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Democracy and our politics

Many articles and comments have been published in various publications on this topic. All sensible and literate people are aware of the value of democratic institutions and hence the importance of having democracy in a country. Democracy is successful if the institutions which run the state are themselves democratic. The main point I want to focus on is, how can we expect democracy in the country when the head institutions (BNP or AL or the other political parties) which should nurture and uphold democracy are not democratic themselves. A few examples are in order.

All political parties are autocratic in nature as their day-to-day affairs are run by the top leader. As long as pleasing the leader of the party gets preference over the ideal or state of the party, it can never be a democratic activity.

Does each and every member know the core ideals of the party and can protest if any policy goes against such ideals? I can't find an answer to the fact that both the BNP and AL are fighting (also with huge bribes) to bring Ershad into their alliance, while they together brought him down from power by declaring him corrupt and autocratic. Where are the party ideals? Is it to acquire from him better techniques of looting public money?

Look at the current nomination practice (how can a non-affiliated rich person get

nomination instead of a die-hard party activist?). Money is the key factor behind getting nominations; it is not at all a democratic practice.

Do party policies get evolved from or consulted (with a proper voting system in place) at the root levels? It is usually from the top and imposed on the root level - in other words lack of democratic participation.

Is there any internal audit system placed with accountability before the party members concerned? It should be clear where the funds come from and where they end up. Any member can question it without any fear of any kind of reprisal.

When a party gains power, it feels that it has got a mandate to distribute wealth among its members and nominated beneficiaries - no matter if it is justified or not. A Biman aircraft can cost the government up to ten times more than its international market price as everyone in the process pockets his or her share. This is equally true of the opposition party which breaks vehicles, buildings and assets during hartals as if they belong to the party in power. Politicians must take the role in believing that each and every government asset belongs to the people and each person should protect it.

Finally, corruption is inherent in every party's manifesto. I know some will react to



this statement as they did after Dr. Yunus revealed the truth. Yes, there may be a few who are trying to keep themselves honest by not participating in looting, but they turned a blind eye to those who were looting while in power. I guess the blame goes to the party as a whole (I remember my childhood poem: "Onnyai je kore and Onnyai je shohe tobo ghrina tare trino

shomo dohe"). If the so called honest members cannot successfully protest even internally in the party, then no one can expect them to run a country on democratic values. If all members can declare their own assets with legal justification any time they are asked to, and pledge to uphold honesty among themselves, only then can we think of the implementation of

democracy.

Dr. Abdul Qader
Cooperative Research Council, (Greenhouse Gas Technologies)
Melbourne, Australia

We have seen enough of democracy rendered by the parties that were in power or in opposition in the past years. We are the ordinary citizens of Bangladesh (a country with stranded democracy) and suffered a lot from politics socially and economically and are not very optimistic about the future.

What a 10-member advisory body did in a couple of days, the ministers from an elected government couldn't in 5 long years, then how can we trust them! What are the reasons of their failure? Lack of education, honesty, dedication & vision. Due to lack of education they do not have honesty; honesty builds dedication and gives vision.

Because they are all power hungry (power brings money) they do not have any strategic planning, and without proper planning one cannot run a country.

Having witnessed the change in the country, I suggest no matter how long it takes we should have National ID, which will serve the purpose of Voter ID, and we do not have to spend millions on census since the same database can be utilised for that purpose too.

We may not be lucky next time to find and appoint a person like Mr. Fakhruddin to salvage the country & its people from political turmoil every five years.

Tazim
Orbit Satellite TV, Bahrain

In my professional language of once being a Water Resource Engineer, I conclude here that the 'river flow' must be confined within its 'defined banks' with little or no 'erosion and/or sedimentation' occurring, by 'installing the elements desired', to keep them under control. [An analogy of above, 'river flow': the running of the state, 'defined banks', both the party in power and in opposition, 'erosion and/or sedimentation': all that is against our moral values and ethics like corruption etcetera, and 'installing the elements desired', the check and balance by: a) An efficient or effective running of a parliament with the participation of all the representatives, b) the healthy political and democratic culture and c) An honest bureaucracy free from any political alliance or influence].

Then and only then, we have the government of the people, for the people and by the people. Else, we live in 'an autocratic democracy'.

Shaheedul Islam
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

Tenure of interim government

As reported by your staff correspondent, there has appeared a ray of light in the dark political tunnel of Bangladesh.

The tasks of the interim government are immense including preparing a credible voter list, reconstituting the EC, maintaining and enforcing law and order, reviewing the role of the Anti Corruption Commission etc. I would like the ACC to check the candidates' honesty and integrity, before being elected an MP, and to check the activities of the people who have amassed vast wealth to the deprivation of the poor.

I should refrain from counting the chicks before the eggs are hatched but while the country has quality people to run an interim government in perfect democratic style, why they should be shy to continue a bit more for the betterment of 14 million? Regardless of any political clout, one must see through why Bangladesh is so poor, while the neighboring country is the world's third largest industrial giant? I did not see any manifesto from any political parties for economic progress, curriculum for education, tackling corruption and bringing an end to militancy. The agenda in practice seem just otherwise. Can the interim government help the country which is in need for a visionary leader?

A reader

On e-mail

More high schools needed

Enrolment of students in high school is a crisis Dhaka has been facing for a couple of decades. We know that high standard education is necessary to match with the

present dynamic world. For attaining that goal developed educational institutions are required. Science, commerce and technological schools are demand of the time. In the last two decades write ups published in national dailies in January every year highlighted the problem of students' enrolment in standard schools. Guardians intend to enroll their wards in standard schools because they are supposed to take regular care in imparting education.

In the assessment of guardians of Dhaka city five-six private and some twenty-four public schools fall in the good category. In addition to that there are also a handful of standard schools run by government owned autonomous organizations.

Here it may be mentioned that there is arrangement in Bangladesh to impart education in humanities subjects more than the country needs at present. It will not be wise to extend facilities there, Dhaka City Corporation needs to set up high schools to impart education in science, commerce and technological subjects. The new high schools, if set up, should run on two shifts -- morning shift for girls and day shift for boys. Dhaka City Corporation should take a plan that within five years it will set up and run one high school in each ward.

Md. Ashraf Hossain

Central Bashabo, Dhaka

National ID

Everybody will agree that preparing national ID cards is not an easy task for Bangladesh, especially when we have such a high level of illiteracy. It even seems to be an impossible project when we look at the past legacy of failures in implementing Voter ID cards or even preparing an error-free voter list.

But, it should not be an impossible task if we take lessons from other countries where National ID exists. What we need at the moment is planning that can be a foundation project for the country. It will not only help produce an error-free voter list but also serve as a national database in solving the country's law and order problem, corruption, tax evasion and so many other things. I have a couple of suggestions here:

- This ID project should be planned and implemented in a way so that in future we do not need to spend any big money for this kind of project any more. This way the cost of this project would also be justifiable

- We should set up a national central database and every individual should be required to be on this list. I have very little confidence that a project like this will be implemented by any of our major political parties as it will make the administration more transparent and empower it to go after corruption. I urge the current caretaker government to seriously think over the issue.

- We don't need to re-invent the wheel. There are many countries around us which already have this National ID. We can learn from them. I am sure if we request them, there will be many countries which would like to help us. This will also give us an idea about the resources we will need now and on an ongoing basis. At the same time, I would suggest that some national seminars be arranged to ascertain the views of our local experts in all areas. This will also help us to decide the nature of personal information we should be keeping in this national database. We should involve our IT sector in this project. This will not only help us to gain knowledge but also help us to

have local resources to maintain this project on a long-term basis.

- Once we implement this, we will have to make the registration of the newly-born mandatory. People will follow this if we make an ID number which is mandatory for any academic admission, health care and immunization assistance, any government help for the poor people, bank account opening, etc.

- We should issue an ordinance to ensure the implementation of the ID process, defining all the protocol and operation infrastructure and providing punishment for not being able to register or resorting to fraud in the national ID.

The benefits of a national ID are manifold.

It will give us a voter list always ready for any parliamentary election or local elections.

This ID can be used by our police force to trace any terrorists.

Anti-corruption authorities can use this ID to trace the corrupt and bring them to justice.

The national database can be accessible to the different government offices and help them to resolve any issue.

The ID holders will be able to change their addresses and choose their intended location of voting.

There are indirect benefits for our IT sectors. This will open up many opportunities for businesses and government offices to take the real benefits from IT, our IT companies will get the chance to brush up and the next steps will be to get more overseas businesses.

The cost of a project like this might seem huge in size both for start-up and on-going maintenance, but the justification should be coming not only from having the above mentioned benefits but also from the potentiality of limiting corruption and terrorism. Just think about the much talked of corruption of Tk. 6,000 crore in the electricity sector under the last government. Shouldn't it be enough to justify a national ID system? I am in no way suggesting it should be decided without analyzing the cost benefits of such a project. My only fear is that if we delay it until the next elected government comes, it will be a lost opportunity. I strongly urge Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed to turn our dream into reality by implementing such a project.

Majbah Ahmed

Edmonton, Canada

Diplomats

Of late diplomats of powerful countries, particularly our development partners, have been playing a facilitator's role in our national affairs. We commend their role in helping to break the recent political impasse. They have visited the residences of our leaders, offices of political parties and even high officials in their pursuit. No one raised any objection to such visits. We expect that as part of their duties they will meet as many of our people as necessary. But there should be some restriction, better self-imposed.

M. Sanaul Haq

On e-mail

Here is the chance...

At this point, it seems that the next parliamentary elections will not be held in the next four or five months. That means the caretaker government will be in charge for the next quarter of a year. The one necessary thing that was not done by both our major political parties while they were in government was separation of the judiciary from the

executive. Both the AL and the BNP kept quiet about the much-needed issue.

It was especially the last BNP-led alliance that took excessive time without any logic. Now the burden is on the caretaker government to separate the judiciary from the executive. Since it is not under any pressure, it will be easy for it to take a strong initiative about the separation of the judiciary. To this end, the caretaker government can assess public opinion and authorize a survey of the issue.

Saumitra Sarder

London, UK

Rab and accountability

Most people I know in Bangladesh welcome Rab and tend to treat unfortunate 'crossfire' deaths as a necessary evil that they have to live with. The argument given is: the whole system is corrupt; almost all the people caught by Rab are mastans and anti-socials who would not be convicted in a court of law because they intimidate witnesses, bribe the police, etc. Further, the rights of innocent law abiding people should, in this line of argument, supersede those in Rab custody. I have had many arguments with people following this line of logic. The recent custodial deaths are similarly shrugged off.

The civil libertarian argument about lack of due process does not buy many converts in Bangladesh, unless you have a near or dear one directly affected. It is generally believed that only a few innocent people have suffered and that Rab has been on the mark most of the time. People seem to be willing to sacrifice a few innocent for what is perceived to be the greater good of society.

I maintain, however, that even the current overall utilitarian aspect of Rab will disappear before long. There is the natural law of diffusion. If Rab stays in place for a while, the influence of money and corruption is bound to affect a decent segment of this elite unit. It will be foolish to assume that any group in society can be immune to temptations and pressures for long. Already there have been serious allegations of people settling vendettas by using Rab. This will become all the more common. With little or no oversight, there is the serious potential of some members of this group doing the work of the highest bidder and degenerating into death squads. If the present system is maintained, there will come a point when Rab infractions will be more and more numerous and society will wonder how we came to tolerate the creation of this organisation.

Unless accountability questions are addressed satisfactorily, we have to realize that justice denied to a few accused will eventually mean justice denied to many. If situation becomes as bad as I fear, people may have little recourse to undo the damage. Any one speaking out too loudly will be made to disappear, if we are to extrapolate the experience with paramilitary groups in South American countries.

I urge the government to revisit immunity laws and challenge their constitutionality--no one should be above the law. People in general should be worried about the long term danger of institutionalized armed groups operating with minimal oversight and accountability, even when it may appear to be an effective short-term fix for law and order problems.

Saleh Tanveer

Professor of Mathematics, The Ohio State University

Zia International Airport

A few changes in procedures would spare arriving passengers at Zia International Airport considerable hassle. When a person goes abroad he fills in both the embarkation and disembarkation cards. The embarkation card is kept by the immigration and the disembarkation card is stamped and handed over to the passenger to be submitted on return to Bangladesh.

If there were a separate counter for arriving passengers who already have a stamped disembarkation card it would reduce the rush at the immigration counter.

The present procedure to enter the particulars of each passport in the computer takes a lot of time. The immigration officer not being a fast typist is sometimes seen to thumb each word which takes a long time. The disembarkation cards may be kept aside to enter the data in the computer later by an efficient typist.

Often some passengers cannot fill in their disembarkation cards and request the immigration officer to help. This is very time consuming and holds up all the passengers. A separate help desk for such cases would also reduce the time to get through the immigration.

Farid Uddin

Banani, Dhaka

Political parties sidelined

Bangladesh has recently been flooded with hypotheses, coupled with prescriptions, suggestions, demands, expectations and what not to the new caretaker government leading perhaps to a situation with a number of complicated riddles. Trailing the host of riddles, the political parties, more specifically the two major alliances, have been raising the clamour for taking quick steps towards restoration of democratic government. Major donors for Bangladesh, USA, Canada, UK, European Union etc. also have appeared on the queue with their desire that Bangladesh 'should' soon return to democracy. Going a step further forward, they have also categorically mentioned that the caretaker government should immediately declare the date for the election. But the most pertinent question in this regard is, has any of the parties entangled in the riddle consulted the people 'for, by and of' whom democracy is meant? All these have resulted in a kind of unusual 'what-to-do' situation leading to confusion among the members of the public. It appears that neither of the parties have gauged people's mind on this grave issue. Scanning the news items published and disseminated through print and electronic media, gives one the idea that people at large do not have any major objection against the recent steps taken by the caretaker government.

Neither do they clamour for holding election immediately. Rather, they appear to be favouring a 'go-slow' rule. At least they are keeping mum to imply that they are happy with the steps being taken by the caretaker government.

On the other hand, the caretaker government has vowed to hold the election as soon as it can create a congenial atmosphere and a 'level playing ground' for all the parties concerned. It will not stay in power a single day more than it needs. All concerned have been requested to wait and cooperate. In order to create a level playing ground for election, eliminating corruption, completing separation of the Judiciary, reforming and activating Election Commission and Anti-

Corruption Commission, tracking down the criminals and many more are the preconditions. It implies, therefore, that the government will be able to set exact dates for elections only when the preconditions are fulfilled in, however, 'the shortest possible time'.

Given the above perplexing scenario, it is possibly high time to ask the concerned quarters certain pertinent questions: Why election? Is it for returning to democracy? If so, is it not needed to revisit the definition of popular democracy? Where does people's welfare and country's development stand in this context? What are the basic reforms needed to bring about for holding a free, fair and acceptable and credible national election? What outcomes can be expected, if election is held before needed reforms are done and preconditions are fulfilled? Will the party/parties coming to power through early election without satiating the preconditions guarantee the imperatives that must be established for a just social order?

Anannya Das Gupta

Mount Allison University, Canada

A suggestion

We are now passing through the 21st century and our nation is already 35 years old! We had governments in the past pursuing ideologies like nationalism, socialism, secularism, democracy, martial law and recently moderate Islam.

No matter whichever ideology is being pursued by the elected representative government or a military government, it has to be accounted that neither the Resident Director of the World Bank (WB) nor the Resident Representative of the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) are in the capacity to guide us to attain our cherished goals of independence.

Moreover, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore or Malaysia would never come to our country and lead us for our overall development. I am sorry to inform you that although we have crossed 35 years of our independence but the prime duty and responsibility of all the former governments for ensuring 'smooth circulation of money' among all the adult citizens remains unfulfilled.

The Caretaker Government (CG) should promulgate an Ordinance and Constitutionally empower specifically either the Honourable President of the Republic or the Governor of Bangladesh Bank to oversee the important task of ensuring 'smooth circulation of money' among all the adult citizens.

Golam Ashraf

Gulshan, Dhaka

Fidel, we need you

Fidel Castro is ill. The moment I read this news, I was shocked and motionless for a while. Fidel is like a true living legend to me. He is a hero. Throughout his life, he battled against America's conspiracies.

Numerous murder plots had been attempted against him but the mission of the ruthless America failed all the time. All his life my Fidel stood firm against the US aggression on foreign lands. He is undoubtedly one of the great charismatic leaders of all time.

I pray for his good health & hope he will recover soon.

Minhaj Ahmed

Uttara, Dhaka

Bush and Congress



The US is ferrying democracy throughout the world and its President GW Bush became a self-declared guardian of democracy. He invaded Iraq to restore democracy. The situation is not better than vesting custody of some hens to a fox. From time to time the fox eats out a hen and says its existence is dangerous for the other hens as it sometimes peck others. In fact Bush's democracy signifies holding authoritarian control over everything and dic-

tating all as per his whims after being elected, no matter how controversial the election was. If not so, how he could decide to boost US troops in Iraq bypassing Congress saying that Congress' dissent would not affect his decision.

A despot is the guardian of democracy, how ridiculous!

Sharif Ahmad
Advocate, Dhaka