

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

It is the responsibility of the people to plus or minus somebody

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How much reform has taken place, how much of it will last?

The National Identity Card has been prepared, the judiciary separated from the executive, the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission reconstituted. There are some successes. But there is a question about how long these will last, the answer to which can be found after an elected government comes to power.

All the successes failed to attract people's attention due to the government's failure to rein in the price of essentials. Besides, the people of Bangladesh do not want to see an unelected government for a long time. They want other issues of their lives addressed, not only corruption. The number one concern for people is the price of essentials, not political reform. But I don't think the reform of institutions and the political system and culture will altogether fail. The attempts will have a positive effect on the people.

How do you evaluate the advancement since 1/11?

I don't think the country will plunge back to the pre-1/11 days. 1/11 and following exercises will not go futile, they will have a positive impact on the political culture, parties' and leaders' realisation and behaviour, and we will see a reflection of it.

Now, the political parties are responding, even by changing their

party constitutions and turning their front organisations into associated organisations. But it is not possible to bring major changes to the political culture in just 20 months. Being part of a competitive global society, we need uninterrupted democracy, we can't continue with an ad-hoc system. The very fact that there is no elected government is pushing away business.

Do you apprehend recurrence of 1/11?

Political leaders need to do soul searching to understand why 1/11 took place. After the caretaker governments' successes in 1991, 1996 and 2001, the BNP-Jamaat government extended the retirement age of the chief justice from 65 to 67, triggering political instability. Mannan Bhuiyan and Abdul Jalil failed to show wisdom during the dialogue, thus frustrating the people.

Those whose intervention we don't want ultimately got a chance.

Such intervention will take place in future if political leaders cannot feel the need of norms, values and rules of the game. It is true that 1/11 shook the political culture from above. But there is no reason to think that it will make everything perfect and bring full realisation to politicians. It is through a political process that corrections and

reforms take place.

What mistakes has the government made?

The government adopted a wrong strategy by arresting politicians and, in many cases, their family members indiscriminately, sending a message of aggression to the people. You know people do not like anything aggressive, and their sympathy went even to a corrupt person if he was tortured.

There is a kind of fear among the people that the ACC can apply its power. But an institution cannot run only on fear. The minus two theory also failed. There was an attempt to create pro-reformist and non-reformist division among political parties by excluding the two leaders.

Can the Progressive Democratic Party or Kalyan Party be an alternative? AL and BNP have emerged through the political stream of the country over a long time, and cannot be negated. And the two streams are so strong that no one can break those and form new streams overnight.

Has the government or the EC retreated from reforms?

It is not unusual in politics that there will be give and take. Realising the political dynamics, the government and the power backing it is giving concession and, thus, entering into the dynamics. If the government

can do it now, why didn't it do so in the beginning? That was not a politics approach. Granting of so many bails in a short time shows that the system is controlled from somewhere. If that is true, can we say the judiciary has really become independent? The way they dealt with the two leaders was totally wrong; they have to release them now.

What could be the proper approach? The government could have taken the two former prime ministers into confidence at the beginning, opened a dialogue, and sought their help and involvement in implementing its plans. The parties supported the government in the beginning, and would continue with the initiatives after the election had the government involved them in the process.

The government could ask them to drive out the corrupt from their parties, and not to nominate them for elections. Had they taken this positive approach, the result could be different. Now the government is compelled to go to the two leaders' houses. Without realising the political and social reality of the country, the government wanted to change everything by using force. If that could be done, Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, and post-independent army rulers would have succeeded.

What can ensure democracy in political parties? There are many parties that practice democracy. The left-leaning organisations practice it, even the AL practices it to some extent. The BNP's constitution, which is chairperson-centred, will possibly be changed. The Jatiya Party and Jamaat are also going to change.

For better democratic practice, we not only need debate, discussion and a legal framework, but also realisation among politicians.

Those who mould opinion, like the civil society and the media, will have to propagate this, and there should be some legal compulsion at the same time.

How do you see the reform in the EC?

The EC had several sessions of discussion with parties, and I would say they are on the right track. But it will pass the final test through holding of a peaceful and fair election where people will be able to express their will through ballot without any problem. But if any unseen power influences the election, all the successes of the EC will go in vain.

I support the provision of having 1/3 women in parties and associate organisations. But I oppose dissolution of the foreign branches of political parties because those come to help during different disasters. If the law in those countries allows them, why should we oppose it?

How to ensure transparent financial dealings of political parties?

There was practice of auditing party funds during the British period, but it is absent in Bangladesh. I don't support letting the dealings go unaccounted. However, if democratic leadership does not develop in a party, only a transparent account won't bring any good.

How to make the parties break away from the political culture?

Leaders need to practice self-criticism. Politicians need to search their souls, and reach an agreement regarding relations between the opposition and the ruling party, and on how to make the parliament function. AL and BNP represent two conflicting political streams, and there are differences in their origins and characteristics. So, we won't see a stop to the confrontational politics soon.

Is there any need at all to bring

them to a table?

If they realise that they need to sit, they themselves will initiate this; no third party will be needed. Jalil and Mannan Bhuiyan talked, but what result could they show?

What's your opinion of the so-called "minus-two" formula?

It was a blunder by the government. The two leaders are very much "plus" now because they were freed even after filing of so many cases against them; advisers rushed to their houses to hold dialogue with them.

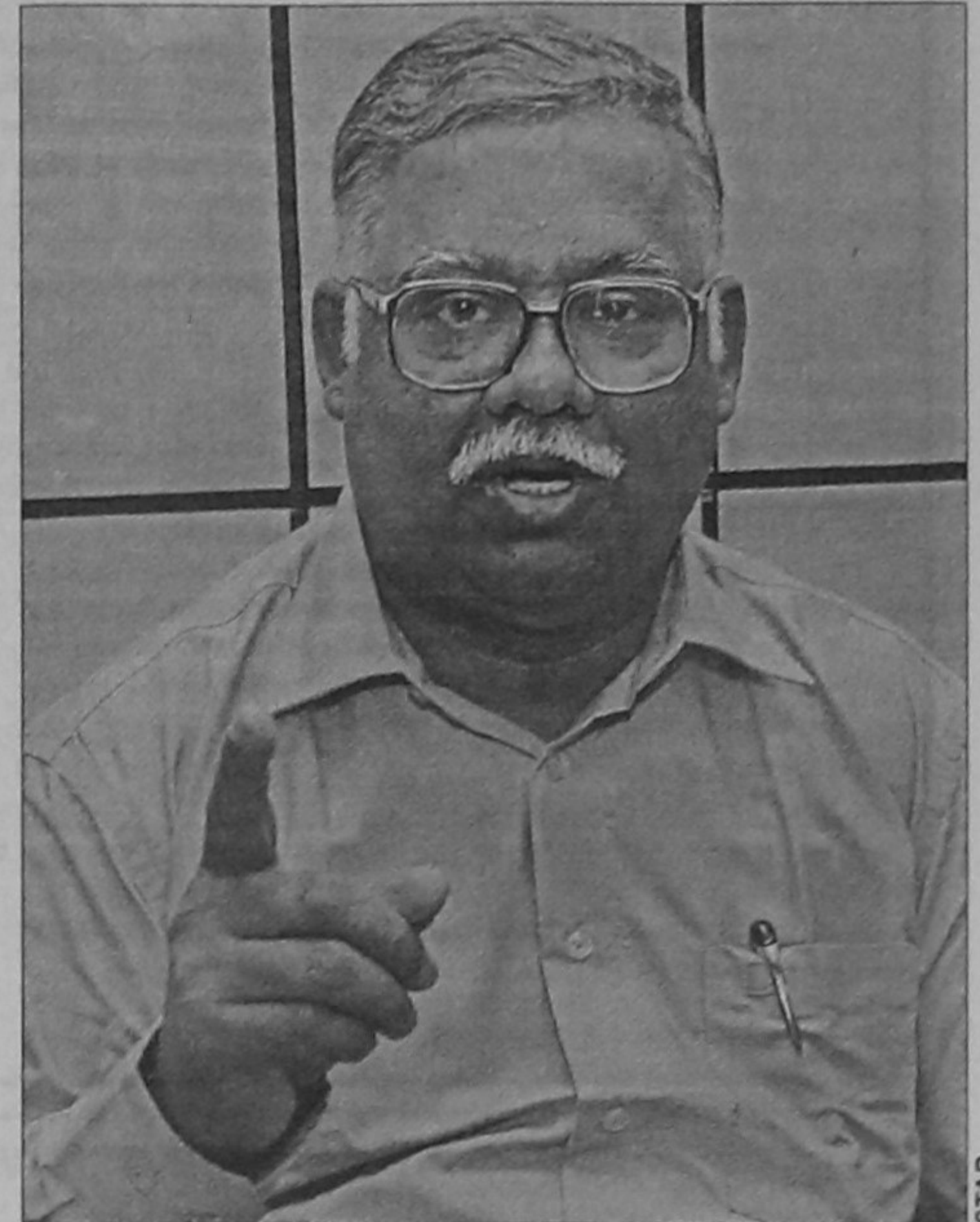
It is the responsibility of the people to plus or minus somebody. When you do it yourself, it means that you are a stakeholder, and you can no longer play the role of an umpire. Many think the government is still pursuing that. If that happens to be true, it'll bring bad luck to all of us. The two leaders have emerged from our political culture and cannot just be written off.

Do you still see any uncertainty about election?

There is still an uncertainty among the people. It will go once the election schedule is announced and parties declare their participation. If there is any kind of manipulation of the elections, or the allegation of seat-sharing is true, it'll be counterproductive. People will then think that the pledges the government made were a hoax, that their real objective was different. Any deviation from holding the elections on the scheduled date will cause confrontation among the political parties and the government, and political instability.

How to keep away the corrupt elements from state power?

We can just do advocacy and have nothing to do if the people do not receive it. Some people who were facing corruption allegations were



Professor Dr. Harunur Rashid

victorious in the city and municipal elections. It is not unlikely that similar people will come out victorious in the parliamentary elections. Maybe there'll be some changes in the nomination practice. There is a difference between moral turpitude and political dynamics.

Can't we hope for honest candidates then?

Surely we can. But we won't get them soon.

Do you support election under the emergency?

Emergency needs to be withdrawn at this very moment. If the parties do

not behave properly or there is violence, the president can reimpose it anytime locally. Emergency was withdrawn in Pakistan during the elections. There were many problems in India, but they didn't need army intervention.

Airmy intervention in Pakistan caused disintegration, and now the state is about to turn into a failed state; army rule or emergency failed to stop the rise of corruption and extreme militancy. While, in India, the EC and an independent judiciary developed through the practice of democracy.

Time to take a stand

One of its richest and most potent expressions is found in baul philosophy, which espouses religious tolerance and the power of humanity to heal the wounds of religious divisions. That's why the demolition of baul figures is a potent reminder of our larger threats.

ASHEAQ WARES KHAN

WHAT next -- *Aparajayo Bangla? The Shaheed Minar? The Smriti Shoudho?* Wait, what happens to all those "statues" in our temples and churches? What is at stake here is not only the future of these important monuments to our history and our faiths, but the daily rituals that constitute our way of life.

The agitation which culminated in the removal of the five baul sculptures in front of Zia International Airport strikes at the heart of a society built on the foundations of religious tolerance that has developed over a thousand years of adaptation of a diverse set of cultural and religious practices.

The Islamists have already

threatened to shut down *Pahela Baishakh* and they came mighty close by bombing the *Ramna Batamul* in 2002. Who knows what or who they are going to attack next.

If we are to believe Fazlul Haque Amini, the head of the IOJ and a group that calls itself the Islamic Law Implementation Committee, then don't expect to see any of this when Islamists take over. Most people say, well, they will never take over. Fine. But, the problem is that they don't have to. They are being handed out favours for free.

The government's concession to the Islamists on Wednesday is part of a larger victory for the hard-liners hell-bent on transporting Bangladesh back to the middle ages in the Middle East. What's

worse, the middle ages in the Middle East were perhaps more tolerant and liberal than the society envisioned by these radical Islamists in Bangladesh.

This government, along with its democratic and non-democratic predecessors, has consistently conceded and cravenly acquiesced to the slightest and strangest demands made by Islamist fringe groups who seemingly pull more weight than the vast majority here who do not prescribe to their radical agenda.

This has been facilitated by an appeasement policy run by mainstream political parties. The governing principle apparently being that appeasing the hard-line Islamists, along with a nominal number of arrests, would repel the greater threat of terrorism.



Where will it end?

But, even though they object to the full installation of the Islamist agenda, in the long run, by conceding these ostensibly small but significant defeats, the appeasers are conceding and participating in the slow but steady erosion of the tolerant and secular soul of Bengali culture.

This practice of Islamising

Bangladesh (and, that too, a narrow interpretation of Islam that is peddled for political ends) at the cost of a secular society is not new. In the 1970s and 1980s, this was represented by the changes in constitution. In the last decade, the attacks have become more bold, more outrageous, and more violent.

Successive governments have not only maintained silence about these attacks, but at times actively encouraged the attacks on other religious communities and secular intellectuals.

The last BNP-led government not only silenced but arrested journalists for publishing news on the violence against Hindu communities in 2001-2002. The same government banned Ahmadiyya religious texts, and also tacitly encouraged the attack on the Ahmadiyya community by the same group that tore down the baul statues. The attackers of Humayun Azad were never really chased.

This isn't really unexpected in a country when most politicians and administrators refer to it as a "moderate Muslim nation." How the country became a "Muslim" nation, no one knows. But in reality it has and it's not far from the truth. But to call it moderate? Please!

The double standards here are farcical. The Election Commission has been haranguing over the need for religion-based parties to adapt

secular constitutions. Every time the government needs a cultural symbol, it boasts of the grand historical achievements of the country's writers, playwrights, artists, singers and (surprise!) baul music.

Yet, when push came to shove, the government didn't waste a second to dispense with the country's pride and joy when pushed by the Islamists.

The fact that Wednesday's event took place in front of the airport takes on added significance because the location offers the visitor his or her first impression of Bangladesh.

The signs and symbols leading out of the airport are meant to showcase the best of Bangladesh. Instead, the statue-wreck outside the airport showcases the worst of a country at war with itself.

Wednesday's event is scarily reminiscent of the Pakistani government ban on Rabindranath Tagore in the 1960s. He wasn't Islamic enough, they said. Now after nearly 50 years, people are again being provided a false choice

of Bengali versus Islam.

It's a false choice because Bengal, and later Bangladesh, has seamlessly combined religious and cultural practices. One of its richest and most potent expressions is found in baul philosophy, which espouses religious tolerance and the power of humanity to heal the wounds of religious divisions. That's why the demolition of baul figures is a potent reminder of our larger threats.

The artists and intellectuals who came to protest in the aftermath of the demolition need to be lauded for their efforts. They are rare and courageous at a time when the government has wilted in the face of fear.

But, sadly, this is not enough. The calling to act is an agonising and dangerous vocation in Bangladesh. We don't have to act with guns or platitudes. If they take down one statue, we must erect another ten as symbols of our firm dissent when faced with fear.

Asheaq Wares Khan is a freelance journalist.

Taming unruly democracy

Unfortunately, perception has become more important than reality in Bangladesh. This is why leadership has nearly become a cult in our environment. Obsessed with made-up vast popularity, we have seen in the past, our leadership often forsake people to enjoy the favour offered by the sycophants, because they are convinced by their sycophants

Z.A. KHAN

THE recent violence around the Dhaka University campus is another manifestation of our intolerance to opposing political views. Our political history is rich in achievement and sadly poor in maintaining the achievements that helped us win blue ribbons.

We can boast of our Liberation War, which is the end result of our long political battle. Our respect for political values started diminishing in the eighties and the nineties of the 20th century.

Money and muscle power became the dominant arms to gain ascendancy in the politics. The current scenario does not hold any promise for us either. Should we let our politics go its own way, which is marred by inadequate motivation, intolerance and lack of patience? The views of the old generation and

the emerging young leadership are at variance with each other. The old wants to tame the violent history of our politics while the young opt for a mix of money and muscle to overpower opposition.

They feel that politicians who think history can be tamed are trying to "lasso a locomotive with cobweb lariat." Their view is for a sedate approach towards political development so that we do not dance blindfolded. This will entail purging of violence to establish reason.

Mutual trust, which is regarded as social capital, is fast depleting, and that is probably the reason why our society has become restless. Frankly, enough endeavour has not been invested to insulate our society to keep the dynamics of tumult at arm's length.

Conventional wisdom has it that we should stay calm in the face of confrontation till it becomes out-

rageous. One may ask: do we have a history where we demonstrated an approach for amity when embroiled in political differences? I think we allowed despondency and muscle flexing to defeat the opponents.

It is an uphill task to find a common ground to talk for amity and to search for consensus that assures peace and protection to life and liberty of our people? My conviction is that it is not difficult if all parties agree to resolve issues for the greater interest of the people. Let us not forget the old adage that even "a sheet of paper becomes lighter if two people carry it."

What, then, does democracy aim at? Numerous definitions are available that reveal eloquence and objectivity. I simply understand that it is a means to honour the views of the majority, unbiased by the forces of tumult.

Bangladesh has a brief but tumultuous history of democracy. Without

trying to blame any stakeholder, one would like to say that we did not put in great effort to build institutions that guard against desecration of democratic values.

Unfortunately enough, we have not yet been able to rise above the slavish attitude or personality worship, for which most of the parties have fallen victims to identity crisis. Should a party be known by its name or by the leader?

Although a party and its leaders can be synonymous, it should be the party for which its leaders should work. One cannot, for sure, remark that enough has been done in Bangladesh to empower people to choose political options. Leaders daringly promote servitude with impunity so that they can use them against their political opponent, even for violence.

This had opened the floodgate for the sycophants to surround the leader. These sycophants give the impression to their leaders that they are invincible because they are the best.

Our leaders treat their constituencies as fiefs and the constituents as their subjects. Being poor, our people cannot but resign to their fate of death and denial. So, they fall easy victims to cajoling by the leaders who do not seem ashamed

to denigrate our people. I have seen people being called by their names and yet they display calmness even though they are irritated, because they are dependent on the "generosity" of their political patron.

I have seen people appear in constituencies all of sudden in the guise of philanthropists who dole out their ill-gotten (mostly) money a few months before election. As they are able to create a substantial number of beneficiaries, they are requested to contest the election by their designated sycophants, and these "philanthropists" accept the vox populi with grace (not gratitude).

Gradually, these philanthropists turned politicians resort to all kinds of ruses to obtain nomination, if need be by influencing the party highbrows (God alone knows how?), thus the dedicated leaders who may have been working for years for the party and the constituents are sidelined at ease.

The leaders resort to this trick because they know that an average citizen in Bangladesh has very little or no interest in politics, because he remains too busy earning his meals or a cover over his head. His response to those who rule or seek to rule, according to Vinod Mehta, "is made up of prejudices, gut feeling,

vague notions, words of mouth, anecdotes and self-certified opinions. Facts, deeds, or views of newspaper pundits rarely cause him to adjust his conclusions."

Unfortunately, perception has become more important than reality in Bangladesh. This is why leadership has nearly become a cult in our environment. Obsessed with made-up vast popularity, we have seen in the past, our leadership often forsake people to enjoy the favour offered by the sycophants, because they are convinced by their sycophants, who collect huge crowds to attend meetings, that the leader has no opposition to reckon with, except a handful of city dwellers and intellectuals who are deluded and misled by the opposition.

Thus, democracy has been dealt severe blow. Over the past three decades, we rarely saw politicians delving on problems like terrorism, human rights violation, ethnic or religious conflict, poverty, or national debt, in or outside the parliament.

The credible reason behind this indifference is that the leaders know that they have not allowed emergence of new leadership in their constituencies to rise with the unremitting support of their sycophants

and goons, who subjugate opposition by hook or by crook with impunity as the government administrators are cajoled or threatened to ignore what is happening.

That is why it is said that moral eclipse due to perceptive dynamics distorts even a good "all holds barred" set of rules. Therefore, we should make sure that the personalisation of power and fragmentation of the party system does not take root as this give rise to tension among party supporters.

It is not unknown to many that "central to any democracy is the right of any group or individual to compete in the political process, unhindered by the people at the helm of the party."

In Bangladesh, politics, till now, has been dominated by strong personalities due to family legacy at the expense of substantive individual capability. We must try to create a transparent political process with the help of civil society to exert pressure on political parties to become more responsive to their constituents.

A vocal, vibrant, fact oriented and fair press can do wonders in educating both leaders and the people about their responsibilities towards politics and the institutions that help democracy to thrive.

President Ronald Reagan once said: "We should foster infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities which allows people to choose their own way to develop their own culture to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means."

This is the way one can tame the unruly and wily democracy in Bangladesh. Maybe a blend of educated approach and experience will make our long denied democracy worthy of the aspiration, honouring peoples' right of protection to life and liberty that acted as the prime mover in our fight for an independent Bangladesh.

Z.A. Khan is a former Director General of BISS.

Announcement

We request our valued readers to share with us any personal information or photographs relating to the killing of intellectuals on December 14, 1971 and events leading up to Victory Day.

We plan to use such information and photographs in our Martyred Intellectuals' Day (14 December) and Victory Day (16 December) supplements after due verification.

- Editor