

Under one banner

Although a certain amount of adversity is necessary and desirable in a democracy, but the critical tension level between cooperation and competition has been broken down much too often in favour of the latter in Bangladesh. It is time to reverse the pendulum a little to the other side to make the system functional.

MAHBUB KAMAL

As the country moves towards another transition, the need for a national consensus government has become all the more important. The idea of a national government has been there in the political domain since the country's liberation.

During the Liberation War, a national consultative committee was formed headed by Maulana Bhashani and included all major political parties that did not have representation in parliament but had a significant following in the country. A national government could not be formed for obvious reasons: the war was being fought partly to legitimise the mandate of the 1970 elections that the Pakistan government had subverted. A national government involvement in the government directly would have made the cause less appealing and to that extent less legitimate in public perception.

But very soon after independence, most opposition political parties including the NAP (Bhashani) demanded a national government to rebuild the country. The newly formed JSD went a step further a wanted a "revolu-

tionary" government. The ruling Awami League felt that such a deviation would undermine their moral right and went for a quick election in 1973. This, however, did not resolve the myriad problems that had emerged through the Liberation War.

The issue of a national government came up again after the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991. But this time, too, the predominant party, BNP refused to accommodate others, although it fell short of an absolute majority and had to depend on Jamaat-e-Islami to gain a majority to form a government. However, BNP ignored its lack of an absolute majority in parliament and paid the price when the other political parties banded together against it. In the general elections of 2001, BNP tried to remedy its mistakes of the past by forming an alliance of four parties.

The Awami League when it formed a government in 1996 called for a government of national consensus but this was rejected by the main opposition BNP. Nevertheless, the BNP agreed to have national consensus on important national issues. Had AL accepted the offer it may have been a beginning, but then

earlier experience was not so good either.

In the early 1990s the BNP government had initiated several national dialogues on major national issues like student politics but it did not have any output. Part of the problem was that the representatives at the roundtables did not include the two major decision makers of the party.

Political parties have a long tradition of banding together when in the opposition, but they tend to split up over the spoils, once in power. In the early 1960s the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) was a significant force that launched a vigorous campaign to challenge Ayub Khan and promote Ms. Fatima Jinnah as the presidential candidate. Although, Ms. Jinnah did not win the polls, as it was widely believed to be rigged, but the campaign left an indelible imprint on the psyche of the nation. In 1968, the political parties, once again formed DAC, the Democratic Action Committee, to oust Ayub and restore democracy. The DAC was successful in attaining its objectives. But after the ouster of Ayub it also fell apart.

In post-liberation Bangladesh there were some coalitions, too.

In 1975 when the Awami League formed the one-party state it absorbed NAP (Muzaffar) and the CPB. Later when Zia wanted a political base, he formed a united front of political parties ranging from the left to right. It included the Muslim League and the NAP(B). Later the "nationalist front" as it was called became the Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP for short.

After the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the 1990s, all governments were either coalitions or quasi-coalitions. Gradually, the country was moving towards greater and bigger coalitions. The fact was dawning on the party leaderships that, however large their following, they alone were not in a position to rule the country peacefully.

By the winter of 2007 when general elections were scheduled to be held, it had become increasingly clear that even grand coalitions were no solution to the perennial problems of Bangladesh politics. The nation needed some kind of power sharing arrangement among the major players. It was a refusal to accept the ground realities that forced a suspension of the scheduled polls.

An unprincipled alliance is the last thing one wants to see, as it will only deprive people of their choices. But a principled coalition of forces seems to be the only way out of the intensely competitive and increasingly confronta-

tional politics of Bangladesh. The major stakeholders must be willing to share and give what is due to their adversaries, otherwise, there will be no peace in Bangladesh.

There is a growing consensus that parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh is not working as hoped. The opposition, whether it is AL or BNP, boycotts parliament and takes to the street, often calling for hartals and making the entire country bleed. This is not expected from a responsible opposition. The cost to the economy is incalculable.

But the opposition has its arguments, too. They claim that the party-in-power is persecuting them. And it is true. Opposition leaders and workers are harassed and thrown into jail. Some, like Ahsanullah Master and Shah A. M. S. Kibria, even got killed. Then there is the endless politicisation, where only party followers get jobs, strategic postings and business opportunities.

This relation must give way to more constructive ways of promoting one's cause. Evidently, Bangladeshi politicians have not known how to do it. The tactics that they are familiar with are disruptive and in no way congruent with democracy, as it is known elsewhere in the world. Working together for a reasonable period of time may inculcate some of the behavioral patterns that allow respect for opponents and peaceful pursuits of political goals.



Can't we all get along?

Recently, national consensus or national governments have been formed in Nepal and Pakistan during peacetime to oversee the country's transition to democracy. Both countries have formed broad coalitions involving almost all political parties represented in parliament to oversee the transition.

In both cases, the largest parties had a choice of forming weak coalitions with smaller parties but it was thought wiser to go for a broader coalition implying the greatest possible political support for the political transformation. Although it is too early to say

whether the experiment in these countries will succeed, but the fact remains that it has been appreciated by all, both locally and internationally.

The repeated disruption of the democratic process in Bangladesh also calls for some kind of cooperation between the principal actors. The informal networks that work so well while in the opposition need to be formalised and given a place in the power structure.

Most importantly, sitting on the same side of the table would be a major role reversal that may help the disparate parties think

along similar lines. So far, they have always been sitting across the table, making the relationship adversarial.

Although a certain amount of adversity is necessary and desirable in a democracy, but the critical tension level between cooperation and competition has been broken down much too often in favour of the latter in Bangladesh. It is time to reverse the pendulum a little to the other side to make the system functional.

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Rice farmers battle for their rights

Over 500 farmers under the banner of Action Aid FoSHoL Krishok Moitree handed over a memorandum to Koira Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Aziz Pasha containing their eight points of demands on June 5. A large number of women also took part spontaneously. They submitted the memo containing over 500 signatures in presence of local government leaders.

Z.A.M. KHAIRUZZAMAN

Rice farmers of Koira upazila in Khulna district are now engaged in a battle for establishing their rights.

Hundreds of poor farmers have demanded immediate stoppage of leasing of government canals and water bodies to rich farmers for shrimp culture.

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demands on June 5. A large number of women also took part spontaneously. They submitted the memo containing over 500 signatures in presence of local government leaders.

They also sent copies to secretaries of respective ministries, chairman of Bangladesh Human Rights Commission, chief executive of Bangladesh Environment Lawyers' Association (BELA), and respective divisional and district commissioners.

They asked the upazila administration to take immediate initiatives to ease their sufferings



Livelihood threatened by shrimp farming.

caused by salinity due to massive shrimp culture by influential people in Bedkashi, Moharajpur and Moheeshory unions. They alleged that agricultural lands were being sacrificed for commercial shrimp farming. They said that the administration should create an environment so that they could cultivate paddy (Amon and Boro) twice each year.

Poor farmers have been protesting against rich farmers for destroying agricultural lands and causing water pollution in an 1,813 square kilometre area. They allege that shrimp culture is adding to the health problems of the people in the vicinity, thereby leading to destruction of agriculture and leaving vast numbers of farmers unemployed. At present, about 0.2 million inhabitants are struggling for better livelihood in the entire coastal upazila.

Koira upazila is the last border of the southern coastal belt beside the largest mangrove forest of Sundarbans. Here, several years ago, the entire area was lush and verdant. Once the lands were the source of livelihood of poor farmers. Poor farmers used to cultivate amon paddy utilising the fresh water of lots of canals in the upazila. Canal water was used for

indigenous fish culture and other homestead activities. Following the leasing of 132 public canals, rich farmers built temporary embankments around cultivable lands to ensure steady flow of saline water to 4,000 shrimp enclosures. Because of leasing, public property has become personal property of influential people. As a result, poor farmers have lost their right to cultivate paddy and other crops on the lands.

And now the entire area is looking like a desert. Now they lie useless.

The practice of shrimp culture is destroying land along the coasts, and causing water pollution. Shrimp culture has hastened the demise of indigenous fish. Right now shrimp farming is a slash-and-burn activity.

Violations by rich farmers

Action Aid FoSHoL Krishok Moitree, a platform of farmers under JJS-FoSHoL, Action Aid project has been formed at Uttar Bedkashi in support of the just struggle of poor farmers.

Rich farmers established 4,000 shrimp enclosures, in violation of rules and regulations of the accord of lease. They have made holes illegally at many places of the coastal embankment built during the '60s to protect the area from salinity. The consequence of the blatant use, misuse and violations of existing rules have led to depletion and degradation of natural resources and land in the vicinity.

Poor farmers had launched an agitation in July 18, 2006 by organ-

ising a signature campaign at Moheeshory union. They collected 200 signatures and submitted their grievances to the local administration. Their demand was immediate stoppage of illegal diversion of saline water towards Vagbar canal by cutting an embankment. Again they collected signatures of 300 people with a demand to stop leasing of canals and water bodies. They ventilated their grievances to the administration on March 22 this year.

Farmers of Bedkashi and Moharajpur unions handed over memorandums to the administration on two occasions, once on April 16 and then on May 12 this year. One of their demands was stopping of diversion of saline water illegally to Fatakhal, Dewankhali, Putigheri, Pathorkhali and Arjunpur canals. Local communities also organised rallies and human chains in support of their demands.

Of late, a discussion on prevention of infiltration of saline water in Koira upazila was organised at Uttar Bedkashi Kutchurybari on June 5 this year. Action Aid, Manobadhikar Jote, Jagroto Jubo Sangha (JJS) and Loko Kendra jointly organised the discussion.

At the discussion, a participant repented for cultivating shrimp. His honest comment is as below:

"I have been engaged in shrimp culture for a long time. During this period, I observed the misery of people in my neighbourhood. The practice has created a negative

impact on agriculture, livestock and livelihood. So, I have decided to stop shrimp culture from the next season. From now on, I shall cultivate paddy in my field, and I advise other shrimp farmers to come back from the bad practice of shrimp farming."

Shrimp farming has been associated with serious negative environmental and social impacts. Environmental problems include destruction of mangroves and other wetland habitats, associated damage to coastal and marine ecosystems, dispersion of chemicals and nutrients into the environment, pollution and salinisation of soil and of ground and surface water supplies, depletion of ground water and depletion and biological pollution of indigenous fish.

Social impacts include promotion of poverty, landlessness and food insecurity, elevation of risks from floods and typhoons, and impacts on health and education.

Rice farmers are waiting for a response from the administration. They are protesting, and one thing is sure, they will not allow themselves to be victims of corporate crime committed by rich farmers.

The agitation has been going on for about two years, and yet no action has been taken to address the problems faced by the victims. However, Koira UNO has assured the agitating farmers that he would carry out an "enquiry into the matter."

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Jogging through the valley of the shadow of death

THE world's most invigorating exercise is jogging, but only in Asia. Going for a run anywhere else is pathetically dull: you pad along purpose-built waterside tracks with other yuppies like a herd of iPod-wearing sheep. I recently went jogging in Perth, Australia, and learned I could sleep at 10 kilometres an hour.

But joggers in Asia never have a dull moment. You have to leap over massive holes. You have to maneuver around wild dogs. You have to sneak past wild people. And, of course, you have to negotiate normal Asian pavement traffic: wedding parties, marchers, scooters, cars and trucks.

My most memorable jogging experience was on a road near my home. This road was dug up so regularly that residents proposed changing the name from Victoria Road to Victoria Trench.

That night, I took my youngest child with me. She sat in her stroller while I pounded the pavements, pushing from behind and feeling like SuperDad. She was so excited at the thought of an outing with me that she immediately fell asleep.

Reaching the road, I was horrified to find workmen had dug up both pavements. They had also turned off the lamp-posts. And they had installed a contra-flow system, which is when temporary traffic lights force cars to take turns using a single lane.

Contra-flow systems bring out the worst in drivers. Normally, when a traffic light turns red, a few drivers think: "I'll speed through it as it's only been red for a second or so." But when a contra-flow system traffic light turns red, all drivers think: "I'll speed through it as it's only been red for a few min-

utes or so, probably."

The only way for us to continue on would have been a suicidal sprint down the middle of the road in pitch darkness with crazed drivers running red lights in both directions.

So I was about to turn back when the man operating the temporary lights asked a favour of me. The walkie-talkies were broken, he said. Would I mind delivering a spare handset to the traffic light guy at the other end?

Seeing that he had the ability to turn the lights to "stop" and ensure our safety, I agreed to make the delivery. He clicked a switch, the lights turned red, and I jogged off down the middle of the dark road, holding the equipment in one hand, and pushing the baby-stroller with the other. I felt even more like SuperDad. Here I was exercising. AND taking the baby out, AND doing my bit to keep the city's arteries moving.

But we were less than halfway down the road when I heard an ominous click. The idiot had turned the traffic lights green!

Vast numbers of roaring vehicles charged through the darkness, heading straight for us. The pavements were fenced off. Suddenly I knew what a skittle in a bowling alley felt like.

There was only one thing to do. Pray. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

The next couple of minutes were a blur as we dodged trucks, cars and buses and raced to safety. Miraculously, we survived.

I delivered the equipment and got my breath back. The excitement had woken the baby up. "Again! Again!" she said.

Next day I joined a gym.

The valley of death probably has more laughs than our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com

The other threat to Pakistan

All these leaders are far too preoccupied with their own survival at the moment to deal with Pakistan's pressing economic ills. Yet, this inattention could prove critical, for economic drift will only exacerbate the country's political woes. Widespread economic distress will lead to increased public demonstrations, strikes and turmoil.

SUMIT GANGULY

FOR much of his tenure, Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, had two claims to fame: that he'd put the country on the path to moderation by marginalising its Islamic radicals, and that his economic policies had helped spark dramatic economic growth (about 7% a year).

Now the resurgence of the Taliban and its allies and a spate of suicide bombings have called the first claim into question. And while the recent accidental killing of Pakistani troops on the Afghan border, allegedly by coalition troops, has focused all attention on security matters, Musharraf's second supposed achievement is also unraveling: according to some Pakistani economists, the poverty rate recently hit 34% (up from 32% in 1999); the World Bank

is now predicting a paltry 3.5% growth rate for the coming year, and the rupee is plummeting against the dollar.

What happened? The answer has less to do with Musharraf's declining power -- he's now fighting for survival -- than you might think. The country's economic boom never actually had much to do with the general's policies; like Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois, Pakistan has always depended on the kindness of strangers. In the wake of 9/11, renewed ties with Washington brought substantial aid.

Even before the \$10 billion in US military and economic assistance started to flow in, Pakistan's Western allies wrote off billions of dollars of debt, which helped bring the economy back to life. About the same time, many expatriates who'd parked

their wealth in foreign banks began investing in their homeland's stock market.

Their new strategy wasn't irrational; after the attacks on the United States, many Muslims in the West, regardless of their political or ideological proclivities, started coming under considerable government scrutiny. Suddenly investing back home became much more attractive.

The new aid, investments and remittances significantly buoyed Pakistan's economy. Yet Musharraf's military regime never used the opportunity to address the country's endemic underlying problems. Tax receipts remained low due to the government's reluctance to crack down on powerful business players, investment in infrastructure lagged, agricultural productivity stagnated and social services were

neglected.

Adult literacy is still only about 49%, and the Human Development Report ranks Pakistan 136 out of 177 countries. Foreign investors, who'd been flooding the country's booming service sector to cater to its growing ranks of nouveau riche, took note of these persistent flaws, and even the emergence of a democratically elected government in the February 2008 elections did little to allay their concerns.

The worsening security situation -- tragically underscored by the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 -- made the country's future seem all the more uncertain.

Foreign dollars, thus, soon started to dry up, and the underlying weakness of Pakistan's economy left it acutely vulnerable to other external shocks. When oil prices began to climb this spring, the country reeled, and as Pakistan's treasury faced a dramatic outflow of funds (Pakistan buys most of its oil abroad and has to pay in hard currency), confidence in the rupee fell precipitously. This, in turn, made imports more expensive. The rise in global food prices also hit ordinary

Pakistanis hard and, as they cut back on consumption, sent the already shaky economy into a tailspin.

All this bodes ill for the country's immediate future. The new coalition government is already deadlocked, mired in an unseemly squabble over the reinstatement of a number of Supreme Court judges arbitrarily dismissed by Musharraf. (Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister and leader of one half of the coalition, wants to reinstate them; Asif Zardari, Bhutto's widower and the head of the other faction, doesn't.)

All these leaders are far too preoccupied with their own survival at the moment to deal with Pakistan's pressing economic ills. Yet, this inattention could prove critical, for economic drift will only exacerbate the country's political woes. Widespread economic distress will lead to increased public demonstrations, strikes and turmoil. Under these conditions, Islamist forces could easily win broad support by promising facile remedies, such as the imposition of Sharia and an end to military cooperation with the United States.

An Islamist resurgence would put the country's military, which has recently been accused of starting to appease radicals in the border regions, in an awkward spot, forcing it to decide between trying to co-opt the Islamists and crack down. An Islamist surge could also damage Pakistan's fragile relationship with India, which both countries have tried to repair in recent years.

From a US standpoint, all this would be a disaster, since an economically anemic and politically unstable Pakistan wouldn't be able to offer much help against al Qaeda and the Taliban. Islamabad can still switch course if it ends the factional squabbling in the government, restores the independence of the judiciary, professionalises the police and paramilitary forces and keeps the military in check. But time is fast running out.

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