

# Why didn't alternative political forces emerge?

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**T**HE demand for alternative political forces is generated when existing forces are perceived to be inadequately responsive to the needs of the society. Political parties manifest the various forces operating in a polity. In Bangladesh for nearly three decades two major parties the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have been operating as embodiments of separate streams of social forces. Despite the presence of other political parties such as the Jatiya Party of former President Ershad and the Jamat-E-Islami Bangladesh the AL and the BNP have been the virtual centerpieces of the country's politics since 1979 and more particularly since 1991. The dominance of these parties in the post-1990 period when resurrected parliamentary democracy was ostensibly in full operation, turned the political order into a virtual two-party system.

Both the Awami League and BNP are avowedly liberal parties with centrist inclinations and based on the active support of lower-middle, middle-middle, upper-middle and upper classes. On account of transformations at the global, regional and national levels the Awami League gradually changed its economic manifesto from the 1990s. It changed its earlier commitment to socialism and replaced it by loyalty to social welfare. It, however, remained unflinching in its commitment to secularism, Bengali nationalism and democracy.

By contrast, the BNP while avowedly committed to democracy and social justice, advocated Bangladeshi Nationalism and without overtly abandoning secularism stressed the role of Islam in a predominantly Muslim society. From 1990 the AL under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the founder President of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the BNP under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of Liberation War hero Shaheed (Martyr) President Ziaur Rahman, succeeded in mobilizing widespread and steadfast popular support for their respective parties. Each party, with assistance from allied political forces commanded support of more than 30% of the electorate in the national elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 while the Awami League scored a victory in the national polls of 1996.

For one and a half decade the two-party system seemed to have become well entrenched in a parliamentary order that appear to work despite many shortcomings. Appearance, however, did not faithfully reflect the reality. A close look at the three parlia-

mentary Governments that ruled Bangladesh from 1991 shows that tradition of the strong executive dominating the scene continued unhindered. The parliament remained comparatively ineffective despite the system being parliamentary cabinet in form. Governance weakened and decayed. State institutions inherited from the past including the civil bureaucracy, lower judiciary and local government lost their strength through a process of degeneration and undesirable excessive politicization. Violence in politics that began to spread in the 1980's increased manifold, especially since the mid-1990s and corruption in all spheres of life expanded like a hydra-headed monster.

What Almond and Verba called 'civic-culture' appears to be in short supply in our society. Only lip service seems to have been rendered to the essential democratic values of consensus on important national issues, bipartisanship in foreign affairs, toleration of different and divergent political ideas and views, rule of law, human rights and peaceful resolution of political conflicts.

During the three decades of liberated Bangladesh, the indispensable component of democracy called constitutional opposition has had a very rough deal. Aptly has it been said "the purpose of the party system in a democracy is to make opposition respectable." It appears that the party system in Bangladesh failed to realise this essential purpose of making opposition respectable. Elections here have been regarded as zero-sum games in which 'the winner takes all'. After every election the winning side tried to ride roughshod over the defeated opposition both within and outside Parliament, thus weakening the practice of democracy.

Both the major political parties consciously or unconsciously, tried to politicize the entire society in their own favour. Lack of toleration and give and take resulted in turning Bangladesh into an illiberal and uncertain democracy.

Power was centralized in the hands of top party leaders who also alternated to become Chief Executives of the government. Dynastic trends were visibly promoted. Coterie close to the top leadership indulged in cultivating and promoting corruption. Governance suffered and people's demands and rights to have a better quality of economic, political and social life were often ignored and frequently suppressed.

Economic development became skewed. Despite growth economic development failed to effectively address the issues of equity and just distribution. People became restless and often agitated even in the absence



of political leadership to voice their rightful demands for adequate supply of necessities such as electricity, water and fertilizer.

All this, coupled with waning trust in the efficacy of the Caretaker government system for securing free and fair elections led to profound and widespread political conflicts especially during 2006. Confrontations between the 4-party ruling alliance led by the BNP and the united platform of the opposition led by the Awami League spilled over to the streets causing nationwide violence and disorder. As history witnesses, the result was the promulgation of Emergency on the 11th January 2007, postponement of national elections scheduled to be held on the 22nd January and the emergence of a reconstituted Caretaker government with the support of the armed forces.

The failure of the major political parties to conduct politics in a desirable manner caused grave concern of the society at large. Even before the events of the 11th and 12th January 2007 there was a widespread feeling that alternative forces were needed to fill the gap created by the inadequacy of the dominant parties.

After the advent of the reconstituted Caretaker government discussions about the necessity and the importance of such alternative forces have become more prominent in government, political and civil society circles. Both the print and electronic media have been aghast with heated deliberations on the issue. Simultaneously energized discussions are also

continuing on needs of constitutional reforms to achieve desirable separation and balance of power, reform of constitutional bodies and state institutions including public administration and reform of political parties for their effective internal democratization.

The question naturally arises: will there be any need for alternative political forces if the existing political parties can reform and democratize themselves, put reins on powers of the autocracy of personalistic political leaders, arrest undesirable dynastic tendencies, resist corruption and vow to help to establish good governance. The obvious answer is no. The necessity will become inexorable if the parties fail to do what is expected of them and what they publicly promise to do.

Even in such a situation the rise of alternative force or forces is not going to be easy. Politics everywhere is bound by tradition. Bangladesh is no exception. The existing principal parties embody and manifest major trends and forces in the society. Their leaders not only have strong dynastic credentials but have also succeeded in acquiring charismatic mantles in course of two and a half decades of political struggles and activities. The leaders and their parties have not failed their ideological and political followers in terms of upholding the ideas and concepts of their political organizations. Their failure is writ large in their inability to practice real democracy within and outside the parties and their incapacity in achieving good governance when in power. That failure does not yet seem to have created the space for emer-

gence of an alternative political force. This is evident from the stillborn efforts of Noble laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus in what appeared for him to be an adventure in uncharted seas. Further, attempts by other comers in the field are still to show visible strength.

The negatives are not evidently enough to create, propel and sustain an alternative political force in present day Bangladesh. The positives are apparently in short supply. A capable and effective alternative political force will cer-

tainly need charismatic as well as competent leadership. Charisma and competence by themselves are not enough. It will also need effective organization and mobilisation. A competitive party "with sound organisation and effective spread can successfully aggregate diverse interest of specific groups and bring broad unity".

In Bangladesh today building such a political party is easier said than done. It requires not only capable, honest and dedicated leaders but also long and hard work to build

such a structure successfully challenging the existing dominant leaders and their parties. At the moment neither new and capable leaders nor their dedicated and committed associates and followers are in sight. That is where the process of emergence of alternative political forces seems to have stuck.

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