

Elections 2008: Power to the people

NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY

AMBAASSADOR Butenis lamented recently that she could not see "free and fair" election in Bangladesh before leaving for her new assignment in Iraq. I, too, share the good ambassador's frustration. As a Bangladeshi citizen I, too, want that our nation move forward down the democratic path with another of our free and fair elections. After all, is not democracy the ultimate destination of any free nation? But then I got to thinking: Are we actually a democratic country? Were we ever a democratic country?

I know it is fashionable to say that we have been a practicing democracy since the elections of 1991. After over-throwing an autocrat through a popular people-led revolt, we truly had a democratic election. Well participated and actively contested, this election offered hope to the citizens. Unfortunately, it has been a downward slide for the nation since then. Though we have had two more "democratic" elections, I am afraid we have not achieved "democracy."

One definition of the word democracy is: "the free and equal right of every person to participate in a system of government, often practiced by electing representatives of the people by the people." So have we had free participation? To an election, I suppose yes, but what

about to the governance afterwards? Have even the parliamentarians we elected been able to participate in the process we elected them to? Now I am sure I don't need to debate here the utter failure of the experimentation. Even the ardent supporters of the past regimes will agree with me that the failure of democracy to live true to its definition is unquestionable.

Ambassador Butenis, I am sure, will soon find out in her new posting that an election for the sake of an election is no indication of people's will. It is easy to hold an election, but quite different to usher in participation in the political process. So if "free and fair" elections do not necessarily give us democracy, should that be our only goal? Or should our aim be of a higher calling? Maybe to ensure the participation of a vast majority of our citizens in government and the processes of governance should be the ultimate aim of any reform process.

Over the last thousand years, Bangladeshi have not had much autonomous democratic control of their destinies. We have been ruled during this time from Delhi or London or Islamabad. Even since 1971, our political leaders have often been autocratic leaders. So, theoretically speaking, we have had at best 15 years of free rule in the last 1,500 years. Given this, should we be so sure of what democracy or which

model of democracy suits us best? Should we not even spend some time on deliberating on the structure of our government and representation?

Let us assume for sake of argument that you good readers have said yes to the questions above and have opted for some debate on the path to democracy we should take. In that case could I offer an alternative roadmap to democracy?

I am a firm believer in the power of the "demos" in democracy. That is, the common man in the street (or, in this case, village) should not only have a say in but should also participate in the political process. Our previous government, even in the best of light, was limited to 300 or so parliamentarians. Mind you, I am not even getting into the debate of Article 70, coupled with megalomaniac leaders and ineffective party structure, which, in effect, concentrated power in the hands of, at best, five people!

This concentration of centralized power leads to its wide-scale abuse. Now, say if we could take away the unbridled authority that the legislative members have on the development cash cows and disseminate that to a local authority, we would be achieving two things.

One, we will allow local citizens to have a direct say on what the development priorities of a local area should be. And, second, we

would allow legislators to fulfil their number one task -- to legislate.

This simple re-look at what democracy actually means will give power back to the people, where it should have come from in the first place. Upazila Parishads will be allocated a development budget which they will decide on, without the interference of the ever powerful MP. As UP leaders, in a vast majority of the cases, live in the local area and come into interaction with their constituents on a day to day basis, I believe they will be more answerable than the absentee landlords of our previous Jatiya Sangsad. This devolution of power from the central authority to many local authorities will have the most pliable change in the fabric of governance in the nation. And that, my friends, in my book, is the best example of democracy I can think of.

So, keeping to the caretaker government's announced timeline, we have local authority elections by December 2008, we will fulfil the pledge we took as a nation on 1/11: that of transferring power to an elected government at the earliest possible time.

Now, now, I am sure there are puritans amongst us who will equate only parliamentary elections with democratic handover of power. But why is that the only criterion, the only benchmark, of



PHOTO: STAR

democracy? With my local authority elections (and mind you, effective devolution of power) we are achieving a far stronger participation in governance than any parliamentary elections under our old structure will allow us.

I am sure the next question on everyone's mind is, does the unelected caretaker government stay on forever? Well, of course not. Say we give the local government system a year to settle in and find its foothold in govern-

ment. Next, we hold an election to a "Constitutional Assembly." I am sure I have a few perplexed readers on my hand. Why do we need to do this? Well easy, we are not sure what model we should follow. Do we have, say, two houses of parliament? Or should we replace first-past-the-post with proportional representation? Or even, how do we ensure equitable participation of citizens regardless of gender, religious beliefs, or ethnic bias? A thousand other questions like

and apolitical activists (I did not want to use the term "civil society") seems quite attractive a proposition. Secondly, we have a "Panel of Elders" in a supervisory role. Say a body of ten prominent and acceptable elders who will act as a national conscience. The NUG will fix policies and implement them, and the Panel of Elders will offer advice, guidance, and, most importantly, criticism.

Election for the sake of an election is not, and cannot be, the only answer for democracy. It is through a creative re-evaluation of what the ultimate objective of the reform process is, that will we be able to fix priorities that will help us achieve a robust and long-term solution to the problems that have plagued our race for a millennium. There has to be an earnest effort for the citizens of Bangladesh to break out of the endless cycle of cynicism and corruption. Our friend Ambassador Butenis and her colleagues, I am sure, will appreciate this effort for self-rule that most Bangladeshi yearn for. And, hopefully, they will accept the paradox that for the emergence of true democracy, the only target cannot be the speed with which we attain it.

Nazim Kamran Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Natural disasters: Implication and remedies

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

NATURAL disasters, floods, cyclones or earthquakes, take heavy toll of lives around the world every year. It is true that man can do nothing about a natural disaster of huge magnitude, but vision, and timely precaution and practical measures could save millions of people. Natural disasters bring not only misery and hardship, but also cause water borne diseases in the wake of receding flood waters in particular.

Floods have been visiting Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan every year, but cause havoc in cycles of four or ten years. It may be recalled that Bangladesh was affected severely by floods in

1988, in 1998, and also this year. This year, 35 million people in South Asia have been affected according to Care, one of the world's largest private humanitarian organizations.

Floods not only affect the people of the country concerned, they also involve the international community for financial and material assistance.

Bangladesh is a lower riparian country, while India and Nepal are upper riparian. If there is heavy rainfall in the upper riparian region, Bangladesh is at the receiving end because it does not have any control over waters, which are within the boundaries of India and Nepal.

Now that the people in Bangladesh, India and Nepal have become victims of floods there is an

imperative need to take up joint venture projects, not only to share the water equitably but also to build water reservoirs and dams to preserve the quality of life in this region.

During Pakistan rule, the central government succeeded in negotiating with the Indian government, brokered by the World Bank, and signed the Indus River Treaty on September 19, 1960 for equitably sharing the waters of the Indus and its tributaries. The Indus River originates from the northern side of the Himalayan Kaillas Parbat, and flows into Pakistan covering 1,708 miles.

The World Bank raised a \$893.5 million fund for development of the Indus basin. This has facilitated building of a good number of bar-

ages and huge dams like Mongla and Tarbela in Pakistan.

The central government of Pakistan could have negotiated with the Indian government for sharing the waters of the Ganges, which is also an international river, along the line of the Indus River Treaty. Nothing was done in this part of Pakistan. Only the Kaptai Lake Water Reservoir was built in erstwhile East Pakistan to facilitate construction of industries like rayon mills and paper mills in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. That served the interests of business magnates of West Pakistan.

India, on the other hand, had begun constructing a barrage on the Ganges at Farrakka near Murshidabad when East and West Pakistan were united. The barrage came into operation in 1974 after Bangladesh emerged on the world map in 1971.

Generally speaking, two types of rivers come under the purview of the international maritime laws, boundary rivers and successive rivers. Boundary rivers pass through two or more sovereign states, and are the joint property of the states concerned. The Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers fall within the definition of boundary rivers. A state has the legal rights and exclusive sovereignty over that portion of the river, which passes through its territory.

In 1997, the United Nations General Assembly passed a draft submitted by the International Law Commission with regard to the non-navigational uses of international watercourses. The International Law Commission encourages upper riparian and lower riparian countries to come up with mutual agreements which serve the interests of both countries.

There is an imperative need to undertake geological and hydrographic studies in Bangladesh to build another barrage on the Gomati river in Comilla. If these barrages are constructed, water could be stored during

the rainy season and be of immense benefit during the lean period of the year. Similarly, a study should be carried out to find ways to increase the flow of water in the Teesta barrage in Rangpur.

A good number of examples of cooperation between lower and upper riparian countries exist around the world. The Columbia River Agreement between Canada (upper riparian) and the US (lower riparian) and the Rio Grande River Agreement between US (upper riparian) and Mexico (lower riparian) are some examples of water policies between upper and lower riparian countries.

Another example would be the River Nile Treaty, which involves Egypt and Sudan as collaborators. If we look at our region, we find a number of joint venture cooperation projects between India and Nepal and India and Bhutan that are beneficial to the people of these countries. The Kosi river agreement between India and Nepal and the Wangchhu river agreement between India and Bhutan reflect such cooperation between countries.

Bangladesh may consider negotiating with Nepal and India jointly to harness the huge reservoir of waters in Nepal for generating energy to meet the needs of the people in northern Bangladesh and for building a barrage near Pabna on the Padma river, a tributary of the Ganges, for generating hydro-power and for irrigation in both northern and southern Bangladesh as well as in Murshidabad and West Bengal in India.

There is an imperative need to undertake geological and hydrographic studies in Bangladesh to build another barrage on the Gomati river in Comilla. If these barrages are constructed, water could be stored during

the rainy season and be of immense benefit during the lean period of the year. Similarly, a study should be carried out to find ways to increase the flow of water in the Teesta barrage in Rangpur.

Bangladesh should develop an extensive watershed management program involving forestation and construction of sediment traps and speed breaks in the catchments around rivers. Dredging of rivers and digging of canals should be revived as a priority. Most of the rivers in Bangladesh are dried up as a result of sedimentation, and because of the sand and silt that come downstream from the upper riparian region.

A separate fund should be opened by the government through the cooperation of private banks, as had been done in collecting money for building the Jamuna bridge, to meet the financial requirement.

Bangladesh should also approach the international community to create a consortium for these projects. Instead of providing aid every year, the international community should be encouraged to contribute to such a fund for the greater interests of Bangladesh and the international community.

Bangladesh and India should leave aside unproductive and destructive politics and work together for solutions that will have a positive impact on the people of Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia

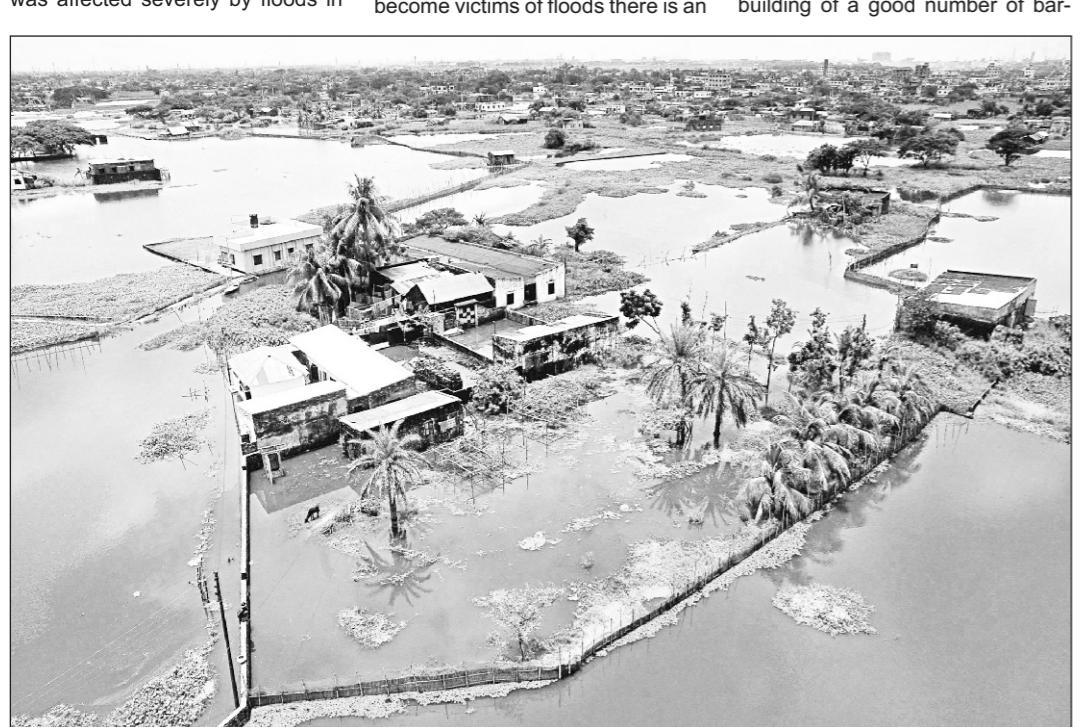


PHOTO: STAR

Plot thickens in Pakistan

HUSAIN HAQQANI

PAKISTAN is a country run under the law of rulers not one that is subject to rule of law. If evidence was needed of this reality, it was provided on September 10 with the deportation of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan had only recently recognized Sharif's "inalienable right" as a citizen to return to the country from an exile imposed on him by an unelected government. Instead of allowing Sharif to exercise his right, the government exiled him again.

The Musharraf regime claims that Sharif entered into an agreement seven years ago to stay out of the country and its politics for ten years. The agreement involved a foreign businessman, a foreign prince, and the secret services of Pakistan and a foreign country. It is not even a written contract.

Only in a state controlled by lawless coup-makers can an

agreement of this nature trump the constitutional judgement of the country's highest court.

Sharif's banishment is indeed a sad development but it cannot be said that it was unexpected. On legal and moral grounds, there is no justification for the government's uncivil attitude towards the former prime minister.

That said, Sharif made an error in political judgement by failing to correctly estimate his strengths as well as his weaknesses. He was swayed by Pakistan's many armchair revolutionaries into believing that his immediate return to the country would make him more popular than Benazir Bhutto.

Sharif rejected Bhutto's suggestion of following a two-track strategy of negotiating with the regime while at the same time opposing it. At a time when General Pervez Musharraf is almost universally opposed as the symbol of authoritarianism in Pakistan, defiance towards him could be the key to enhanced popularity.

But the armchair revolutionaries advocating defiance stayed at home on the day of Sharif's arrival, leaving others to man the barricades. The regime shamelessly arrested hundreds of people and used a security blanket to block significant demonstrations of support for Sharif.

If the United States needed a reminder that Musharraf is too distracted by domestic politics to continue the hunt for terrorists it was provided by the mobilisation of thousands of security personnel to deal with a single political opponent.

Commandos surrounded Sharif's plane immediately after it landed in Islamabad, according to media reports, even though the US is paying top dollar for them to search and surround known Islamist terrorists.

The entire event exposed the weakness of Musharraf's regime and the disastrous consequences of arbitrary governance. None of the military officers and civil servants engaged in the operation

against Sharif had the moral courage to refuse the unlawful orders of their superiors.

Pakistan became the object of international ridicule once more, with images on television of plainclothesmen shoving a former elected prime minister. Had Musharraf obeyed the Supreme Court's judgement and allowed Sharif to return, heavens would not have fallen. But Pakistan's dictators have a set pattern as, unfortunately, do Pakistan's political leaders.

Musharraf chose to stick to the authoritarian blueprint of tolerating no challenge to his absolute power. Sharif chose unplanned defiance as the route to instant popularity. The cause of democracy in Pakistan was hardly advanced.

For several weeks, Sharif's supporters were attacking Bhutto for negotiating with Musharraf even though Bhutto insists that she is only trying to work out an orderly transition to democracy. Negotiations are an integral

part of politics and Bhutto's dialogue is no exception. It would have been better if the negotiating process had been more transparent but Sharif's view that there should be no talks at all amounted to posturing at the expense of substance.

Bhutto was most likely forced to negotiate outside public view because of the involvement of Pakistan's ubiquitous intelligence services in the negotiating process and their insistence on secrecy.

After all, Sharif, too, was forced to deal with the Musharraf regime under duress and kept secret the terms of his arrangement involving the head of Saudi Intelligence, a Lebanese businessman, and Musharraf's security officials. Given its turbulent political history, Pakistan definitely needs a period of healing its national divisions. Polarisation between political forces has already diminished considerably and the country's military-intelligence establishment also needs to end its "war" against

popular politicians. Instead of breaking ranks with Bhutto over negotiating with an unlawful regime, it might have been better if Sharif had correctly estimated his ability to mount a street challenge and not exposed himself to a second deportation.

He could then have worked together with Bhutto to negotiate a settlement for return of democracy with the help of popular support. Musharraf's regime looks weaker by the day because it lacks legitimacy -- a precious commodity that may be the most important selling point for Pakistan's popular politicians.

Pressure over Musharraf's lack of legitimacy, rather than antics to show who is more capable of defiance, could make the general bow to the Pakistani nation's desire for constitutionalism.

Husain Haqqani is Director of Boston University's Center for International Relations, and Co-Chair of the Islam and Democracy Project at Hudson Institute, Washington D.C. He is author of the book *Pakistan between Mosque and Military*.

A man of charm

K. Z. ALAM

MIR Abdur Razzaq left us all on Wednesday morning, August 29, at a London hospital near his home in Leytonstone, having spent there about 54 very active and worthwhile years. His is a name familiar to any Bangladeshi expatriate in London, and he established his bona fides as a perfect gentleman, and a kind and considerate human being, ready to extend all kinds of help and assistance to anyone in need.

He may not have been known to many in Bangladesh barring those who are from greater Mymensingh or those who met him even briefly. He was a man who would attract all kinds of people -- young, middle-aged, and old. One who had met Mir Abdur Razzaq, I am sure, would have come to him time and again, and he, without any hesitation, would give all the help that one could expect from any person.

He came to London a couple of years earlier than I did in 1957, and I first met him by chance. I was immensely impressed, and started asking questions on various matters, including possible employment opportunities in London after the Suez crisis.

As I have stated, he gave me all kinds of practical advice which helped me very much. Others also got various tips as to how they could come out of their difficulties. He came to London from Karachi where he had a chequered career, as an officer in the army, a subaltern in the air force, and, prior to leaving for London, as a journalist.

Mir Abdur Razzaq was a charming man and had an impeccable way of narrating events, and those who were in his company would stay glued listening to him for hours. He had an immaculate memory and knowledge in practically all subjects. I noticed no change in him from the day that I met him for the first time till his death, except that his health became fragile due to old age ailments.

I became a fan of Mir Abdur Razzaq soon after I met him, and have had the pleasure of his hospitality on my visits to London. When he used to live in digs (room) we spent many

pleasant evenings with him, and when he bought his house in London we spent many weekends there, enjoying every minute.

Mir Abdur Razzaq stayed a few hundred yards away from 29 St. Mary Abbots Terrace, High Street Kensington, London, where I lived for a few months care of the late Tossaduk Ahmed, which was frequented by great political leaders including Maulana Bhasani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Mir Abdur Razzaq would visit our place to meet the great leaders. He was also very close to the leaders of the Labour Party of Great Britain including Mr. Peter Shore, member of parliament and cabinet minister, and worked in Tower Hamlets for