

Of democracy and democratic institutions

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MOST of the people of Bangladesh, stifled by the political impasse during the period preceding the declaration of emergency, welcomed the emergency and the military-backed caretaker government as a God-sent historic opportunity to put a dysfunctional political, administrative and socio-economic system into order. Historic opportunities came and went in Bangladesh many times. The war of independence in 1971 was in essence a manifestation of the popular verdict in favor of a democratic society and the rejection of totalitarian forms of governance. Yet, due to the lack of mature political and administrative institutions and in the absence of a democratic culture of tolerance and consensus, the historic struggles for democracy slipped into the abyss of authoritarian polity.

The uprising of 7th November 1975 came about as a reaction of politics of coup d'état and conspiracies. The leadership which assumed the responsibilities of leading the nation became more interested in entrenching their own power rather than to build democratic institutions. In their bid to consolidate their holds over state power, political organizations and institutions in whatever stage they existed were dismantled. Politics was virtually turned into an auction market where the sale and purchase of greedy and corrupt politicians became a regular phenomenon. The result was catastrophic; the leadership had to pay a heavy price and the nation had to endure politics of coups and conspiracies until it rose once again in 1990 to prepare the ground for a fresh start.

Bangladesh indeed had a fresh start. After a prolonged bout with a series of dictatorial political leaders and neo-Bonapartist military adventurers, the people had an opportunity to choose their leaders through an acceptably fair election in 1991. Since 1991 through three terms of political intolerance, violence, mismanagement, corruption, black money and godfather-ridden experiment in parliamentary democracy, the process came to a climactic end with the declaration of emergency on January 11, 2007 and subsequent cancellation of the election. This

situation combined with the bitter experience of the people of complete lack of cooperation and communication between and among the party in power and opposition parties has raised questions about the functioning of a credible and viable parliament in this country.

But then Bangladesh is not any other country. It has proven its monumental resilience of bouncing back from seemingly fatal falls many times. The surgical intervention by the military-backed caretaker government and its popularly backed measures to rid the politics and the administration of their prevailing ills have raised hopes of the people once again. Keeping the experiences of past thirty five years in mind, the policy makers, both, who are managing the government now, and those who will be running it in the near future, should not short sell the opportunity of putting the house in order by being hasty about starting another process which cannot endure.

The need of the hour is to cut through the din and dust raised by the over-enthusiasm of the reformers on one hand and mutual mistrust on the part of the political parties on the other and approach the heart of the problem; to reduce the vague and often illusive concept of democracy into a legible, definable, identifiable and functional political system. The opportunity must be availed to develop an institutional and procedural framework to protect the people from the power trap of political manipulation in the name of democracy.

Plurality of concepts and ideas are being discussed and circulated to create a level playing field. The caretaker government has already taken steps to reform the electoral process and curb the influence of black money and arms from the politics and conduct of business. A number of ideas are presented here that will add to the mileage of the reforms that are being carried out towards creating the ground for a free and fair competition for the control of the state mechanism as well as socio-economic opportunities and justice.

Nomination of candidates

While periodic election is recognized universally as a fundamental tool of democracy, the method of its conduct labels the degree of its efficacy. It is now a well-established fact that in a country

with widespread poverty, illiteracy and underdeveloped political institution, to hold a totally fair election is very difficult to say the least. In addition to the reform that the Election Commission has already undertaken, the political parties and the commission should revisit the process of nomination of a candidate. To circumvent the corruption involved in the nomination process at present and to allow honest, qualified and popularly acceptable candidates to participate, the nomination process should be left to the local

workers and leaders in the constituency. This can be done by holding a preliminary election/selection of candidates at the local level in a manner somewhat similar to the American primary system.

Deregulation of media

Government control over all instruments of mass communication, specially those funded by public money, must be withdrawn. The successful performance of the private TV channels and radio stations has proven that spending public money on

media is no longer necessary. Control of the incumbents over the media only provides room for manipulation of news and views to their own advantage thus defeating the critical criteria of fair competition among competing forces in the democratic process.

The ministry of information should be reorganized. Public money should be invested, and the focus of the information ministry should be reoriented, on external publicity and national development and education oriented

activities.

Neutrality of law enforcement agencies and intelligence community

Rampant use and abuse of the law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community by ruling parties have been and is one of the key obstacles to the functioning of democracy. The shameless abuse of these institutions by consecutive governments is no longer a secret. The nation has also witnessed how opposition leaders and their supporters have been suppressed and

coerced by incumbent governments thereby skewing the natural course and flow of politics.

For unhindered functioning of democratic process and uninterrupted growth of democratic institutions, it is essential to ensure democratic accountability of these vital institutions of the nation by establishing parliamentary control over them. The functioning of the law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community should be brought under effective supervision and control of a parliamentary committee to be composed of members of all representing parties in the parliament in ratio with percentage of representation they have.

Defining national security

Some of the most horrendous atrocities have been committed by the party in power in non-democratic countries or underdeveloped democracies in the name of national security.

In a pluralistic democratic society, political attempt to remove or install governments by the people or an organization or association of individuals through constitutional means is absolutely legitimate. In countries like Bangladesh where democracy is in its nascent stage or exists in prints only, political threats to the governments have often been neutralized and even eliminated in the name of national security.

The promulgation of special powers act in the early seventies and its irresponsible and blatant use ever since by subsequent governments show how loosely and flexibly the term national security has been used to contain political threats.

Routine surveillance and periodic harassment of political activists are so common that they are treated as integral hazard of politics. Such practices by the party in power drive legitimate political activities underground on one hand and give rise to politics of conspiracy and militancy on the other.

National security must be defined in clear and unambiguous terms. Constitutionally guaranteed political rights of citizens must be differentiated from what constitutes threats to national security. Parliamentary mechanism to protect the political rights of the citizens against all forms of interferences of manipulative governments ought to be developed and put in place.

Deregulation of national economy

It is now an almost universally accepted concept that free market economy is a prerequisite for democracy. The ramification of a free market economy vis a vis a controlled economy on the entire political process is far greater and deeper than usually perceived.

The conduct of politics is expensive. Political activities need perennial sources of funding. Government control over the national economy and the economic activities of the citizens provide the incumbents an unfair advantage in manipulating national economy for partisan interest. It is also one of the prime factors for the spread of corruption.

Government should withdraw from all micro economic activities and focus on the macro economic policy making of the nation. Massive institutional reforms are called for to make such programs effective.

Democracy is not merely a political system but a comprehensive culture with all its multi-dimensional facets. Nor is it a construction project that can be planned and constructed within a stipulated time. It is, rather, like a banyan tree that takes time to spread and entrench its roots in the national psyche. It took almost seven hundred years for the spirit and the concept of the Magna Charta to be understood and to spread its roots in the society.

No matter how appropriate or timely are the reforms, at the end of the day it will be up to the political parties to implement, protect and develop them. Hence their sincere and whole hearted participation is necessary. We are at the confluence of critical historic events and transition. It is unto our leadership and the elites of the society to transcend the confines of parochial and partisan interests and work together to develop the necessary social, political, economic and cultural infrastructure over which a strong, stable and growth oriented democratic political system can develop. One must not forget that the door to power is a revolving one and should be kept as such. Once jammed, the wait outside may be a long, cold and difficult one.

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US-Bangladesh strategic partnership: Prospects and challenges

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IT is reported that a US security delegation comprising of a Congressman and military veterans has asked President Bush to give Bangladesh "high priority" as a strategic partner in US foreign and national security policies against the backdrop of its exposure to Islamist extremism.

The delegation reportedly said: "Bangladesh is potentially a crucial player in the struggle against Islamic extremism and this is a crucial period for that country. The US has a rare opportunity now to help shape the future of an important nation."

A five member US delegation visited the country last month and reportedly met senior government leaders, civil and military officials and businessmen. Media reports say that they came to Bangladesh to develop the framework for a major conference on homeland security issues to be held in Bangladesh later this year.

What is strategic partnership?

Strategic partnership, among others, means inter-state relationship at several levels and they are mainly as follows:

- Very good and friendly relations at the top political level, which are usually institutionalized in one or another form.
- Intensive cooperation in the spheres of the highest strategic importance for both countries
- Dynamic and mutually beneficial economic relations, intensive cultural exchange, cooperation at the level of various NGOs as well as individuals.

Empirical evidence suggests that development of this relation and its intensity cannot be uniform because it depends on the countries' resources. It may be more important to underscore influence of international environment on such relationship.

Factors of proposed strategic partnership

It is obvious that since 9/11, the US administration, political scientists and media have been following the signs of upsurge of Islamic militants in Bangladesh. Alex Perry of the Time magazine in its October 21, 2002 edition came out with a story that Bangladesh had become a "safe haven" for Islamic jihadis.

He wrote: "Bangladesh has also its fundamentalists. And its southern coastal hills and northern borders with India are lawless and bristling with Islamic militants armed by gunrunners en route from Cambodia and southern Thailand to Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Central Asia and the Middle East."

Since 2004, Bangladesh had been hit by a spate of bomb attacks that have targeted judges, NGO workers, journalists and politicians.

On January 23, 2005 Eliza Griswold wrote in The New York Times about the attempt by Islamic militants to bring about Talibisation of the country. Travelling throughout Bangladesh

of Islamic law were found near the scene of the blasts, some written in Arabic and others in English.

On 30th December, a suicide

attack took place in Gazipur (near capital city Dhaka) killing one person and injuring 27. This was the first time a suicide attack was made. It is reported that the banned Jamat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) had trained about 2000 suicide bombers.

On 31 March 2007, six JMB leaders were hanged for murdering two judges and reportedly, they were not repentant for their militant activities.

On 1st May 2007, the militants demonstrated their might by exploding bombs in three railway

border areas.

Challenges threatening the strategic relationship:

It is not uncommon among political observers to start wondering about the content of the partnership and its effectiveness. Without embarking here on an extensive discussion of the issues related to the problem, it is noted that in discussing the effectiveness of the strategic partnership and its prospects, the existing asymmetry between the two countries cannot be ignored. Even though the desire to curb terrorism coincides, there nevertheless exist considerable differences between the US and Bangladesh. There are great differences in culture, politics, and economy.

Bangladesh's geopolitical orientation is to be friendly to its neighbours, in particular to India, China and distant Russia. Furthermore, Bangladesh is a member of the Non-Alignment Movement and is not comfortable to be closely associated with the superpower. Such relationship could be misunderstood by its neighbours. Bangladesh is rather inclined to perform the function of a neutralizing buffer (between India and China).

Among the impediments, the attitude of the left-wing political parties and civil society in Bangladesh toward the US is significant. The US under Bush administration is perceived as an imperial power that believes in politically influencing other countries across the world with their military power; it is also perceived as exploiter of natural resources. Free market and unbridled capitalism pursued by the US multinationals tend to create gross disparity between the rich and the poor. This image does not help the US to forge a strategic partnership with Bangladesh.

Furthermore, it is possible to maintain that the future development of US-Bangladesh relations is likely to depend upon the interrelation of both external and internal factors that may confront Bangladesh. Internal factors include social, political and economic dynamics of the country, while external factors relate to changes in the international environment.

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she concluded "The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of regimes like that of the Talibans impossible; in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way."

On 17th August 2005, the entire country was rocked by about 400 bombs that exploded almost simultaneously in sixty-three of sixty-four districts of Bangladesh. This attack had demonstrated that they had the expertise and planning to explode bombs.

Police in some of the cities said leaflets calling for implementation

stations even though six militant leaders were hanged. The organization that carried out the attack reportedly left their name as "Zadid (new) Al Qaeda".

All these events are of great concern to US because their troops have been fighting the Islamic militants since 2001 in Afghanistan and since 2003 in Iraq.

If Bangladesh government does not act firmly to eradicate Islamic militants, the jihadis might find a way to Afghanistan and to Iraq.

Bangladesh is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Islam

Rise of the Hindu Taliban?

BY AMULYA GANGULI

EVEN as the veiled women fundamentalists of a religious seminary in Islamabad are threatening video shop owners and setting a deadline for the introduction of Shariah laws in Pakistan, their Hindu counterparts in India have also become active, underlining a retrogressive tendency towards the Talibanization of the entire subcontinent.

What has angered the Hindu groups are some of the recent marriages between Hindu girls and Muslim boys. The extent of the concern among these outfits can be gauged from the fact that their chief patron, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), even brought out a compact disc depicting the supposedly baneful effects of such cross-community weddings.

Although the BJP had to withdraw the CD when the Election Commission accused it of spreading communal hatred to garner votes during the Uttar Pradesh elections, at least one saffron commentator referred to the underlying concerns expressed in the CD even as he acknowledged its crudity.

One of the marriages that drew the ire of the Hindutva groups followed the elopement of a Sindhi girl of Bhopal with a Muslim boy. It led to the 'kidnapping' of the boy's brother by the police, evidently to put pressure on the groom. But when the Mumbai High Court intervened, the 'abducted' person was released.

The police were also ordered by the court to provide protection to the bride and the groom. But by then a Hindu "Kanya Suraksha Samiti" (Committee to Protect the Daughters of Hindus) had been formed with the BJP's blessings.

Since Bhopal is in the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh, incidents like the abduction of the groom's brother, which was officially denied by the police till the man's presence in custody was filmed on a mobile phone, and the formation of the

vigilante committee could take place seemingly with the tacit consent of the authorities.

But what these incidents indicate is that secular India is becoming susceptible to the kind of regressive attitudes which are associated with countries like Saudi Arabia, where there is not only a General Presidency for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, but also a so-called religious police or Muttawwa, which roams the streets looking for and punishing violations of strict Islamic laws on the segregation of the sexes. Afghanistan too had a Ministry under the Taliban for Fostering Virtue and Preventing Vice.

If the saffron brotherhood has set up similar organisations in India to watch over unmarried Hindu girls, the reason is the same extremist mindset based on a warped interpretation of the mutual exclusivity of religious communities, driven by an intense animosity towards the other sects.

There is little doubt that the BJP's efforts to curb the influence of anti-Muslim, and also anti-Christian, campaign has bred an atmosphere of intolerance in India, which frequently erupts into violence directed against individuals with the police looking on as spectators, mainly in the BJP-ruled states.

While in the case of Christians, the focus of the Hindu extremists is usually on preventing suspected conversions, which led to the murderous assault on the missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in Orissa a few years ago, the propaganda against Muslims concentrates on their alleged links with terrorism, their preference for cow slaughter, and their suspected high rates of population growth, which threatens, according to the saffron outfits, to reduce Hindus to a minority in their 'only' country.

All these allegations, coupled with the charge that the Muslims are not sufficiently patriotic since they refuse to sing the Indian national song "Vande Mataram" (Hail to the Mother), as it includes references to Hindu idols, are continuously voiced by the BJP and other saffron groups, provoking a sense of animus against the minorities.

Courtesy: IANS