of the respondents said that "it does not matter to people like them whether they had democratic or non-democratic governance." Only 4 percent replied that "in certain situations, a dictatorial government could be preferable to a democratic one." Interestingly, 38.2 percent of the respondents could not understand the question.

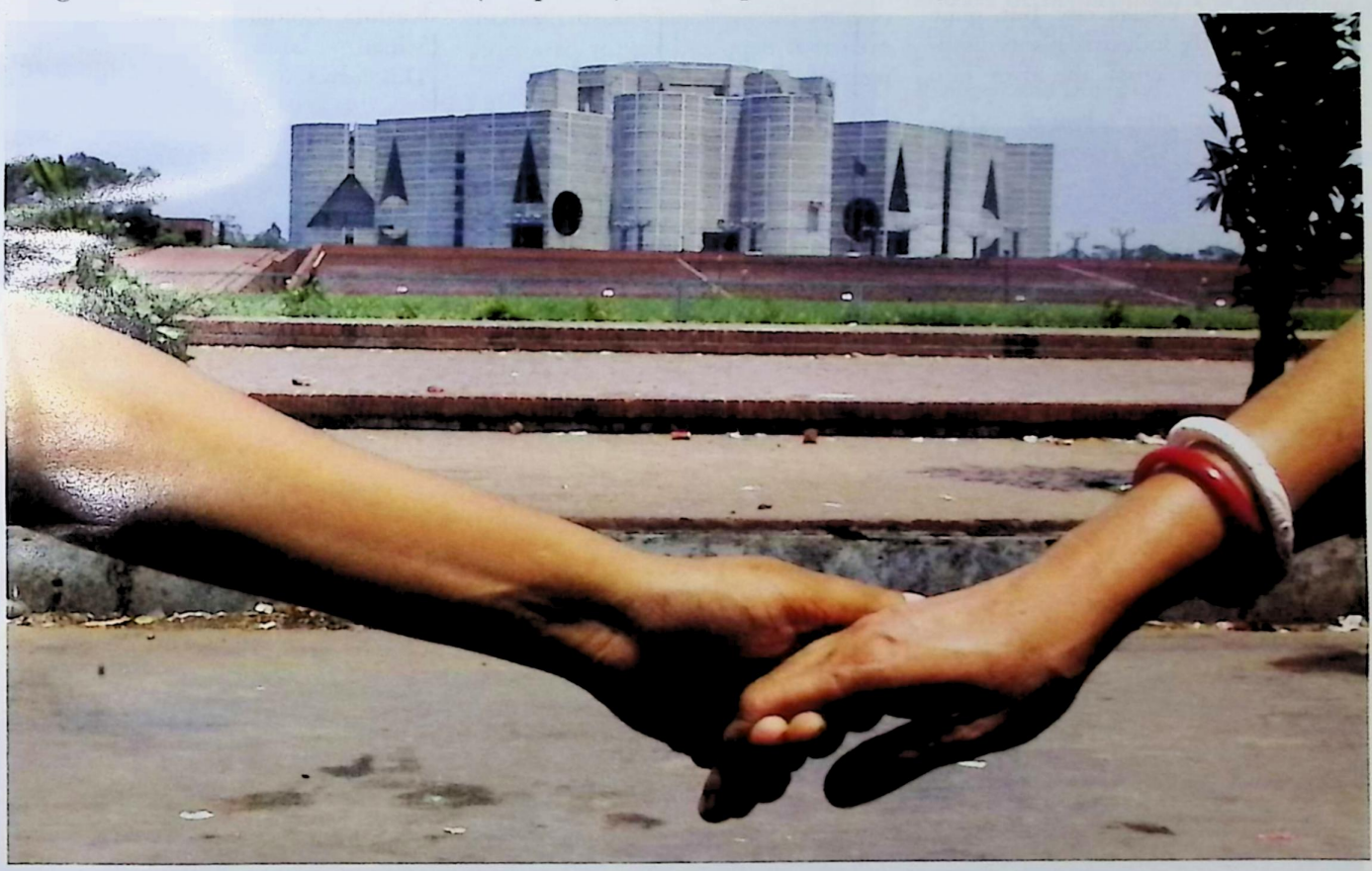
What are the essential characteristics of democracy? To this question, the respondents were more vocal and had varied responses. The bulk of them (44.4 percent) saw democracy guaranteeing "basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter for everyone," followed by "equal rights to everyone" (25.9 percent). A good number of them (10.3 percent) identified democracy with an "opportunity to change the government through elections."

Does a weaker section of the population get better treatment in a democracy? This is a thorny issue to tackle, but when asked "what they like about democracy" the majority of the respondents (55.3 percent) said that "the weak are treated with dignity." 23.5 percent of the respondents, however, like democracy because "everyone is free to speak and act." Only 5.8 percent of the respondents favour democracy because "people have control over the rulers."

A correlation between corruption and democracy was also found in the survey. 29.4 percent of the respondents "dislike" democracy because "corruption increases" in a democracy. Again, 24.7 percent of the respondents "dislike" democracy because "those who have more votes dominate over others." "Rulers keep changing" was also viewed as a negative attribute of democracy (10.5 percent), while 7.2 percent of the respondents "disliked" democracy because "too many parties divide the people."

These comments are only preliminary in nature, and only deal with the meaning of democracy. The survey was more comprehensive, and surely will throw more light when the full results are computed, analyzed and discussed. What is striking here is that a high number of people are not familiar with the meaning of political democracy, although it has remained the number one in the political agenda for over half a century in this country. There is also a perceptible number of people who have given negative responses to the meaning of democracy.

Noticeably, parties and elections, peace and security, and also procedural and institutional mechanisms in the understanding of democracy had a very low priority with the respondents. But then, if the less ambiguous responses, like taking democracy to mean "basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter for everyone," "equal rights to everyone," "the opportunity to change the government through elections," "freedom to criticize those in power," are all grouped together then it can be rightly concluded that the respondents, in overwhelming numbers (84 per cent), have given some indication as to what democracy is all about in Bangladesh. Are the politicians and policymakers ready to heed their call?



STAR

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