Whither democracy within the political parties?

MAHBUBAR RAHMAN

POLITICAL parties, publicly ever vocal about democracy and democratic rights, may be questioned about the practice of democracy within their own parties. To understand their (currently three main -- AL, BNP and JP) style of practice, we need to look at the history of their rise in the region.

Following partition in 1947, top leaders of All-India Muslim League migrated to Pakistan and formed the Pakistan Muslim League, operating it in Jinnah's authoritarian style. Shortly after, the Awami Muslim League was formed in Dhaka in 1948, with giants like HS Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhashani, in reaction to Muslim League's anti-East and pro-West Pakistan policy. Leaders moving in from the Muslim League moulded the new party to its authoritarian pattern. Later with the word 'Muslim' dropped, the Awami League grew from strength to strength in East Pakistan, and practically wiped out the Muslim League in the 1954 provincial elections by joining hands with the Krishak Sramik Party (of pre-partition days).

With the advent of Bangladesh, the Awami League under the leadership of Bangabandhu emerged as practically the only political party to be reckoned with. But with the authoritarian style rooted in the party, run by heavyweight leadership at the top, members in the lower hierarchy, instead of cultivating an open culture or grooming themselves for leadership remained complacent with hero worship, awaiting commands from the top. So, at a later stage when Bangabandhu introduced his one-party BAKSAL system, no one except Gen Osmany, dared to oppose it. This step cost the party heavily with its opponents constantly using it as a leverage for mud-slinging.

With a series of bloody coups and counter-coups following Bangabandhu's assassination, and later on with Gen Ziaur Rahman at the helm of affairs of the country, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed, and the AL also revived, with the 'BAKSAL' system scrapped. After Gen Zia's unfortunate assassination, and Gen Ershad's assumption of charge as the President, in due course Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) was floated. Thus, in Bangladesh politics there have been three main parties AL, BNP and JP, all with top-heavy leaderships.

A number of circumstances hampered, to a great extent, the growth of democratic culture within the AL and the BNP, both portending to be champions of democracy. The daughter and the wife, respectively, of assassinated towering personalities Bangabandhu and Gen Zia succeeded them as chiefs of AL and BNP. Autocracy deepened with the same person continuing as the party boss for indefinite terms, even when holding charge of the government. Although a 'unanimous consent' may technically recognise this arrangement as democratic, it has only turned party members into mute yes men.

In comparison let us look at India where major political parties appear to have followed two golden principles, avoiding dual charge as heads of the government and the party, ignoring family clout in the choice of successors. Hence we hear about legendary Congress Presidents like Pattavi Sitaramaiya and Kamraj, hardly ever in clash with powerful Prime Ministers. Again, we see Lal Bahadur Shastri succeeding Nehru, and not his daughter Indira Gandhi, though she was competent enough with her experience as Information Minister.

A departure from these two golden principles, after Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister later on, caused a severe dent in the Congress party, first when she assumed the dual charge of the party and the government, and next when her followers got her son Rajib Gandhi 'elected' as 'leader', by exploiting the sentiment of her bereaved associates.

Rajib's wife Sonia Gandhi, on the other hand, took lessons from history, and when she, after great persuasion, became the party leader, she kept her daughter and son in law profile. As party president, Sonia rehabilitated Congress to a respectable position in parliament but declined the Premiership in favour of Manmohan Singh. Sonia's dedication to principles is apparent again when she resigned not only from a committee, in the face of an untenable criticism that it was an office of profit, but also from her parliamentary seat, displaying a sense of honour and sensitivity. She sought re-election and won easily

A similar sense of dignity and sensitivity is expected among persons manning institutions like the Presidency, the Judiciary, the Election Commission etc, which make a parliamentary democracy effective and meaningful. Our immediate past Election Commissioners, and a few others in such institutions, shamelessly sticking to their positions, against adverse criticisms and public ridicule, provide a contrast to the Indian practice. TN Sessian's legendary role has put the Indian Election Commission on a strict non-partisan track, even though it is considered as an executive branch of the government, and not a constitutional body as ours.

There are more instances of democratic culture within the party. The veteran W Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu did not rush for the high post of Indian Prime Minister, without his party's consent, when there was a general consensus offer from a hung Parliament. His party did not spare him in the party's interest, with the result that India had a lesser mortal like Deva Gauda as the Prime Minister, and a short-lived Parliament. With a hung Parliament again, the CPI(M) in a true democratic and sacrificing spirit, agreed, on condition of a minimum action programme, to support the Congress Party, from outside. Imagine, Congress, an arch enemy of CPI(M) in West Bengal, being supported by the CPI(M) at the centre!

Coming back to Bangladesh, if a compulsory registration of political parties is enforced, the required information will make the parties transparent, and consequently stronger and more credible. These should relate to sources of fund, audited account statements, details of organisational structure and the party constitution and its abidance, particularly election of office bearers, number, nature and district wise distribution of their members, etc. In this way, the mushroom growth of signboard political parties with only a few henchmen (and musclemen) by adventurists could be checked. There has been talk of barring public servants from seeking election for a specified period of time after retirement. This then justifies a similar restriction to office bearers of trade organisations and various chambers of commerce and industries holding positions in the immediate past term, or the current term of the election date.

A few more measures are necessary, perhaps through strong public opinion, rather than by government regulations. These are:

- For making party conferences meaningful and effective, the present practice of day-long eulogies to top leaders, past and present, laced with volleys of abuse for rival parties, should yield place to speeches on specific topics on health, education, trade, labour, agriculture, foreign relations etc, avoiding duplication and repetition..
- Instead of rushing through a 'panel' of office bearers kept handy with prior invisible blessings of the Chief/influential party bosses for a quick 'approval', preferably unanimous, with 'disputed' cases (occasions are rare) left for the Chief's decision, there should be a proper election through secret ballot, a day before the speech session, so that the result can be announced before the conference concludes.
- An office bearer holding a post (including those of President, General Secretary, and Organising Secretary) for two consecutive terms, should not be eligible for election to any post, unless two terms, or four years, whichever is more, have elapsed.
- Instead of enhancing the limit of election expenditures, it should be decreased, with: a) the state undertaking to arrange fixed number of meeting venues in every constituency, which may be available to all contestants, according to a pre-arranged schedule; b) circulation of candidates' bio-data (with their photographs) and promises through pamphlets, and display of festoons and banners; c) candidates' meeting the people with a limited number of workers rather than in a big procession.
- Under such arrangements, election expenses of the party nominees are to be borne/shared by the parties. Thus, the candidates being spared of huge election expenses, and also other invisible expenses in the form of contributions to party fund and party bosses' fund, they will not need to treat this expenditure as 'investment'. Consequently, the propensity to 'recover' this amount while in office, and also to 'build up a reserve' for the next election will cease.
- Instead of a so-called 'selection' through a 5-minute 'interview' of dozens of candidates per constituency, or calling them all together just to direct them to support the one 'blessed' by the High Command, applications should be invited a year ahead, and nominations finalised at least six months before the likely date of election, on the basis of the High Command's long period of observation about the aspirants' worth and acceptability in the area concerned.
- In order to facilitate a quick check on the financial statements of candidates by the election officials Tax Return Forms (for all) should be more elaborate, with provisions made for re-opening of candidates' assessed accounts.

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Mahbubar Rahman is a former civil servant (Audit & Accounts).

A Corridor f peace

MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Around the round-about ten roads are converging
But none, none of them has got a zebra crossing
The pedestrians have got no right of way.
They have no scope even to go astray.
There is no road for them to use.
There is no scope for them to abuse
Their right of way.
The pedestrians have got no right of way.

All conceivable missiles are thrown by the vandals,
Bricks and stones, and shoes and sandals.
Water cannon, rubber bullets and teargas grenades
Are matching the fire-eating fanfaronades.
Like the ten furies ten roads are converging
But none of them has got a zebra crossing.
All are blocked and barricaded by the police,
And everybody is longing for a corridor of peace.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government

Preventing blowout at Titas gas field

DR. AFTAB ALAM KHAN

TITAS gas field is one of the largest gas fields in the country having more than four and half Tcf of proven gas deposits. This field has produced more than two Tcf gas since 1968. The major gas fields such as Titas, Bakhrabad and Habiganj contribute about 60 percent of the proven gas reserve of the country. There are fourteen wells producing gas from Titas field. If this field is damaged due to blowout that will bring catastrophic crisis not only in energy sector but in all industrial and commercial sectors. In present scenario of gas leakage, about 15 to 18 MMCF of gas per day is coming out and lost. The daily monetary loss is to the tune of US$ 50,000. The situation will remain unchanged for at least 45 more days even if a remedial measure is implemented in the shortest possible time as report goes. This will incur a loss of more than US$ two million. We never know whether the situation will remain unchanged or will be aggravated further although the leakage has reportedly come down to 8-9 mmcfd from 15-18 mmcfd.

After Magurchara and Tengratila blowout, it seems another gas field disaster is eminent in Titas gas field. However, the nature of disaster in Titas, obviously, will not be same as in Magurchara and Tengratila. The nature of gas seepages in Titas gas field indicates widespread manifestations of blowout that would affect large area damaging vast cultivable lands and forcibly displacing large population. This is undoubtedly an extreme alarming situation. However, a blowout prevention expert is supposed to assess gravity of the situation and decide course of action.

Before looking for a solution of a problem, one must determine the reason of the problem. It is learnt that the reports of severe gas seepages were made at least a year back. The pertinent question is, why then due attention was not given for ascertaining the reason. However, it is not too late in searching for a reason. Titas structure has a dimension of 25 km by 15 km with maximum amplitude of about 600 m. It has a structural closure about 13 km by 6 km. Under normal condition, sand layers above the cap rock would not contain gas unless the sand layers above the cap rock contain isolated gas pockets or the well-wall cement casing is largely destroyed to bring gas from the main reservoir through the well (diagram). The present situation does not support for isolated gas pockets as the intensity of gas spell suggest.

In contrary, it is most likely that the well-wall cement casing is largely destroyed to bring gas from the main reservoir through the wells to accumulate in the overlying sand layers for ultimate seepages at multiple points. The migration of gas from the main reservoir through the well, if the cement casing is destroyed, can occur due to in-situ formation and hydrostatic pressure of the reservoir. The migration is certainly enhanced due to production of gas through the wells. The added problem is laying with the possible occurrence of a fault across wells 1 and 9. Through the fault plane, gas can move in the overlying layers, but the rate of gas movement is too slow unless there are some major rupture offsets bringing reservoir close to overlying permeable zones. Hence, the contribution of fault for gas accumulation in the overlying sand layers is ruled out.

The question of solution of the problem to prevent any possible disaster is not straight forward. There is no text book solution of the problem of this kind. Neither, there is any example of the problem of this kind. The way to solution of the problem possesses lots of *ifs and buts*. The present problem is largely different from that of traditional blowout prevention and burning well management. The first necessary job will be to reduce gas flow pressure through the destroyed wells. Extra wells need to be drilled at safer distances from the destroyed wells. Production rate of gas needs to be increased from the good wells. Simultaneously, the destroyed wells need to be sealed-off by injecting drilling fluid.

Utmost care must be taken in selecting mud weight. The mud weight that required while drilling well #1 shows a tremendous jump from 11 lb/gal for reservoir formation to about 17 lb/gal for layer below (diagram). The density jump from 1.25 gm/cc in the reservoir to 2.1 gm/cc in the layer below indicates high pressure shale below the reservoir. Once the reservoir pressure is reduced and the destroyed wells are sealed-off, the so far accumulated gas in the sand layers above the cap rock will be exhausted with time without posing any potential threat.

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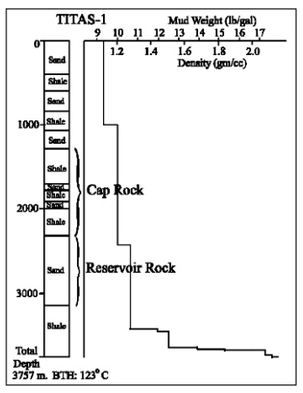
DIAGRAM



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Pesticides harming human health

SHALIM UDDIN

SCIENTISTS all over the world are concerned about contamination by the organochlorine pesticides (OCPs) of corps or foodstuffs during processing or storage or transport or while using treated seeds as food. The continuous usage of these pesticides create threat to environment as well as public health because of their persistence, mobility, high solubility in fats, bio accumulative and bio magnifying capacity.

Very little effort has been made in Bangladesh to develop methods of pest management, other than the use of pesticides. Along with the increasing use of pesticides there is also an increasing awareness of the effect of pesticides on human health and the environment in general. In the global context, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has developed the International Code of Conduct on the distribution and use of pesticides.

Despite this, certain violations of the code can occur, e.g., the export to developing countries of pesticides, which have been banned or whose use has been severely restricted. In addition, many of the developing countries have no specific pesticide legislation. A number of pesticides such DDT, BHC, ethyl parathion, methyl parathion, etc are banned in Bangladesh but still available in the market. Nevertheless, actual use of agricultural pesticides in Bangladesh is minimal in comparison with other countries of the region.

The purpose of this article is to provide understanding of the impacts of organochlorine pesticides followed by a discussion on its usage, exposure and effects on human health. It is also notable that some fatal diseases such as various types of cancer, heart failure, liver damage, paralysis, brain damage, nervous system weakness, etc. are occurring more frequently in the pesticides usage area than the non-usage area.

Based on experiments on laboratory animals, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has identified at least ninety-six different pesticide active ingredients registered for use that are potential human carcinogens. Studies of human populations, particularly farmers, also demonstrate the carcinogenic potential of certain pesticides. A 1992 National Cancer Institute review of two dozens epidemiological studies found pesticides to be one of five likely suspect explaining way farmers had elevated risks of several forms of cancer including Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, leukemia, melanoma and cancers of the lip. There are some evidences that the break down product of the organochlorine pesticide, DDT, which is now banned but still persist in the environment, may be associated with breast cancer.

Several studies of DDT/DDE in mother's milk from North Carolina and Northern Mexico showed that the duration of lactation was inversely related to the concentration of DDE in milk. High levels of estrogen during pregnancy inhibit the onset of full lactation, and after birth, it is the fall in estrogen levels that, in part, allows the beginning of lactation. While not a classic endocrine disrupting mechanism, the presence of estrogen mimics like DDT or DDE would lead to a decrease in the quantity of milk, resulting in early weaning.

Dry fish is an important protein source of the general people of Bangladesh. But it is now inedible for the people because it has become hazardous to humans. It is a matter of great concern that the curers and stores are applying various banned or unapproved harmful pesticides to fish during drying and storage periods indiscriminately. Even they use most persistent and toxic organochlorinated pesticides especially DDT, which can withstand bio-geochemically for long period (10-15 yrs) in the environment because of their stability, bio-accumulative capacity and global occurrence. Their presence in dried fish has been documented in various surveys carried out over the past 15 years. One major concern for the uptake of dry fish treated with persistent pesticides by humans is the amount of DDT, which can easily be accumulated in fatty tissue and bring about physiological complications.

As it is made sure by several workers that organochlorine pesticides especially DDT residues are still used to cure and store fishes, there is a great possibility of their presence in human body. No scientific study has yet been made and no limit for human exposure (Acceptable Daily Intake) to pesticides in foodstuffs is still ascertained in Bangladesh although a number of pesticides such as DDT, BHC, parathion, etc. have been banned in the country. Perhaps the concentration of DDT residues in dry fish consumers' body in Bangladesh may accede the concentration in other nations as they are not consuming dry fish daily.

In brief, it is crystal clear that the dry fish and corps found to contain DDT and other pesticides, which are health hazards recognised by the scientific community at home and abroad. The coastal people of Bangladesh take dry fish more or less with their every meal. Due to long term consumption of dry fish and corps, most of them suffer from various disorders which could turn into above mentioned fatal diseases and in near future they would be inactive and the country would be deprived of her vest active manpower.

OCPs residues were analyzed from the human milk. These are accumulated in the human body through food chain. OCPs are usually known to be broad-spectrum poison, which is very chronic and acute to human and causes carcinogenic effects. Each compound has its individual effect on human. These silent killers being accumulated in the fatty tissues of human body gradually pass from generation to generation which is hazardous again in heredity chain. This is why the organochlorine pesticide DDT should be banned or restricted to emergency use only otherwise the above mention situation would become a certain threat for the children. At the same time decisions about using combinations of chemical and nonchemical approaches should be made on a risk-balancing basis. The risk-balancing should include such considerations as effects on human health and the environment, its sustainability, affordability, and effectiveness.

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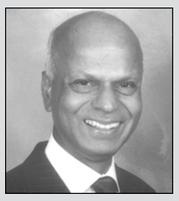
Global warming: No time to waste



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

LETTER FROM EUROPE

THE latest reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in February and April, this year, make compelling reading. They paint a grim picture of the effects of atmospheric changes on Earth in the 21st century. According to the IPCC, the ripple effect of global warming will have devastating implications for human life. It will affect critical areas like fresh water and food supply, ecosystems, polar glaciers, coastal areas, sea levels and human health.

The reports establish with "90 percent certainty" that humans are responsible for the significant rise in atmospheric temperature over the last fifty years. The IPCC believes that this rising trend is "unequivocal". The reports elucidate research showing that even if we somehow manage to stop all green-house gas emissions to the atmosphere today, temperature would continue to rise between 1.1 and 6.4 degrees Celsius throughout the 21st century because of the huge amount of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases we have already deposited in the Earth's atmosphere, mostly from burning coal, oil and other fossil fuels. This rise will be accompanied by longer and more intense heat waves which will bring hurricanes, floods, drought and hunger to the poorer parts of the world. Changes in the minimum temperature which has been rising twice as fast will have disastrous effects on polar glaciers.

According to the IPCC, sea levels will rise by between 18 and 59 cm. However, there is a good chance that they would rise 1.4 metres by the end of the century because of accelerated glacial melting. If it happens many islands like the Maldives and low-lying coastal towns and villages in the Bay of Bengal would disappear under water. This phenomenon may displace as many as 130 million people worldwide creating a new type of refugees called the "environmental refugees".

These changes will hurt the poorer peoples of the world in Asia and Africa more than the richer and more industrialised ones in the West, even though, ironically, they have contributed by far the most to the atmospheric changes linked to global warming. Canada, Siberia and Alaska will have longer growing seasons because of less severe weather and more precipitation. But climate change could lead to the extinction of 25% of the world's species. Between 75 and 250 million more poor people will suffer from food and water shortages. Unfortunately, rain-dependent agricultural production will fall 50% by 2020.

The IPCC is not a lobby at the service of any vested interests. It is a highly reputable scientific institution which provides advice on climate change to the international community. It was set up in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organisation and the United Nations Environment Program to "assess the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant for the understanding of the risks of human-induced climate change". The IPCC has already produced three comprehensive assessment reports in 1990, 1996 and 2001 which provided the scientific foundation for the formulation of an international response to climate change including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol. 2500 scientists from all over the world have worked for several years in the preparation of the reports published in February and April, 2007. (A third report will be published later this year.) Therefore, the governments will do well to move beyond the denial of climate change and take the findings of the IPCC seriously. It is necessary to act now by introducing new methods for the production and conservation of energy which no doubt will require huge investments in new technologies.

The truth is that a more efficient energy policy is possible and Japan has shown the way how to do it. Japan imports almost all its oil because it has no domestic oil supply. After the United States, Japan's economy is the second largest in the world. Yet it burns half as much oil per capita as the US. The International Energy Agency has confirmed that Japan's energy consumption as a percentage of gross domestic product is the lowest in the world. No wonder, Japan has earned the reputation of being the world's most efficient wealthy energy user. How have the Japanese done it?

Well, first of all, there is a common consciousness among the Japanese people that global warming is already here and that energy abuse must be stopped. Enormous self-discipline, constant innovation and design are the secrets to the Japanese success. Increasing use of energy from renewable sources, a highly efficient public transport system, hybrid cars, flexible solar panels, residential and commercial recycling have helped Japan to control carbon emissions. Japan's example should inspire other industrialised countries to take urgent energy-saving measures. There is absolutely no excuse for inaction.

Luckily, more and more governments in the industrialised world are becoming conscious of this growing danger and are prepared to take strong actions. In March, the European Union committed itself to reducing carbon emissions by 20% by 2020. It went even further by stating that if the United States were to make similar commitments, it would achieve 30% reductions. Unfortunately, Bush has steadfastly refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol and rejected all imposed cuts on carbon emissions. He feels it is pointless to join the Protocol if China and India do not come along. But Bush seems to forget that the US produces one quarter of the world's total emissions with only 5% of the population, which makes it the world's largest per capita emitter of carbon dioxide. China and India will always use this argument for not entering into serious negotiations on carbon emissions. It is time for the US to act now and break the deadlock by joining the Kyoto Protocol.

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The writer is a columnist for the Daily Star.