

Democracy without a support structure is unsustainable



If we are now to put our derailed democracy back on track, we must, among others things, urgently initiate the important task of democratic decentralisation using local government as the instrument. With that end in mind, we must immediately overhaul the existing statutes of local government to make them reflect the words and spirit of self-government as laid out in our Constitution. We must then embark on holding all local body elections. This only will help provide the necessary foundation for a democratic polity in the country.

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

BANGLADESH'S democratic system unravelled on January 11, 2007 with the promulgation of a state of emergency and the cancellation of the parliamentary elections that were scheduled to be held on January 22. To many observers, this was a shocking development in that it happened 15 years and three general elections after democracy was re-established in the country through a mass upsurge against the dictatorial Ershad regime.

Many complex factors -- such as rampant corruption and the undemocratic behaviour of politicians -- are responsible for the events leading to that fateful day on January 11 and they ought to be thoroughly analysed and clearly understood. However, another factor behind the collapse of the system appears to be that it lacked the necessary support structure for the democratic edifice created at the national level.

In the physical universe, for any structure to remain standing, a support system -- a set of pillars -- is required. Without such pillars it cannot just hang in the air. Similarly,

a democratic edifice put in place through national elections cannot dangle in a vacuum -- it needs a support structure. It needs a foundation from the bottom up. That is what appears to have been missing in Bangladesh's experiment with democracy, making it unsustainable.

The democratic structure that was ushered in Bangladesh in 1990 consisted primarily of a parliament elected through a fairly free and fair elections and a cabinet -- the executive branch -- formed by the majority party.

Underneath was an elected Union Parishad, around a hundred Paurashavas and one city corporation. In between the elected local bodies and the elected national government existed a big vacuum due to the absence of elected Zila and Upazila Parishads.

Experience worldwide shows that democracy only at the top is not sustainable. You cannot hang a democracy between layers of autocracy. It must have a solid foundation. If the culture, values and practices of democracy are to be established, democracy must start with the people -- at the people's

doorstep -- and go all the way to the top. Elected structures must be created from the grassroots all the way to the national level.

In the vacuum caused by the absence of any democratic structure, bureaucrats operated at the District and Upazila levels with no democratic accountability -- accountability to elected representatives. This caused representative democracy to lose its representative character and much of its true meaning. In fact, with no elected bodies at the Zila and Upazila levels, the representative democracy became largely a sham.

Without elected bodies at the Zilas and Upazilas the governance at those two levels lost much of their vitality and vibrancy. This is reflected through the District Administration's gradually becoming less and less important and the Upazila Administration growing largely dysfunctional.

The breakdown of the Upazila administration is evidenced by the fact that most of the government functionaries, except the UNOs, now do not even reside at their place of posting. This is primarily because of the collapse of the accountability

structure.

As in nature, no vacuum remains unfilled. The vacuum caused by the absence of elected representatives at the Zila and Upazila levels were filled by power brokers linking the people at the grassroots with the Ministries and Directorates in Dhaka.

The elected Members of Parliament (MPs) from the ruling party became the most prominent of these power brokers, creating a sort of "MP sarkar" or "MP raj." In those Zilas and Upazilas, where the MPs were from the opposition camp, the ruling party bosses played this ever-powerful role of power brokers.

These power brokers were obviously not accountable to anyone. There was also no countervailing power. The unfortunate consequence of this arrangement, with no accountability and countervailing forces, was that power brokers used their influence to enrich themselves as well as dispense patronage to their cronies.

More seriously, these powerful power brokers and their cronies, with the blessings of their party brasses, not only indulged in rampant corruption, they also undermined the unelected, bureaucratic Administration at Zila and Upazila levels and were largely responsible for making these two layers of administration gradually less important.

The emergence of the "MP raj" thus clearly resulted in a serious breakdown in the age-old administrative structure.

The absence of elected Zila and Upazila Parishad also weakened other local government bodies,

especially the Union Parishads. In fact, the power brokers, particularly the ruling party MPs took over the UPS, making them largely ineffective. This further impaired the system of local governance, preventing institutionalisation of democracy in our country.

A serious consequence of the lack of elected structures in the middle was further centralisation to power and authority. Instead of bringing governmental services closer to the doorsteps of the people under the leadership of elected local bodies, the decision points for the simplest of services concentrated more in the hands of bureaucrats located in the distant capital city. The decisions that were once taken close to where people lived were transferred to nameless, faceless functionaries located far away.

Many horror stories about the mindless centralisation and its consequences abounded. For example, you even need permission from the Director General's office for the simple task of placing advertisements for hiring secondary school teachers for which you already have sanctioned positions.

This is a clear breakdown of the system, leading to unnecessary harassment of citizens and rampant rent seeking activities by functionaries. Again, this unreasonable and unnecessary centralisation happened in absence of elected local bodies in the middle layers to guard against it. In fact, had there been democratic structure in those layers, there would be democratic decentralisation rather than centralisation.



There would also be devolution of resources, making more resources directly available to the people through self-governing local bodies. Studies show that the closer power and resources are to the people, the more benefits people derive from them.

Increasing centralisation clearly caused a disconnection between the citizens at the grassroots and the government at the distant centre. Consequently, citizens became alienated and increasingly lost faith in the government. Many now feel that government is not for them and they have no ownership right in the state.

To many ordinary citizens, the government has become "of the

power brokers, by the power brokers and for the power brokers" and it cares little for them. Such loss of public confidence clearly made the existing democratic system unsustainable. The collapse of the democratic edifice is the end result of such un-sustainability.

Given this, if we are now to put our derailed democracy back on track, we must, among others things, urgently initiate the important task of democratic decentralisation using local government as the instrument.

With that end in mind, we must immediately overhaul the existing statutes of local government to make them reflect the words and spirit of self-government as laid out in our

Constitution. We must then embark on holding all local body elections. This only will help provide the necessary foundation for a democratic polity in the country.

It may be noted that the Appellate Division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court, in its unanimous judgment, in the famous Kudrat-E-Elahi Panir vs Bangladesh directed the government in 1992 to hold elections of all local body elections in six months, which was defied by successive political governments for the last 15 years.

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Trouble at the grassroots



What the nation witnessed over the last 15 years is that the tens and thousands of political cadres turned almost all the villages into dens of terror. This took a serious turn immediately after the general election of 2001. This daily, for example, ran an investigative series on this subject in 2002. Unfortunately, the atrocities began in 2001 by the BNP-Jamaat cadres with the nod of their godfathers (some now in custody) to wipe out opposition, did not rest until 1/11.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

In recent weeks and months, the nation has been witnessing a reform fervour going through the minds of our politicians. This got further momentum immediately after the announcement made by Professor Yunus that he changed his mind with regard to running for politics. Presently, the old political forces are back in the ring again with proposals and counter-proposals of party reforms to begin afresh after the current ban in politics is over.

As a result, the BNP under the hidden leadership of its secretary general, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, has just released a 15 point reform slate for his party. The AL has been releasing its reform proposals bit by bit through the senior leaders in

their so-called "individual capacity." So far the presidium members Abdul Razzak, Tofail Ahmed and Suranjit Sengupta spoke to the media with new measures.

The JP (Ershad), third largest party in the last parliament, has made it clear that the former president and party chief HM Ershad has called the day with, of course, a big if. That is, if the grassroots of the party, after the current ban in politics is lifted, wishes him to return at the helm, he would certainly reconsider.

The reform agendas of the BNP, while they sound very interesting, given the party's past record, however, are not free from caveats. The reforms must be ratified by the party councillors who are regarded as grass-roots supporters of the party.

These councillors, according to

the BNP constitution, represent the party branches from the upazila to the centre. It has been claimed that this party has almost 3,000 councillors nationwide. It also appears that the national council for this party did not meet in the last 14 years. With these in mind, I would like to make some observations on the BNP's proposed rules for the game.

What is new in the secretary general's reform proposal? Among other things, most importantly, it is clear that the BNP's current chairperson automatically ceases working if the reform measures had been ratified in full by the majority in the council.

This is certainly no less than a civilian coup against the incumbent chief of the party.

Who would have thought of a



BNP minus Khaleda Zia even six months back? At this juncture, however, a fundamental question remains: has the reform gone far enough? While technically dropping Khaleda Zia from the top job addresses a part of the present crisis, nothing has said in the reform about the bottom. It is needless to mention that while the politics has been rotten at the top, the so-called grass-roots at the bottom were not spared either.

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Over the whole period of the

BNP-Jamaat rule (2001-2006), a common phrase among unemployed youths in the villages was: "Ami BNP kori (I belong to the BNP)."

What does it mean? It means: "I am above the law and the village elders must submit their allegiance to the cadres like me." Like the mafia, the godfathers in politics through their cronies and cadres destroyed the age old non-partisan, non-political co-existence of rural ordinary Bangladeshis.

The true grassroots support base of a political party or parties at village level has completely disappeared and has been replaced by the cadre roots of the godfathers. This resulted in taking into custody of more than 200,000 political cadres nationwide by the joint forces over the last six months.

This is a damage done, unfortunately, could not be repaired in a generation let alone next year or the year after. The BNP reform measures, however, have remained silent about this whole episode.

Moreover, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has been in the record in saying that his party is in great trouble now since a huge number of

the party men and women have been taken into custody under the emergency rules. This suggests reform or not, when the grassroots cadres become free, the secretary general has intentions to play the game again in keeping them in the squad.

He has no plan yet for the cadres who committed atrocities over 2001 and 2006. I am sure, after 2008 when normalcy in politics has been restored through holding general election, these cadres would surface again with ruthless vengeance against people who oppose them.

In this regard, however, the BNP reform measures offer that the branches can be operated at ward level instead of formerly village level under the gram sarkar law introduced under the leadership of Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in 2005. This gesture of the BNP, I am afraid, is too little too late.

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Confronting terror



Islam is a global religion with a very active and clear socio-political and economic vision. As such, many Muslims feel that it is their obligation demanded by their faith to work towards bringing about a society in which their values are appreciated and established in the political apparatus of the state. This, however disliked by many, is a legitimate desire that any groups of whatever ideology can and should hold for so long as they do not seek to impose upon others by force.

TALHA J. AHMAD

An interesting article on Christian Science monitor catches the mood of thinking-minded and sensible people on the issue of terrorism. The author quotes the surprise findings of surveys revealing public attitude towards terrorism. A few points made in the brief article, reflecting on the survey results from countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia and United States, deserve more attention and space.

It has been asserted, validly in my view, that Muslims are no more supportive of terrorism than any other communities of religious and other groups. Terrorism steams out of misguided ideology energised by anger, mistrust and ignorance. Those that seek to kill innocent people indiscriminately do so out of their evil desires.

Such actions as unfolded in various terrorist attacks in NY, London and other places are utterly condemned by all people from all

others, or that their understanding of Muslims and Islam is so shallow and misinformed that they totally fail to understand the very nature of it and thus adapt policies that instead of befriending Muslims, it offends them.

As a result, in what should have been a relatively simple criminal matter, in which everyone would sign up to, their policies antagonise Muslims and convinces many of a hidden agenda to subjugate global Muslim communities thus increase sympathisers to Al-Qaeda likes.

Westerners feel that their lifestyle is superior to others and they have the right to think in that way. Similarly, Christians, Jewish and all other believers of various faiths feel the same regarding their faiths and it is their right, which we should respect. Why should than the Muslims be different? The current trend in the global struggle against extremism seems to deny this right to Muslims and seek to silence all political movements, peaceful popular organised, which find its inspiration in Islam.

Of course, the shallow and rather one-sided media coverage, the ability of the Neo-Conservatives and their allies world over, to twist and spin the truth and mobilise public opinion using powerful propaganda tool means today Islam and systems inspired by Islam has been demonised to the extent that the moment a Westerner hears of an Islamic State, Islamic System, they instantly feel frightened. They imagine of some back dated draconian existence, which has nothing to offer to modern progressive societies whereas in reality nothing can be far from truth.

The issue of equality, freedom of speech, freedom of belief, justice and fairness are the fundamental principles that underpin any Islamic system. For centuries, when Islam was firmly rooted in the political, social and economic lives of Muslims, they went on to make extremely valuable contribution in enlightening our world through scientific discoveries, mathematical excellence and development of various humanities disciplines.

History, astronomy, medicine and mathematics are only but a few of the areas in which Muslims contributed enormously. Today the Muslim world is in disarray; political-socio-economic condition of Muslims is dire. There are good reasons to suggest that at the heart of this direness of Muslims are the legacy

of colonial rule and a planned and carefully orchestrated strategy of decapitating Muslims in the colonial error, which continues to date in many shapes and forms.

And it is not only Muslims who suffer from this utterly despicable condition; the non-Muslims suffer comparably from it too. When Islam dominated the lives of Muslims, non-Muslims were flourishing in the Muslim world with dignity, honour, safety and security.

Classic example was the decadent Ottoman Empire in which many Westerners fleeing from persecution at home found refuge and Jewish enjoyed relatively a better life and had a lot of influence, for Islam guarantees freedom for all religious groups and forbids any kind of biasness towards them by the Muslims.

Cutting things short, it is suffice to say that the current strategy to support puppets, marginalising Islamically inspired political and social movements is a wrong strategy which in long term will continue to strain the relationship between Muslims and the wider world.

This strategy is also doomed to be a failure for it falls short to recognise the rights of Muslims to be heard and valued. To Muslims, it is not the guarantee of economic prosperity, technological advancement and political authority that means most, though they are very

important. What matters to Muslims most is their faith and the integrity of their faith.

Therefore, let the Muslim community decide for themselves as to what they want, what kind of ways of life they want. Let us not mix up a mere criminal issue with wider aspiration of Muslims who seek to glorify and flourish their ways of life.

Terrorism is a criminal matter, which must be dealt with as such.

In the process we should attack the justification of Al-Qaeda type groups for this kind of attacks and not get into a petty propaganda



assault to condemn their stated objective of bringing about Islamic state.

For every Muslim wants to see Islam prevail at all level of social strata. It is not the desire to see Islam being established politically which is wrong; it is the mean in which one seeks to establish Islam as the political force we should be concerned about. Only then and then alone will we be able to truly confront terrorism in all its evil shapes and forms.