

Minus-two formula: A democratic interpretation!

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THE necessity of reforms in our political party systems seems to be the general consensus in the country. As part of this reform process, the minus-two formula has cropped up. This formula suggests that the country's two main political parties – Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – should be reformed by retiring/removing their present chairperson. More specifically, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia should now say goodbye to their leadership status.

The proponents of this proposition hold that both AL and BNP must be held responsible for the current political condition of the country. And, as the leaders of the two parties, (autocratic leaders to be more accurate) Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia should accept the blame and step down from their positions. It is further expected that they should offer an apology to people for their mistakes, and thank them for giving them the opportunity to rule the country as chief executives.

The opponents, on the other hand, argue that the minus-two formula is undemocratic. For, according to their opinion, the selection of leadership is a prerogative of the party council. The party councillors can choose anyone as the party leader, and keep him/her as leader as long as they want. But, in the case of the state, the voters have the supreme authority to determine which party leader will form and lead the government.

Hasina made these points crystal clear in her talks with reporters at the Lab Aid hospital on July 7, where she went to visit ailing singer Sabina Yesmin. Begum Zia holds a similar view. In commenting on the reform proposal made public by BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuyian, she stated that all reforms would be carried out in the council meeting.

Both proponents and opponents agree that voters choose which party leader should form the government. Therefore, the fundamental contentious point in the debate is the antagonists' claim that the party councillors have the right to choose anyone as their leader, and keep him/her in the



position as long as they want.

Is this system democratic? Or, in other words, is this argument consistent with the theory and principle of democracy?

A satisfactory resolution to the debate hinges on the answer to this question. To do this, we must understand the role of political parties in a democracy. This, in turn, requires a close and careful look at the theory of democracy, and appreciates the critical difference between the state and government.

A state is generally defined as an organized political community that occupies a definite territory, possesses internal and external sovereignty, and institutes an organized government (rephrased from a web definition).

The most important point to note here is the idea that the state is an organized political community, meaning that the people are its sovereign authority. Or, as our politicians say, all powers of government come from the people.

There are three critical elements that this political community must have to be recognized as a state. First, the community must live in a geographically defined territory, so that sovereign authority can be exercised in this area. Second, it must have sovereign powers, both internally and externally.

A government, on the other hand,

is an organization in which the state or people's sovereign authority is vested, meaning that a government is empowered to exercise sovereign power of the state.

This brings out two pivotal points of the democratic system of government. First, government is a very complex organization of public administration. Therefore, for good governance, it needs highly professional and meritorious personnel, who can be appointed mainly through selection.

However, these appointed people, no matter how qualified they are, cannot be allowed to lead the government, because they are not chosen by the people whose power is to be exercised. In other words, leaders of a government must be elected by the people – the state's sovereign authority.

Second, the welfare of the people, which is the sole purpose of organizing a state, depends critically on how this power is exercised. Thus, in a parliamentary system, the people must choose the team that they believe can promote their welfare. If they make the wrong choice, they will suffer the consequences.

Here comes the critical role that political parties play in helping people making the right choice during general elections. In a parliamentary system, the political party



commanding majority seats in the house forms the government. Consequently, people vote along party lines, i.e., instead of judging the merits of individual candidates, they vote for candidates belonging to the political party of their choice.

This, however, does not mean that people choose the political party in every election, because a political party needs a long time to win over the confidence and sympathy of the general public, which is usually achieved by highly charismatic leader(s). Once a political party wins popular support it continues for a long time, until and unless its leaders subsequently lose this popular trust, thereby inviting another party to take its place.

What, then, do voters choose in general elections? They choose a political leader and his/her team who, they trust, will run the government according to their expectation. This is a serious point that demands all our attention, because the solution to the minus-two formula lies in investigating what happens when this team is defeated in the next general elections.

In 1991, neither Sheikh Hasina nor Khaleda Zia had opportunity to run the government. Thus, both of them were qualified to seek voters' mandate. People mandated Khaleda to form the government, while Hasina was made opposition leader. This, in turn, suggests that both leaders were qualified

to run in the next general elections held in 1996.

And they did. People chose Sheikh Hasina. Since Khaleda failed to get voters' mandate, she was no longer eligible to lead BNP in the next general elections. She could run as a party candidate if she wanted to remain active in politics, because she was re-elected from her own constituency. But she could not lead BNP, because people rejected her leadership, not BNP.

Under the circumstances, the most logical thing for Khaleda to do was to resign from the chairperson position and let the BNP councillors choose another leader. But she did not, and there was no one in the party to even think of asking her to resign.

Consequently, people went to the general elections in 2001 with little choice. They were fed up with Hasina's administration and, therefore, wanted to replace her. But the option they got from BNP was a failed leader. They had no choice but to accept this option.

In the 2001 general elections, Hasina was defeated, meaning that she became unqualified for leading AL in 2006. But she retained the AL leadership and got the party ready for elections. Thus, even if 2006 elections were held, the people had no opportunity, whatsoever, to make the right choice.

Perhaps it is quite appropriate to quote here the British queen's power and function. It is said that the queen has all the power in the empire, except making a man a woman, and vice versa. But the queen can do no wrong. The reason is that the queen can do nothing without the advice of the prime minister. Therefore, if any wrong is done in the execution of government policy, the blame lies with the prime minister, not the queen.

The people are sovereign. They cannot make any wrong choice. If the choice is wrong, that blame must be borne by our political parties. It is their inability that they could not present the right candidates and right leaders for voters to choose.

Perhaps, it is now clear that the opponents' argument – the party councillors can choose anyone as their party leader and keep him/her

leader as long as they want – is not consistent with the theory and principle of democracy. The minus-two formula, although referring to two specific persons is, indeed, a general principle of the democratic political system. More specifically, this formula is key to a lasting cure for our ailing political parties.

Reforms in political parties are a precondition for good governance in our country. It now appears that the most important element of these reform measures is the notion conveyed by the minus-two formula. Yet, the reform process is not progressing smoothly, because the minus-two formula has become a very controversial political issue.

Many politicians, who feel the political correctness of this proposition, do not come forward because its future is uncertain. On the other hand, those who are courageously supporting the idea are summarily branded as conspirators who want to split their parties by working as government agents.

Under the circumstances, the direct intervention of the Election Commission seems to have become imperative. As a guideline, the EC must request our political leaders to reform their party constitution by requiring their leader, who is the incumbent prime minister, to step down from party leadership post if the party is defeated in the general elections.

This requirement is not negotiable for two good reasons. First, this law is dictated by the principle of democracy. Second, because of the first, this law is the will of the people, the sovereign authority of the state. And this national government has the moral and constitutional obligation to execute this sovereign will.

I just wish to mention that this principle of democracy is a practice in all mature democracies. I also warn that a right practice cannot be countered by a wrong practice, which is unfortunately a common debating error in our country.

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post 1/11 situation. He said: "all I care for is two hands-full of rice (du muttho annaya)." Sensing his predictable grumbling about the high prices of everyday essentials, I asked: "Is that all?" "Not really," he added, "if there is rampant crime and disorder in the country the money I earn from you would be robbed by someone and I will go hungry." So we need it all: orderly society and democratic polity. The problem is: nobody seems to know how or when.

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How is post 1/11 Bangladesh doing?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

I was in Dhaka for ten days, just before two recent major developments: declaration of election road map and the arrest of Sheikh Hasina. Dhaka's political mood was uneasy, mirroring the dualities of July weather – hot temperatures alternating with cooling showers.

A Dhaka politician yet untainted by allegations of corruption, a member of the last Parliament, and not of Awami League told me: "Don't restrain Hasina, let her speak her mind. She is the only voice of democracy in the country." He went on to complain that most politicians who matter are either

compromised or are in fear of punishment for their past wrongdoings. A mixture of favour and fear has cowed them down. The only exception is Sheikh Hasina, so she should not be silenced or marginalized.

A businessman friend with ostensible links with the powers that be cautioned me of the fate of the top politicians and asked me to ask Sheikh Hasina to shut up completely. The businessman had excellent links with the BNP government earlier and was a well-wisher of Sheikh Hasina. I sensed exasperation in his voice: "Why does Hasina have to comment on Tuku's (ex-state minister Iqbal Mahmud of BNP) children?" Yet, I

was told only the other day by a banker friend that Hasina's concern over Tuku's children being sent to jail earned her respect even among those who are generally critical of her.

I was not surprised by the sharpness of the differences of interpretations of events in Bangladeshi politics. Bangladesh politics is made up of sharp differences, surprises, and returning to the well-trodden, failed paths of the past.

When I quoted the "voice of democracy" sobriquet to a university professor of English, who was narrating to me the litany of "reckless statements" of Hasina, he dismissed it as nonsense. I was

afraid to share with him what my politician friend told me about the future of Hasina. He told me that the time has come for Hasina to choose whether she wants to be Bangabandhu or not. If she maintains her defiance and stands her ground she will be another Bangabandhu, if she fails to perform this historic role she will be quickly forgotten as another compromised politician.

Now what is the future of Bangladesh, at least politically? Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

Some worry that Bangladesh may be heading for a soft authoritarianism replacing a dysfunctional democracy. The statement by the army chief on the need for a free-

dom of information act is both encouraging and baffling. Encouraging because it reinforces the commitment of a professional army to strengthen the institution of democracy, and baffling to those skeptics who see the eclipse of democracy writ large. Is it possible for the caretaker government to reformat the political system with a limited mandate, however well-meaning they may be?

When the caretaker government assumed office on 1/11, the metaphor used was of a derailed train being winched back onto the rails. So the job was limited, as indicated by the metaphor. The train driver and the crane operator have two separate roles. A busi-

nessman confided in me his conversation with a military officer, when the officer told him that the military is called upon to manage all kinds of jobs, like traffic control, crime control, fighting terrorists and disaster response.

This shows the failure of the civilian governments as it, indeed, shows the capacity of the military to deal with all these crises. So, if the military has the skill and capacity to do the job why can't they rule more permanently? A convincing argument that sold my businessman relative to the idea of the military taking over the government on a long-term basis.

But as I told him: "it is only when there is a fire in my house

that I call the firemen who come to my help, take risks, put out the fire, and then return to their station." He was now not very sure, and conceded that the political future looks uncertain.

When I narrated this conversation to a leftist leader, Fazle Hossain Badsha, he agreed with me and added that it would be like the firemen wanting to stay in the house on the ground that they put out the fire. And, I thought, their living in the house would prevent future fire hazards. Fortunately, this has not come about yet. But would they still be firemen if they became occupants of that house?

As I rode on a black taxi I asked the driver about his opinion on the

Chinese migration goes global

PETER KWONG

INCE the end of the Cold War, some 181 million people have left their homes to find opportunities elsewhere in the world, not only from the poor nations to the rich, but from the poor to the less poor nations. This movement is fluid, its impact not confined to individual nations.

And perhaps no group has had more visible impact than the 18 million Chinese who have left China since the economic reforms of the late 1970s – just over half of the approximately 35 million Chinese who live outside of China in what has become known as the Chinese diaspora.

Chinese emigrants these days, be it skilled professionals, businessmen or laborers, prefer North America and Western Europe as their destination, but also settle for Argentina, South Africa, Mauritius, Israel, Dubai or the like, countries not previously associated with the notion of Chinese migration – 150 countries in all.

In Romania, Chinese immigrants eliminated labor shortages created after some 2 million Romanians emigrated to Spain and Italy after the fall of communism. Chinese women employed in Romanian textile factories are paid US \$260 per month – four times more than what they would

earn in China, but a sum for which Romanians are no longer willing to work.

The driving force behind Chinese emigration is the monumental demographic shift of its 1.4 billion population induced by China's rapid economic expansion. Some 200 million people have left homes in rural China for jobs in the cities.

The unprecedented influx has created overcrowding, social disorder and downward pressure on wages in the cities, as the Chinese economy, even with impressive double-digit growth, fails to create enough jobs to accommodate all rural migrants. Thus the most ambitious among them see leaving China as an attractive option.

The post-Cold War global migration, however, takes place within the old framework of nation states. While the capital and goods flow freely across national borders to the drumbeat of open markets and free trade, the movement of people is all but free. Ordinary citizens of developed receiving nations are unwilling to accept mass immigration in fear of losing their jobs, clinging onto the concept of national borders as a guarantee against such fears.

But their concerns are not shared by employers, who want to hire immigrants to cut costs and who hope that the force of global migration will weaken national labor

movements and labor standards. Thus, although jobs wait for the mobile plucky takers in many nations, unless they are skilled professionals, the immigrants must enter borders illegally or on temporary visas.

Chinese emigrants are so motivated that they willingly pay organized crime networks tens of thousands of dollars to be smuggled to their destinations by perilous means, often with tragic consequences. In 2000 British authorities found 58 illegal Chinese immigrants asphyxiated aboard a tomato truck in the port city of Dover.

Governments make repeated attempts to strengthen border controls and beef up criminal sanctions against illegal immigrants and their smugglers, but so long as there is demand for migrant labor, the illicit migration goes on.

In fact, legislation that makes migrants more "illegal" only increases their vulnerability, therefore cheaper for the employers to engage. The profits from smuggling also increase. It now costs \$30,000 for a Chinese to be smuggled to the UK and \$70,000 to the US – roughly double of what it was a little more than a decade ago.

After illegal immigrants enter a country, they have no access to regular labor markets or the benefit of labor-protection laws. Forced

underground, Chinese immigrants squeeze into niche trades, usually employed by co-ethnic subcontractors. Because such immigrants work for and alongside fellow Chinese by necessity, not by choice, they become targets for resentment and accusations of sticking to their own.

In late 2006 local residents in Tonga – furious that the Chinese businesses recruited Chinese from China instead of employing from the local population – looted and burned more than 30 Chinese-run shops.

Of course, Chinese workers don't necessarily have common interests with their Chinese bosses. While some 2,000 Chinese entrepreneurs own a quarter of the textile businesses in Prato, Italy, an army of low-wage workers recruited in China works long nights, sweatshop-style, to produce low-cost "Made in Italy" fashions for export to Western Europe.

In New York City, Chinese restaurant and garment workers frequently wage battles against their co-ethnic employers for abuses such as withholding of back wages and confiscation of service tips. They see the Chinese as a sign of a creeping annexation of Russian territory. Adding to the fears is the fact that China controlled most of that region until the 1850s. President Vladimir Putin plays on

this fear when he warns that, if the government does not introduce immigration restrictions, people in Russia's Far East could soon all speak Chinese – even as his experts agree that Russia needs Chinese labor and resources to develop this region.

The disconnect between national policy and the logic of global migration underlines the necessity for governments to work together in finding new ways to protect their citizens' living standards while guaranteeing immigrants the right to work without undue exploitation. Unfortunately, most politicians are interested in exploiting anti-immigrant sentiments to generate populist support and win elections.

Russia's Far East region has about 100,000 permanent Chinese residents. Most are merchants, selling clothes, toys and other consumer goods. Since their inflow coincided with the dwindling of Russian population in the region, a belief has taken hold among many Russians that China has adopted a state program of "moving to the North."

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social stability, the issue of global migration has assumed urgency for the whole world and deserves timely attention and appropriate multilateral treatment.

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Chinese immigrant working at textile factory in Bacau