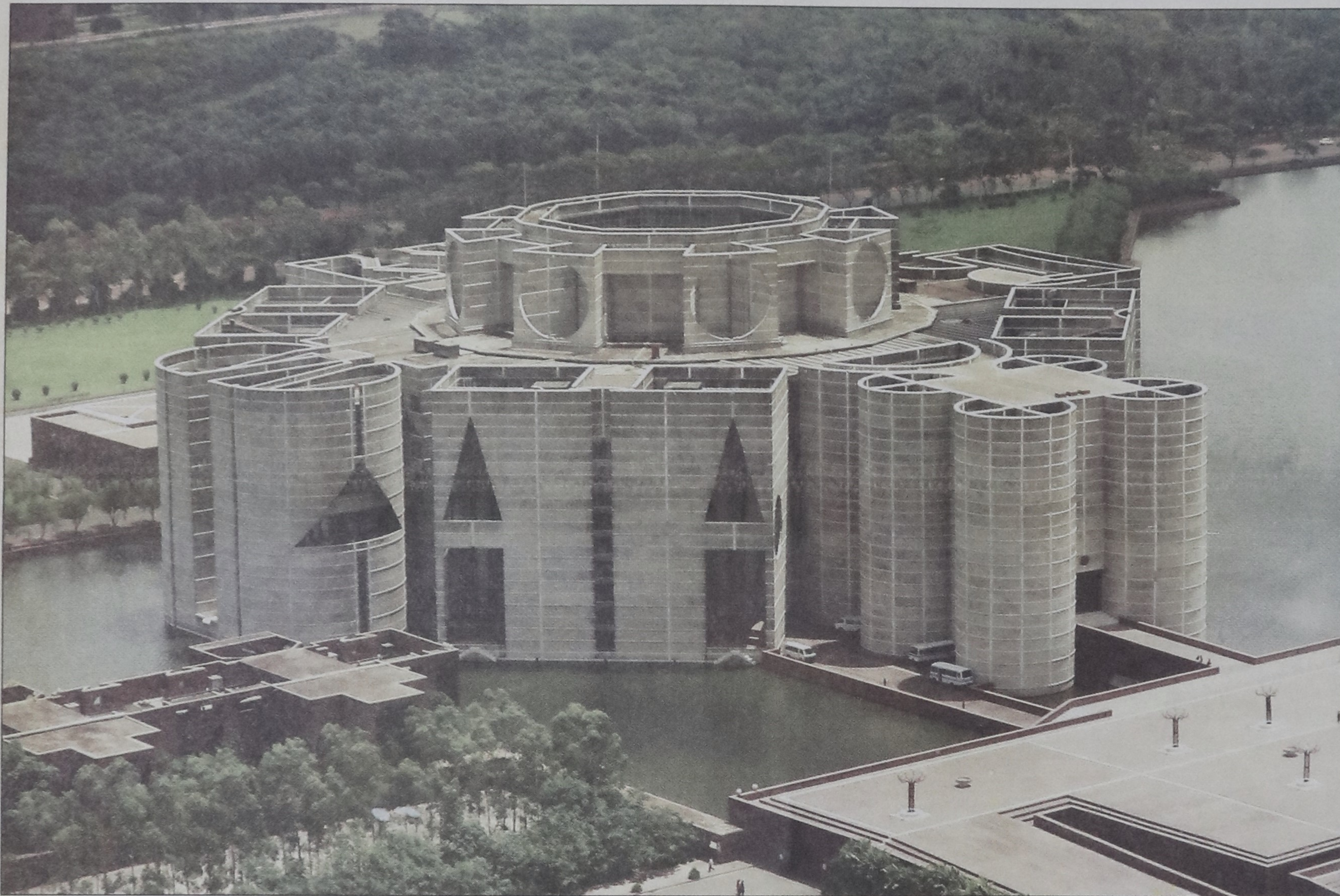




Making *democracy* work: What we need to do



some 40 per cent of our capital city's population.

The law-enforcing agencies were also misused by those who practiced sick politics to patronize and protect extremist elements. Acts of terrorism were routinely covered up, investigations delayed and effective law-enforcement obstructed. There can be no rule of law where there is selective enforcement of law and the injection of the virus of "doliokoron" into national institutions responsible for law enforcement and national security.

Armed cadres and private bahinis controlled by godfathers, patronized and protected by "political parties" strike at the root of democracy. Democracy cannot work, nor can the rule of law assure security of life, person or property, unless there is comprehensive de-commissioning and disbanding of private bahinis and armed cadres.

Parliament did not develop into a forum for debating and adopting national policies on major subjects, ranging from education and energy to industry and agriculture, nor did it exercise accountability. With a dysfunctional Parliament and a non-accountable government, social and economic change which was a basic national goal, remained neglected. Professor Rehman Sobhan, one of our respected economists, has written about the neglect of agriculture and misallocation of resources and that of task of accountability in the industrial and financial sectors, as follows:

"...we have failed to reward our small farmers for their enterprise in doubling our crops and saving the foreign exchange costs of importing grain to feed 120 million people. Instead we have reduced the share of public investment in agriculture thereby reducing subsidies to the farmers which has raised the cost of fertilizer and irrigation so vital for the farmers. We do not provide sufficient agricultural credit particularly to small farmers who have no corresponding access to micro-credit available to landless households."

"Bangladesh thus enjoys the spectacle of bankrupt banks and sick industries co-existing with bank clients and defaulting industrialists bursting with good health and well-being, who sit in Parliament, eat in the best restaurants, travel abroad without a care in the world, own a fleet of air-conditioned new vehicles, build palatial houses which make the properties left behind by the Adamjees and Bawanyis in Dhaka look modest in comparison. It is this sustenance of social disparities through access to public resources which makes our policymakers party to the growing social inequalities. This has provoked a sense of injustice within the great majority of our citizens who have not been so favoured by the largesse of the government and thus hold the state as much as the market accountable for the emergence of two societies in Bangladesh. (Prof. Rehman Sobhan, From Two Societies: Honouring Bangladesh's Social Contract, 1998.)"

It is in the background of the bitter experience of nearly two

We must move forward through consensus on a Charter for National Unity, and by mobilizing support through a national dialogue. Only through active participation of citizens throughout the country it will be possible to create the energy and the strength to bring about meaningful change, a vibrant democracy and a just society.

DR. KAMAL HOSSAIN

We have dreamt of self-rule and democracy. We dreamt of self-rule and freedom from British colonial rule, as we did of an end to the feudal zamindari system. The dream for the overwhelming majority of our people was to replace foreign rule by their chosen representatives, who would bring about changes to improve their lives and those of their families. We secured independence in 1947. As our dreams remained unrealised we fought for independence in 1971 at an enormous price in lives and suffering. But the fruits of freedom still remain unrealised.

People cannot resign themselves to the fate of the Greek hero, Sisyphus, who was engaged in pushing a boulder to the top of the mountain. But every time he reached the mountain top, the boulder would roll down again. Undaunted and invincible he would begin to push the boulder up again. Must we be condemned to suffer the fate of Sisyphus? Has not the time come to break the pattern of successful struggle leading to victory only to be deprived of the fruits of victory by powerful self-serving coterie predators?

We have bitter experiences

of how the fruits of victory of our struggle have been lost due to the selfish pursuit of power by the predators. For people to become empowered, and to remain empowered, and to enjoy the fruits of victory, institutions need to be built, and checks and balances established in order to prevent usurpation of power by the predators, leading to disempowerment of people and their continuing dependence.

Post-colonial history in Africa and Asia has many examples of the end of colonial rule followed by the rule of indigenous coterie and corrupt oligarchs. Can we not in the twenty-first century in Bangladesh break that pattern and ensure that we achieve meaningful change. A free and fair election is essential if we are to enable our people to choose honest and competent representatives who would genuinely represent them. But elections alone cannot ensure a working democracy, unless democratic institutions are strengthened and function effectively. A democratic culture enabling active participation by people, tolerance and mutual respect, must be nurtured. The cult of personality and winner takes all mentality impedes the healthy growth of democracy. This is why economic and

political reforms are of crucial importance. We have seen an election follow another without bringing about significant change. This is because people's choice has been limited to candidates who are put forward by large parties, which are afflicted by the practice of selling nominations to corrupt persons, who see their election to public office as an investment, through which to earn huge dividends. They showed little interest in people's concerns, or in the strengthening or proper functioning of democratic institutions.

This is why in 1990 under pressure from the people's movement the political parties assured that they would create conditions for:

- an effective Parliament;
- an accountable government;
- the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, including repeal of all laws inconsistent with such rights;
- freedom of the press and the autonomy of electronic media;
- independence of the judiciary.

Some 18 years later we must ask ourselves: did we get an effective Parliament or an accountable government, or the rule of law? A courageous youth, Nur Hussain, who had shown spirited support for

the movement by painting on his chest "let democracy be free" and on his back "let autocracy fall", had been gunned down in the city centre which today bears his name. Autocracy fell but democracy is yet to be free.

The systemic crisis of development of a working democracy has been caused by the injection into politics of arms, money and extremism, thus making politics sick. Sick politics did not feel the need to retain the confidence of the people by fulfilling election promises. Instead they manipulated elections with money and armed groups, even co-opting election officials and law-enforcement agencies. Political parties became centralized and their process of nomination of candidates degenerated into a form of auction or selling of nominations to the highest bidder. Potential candidates were questioned not about their qualifications or how they were equipped to serve the people but on how much money they could spend in the elections. This is how people became disempowered and growth of democracy was stunted.

Doliokoron (or partisan politics) degenerated into a winner-takes all approach, personal aggrandizement and cronyism. Checks and

balances were eliminated and accountability of democratic institutions continued to erode as they became vehicles for autocratic rule. The state was captured by predators supported by private bahinis (militias). Party loyalists embedded in the bureaucratic establishment and law enforcement agencies instead of functioning as public servants, working for the public good, became compliant tools of unscrupulous political leaders.

Political patronage of mafias made violence endemic. Armed cadres imposing their reign of terror in different locations became another ugly symptom of sick politics. Mafia-like structures spread through the country and the word 'godfather' found its place in common parlance even in the countryside as small arms continued to proliferate, with the connivance and protection of powerful coterie. A recent report entitled: Proliferation of Unauthorized Small Arms: Impediments to Democratisation in Bangladesh (2003) states thus:

"The recent proliferation of small arms in Bangladesh has resulted in one of the worst forms of violence in the history of Bangladesh. ... Today, both legal and illegal small arms are indiscriminately used in cities, towns and vil-

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