

Dilemma of democracy

Power oriented politics led political parties to a rush for grabbing state power, where the interest of the people and future of the nation bore no consequence at all. All mechanisms for manipulation of election results by use of money, muscle, official authority, bribe, politicisation of administration etc., became part of the game of politics. The other consequence was refusal to accept defeat in the election because of irregularity, as that was more or less there in almost all cases.

G. M. QUADER

SINCE independence, the people of Bangladesh had always held the aspiration of practicing democracy. The Constitution of Bangladesh says in the preamble: "Further pledging that it shall be the fundamental aim of the state to realise the democratic process, a socialistic society, free from exploitation - a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens." The aim had been to achieve an ideal society fulfilling all the elements of social justice through practice of democracy.

The country started with parliamentary or ministerial form, changed to presidential form, to one party rule, to extra-constitutional rule through proclamation of martial law, to multi-party presidential form again, to extra-constitutional rule through proclamation of martial law again, and finally to parliamentary or ministerial form.

The latest was parliamentary form, which continued from 1991 till October 28, 2006. During this time four general elections were held, forming four parliaments - the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth parliaments. Out of these, the sixth parliament was formed as a

result of election on February 15, 1996, under the government of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Almost all the political parties including the major ones boycotted this election.

There were allegations of widespread rigging, and the election results were perceived at home and abroad as totally manipulated. Under the mounting pressure, as a result of people's movement, the said parliament had to be dissolved within eleven days of its inception. The other three parliaments completed their full term of five years each.

The eighth parliament was dissolved on October 28, 2006, after completion of its tenure of five years. National election for the 9th Parliament was scheduled for January 22, 2007, to be conducted under a caretaker government (CTG) formed for that purpose. But, before the election date, it became obvious to all that the BNP-led four parties alliance in power had set the stage for a manipulated election to come back to power through fraudulent practice.

Nationwide protest continued under the leadership of the combined opposition parties (all parties other than parties in the ruling alliance in 8th Parliament), with widespread violence for stoppage of that election.

Ultimately, the armed forces

had to intervene, and that election had to be postponed, on January 11, 2007. A fresh CTG was sworn in to arrange conducting of a free and fair election for the 9th Parliament and handing over power to the elected government. The reconstituted Election Commission (EC) of the new CTG declared a road map covering a period of about two years for holding of the national election. As per the same, the election is to be completed within December 2008.

The practice of democracy, which continued uninterrupted from 1991 to October 2006, could not be sustained. Under the new arrangement, an unelected CTG would govern the country till the next government could be elected.

The question is, why, and under what circumstances, did democracy fail? Judging from different political activities during the period from 1991 till postponement of election for the 9th Parliament on January 11, 2007, it became obvious that there had been a continuous downslide of values in our political culture.

An ever-increasing gap was created between political parties and the people. Political parties, instead of becoming the people's property, became the property of an individual or a group of individuals. The parties, instead of working for the people, were

devoted more towards personal and group interest, even in most cases at the cost of public interest.

In a way, it might have been termed as corporate culture in politics. Political parties took on the hue of a business enterprise, with ownership of a person or a group of persons. Offspring or family members could inherit the ownership of the party. The situation in some political parties was such that the ownership could be sold. Different positions, including policy-making positions, of a party could also be purchased.

Like a business house, the party used to be run by the party chief as chief executive, with the rank and file as employees. The aim of politics became financial profit. Winning an election by hook or by crook to go to power and earn money through corruption and by abusing official authority became the natural consequence of the said corporate political culture.

Power oriented politics led political parties to a rush for grabbing state power, where the interest of the people and future of the nation bore no consequence at all. All mechanisms for manipulation of election results by use of money, muscle, official authority, bribe, politicisation of administration etc., became part of the game of politics. The other consequence was refusal to accept defeat in the election because of irregularity, as that was more or less there in almost all cases.

One of the prime causes for existence of corporate political culture in our political system is the election and, to be precise, the way it is conducted in Bangladesh. There are sufficient

election laws, regulations, codes of conduct etc. for conduct of a free and fair election. But, unfortunately, in reality, there are no effective means for implementation of those laws. There exists enough scope to influence election results with use of money and muscle power.

The majority of the population is poor and still illiterate. Moreover, there are lapses in providing security to the lives and property of common people. This added to inefficiency, corruption, and partisan attitude of the conducting officials made it possible for people with big money and muscle power to snatch the result in their favour by influencing through fear and favour.

If a person having muscle power could earn enough money using the same, he could become a potential candidate with high prospect of success. So could corrupt businessmen and corrupt bureaucrats with sufficient money. Violent and corrupt criminals became the target for recruitment by the political parties, as they were good at winning elections.

When they were recruited in a party in key positions, they took control of the party in time. It was they who inducted corporate political culture in parties, with an aim to gain financial profit. Ascending to power is, for them, creation of scope to achieve that goal. These people never had any scruples, so they did not see reason not to use illegal or unethical means to win election for going to power. They also see no reason not to abuse state power, once acquired, to earn personal profit through corruption and irregularities.

This new breed of so-called



politicians may be good in winning elections, but lack background and education to perform as good parliamentarians. They could never be expected to perform in government positions to serve the people properly with honesty and dedication.

So, the dilemma of our democracy at the moment is that the person who manages to be elected to parliament is not fit to perform in parliament or in government. On the other hand, a person who is capable of becoming a good parliamentarian and could serve the government efficiently is not good at winning elections. To have sustainable practice of democracy associated with good govern-

nance a solution must be found to break the deadlock created by the said dilemma.

The Election Commission should be strengthened. The EC has to ensure that the election is free from the influence of fear and favour, and is conducted as fairly as possible.

Reforms are to be carried out in political parties so that those are not owned and guided by political businessmen (who trade with politics) of corporate culture. Instead, parties should belong to the people; the members are to run the party democratically. The objective of the party should not be going to power at any cost to reap benefits. The priority should be to serve the interest of the people,

whether in power or out of it.

Proportionate representation of political parties in parliament, as per the proportion of total number of votes cast in their favour, may be considered as an alternate to the existing constituency based election. Political parties would declare list of candidates for election in order of preference.

People would have scope to vote for the party on the basis of quality of the people in the list. As per the proportion of votes received, the party would get proportional number of seats in the parliament. These seats would then be filled up serially out of the declared list of candidates.

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NOTES FROM HISTORY

The day Bangabandhu came home

EDITORIAL DESK

THE crowds began converging in front of Tejgaon airport at dawn. By early morning, the place was dense with people - young and middle aged, with a smattering of the aged - come to welcome the founding father of the new state of Bangladesh, back home from ten months of captivity in Pakistan. It was January 10, 1972. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was flying home from London, whence he had been flown by the Pakistan authorities a couple of days earlier.

sion set in about his safety. That was again natural, for ever since his arrest by the Pakistan army in the early hours of March 26, 1971, he had not been seen in public.

He had been flown to the then West Pakistan and placed in solitary confinement in Lyallpur jail. In Bangladesh, the genocide organised by the military regime of Yahya Khan was well underway, thanks to the ruthless Tikka Khan. In the nine months between March and December of the year, 3,000,000 Bengalis were murdered and 200,000 Bengali women were raped by the soldiers of the

before a military tribunal whose proceedings would be conducted in camera. The eminent Pakistani lawyer A.K. Brohi, it was revealed, would be Mujib's defence counsel. In the subsequent weeks, Yahya Khan made quite a few references, all derogatory, to Bangabandhu in the course of some media interviews.

By late November, as was to be known later, the tribunal had found Bangabandhu guilty of treason, with the very likely possibility of the judgement soon leading to his execution. But then came the Indian entry into the war

over as Pakistan's new president from Yahya Khan on December 20, ordered the placing of Bangabandhu, who had triumphed over him at the general elections of a year earlier, under house arrest on December 22. On December 27, Bhutto turned up at the rest house where Mujib had been placed on his orders. It was the first meeting between the two men after the abortive political negotiations in Dhaka in March.

Bhutto's goal was clearly to extract promises from Bangladesh's leader about some form of links between Pakistan

Rahman to Rawalpindi's Chaklala airport. Mujib was being freed, along with his constitutional adviser Kamal Hossain and family (Hossain had been arrested in early April 1971 and placed under detention in West Pakistan). Senior officers of the Pakistan military accompanied Bangladesh's founder on the special PIA flight taking him to London.

Bangabandhu was received at Heathrow by officials of the British Foreign Office as well as the senior-most Bengali diplomat of the time, M.M. Rezaul Karim, and other members of the Bangladesh mission in London. Soon after his arrival, he called on British Prime Minister Edward Heath and opposition leader Harold Wilson. He called his family in Dhaka and also spoke to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed on the phone. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called him and greeted him on his release from imprisonment. In the evening of January 8, Bangabandhu addressed a packed news conference at Claridge's hotel and paid tributes to his nation on attaining victory in an "epic war of liberation."

Bangladesh's president, for that was the position Bangabandhu occupied as a result of a decision by the provisional government at Mujibnagar on April 17, 1971, left London late the next day on a special aircraft put at his disposal by the British government. The next morning, January 10, he broke journey in New Delhi, where he was warmly welcomed by President V.V. Giri, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, members of the Indian cabinet, and civil and military officials. He addressed a public rally thanking Indians for their support to Bangladesh's liberation struggle. And then he took off, this time for home.

He arrived in Dhaka at 1.40 in the afternoon to a rapturous welcome from his people. The truck carrying him, in the company of Bangladesh's government leaders, to the Race Course took nearly three hours to reach its destination. At the Race Course, Bangabandhu broke down in tears as he paid tribute to the millions who had sacrificed their lives for freedom.

He was happy his Golden Bengal was finally free, happy that Bengalis had emerged free of Pakistan. It was twilight when he and the million strong crowd made their way home after what been a dramatic day.

LEST WE FORGET

Remembering Md. Nurul Islam

MD. MATIUL ISLAM

A career civil servant, joining the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1950, Mr. Nurul Islam spent the last 10/11 years of his career as the Governor of Bangladesh Bank, which post he voluntarily relinquished due to ill-health at the age of 61, though he could still serve for another 4 years.

This was perhaps in his character. He was the only civil servant who volunteered to join the judiciary, leaving the glamour of the executive branch, but was not selected on the ground that the government could ill-afford to lose him. He was perhaps the only civil servant who twice declined to become advisor/minister in charge of finance - once in 1982 immediately after the imposition of Martial Law, and again in 1991 when Justice

next 8-9 months as the guest of the caretaker of the Government House, in lieu of tutoring his children.

On the eve of partition in 1947, he returned to Barisal and back to square one, but did not give up. He became a teacher in Barisal Zilla School, and saved enough to take admission in M.A in Economics in the Dhaka University in 1949. But, as luck would have it, he was selected for Civil Service of Pakistan in 1950 and could not complete his Masters.

In his service career, he became the symbol and epitome of honesty, integrity, courage and brevity. As Controller of Imports & Exports in Chittagong he pursued a policy of helping the Bengali businessmen who aspired to go into industry by issuing them liberal import licenses. But that did

Islamabad. But the prime minister refused to trust anybody else with this job. A compromise was worked out. Mr. Islam worked as Chairman, NBR, in addition to his duties in TCB.

With his commerce background, Nurul Islam immediately realised that unless the flow of imports of essential raw materials and consumer goods was maintained, the country would face a serious crisis of closure of industrial undertakings and shortage of essential items. But the foreign exchange reserve was not large enough to maintain the flow of imports. He, on his own, embarked on a massive import program under "Deferred Payment" and averted the crisis.

His last assignment, as Bangladesh Bank Governor, possibly suited his temperament most. In 1976,

As Chief Controller of Imports & Exports in Islamabad, he put in an application for reassignment when serious disagreement arose between him and the commerce secretary, who wanted to proceed against a Bengali civil service officer. The Nawab of Hoti, the commerce minister, not only refused to let him go but also tried to soothe his temper by sending gifts of bags of sugar from his own sugar mill.

Shahabuddin offered him a post in the cabinet of the interim government.

A self-effacing person, he struggled against financial odds for higher education prior to his joining the civil service in 1950. Graduating with distinction from Barisal BM College in 1946, he went to Calcutta to join the Presidency College, but was unable to do so as financial support from the family was not available.

He was forced to take up a minor job in the A.G.'s Office and, to supplement his income, took up evening tuition of the children of Khan Bahadur Mahbubuddin Ahmed.

He always suffered from indifferent health, and the Calcutta life also did not suit him. He decided to go to a hill station, gave up his job and proceeded to Darjeeling where he stayed during the

not make him unpopular with the West Pakistani business community.

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In 1972, Sheikh Mujib appointed him as the Chairman of TCB. I, as the finance secretary, needed somebody to organise the NBR, and the choice fell on Nurul Islam because of his experience in the Central Board of Revenue in

Bangladesh Bank launched a massive program of financing 90% of the cost of small flats upto 1500 sq ft in multistoried buildings, with 5% interest and 30 years repayment.

The NBR was also persuaded to complement the scheme by allowing tax exemption on income from such flats measuring upto 2000 sq ft. The scheme, to a large extent, met the growing demand of the middle classes for affordable housing in the metropolitan cities.

For sometime past, his health was failing. On December 19, 2007, he was moved to Square Hospital in a semi-conscious state, and died there on the December 22 without regaining consciousness. In his death, I not only lost a brother but also a guardian and a benefactor.



The whole of Bangladesh was in celebratory mode on the day, indeed had been since news had first come in of Bangabandhu's arrival at London's Heathrow airport from Rawalpindi. On January 8, though, when Bengalis first heard of their leader's departure from Pakistan, a certain kind of panic and a sense of apprehen-

sion set in about his safety.

No one in occupied Bangladesh knew if Mujib was dead or alive. The first indication that he had not been put to death came on August 9, when state-owned Radio Pakistan put it about that the Bengali leader would be placed on trial on August 11 on charges of treason

between Bengalis and Pakistanis on December 3, prompted by Pakistani air force jets striking Indian cities on the border with West Pakistan. By December 16, all was over for Pakistan, as Bangladesh stood liberated through the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who took

and its now free eastern province. Mujib did not oblige him.

On January 3, 1972, addressing a public rally in Karachi, Bhutto rhetorically asked his audience if they would permit him to free Mujib. The crowd roared its approval. As the night deepened on January 8, Bhutto accompanied Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur