and Germany could contribute more to the world's income than China's entire economy does today. A healthy Japan would give many Asian countries an alternative to growing dependence on sales to China; a recovery in Germany could help revive all of Europe. And rising demand in both countries would help trim the American trade deficit, easing the threat of a sharp fall in the dollar, and the US economy.

Politicians in Tokyo and Berlin are calling these elections the most important since the late 1940s, and they are right. The deeper question for both countries is also strikingly similar: whether to overhaul welfare-capitalist models that delivered spectacular recoveries after World War II, growth and stability throughout the 1970s and 80s, but are no longer competitive even remotely in today's globalising economy. In Japan the central issue is Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's plan to dismantle the largest state-owned component of the financial system: Japan Post, which is the nation's largest insurer and largest savings bank, with \$3 trillion in deposits from 80 million Japanese. Japan Post and the state are joined at the hip, with the government guaranteeing postal deposits and the Post buying government bonds at low rates. Breaking up this relationship would allow trillions in captive capital to seek higher returns which, in

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Koizumi



Schroeder

essence, is what most reforms in Japan will be about. Even more than in Japan, the German election is specifically about wholesale change. A broader number of issues are front and centre, including tax, pension, and health reform. The advisers to Angela Merkel, chairman of the Christian Democratic Union and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's opponent, have talked about changes in taxes that would lower the deficit as well as encourage German conglomerates to sell off unrelated subsidiaries and thereby unlock value. They have talked about further eclipsing the power of big unions. Merkel herself has been building bridges to Germany's top business leaders.

If the reformers win, they will take power with wind in their sails. In Japan, the most important change so far has been the shoring up of a bankrupt banking system. Billions of dollars of bad loans have been removed from balance sheets. A wave of mergers has consolidated strong and weak institutions. The government has improved its supervision of banking. Like Japan, Germany has identified the crux of its problem and attacked. Although political stalemate has slowed change in Germany the past two years, Schroeder has taken some important steps to pierce the social market system in which the state coddles both labour and companies. The government has made it more difficult for the long-term unemployed to collect high pensions and has subjected social benefits to means testing. It has lengthened working hours and decentralised collective bargaining with unions.

The most transforming force in both Japan and Germany may be the impact of foreign investors. As late as the mid-1990s the main providers of capital in both countries were the domestic banks that maintained cozy ties to industry and all but ignored shareholders or modern corporate-governance standards. In recent years, both countries have opened to fierce competition from new sources of capital, including

foreign banks like Citigroup, investment banks like Goldman Sachs, private-equity groups like Blackstone, and most recently a slew of hedge funds. In a landmark transaction that brought all the facets of Anglo-American shareholder capitalism to Japan for the first time, America's Ripplewood Holdings bought Long Term Credit Bank out of government receivership in 2000, restructured it, then sold just part of the company to the public for \$2.3 billion four years later. The deal showed that private capital married to smart management could revive companies given up for dead, and there are many of these in Japan. An equally sensational event in Germany saw foreign hedge funds led by the Children's Investment Fund of London force the Deutsche Bourse to drop its effort to buy the London Stock Exchange, calling it a bad deal for shareholders. The hedge funds prevailed and forced the resignation of the bourse's CEO and its chairman, giving all of corporate Germany a glimpse of the future.

Japan changed its own laws to let in foreign investors; Germany, after much debate, decided not to block the impact of new European Union rules opening the door. The foreign investors will demand more transparency, accountability and focus on shareholder returns. They want to buy companies spun off from conglomerates. They want to purchase bad loans at a discount and rejuvenate the assets behind them. They are betting on Japan and Germany as good prospects. And there is no turning back. Japanese companies, such as Toyota and Canon, are on top of their game across global markets. Nissan's revival under Brazilian-born CEO Carlos Ghosn showed that Japan is more open to foreign management than at any time in decades. This trend was confirmed by Sony's recent decision to hire American Howard Stringer as its CEO. The gigantic keiretsu families of companies united by cross-holding of shares and a central bank -- are unwinding. Individual companies

have pared costs, refined their strategies and positioned themselves to take advantage of the growing markets and low-cost skilled labour in Asia.

German industry has sharpened its competitiveness, too. German companies such as Siemens have brought down wage and benefit costs by threatening to move union jobs out of the country. Germany regained its place as the world's leading exporter this year. The stock market has risen strongly in recent months. The lowering of capital-gains taxes in 2001 encouraged big German companies to spin off peripheral businesses, leaving them leaner. Deutsche Bank and insurer Allianz have sold off shares in industrial companies, freeing up their capital to seek higher returns. To be sure, the upcoming elections could go badly, too, and the reforms that have been started could be stopped in their tracks. Koizumi and Merkel could lose or win by so few votes that they find themselves paralyzed by having to govern with dysfunctional coalitions.

Even if the reformers do win by healthy margins, no one should underestimate the challenges ahead. Both face rapidly aging populations eager to protect the health and pension benefits that have helped drive up public debt to 150 percent of GDP in Japan and nearly 70 percent in Germany. These are among the highest debt levels in the industrial world. Both nations must shift from a growth model driven by exports to one led by domestic consumption massive psychological and structural transition.

But the choice is clear: change dramatically, or face mounting societal problems. This is a defining moment for Tokyo and Berlin. Voters in both countries should seize it.

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