

Reflections on our political culture

While Chinese women have become footloose and free to the extent that they have become full partners (almost) in economic life; we in Bangladesh have been able to create a culture of shooting at our own feet. We have been self-destructive. I use the metaphor of foot binding because we have bound our feet as a nation, inflicting pain and stunting growth. The good news is that we can change it. And an important step will be to change rajniti to ganoniti.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

SOMEONE once commented pithily that the only culture we have in Bangladesh is agriculture. The statement rings true not only because etymologically the word "culture" comes from the Latin word colere which means "to cultivate (the soil)," but also because agriculture continues to play an important part in the social life of Bangladesh.

Surely, the economic significance of agriculture has waned compared to non-agricultural sectors but, at a symbolic level, it is ubiquitous, from our national anthem, other patriotic songs such as DL Roy's Dhano Dhanyo Pushpo Bhara, to political symbols.

The sociologist MacIver wrote many years ago that "culture is what we are" and "civilization is what we have." A broader meaning of culture is what we are, what we have and what we can be. That is, our ways of life, our inheritance and our aspirations.

Agriculture, or feudalism, does play a big part in the broader meaning of culture, i.e. Culture I. That is surely what our inheritance has been.

The Bengali word for culture, sanskriti, is somewhat similar to the Germanic definition of culture. The German word kultur incorporates culture and civilization, as well as the idea of improvement or

an ideal culture.

Sanskriti implies some ideational or sophisticated state of affairs. That's why I insist on "what we can be" as part of the definition of culture.

Political culture is defined as "the norms, beliefs, and values within a political system." Or it is that part of our culture, which pertains to politics.

This standard definition of political culture is unhelpful, in my opinion. Politics itself is shaped to a large extent by broader culture.

In discussing the issue of political culture it is important to have two analytically separable notions of culture: Culture I, the all enveloping culture; and Culture II, the specific aspect of culture that is connected to I, yet enjoys some autonomy as a domain unto itself.

Political culture or business culture or sporting culture (why Bengalis love cricket and the Americans love baseball, or Brazilians love soccer are examples) are examples of Culture II.

In Bangladesh some people ask why former prime minister Khaleda Zia's son, Mr Tarique Rahman, should become a senior leader of her party automatically? Is this democracy? What kind of politics is this?

Surely, it may not be democracy but it is rajniti (I switch to the Bengali word for politics deliberately). Politics has been translated as rajniti. I think this translation is

problematic.

The literal translation of rajniti (raj is royal, niti is principle) is principles or policies of the royalty.

Conceptually it comes close to "statecraft," but not to politics. The root word of politics is the Greek word "polis" or polity, which in Greek meant city. Politeness and police are also derivatives of the same root word.

The more accurate meaning of the word politics is ganoniti. The Bengali meaning of democracy, ganotantra, is fairly accurate. But the question is why was politics translated as rajniti?

The answer lies in political culture; and in some sense, in the broader culture of Bangladesh.

Many people in Bangladesh see politics as the domain of the rich and powerful, the modern day incarnations of rajahs and mahrajahs.

There is one businessman who spent part of his wealth to buy the furniture which belonged to the Bhawal Raja to adorn his Gulshan house. Another businessman with political ambition went a step further; he spent his ill-begotten wealth to decorate the interior of his house like a certain palace of the Czar in Moscow.

A firebrand politician who has swapped Mujib coat and punjabi for Armani suit commented that even in the villages now people want to see their political leaders in Pajeros, not on rickshaws.



Gone are the days when politicians were organically connected with the people, eating their food, speaking to them in their language.

The emergence of political culture in Europe was dependent on the rise of the public sphere and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

The link between the rise of an incipient bourgeoisie and the problematic nature of political culture in Bangladesh deserves more detailed examination. We are not suggesting that Bangladesh will walk on the dotted evolutionary lines shown by the European experience.

At the same time, whatever the challenges due to the specific and historical circumstances in Bangladesh, we need to develop a political culture that is conducive to the development of democracy and political stability, without which sustainable economic growth will remain stunted.

For Tocqueville, who was much impressed by American democracy of the 1830s, culture is the habits of the heart. Collective habits can be either positive or

negative for the development of a viable political culture.

We need to explore problems such as familism, nepotism, (nepotism comes from Latin word nepot meaning nephew), primordial loyalties, as well as degeneration of ethical conduct.

It would be useful to remember that culture is not sacred. Sometimes culture can be wrong and counter-productive. Horrendous practices, like foot binding in China or suttee in India, were part of their culture.

Now, at least, foot binding in China has completely disappeared, and Suttee is rarely practiced in India. It is an accepted fact that culture can be changed -- culture is not immutable.

The experience of Grameen shows that even the rules of patriarchy can be challenged and changed.

Foot binding, the horrendous practice of stunting the feet of female children in China so that they remain cute (?) and crippled within the domestic space, did not

make much sense even if seen from the context of an agricultural society.

So, when objections were raised, that cruel practice disappeared quickly. In 1911, during the nationalist movement of China, a period of reforms and renaissance questioned many traditional practices such as foot binding.

Laws were passed, foot binding became history. While Chinese women have become footloose and free to the extent that they have become full partners (almost) in economic life; we in Bangladesh have been able to create a culture of shooting at our own feet.

We have been self-destructive. I use the metaphor of foot binding because we have bound our feet as a nation, inflicting pain and stunting growth.

The good news is that we can change it. And an important step will be to change rajniti to ganoniti.

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Bangladesh in a state of uncertainty

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DESPIITE the fact that the newly formed CG has been doing a great job since taking over from the erstwhile inept CG government, nevertheless there is an uncertain future looming ahead in the political realm.

The CG led by the new CA has rightly perceived the root cause of the prevailing political, social and economic depravity, and the causes of repeated political mayhems that led to the clamping down last month.

No doubt, the nation is immensely grateful to this government for this "spring clean" which had remained long overdue.

Unfortunately, the main political parties and their "godfathers" suffer from an acute case of short-term-memory.

They are seemingly basking in the thought that the present "witch hunt" of the political thugs and their corporate consorts, and bringing those to justice are merely a façade of I-am-just-doing-my-job by the CA. And come election time, whenever that is, their same old hackneyed political characters would emerge from their brief hibernation.

The mafias and the godfathers would come out of their hidings at home and abroad and would begin making the same old noise and ridiculous rhetoric, as though the nation was kept hostage and they are our rightful saviours!

It is abundantly clear that the general public is breathing a sigh of relief that their lives are at last moving at a normal pace.

The leaders of the mainstream parties should begin to search souls and to take stock to find out where they went wrong. What went wrong?

For a start, their whole political ethos was a non-starter as a visionary political party. Their short-term visions, empty promises and leader-centric policies were totally detrimental to their own existence.

These are not political parties but rather mafia-esque clans whose very existence rest on the adulation and glorification of their leader.

The question that hovers on our fate is whether these parties would learn any lesson, whether these parties would bring any semblance of democratic due process in the administration, whether these parties would begin to fear the people, to fear stepping in the wrong direction lest the people whose mandate they are entrusted with begin to question their ill design, whether

these parties would begin to feel that they are serving the people and the nation, and not the other way round!

This seems like a déjà vu. Time and time again the nation sensed a glimmer hope looming ahead, only to be proved wrong later -- liberation war in 1971 was fought to depose a corrupt, colonizing and a ruthless regime.

But the ensuing petty political feuds and corruption led to the downfall of the then AL administration -- 1975 saw the birth of BNP and a new hope, but that too fell foul of petty political feuds.

1982 saw the beginning of an 8-year military junta, for which less said the better -- 1990 saw the unseating of this military regime and the new beginning of a democratic process, but that too fell prey to corruption and fulfillment of ill design to bolster the party fund.

1996, 2001, and 2006 -- all echoed the same old motto: "Get elected and get rich quick and to hell with the nation."

AL, BNP, JP and the other coalition parties have failed miserably to deliver at least remotely a minimum standard of living for the average Bangladeshis.

They all cheated their way to power to carve out a "filthy-rich" livelihood while the millions suffer in dire poverty. The big question is what price democracy?

It has been 35 years since liberation and by any standard, there have not ever been any sort of democratic process per se. What the nation has witnessed since 1971 is a kind of "gate-crashing" by various political parties to assume power and to enact a quasi-totalitarian rule on the masses.

Democracy is not just about holding parliamentary election, but more about creating a transparent system in all sphere of administration, creating an easily accessible basic health-care, an easily accessible mass-education system, an easily accessible basic legal service for all, and overall, a self-sustaining all encompassing system, insulated from any political ill-design or tampering.

Another big question is could these same political parties deliver a semblance of democratic Bangladesh after this present CG finishes their cleaning up job, would they be able to retain the same "cleanliness"? However, the overwhelming cynicism overshadows any shred of optimism.

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Weekly holiday: Sunday or Friday?

Are Muslims all over the world not as faithful as the Muslims in Bangladesh? If the Muslims in most of the countries could gladly accept Sunday as weekly holiday, and go on with prayers on Friday, why can we not do that as well?

AFM MOHIUDDIN

MAKING Sunday the weekly holiday will not diminish the sanctity of Friday as a spiritually significant day in the Muslim weekly calendar. Politics and religious parochialism aside, there is no authentic jurisdiction in the Sharia law which specifically requires making Friday the weekly holiday.

Friday is an important weekday for Muslims because they are asked to congregate and say their prayers in one place on this day. This congregation is to buttress social bondage and enhance the collective spiritual well being of the community. However, this should not be construed as a day when Muslims can take off and rest, like the way the Jewish community take rest on Sabbath.

A deeper probe into the traditions of the early Muslims reveals that they

did not enjoy even a weekly holiday. As Muslims, they had to work every day. In fact, the traditions of early Muslims show that they were so hard-working and assiduous that they found having a weekly holiday abhorrent.

So, the people who say that Friday should be a weekly public holiday are, in actual fact, misrepresenting the traditions of Islam. The 9th and 10th verses in Chapter 62 of Al-Quran say: "O you who believe, when the call for prayer is proclaimed on the day of Friday, come to the remembrance of God and leave off your business and other things; that is better for you if you did but know! Then when prayer is over, you may disperse through the land and seek the bounty of God, and always remember God, so that you may be successful."

These two verses do not ask

Muslims to take rest after the prayer. Rather, they order the people unequivocally to spread out to seek the bounties of God. Most of the classical commentators of the Quran do agree that it is proper for the believers to engage in lawful and socially beneficial transactions on this day, like all other weekly days.

Further, the 9<sup>th</sup> verse tells people to leave off business only when the call for prayer is proclaimed. This means that, until the call is made, a Muslim can go on with carrying out his usual business and trade. Similarly, he can return to do what he was doing prior to praying, after the prayer over.

Actually, it is seen that, during the Abbasid period, Muslim merchants in Baghdad used to settle their weekly monetary and business transactions with one another on Friday because they found it convenient to meet up with businessmen from different

neighbourhoods at prayer congregations. It was an opportunity for them to enhance their business profile and strike new business deals.

In Bangladesh, former president Ershad introduced Friday as weekly holiday as a political tool to appease a few overzealous Muslims. It was designed to bolster his embattled image among the faithful at that time.

Because of having Friday as weekly holiday we are cut-off from the rest of the world for three consecutive days, thus incurring huge losses to business and trade. Even Pakistan, which is reputed to have been divided on the religious line, has retained Sunday as weekly holiday. Likewise, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Morocco, and a few African Muslim countries have retained Sunday as weekly holiday.

My experiences in Malaysia and Indonesia show that Muslims return to their work soon after the Friday prayer is over. The governments allow two hours break on Fridays for Muslims to attend to prayers. Nowhere have I seen that a Muslim misses his prayer because he has to work on Friday in these countries.

Those who pray will pray, no matter what happens.

So, arguing that Sunday weekly holiday will affect the prayer of the Muslims is a very narrow-minded and irrational hypothesis. Are Muslims all over the world not as faithful as the Muslims in Bangladesh? If the Muslims in most of the countries could gladly accept Sunday as weekly holiday, and go on with prayers on Friday, why can we not do that as well?

Many also argue that the Middle-Eastern countries have Friday as weekly holiday. First of all, most of the Middle-Eastern countries have very little trade and international business transactions with the rest of the world. Actually, a World Bank report shows that international trade volume in the entire Middle-Eastern region is just two-thirds of Hong Kong's business and trade size with other countries. Much of Middle-East's trading is concentrated in Dubai. We must remember that we are not sitting on oil reservoirs to feed our teeming millions.

We must generate employment, create new business opportunities,

and find ways to expand our export volume so that the country moves ahead to alleviate poverty. Islam, being a practical and very dynamic faith itself, and its core principles do not contravene the interest of the common good. Rescheduling Sunday as weekly holiday in lieu of Friday does not in any way contradict the Islamic injunctions.

Here, pragmatism must prevail over dogmatism. The successive political governments did not reschedule the weekly holiday to maintain an unsustainable status quo among a few Muslims, but it has no ground among majority of the people.

The present interim government must be audacious enough to rise above the parochial disposition of a few Muslims and declare Sunday as a public holiday, while making sure that adequate timing is officially fixed so that we can say our Friday prayer without much haste.

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A window into Iraq's future

Days after the battle was over, US and Iraqi officials were still trying to make sense of it. Hundreds of heavily armed fighters had secretly gathered at a farm outside Najaf, apparently plotting to seize the holy city and kill Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani during the celebrations of Ashura, Shiite Islam's highest holiday. The gunmen, said to belong to a doomsday cult known as the "Soldiers of Heaven," were able to hold off Iraqi and Coalition troops for a full day, downing a US helicopter and taking the lives of at least a dozen Iraqi and US soldiers before finally surrendering. More than 200 of the armed plotters had been killed, along with the man who was believed to be their leader, and hundreds of others were captured. Their ranks evidently included Sunnis as well as Shiites, even though the cult was dedicated to the Mahdi, the Shiite messiah figure who is supposed to return just before Judgment Day, after more than 11 centuries in hiding, to set up a righteous and peaceful Islamic society. Captured fighters were quoted as saying that the violent plot was intended to hasten the end of times. Newsweek's Karen Fragala Smith spoke to Islamic scholar and author Vali Nasr ("The Shia Revival") about the bizarre incident and its meaning for Iraq.

Karen Fragala Smith: Why would a mixed group of Sunni and Shia want to assassinate Ayatollah al-Sistani and seize Najaf?

Vali Nasr: I am not convinced that this group was acting by itself, judging by the kind of military capability that it displayed, and the mission that it had. Killing Imam al-Sistani by exploding a bomb in the shrine by a Shia millenarian group would have totally shattered the unity of the Shia, and particularly would have destroyed the link that keeps the Shia community together.

The kind of military capabilities that these fighters brought, to shoot down the US helicopter, to be able to hold down US forces for hours on end, is not something that a group of 200 poor thugs following a cultic leader would be capable of. Do you think Iran had any involvement in the battle?

The Soldiers of Heaven have been ferociously anti-Iranian. The Iranians have no interest in the collapse of Shia authority in Iraq.

Whatever problems Iran may have with the United States, strategically for Iran it is not beneficial if Shia authority in Iraq were to collapse. The whole Baathist game plan of coming back to Iraq is predicated on creating chaos in Iraq. The Soldiers of Heaven are reportedly a mix of both Shia and Sunni Muslims. Isn't this cooperation unusual?

Yes, and that's exactly what raises the issue about the role of the insurgents in this. It is possible that this fellow who was running the cult created his own movement that somehow crosses the boundaries of Shia and Sunnis. But in reality, the Sunnis don't believe in the messiah the way the Shias, the Jews (and) the Christians do.

For them, the Mahdi is not a particular person. It is a renewer of the faith, somebody who is a descendent of the prophet, but there is no Day of Judgment or Armageddon. It is very unlikely that Sunnis would follow a claimant to Shia messianity unless they converted to this cult. More than likely what we saw was an insurgent push using the cover of this cult to make an attack on Najaf with the aim of shattering the fabric of Shia politics and authority in Iraq.

According to some traditions, before the coming of the Mahdi, a third of the world will die in a war. Could that encourage a leader like Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to try to hasten World War III?

These prophecies are there, but there is nothing that says humans ought to create these conditions.

Such calamities are signs of the times, but they are not a prerequisite for the coming of the Mahdi. Religious tradition does not support that you could bring about the [coming of the] Messiah by doing acts that are actually the domain of God... It is not as straight a line as it is sometimes depicted. Ahmadinejad has said that there are things ordinary people can do to bring about the Final Days. This exactly what (Ayatollah Ruhollah) Khomeini said. When he created the revolution in Iran, many traditional Shia leaders criticized him by saying, "Improving the lot of the world is the job of the Hidden Imam (the Mahdi). There can be no perfect Islamic government in the absence of the Hidden Imam."

Khomeini's way of going around criticism was to say, "We're not creating the government of the Hidden Imam, but this government -

- in its exemplary existence -- can perhaps be a precursor for his second coming." This whole idea was a reaction to the criticism he was receiving from traditionalists. Do you think Ahmadinejad uses the Mahdi imagery to manipulate popular opinion in Iran? The way the Iranian leadership looks at the problems of Iraq, Palestine, Hizbullah, its relations with the US and the nuclear issue, is much more secular, political and militaristic.

Much like every government, if they have to market war to a population, and justify a foreign policy that includes war, they will use religious themes, including messianic ones, in order to legitimize political action.

We have to make a distinction between what makes political leaders tick and separate that from the way in which they market their own political decisions to their own population.

When you want to market a war, you have to use scenes that the average citizen would react to, but that should be separated from the kind of thing that goes into the decision making itself ... In Iran's own marketing of its nuclear weapons, religion is distinctly absent from the discussion.

It's all about nationalism: Iran's rightful place in the world, pride in Iran's ability to master technology, Iran's rights. You don't hear, even from clerics, any sort of language that gives the nuclear technology any sort of religious significance.

That's exactly why the Iranian people have reacted so positively to

this nuclear program, because it's put in secular, nationalist terms.

President George W Bush has often claimed to be guided in his decisions by his relationship with God. Could this encourage fringe groups like the Soldiers of Heaven to take up arms under the larger banner of the "war of civilizations"?

I think the rhetoric of Washington tends to encourage -- not just with the Middle East, but across the Muslim world -- this notion that this is more of a culture war rather than a political war.

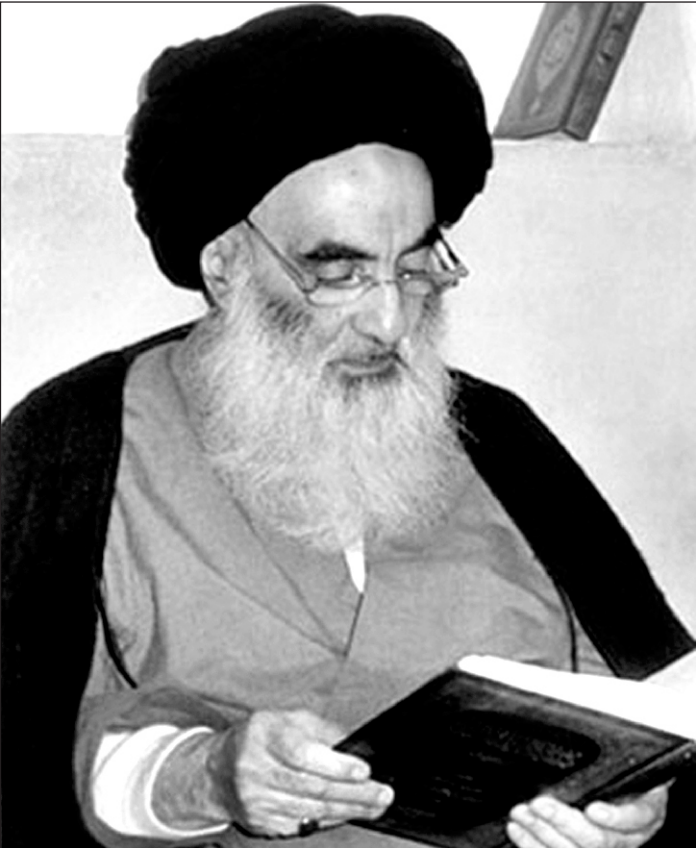
That is exactly why the war on terror has been repeatedly interpreted -- from Indonesia to Nigeria -- as a war on Islam, and we are not able to shake this thing off.

Given that these fringe groups are being used in a strategic way by the insurgency, what are some of the things we need to be concerned with, going forward?

What happened in Najaf with this group can be a window into the future or Iraq. If (Shiite leader) Moqtada al-Sadr is taken out and the US ends up in a war with Shia militias and radicalizes them and breaks them up into smaller pieces, we're going to end up with 200 different "Armies of Heaven."

If the Iraqi government is not able to establish authority, and the large militias lose control and break up -- that's exactly what the insurgency wants. The Sunnis cannot defeat the Shia at election or defeat them if the Shia remain united behind their leadership.

Given that Washington plans to send in 20,000 more troops, what do you think the United States



can do to avoid a further escalation of sectarian violence?

The Shia militias are not at war with the United States. They are a big problem for Iraq, but they are not at war with the United States.

It would be much easier to deal with the Shia militias after we are able to first deal with the (S Sunni) insurgency. The policy of going after both of these groups has the danger of sinking Iraq into far bigger chaos.

If the insurgent capability is not challenged, and they are able to break down even the little bit of harmony that exists in southern Iraq, the collapse of authority in southern Iraq can be devastating for the US and for Iraq.

I don't believe it is in the US's benefit at this time to provoke a war with the Shia insurgents.

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