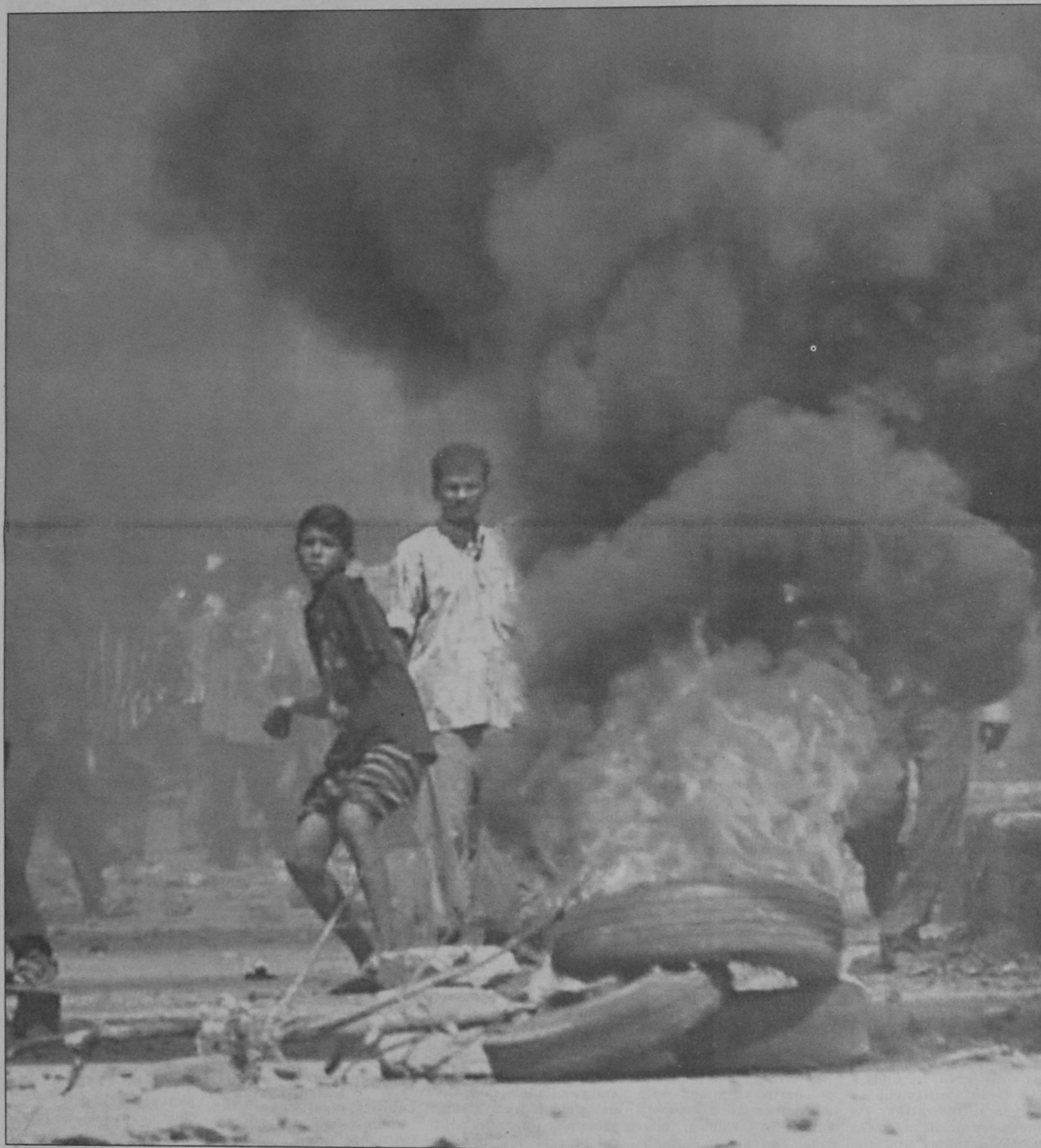


Parliament-centred *politics* vs street politics



pitch-blackened rough stones under the open sky.

When this happens, it might be taken as a symptom of some political crisis emanating from unfulfilled mass desire. The government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the first half of 1970s, and all the subsequent governments of Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party -- even caretaker governments -- till date, faced street protest.

Some protests were fruitful and necessary, while others were just wickedness fashioned as politics of destruction. A good instance that might be cited is the anti-autocracy movement of the nineties, which brought the democratic process on track, establishing a parliamentary form of government and bidding adieu to the presidential form. On the other side of the picture, frequent hartals and blockades in the name of mass movement proved too costly, as they wreaked havoc on the national economy besides the loss of lives, and must be there as bad cases.

It is a tricky question whether street agitation, which often takes a violent shape, putting people in peril, should be recognised as legal way of protest. The constitution of Bangladesh acknowledges the right of doing politics of its citizens, as well as that of expression. These are their democratic rights. The state cannot snatch them away anyway.

But there is a point in state intervention. As violence poses a threat to public life, encroaching upon their right to free movement, it calls for legal action, justifiably. Moreover, the state can come down upon the trouble mongers with the plea of quelling unrest in society.

But the counterarguments should also be taken into account. The people have the right to protest against any injustice of the government, and for this they can take to the street. Through rallies and demonstrations on thoroughfares, the protesters amass mass support to mount pressure on the government.

By this process, the tyrannical force is restrained. It is a kind of check and balance,

without which democracy falls short of effectiveness. Many big changes in history have been brought about by the street. The street way has been the straight way.

As there is no guarantee that a government will be beneficial for the people, the possibility of street politics cannot be ruled out. If something essential cannot be ensured in a peaceful way, it comes through friction; if legality cannot deliver the goods, an apparently illegal way has to be pursued. Then disorder becomes the order -- pollution becomes the solution.

Popular dissatisfaction is characteristically expressed through the street if it has a long gestation period. It is a universal feature, although the government response to it is not universally warm. We can remember recent street protests in Pakistan and Myanmar, two South Asian countries, which have somehow deviated from democracy.

Parliamentary democracy should be strengthened through affirmative political practices. The street phenomenon, as we see it in its crude form here, is not manifestation of a healthy culture, since it is contradictory to the norms of civil life based on the principles of peace and progress. Everything should be resolved amicably in the house, where national problems are supposed to be discussed and laws enacted.

It is the prime responsibility of the politicians and the intelligentsia to devise ways to get maximum utility from the parliament, to avoid the street fallout. In a country with about four decades of independence, urgency is felt for parliamentary stability, not street fatality. We have to create a decent culture of democracy, through bettering the relationship between political parties and creating a real realm of polity. We have to remember that there is no real alternative to parliamentary democracy in our present political reality.

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In a democratic state, the state of politics is determined by constant interaction between political parties -- treasury bench and opposition bench -- on one axis, and a struggle between the ruler and the ruled -- government and people -- on the other. If the political parties take a confrontational stance, politics is heated up and the state faces doom.

But if the relationship between them is collaborative peace prevails, paving the way for quick progress in economic and other spheres. In a similar vein, if the ruling community turns tyrannical, the ruled revolt, invoking insurgency and bloodshed. But if the relationship between them is free of tension, politics enjoys sunshine, bringing welfare for the nation.

In the complex interactional dynamics, politics may take its course through the street or the par-

liament, through agitation or negotiation. When politics rolls down to the street, it becomes the other name of chaos. The street, trampled by thousands of marching feet, cries with the language of protest. Bathed in the sweat and blood of protesters, it takes an oath for change. Until the desired change comes about, the motionless street continues to flow with turbulence.

However, this is not a desired situation. It is a scene in extremity. The mild and modest scene resides in the opposite pole -- in the parliament, which stands for agreeable settlement of any kind of political problem. Only the failure of the parliament leads to the street.

In a nascent democracy like Bangladesh's, the street often takes the place of the parliament. Here, parliamentary politics is so shaky that it gives in to street politics. Parliamentary politics may fail for various reasons, such as belligerent mood of the

parties, unlimited greed for power, and tendency to place petty party and personal interests over national interest.

The party that happens to be in power behaves like a lord, with a show of infallibility. This subordination and humiliation enrages the opposition camp. The attitudinal problem widens the gap between the two sides, causing mistrust and misunderstanding. The opposition leaders, finding their voices gagged and demands rejected, decide to boycott the parliament, turning it virtually ineffective. That is the course to the street, regrettably, of course.

The idea that the street is a better place than the parliament for resolving problems is, in fact, a colonial legacy. The oppression and suppression of the British rulers compelled the patriotic souls of the soil to protest, often with arms. They had no other choice as they had no part in government. "Sipahi

Bidroha" (soldiers' revolt) and "Fakir-Sanyasi Bidroha" (saints' revolt) were two glaring anti-colonial explosions. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a violent nationalistic movement, with the vow to "drive the English out of India."

The extremism was, however, a little counterbalanced by Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement; although it also took place in the street, it was in a peaceful manner. During the Pakistani era, a sense of deprivation sent the Bengalis to the street again, with much more virulence. The language movement of 1952, mass upsurge of 1969, and the ultimate, the War of Independence of 1971 -- all vindicate the necessity of street politics.

After independence, the street scenario did not change much. The street is still the place for venting public fury, the centre of gravity in oppositional matrix. The street becomes vibrant at the cost of morbidity of par-

liament. Politics jumps out of the decorated air-conditioned room to the

