

Beyond reforms ... towards a functional political process

Unity of thought will then, hopefully translate into unity of action and, through a participatory and functional political process, ensure Bangladesh's march forward towards a prosperous future. Elections will then be an integral part of a dynamic and functional political process and will, in essence, be merely a means to a broader objective, that of growth and development, rather than being an isolated technical process and an end in itself.

SABER H. CHOWDHURY

FOR those who view being engaged in politics as a means to an end -- that being a better future for the country and its people -- these are indeed challenging times.

For such people, across the spectrum, who are committed to the vision of a progressive, prosperous and democratic Bangladesh, this is also the appropriate moment to wrest the initiative and, in so doing, be a part of a possible solution in taking the country forward.

The unacceptable alternative

come, necessary and legitimate.

Almost all of these reforms that the caretaker government and Election Commission are now advocating were, in fact, put forward by the Awami League-led 14 party alliance as far back as July 2005 and, thereafter, also tabled in Parliament in February 2006.

An election, free of violence and the influence of black money, so that the people are really able to choose representatives of their choice, is what we all seek. The Awami League has also, in the interim, raised the issue of state funding of political parties, an idea

the polls thereafter are technically proper and acceptable (I acknowledge that this in itself is a big ask), the question still remains -- will we be able to develop a functional political process thereafter?

There is, and has been for a while now, an overwhelming and unexceptional focus on the electoral process itself, but there has hardly been any discourse on what should happen in the period between the elections; I consider this to be equally, if not more, important.

Just as having a constitution which allows full and unhindered practice of democracy within a

even at the periphery of the agenda. Parliament too, in this context, understandably wilted and failed to deliver.

The boundary lines of state, government and political party simply vanished, resulting in there being no barriers, divisions or differentiation between them.

Criticism of the government was thus construed as being anti-state and seditious, and the opposition was persecuted accordingly.

Side by side, ruling party activists considered government assets as their personal wealth, as evidenced by the large scale, grass-root level plundering and looting of relief materials ranging from tins to clothing and food.

Even if a policy of encouraging democracy within the principal political party actors through voluntary reform initiatives from within and strict enforcement of provisions as may be articulated in Political Party Registration-related legislation were successful, they will not by themselves avoid repetition of a paralysis in the political process as witnessed in the events leading to "one eleven" about five months back.

Having done so, we can look to the future, but a forward looking development and growth agenda will only be realised if and when our dream of the future is mightier than our bitter memories of the past, and this is the second point for consideration.

As with India and China in recent times, in Bangladesh too, economics has to take the driver's seat and politics needs to move back and occupy the rear passenger seats.

Now is the hour to focus on, and take full advantage of, our political independence, and use it as a stepping-stone for our economic advancement.

To do so and attain double-digit growth rates, we need to reach across the political divide and build consensus across the political spectrum on a national agenda -- strengthening and capacity building of institutions, upholding rule of law, human rights, dignity and religious freedom for all, and ensuring a significant improvement in governance.

The way forward involves creating a facilitating environment for a functional political process, and in this regard the following three areas merit specific consideration.

Too much energy is spent on battling with what each party would like to think happened in the past. History has never been, and cannot be, a matter of wish, imagination or fancy, neither should it be used as a political football for narrow, partisan and selfish motives.

South Africa, a country torn by bitter conflicts and divisions, set up in 1995 a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to heal wounds and move forward.

Similarly, Germany came to terms with its past through Vergangenheitsbewältigung -- a composite German word that describes the process of dealing with the past (Vergangenheit = past; Bewältigung = management, coming to terms with), which is perhaps best rendered in English as "struggle to come to terms with the past."

Our glorious freedom struggle, culminating in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, should be a matter of pride, inspiration, convergence and unity, and not a source of, or

origin point for, divergence, disagreement and disunity.

We need to come together as a nation, agree and honour the past and move forward, and for this a reconciliation has to take place. Bangabandhu, as Father of the Nation, and all our national leaders, irrespective of party affiliation, should be duly recognised.

It is a matter of shame and deep concern that 36 years on from liberation we have not even been able to agree on a list of freedom fighters, and the issue of who were war criminals, let alone bringing them to justice, has also not been without controversy.

A truth and reconciliation initiative in Bangladesh's case should, therefore, be seriously considered to enable us have a closure on such issues once for all.

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As pointed out by CPD, it is

possible to have a two percent

increase in growth rates even at

existing levels of investment by

getting our act together on the

governance aspect alone, and if

we can manage to win the battle

against corruption, a few more

percentage points can be added

to this.

Within the framework of a

bipartisan approach, certain

sectors ought to be identified and

rail-fenced so that, regardless of

a change in government, there is a

focus and continuity in policies

relating to sectors such as

national security, local govern-

ment, health, education, invest-

ment, regional connectivity and

optimal use of our natural

resources.

There must be a consensus

that the country urgently needs to

move from A to D in terms of

growth imperatives, but how we

get to that point in terms of strate-

gies and routes can then be alter-

natives and options that political

parties can present to the people to

decide.

Rather than trying to

marginalize the opposition, and

even forcing it towards extinction,

the government of the day must

take it into confidence and, yes,

empower it. It has to be given the

space and protection to operate

and contribute in Parliament and

beyond.

For instance, making some

free airtime available to the

opposition parties on Bangladesh

Television and Bangladesh Betar

would be an effective way to

ensure their ownership, participa-

tion and stake in the system and,

consequently, encourage these

parties to engage in the process

constructively, rather than disen-

gage from it at all times.

In this regard, I have always

believed that peaceful, mass-

mobilisation oriented programs

rather than disrupting hartals

should be the order of the day, and

besides drawing mass support

and appreciation such initiatives

also serve as powerful signals.

The agreement signed in 1998

between the Awami League in

government and BNP in opposi-

tion, and witnessed by the UNDP,

on making Parliament effective,

functional and focal point of all

activity and initiatives could have

been a huge step forward had it

been implemented during the

tenure of the previous govern-

ment -- yet another missed oppor-

tunity. Hopefully, the next

Parliament will see a full and

complete implementation of this

agreement in letter and spirit, and

we will at last have a worthy

Parliament.

I recall when Narashima Rao

was prime minister of India, he

had invited the then leader of the

opposition, Mr. Vajpayee, to lead

the Indian delegation to the UN

General Assembly. Why should

such a practice be so remote and

distant for us?

On the other hand, in

Bangladesh we have the instance

of the August 21 grenade attacks

on the leader of the opposition as

well as a number of MPs which

was, despite filing of numerous

notices, not even allowed to be

discussed in our Parliament.

When the Geneva based Inter

Parliamentary Union tried to take

up the issue, the speaker of our

Parliament tried his best to dis-

suade them from doing so! The

right to dissent and have a differ-

ent view point from that of the

government is fundamental to

democracy, and this should be

upheld at all times.