

How to make democracy work in Bangladesh

Of the various requirements of democracy, an important one is trust. The government and the ruling party must trust the opposition party to rule the country when they assume the mantle of political power. Such trust makes smooth, peaceful transfer of power possible. Bangladesh has seen three transfers of power through national elections.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE foggy December weather in Dhaka mirrors the national politics of Bangladesh. Political pundits and talk show guests express their disappointment with the two major political coalitions openly. Scepticisms is infectious. With national elections only a few days away, some ask: Does democracy have a future in Bangladesh? The answer is a qualified yes. Bangladesh will continue to be a democracy with a Bangladeshi face, i.e., it will have some features unique to the culture of this region.

It is highly unlikely that family-based politics will disappear in the near future in Bangladesh, or in South Asia, or perhaps Asia. However, it is also likely that the electorate will increasingly make a distinction between an ill-educated heir of a leader and an educated scion. It is also unlikely that pork barrel politics will disap-

pear soon. There are many sources of corruption, one of which is the acceptance of corruption by the electorate as seen in the continued popularity of some known corrupt politicians. At the same time, honest, educated candidates are sometimes spurned.

As a sign of resentment against imperfect democracy, many are thinking about saying no to the candidates on the ballot. Yet, a large number of Bangladeshis are both pragmatic and forgiving. They are pragmatic enough to accept the second best and forgiving enough to give the corrupt politician a second -- and sometimes, a third -- chance.

Of the various requirements of democracy, an important one is trust. The government and the ruling party must trust the opposition party to rule the country when they assume the mantle of political power. Such trust makes smooth, peaceful transfer of power possible. Bangladesh has seen

three transfers of power through national elections. Those were dismal occasions and not very peaceful either. Justice Habibur Rahman, former chief adviser of caretaker government, was right when he said that the practice of caretaker government was, in effect, an admission of failure. Yet, under the present circumstances, it is a reasonable innovation.

The 9th parliamentary election still looks pretty open. BNP and its four-party alliance may win the December 29 election. Should we trust BNP to be able to run the country? Yes. They have done it before and, given the chance, they will be able to do it again. But this time, it will be a little messier than before. Emboldened by the popular mandate and with scanty graciousness, they are likely to go after their opponents -- by now quite numerous -- which will be quite ugly.

Can Awami League-led *Mohajot* (grand alliance) run the country if elected? Yes. Few would doubt their ability. Many believe that they are less likely to go after their opponents.

The absence of trust between the leading parties is a major problem; the other problem is the absence of responsibility. While there is a culture of sycophancy, which is a feature of authoritarianism, there is no culture of appreciation. In the election campaign BNP leader Khaleda Zia is accusing the opposition of working on behalf of

some unnamed foreign country. She has also accused the caretaker government of making Bangladesh a failed state at the behest of some unnamed foreign power.

Such wild accusations are unbecoming of a potential prime minister. To accuse the opposition of being traitors is simply irresponsible and cannot be downplayed as election propaganda. Although many people in Bangladesh are smart enough to see through this baseless propaganda, there are others whose loyalty to their leader would make them believe anything. However, what is ironical is that these were the tactics of the Pakistani rulers against the Bengali nationalists during the days of united Pakistan, who portrayed Awami League as acting on behalf of India to "dismember" Pakistan.

Muslim League leaders and their successor, General Yahya Khan, made protecting "national sovereignty" their mission. Ominously, the same sound bites now come from the leaders of BNP. I mention this with due respect to the BNP leadership. For the absence of respect will make democracy dysfunctional. But it is difficult to respect irresponsible people.

It is good that many commentators have alluded to Senator McCain's concession speech, which was gracious. However, I would like to remind the leaders of Bangladesh to take a leaf from Al Gore's concession speech, of December 13, 2000,



Co-existence is the essence of democracy.

after the controversial US presidential election and the fiasco in Florida.

In that memorable speech, Al Gore said: "...the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt, while I *strongly* disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome." Mr. Gore also referred to another speech from the mid nineteenth century. "Almost a century and a half ago, Senator Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, 'partisan feeling

must yield to patriotism. I'm with you, Mr. President, and God bless you.' Well, in that same spirit, I say to president-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancour must now be put aside, and may God bless his stewardship of this country."

To make democracy work, this is the sort of concession speech our leaders should rehearse.

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Election 2008: Don't turn my mobile off

Given that experience, and many others like it through the years, I'm baffled by the claim that shutting off mobile networks will ensure election rigging doesn't take place. The example given is that political thugs will use mobiles to plan intimidation. This argument removes agency from citizen voters themselves.

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IN Khagrachari this week for a pre-election visit, I saw the value of mobile networks even in the district that was last to get it and has the most sparse coverage. Because operators have not put towers everywhere, once you leave Khagrachari Sadar certain mobile operator networks go off. After eight hours in the interior, we would return to the Sadar and networks, and immediately find phones filling up with unread SMS.

Among Jumma (Pahari) election organisers, the mobile is an essential tool. They were getting SMS about irregularities in Bandarban, pre-election voter intimidation in Rangamati. Just as quickly, those SMS were getting forwarded to media, activist, and government networks. By the

time the newspapers arrived the next day (usually at mid-day in Khagrachari), those events had been reported and in some cases resolved.

Given that experience, and many others like it through the years, I'm baffled by the claim that shutting off mobile networks will ensure election rigging doesn't take place. The example given is that political thugs will use mobiles to plan intimidation. This argument removes agency from citizen voters themselves. If one example can be given of the goon squad using mobiles, a hundred counter-examples can be given of citizens recording, reporting and preventing abuse using that same device.

The mobile phone camera, with its grainy real-time visual aesthetic, has replaced video cameras as the on-the-fly



How can a mobile phone disrupt the election?

recording mechanism. More than once, we have seen mobile phone video being sent by MMS to TV stations and used for breaking news. "By mobile phone" is the ubiquitous on-screen scroll for election reporting on our major TV networks, whenever it is in a remote area where the camera crew has not arrived.

In the 2000 American elections, hanging

chads, African-American voter disenfranchisement, voting machine problems -- all this became part of the political vernacular. In response, 2004 and 2008 saw a continuous increase in citizen monitoring of the electoral process. My college classmate, Billy Wimsatt, founded League of Young Voters in 2003 to support and monitor the "hip hop" (African-American and

crossover) youth vote. That project was partially informed by his two activist books: *Another World is Possible* (2001) and *Future 500: Youth Organizing and Activism in the US* (2002). Billy's activism came of age when majority of wired teenagers were embodying the "Broadcast Yourself" spirit. Citizen journalism empowered by, among others, YouTube -- a company co-founded by 27 year old Bangladeshi-American Jawad Karim.

The work of many people like Billy Wimsatt and Ian Inaba (VideoTheVote.org and *American Blackout*) made it possible for the 2008 US elections to be conducted without voter disenfranchisement. Voter enfranchisement is possible through work by both citizens and the state. There are many grassroots Bengali activists who now use media and technology to monitor and review the political process. The mobile is the building block and basic DNA for that movement.

Even though political parties have now (superficially) embraced the lingo of "digital," the state has always had a fearful relationship with technology. Our "state secrets" would get smuggled out we were told, and so we fell a decade behind on connecting to the submarine cable. Criminals would use mobiles we were told, and so the Chittagong Hill Tracts went

without mobile networks until this year. A similar fear factor is behind the argument for shutting off mobiles during Election 2008. These arguments are not credible and reminiscent of the fearful 1980s.

Faruk Wasif uses the phrase *Nagorik Nojodari* (Citizen Overview) to describe what we need in this moment. Perhaps the EC believes their own networks are enough to monitor the elections. But they are not enough, they can never be enough. There can be no substitute for the individual citizen reporting via mobile that, yes, the vote is going smoothly; no, there is intimidation at this center; this candidate is breaking electoral code of conduct; etc.

Shutting the mobile networks off would create opacity, when we desperately need more transparency. The EC could find its own credibility questioned in the event of election disputes, and there would be no independent source to verify reports (no, sorry, the international election observers are not enough). Let citizens vote, monitor, and report their own elections. Citizen journalism at this intersection between *alo* and *adhar*.

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Two-nation theory

The two-nation theory stands rejected by the Muslims of India, Bangladesh, and even many in Pakistan, but people of Nizami's hue appear to be more Pakistani than many Pakistanis.

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NIZAMI'S statement eulogising the "two-nation theory" shows that the party remains loyal to its dark past. He tries to justify the hypothesis on which Pakistan was created. He argued that if Pakistan had not been created, Bangladesh would never have been born.

Coming on Victory Day, such statements are an insult to our national ethos. It is apparent that Nizami has poor understanding of history and is engaged in hoodwinking the people. It was also clear that renaming of "Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh" to "Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami" was nothing more than a cosmetic "cut and paste" job, signifying no change in the ideological position of the party.

That people like Nizami can get away with dishing out defunct theories with

virtual impunity shows how easily the history of the emergence of Bangladesh can be distorted.

What is the "two-nation theory?" It is based on the assumption that the Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent needed separate states. The idea, initially postulated by Allama Iqbal in 1937, was taken up by the All India Muslim League led by M.A. Jinnah.

Muslim League adopted a resolution in 1940 calling for the establishment of "Pakistan," a separate homeland for the Muslims. Jinnah expanded the hypothesis in 1944 when he argued that Muslims of India constituted a separate nation based on "distinctive culture and civilisation, language and literature, art and architecture, names and nomenclature, sense of values and proportion, legal laws and moral code, customs and calendar, history and traditions ----."

The theory lumped together the people of South Asia into Hindus and Muslims, ignoring the vast cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences that existed within each religious community, and the fact that religion was only one of the many factors that contributed towards making a nation.

Pakistan and Israel are the only two countries that were created on the basis of religion. The fallacy of the two-nation theory is brought out eloquently by Irfan Husain, a Pakistani columnist, when he writes: "This theory sought to bind a Muslim in Dhaka with one in Dharampura, and a Hindu in Sukkur with one in Simla. The reality was very different. A Muslim Bengali had far more in common with a Hindu from Calcutta than a Punjabi Muslim, while a Pushtun from Durra is much closer culturally and ethnically to his cousin in Jalalabad in Afghanistan than he is to a Muslim in Chittagong. These very real differences were glossed over by the oversimplifications on which the two-nation theory is based." No wonder, Pakistan could not find an anchor for more than half a century, and is still in search of a national identity.

Many Pakistani politicians and academics think that the bloody birth of Bangladesh in 1971 signified the collapse of the two-nation theory. But people like Altaf Hussain of Muhajir Quomi Movement (MQM) believe that the two-nation theory died as early as in 1949, when Pakistan closed its boundaries for the Muslims left behind in India.

Karamatullah K. Ghor, a former Pakistani diplomat writes: "The core of this ideology was its emphasis on 'all the Indian Muslims' being one nation, without any distinction of provincial or state (the princely states of India) affiliation. However, the independent state of Pakistan itself scuttled this core principle when, early in 1949, it imposed restrictions on the immigration of Muslims from India, thus shutting its doors on those who were late in making up their mind about Pakistan."

Although a few million Muslims migrated to Pakistan, many decided to stay on in India; today India has almost as many Muslims as Pakistan. Even Jinnah saw the contradiction inherent in the theory. Thus, he stated: "You will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to

be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State."

Today, Pakistan is torn by many separatist movements. The *Muhajirs* (Refugees) from India are demanding the rights to be treated as a separate sub-nationality, thus the birth of MQM. There is an armed nationalist separatist movement in Baluchistan and an ongoing insurgency in FATA. Even within Punjab, there is a growing demand for the recognition of "Saraiki" as a separate language and cultural identity. Most menacingly, the Shia-Sunni conflict is splitting the Pakistani society asunder.

As Islam is portrayed as the sole source of national identity in Pakistan, the clerics become more powerful. While they remain unpopular with the masses, their partner-in-arms happens to be the military, another unpopular institution in Pakistan. The mullah-military nexus, aided by landed aristocracy and a manipulative bureaucracy, is a serious challenge to democracy and social progress in Pakistan.

It is interesting to note that Maulana Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-

Islami, had opposed the creation of Pakistan and termed Jinnah a half-Muslim. Upon his migration to Pakistan, he started the campaign to establish a state based on Islamic *Sharia*. Jamaat-e-Islami, that opposed the creation of Pakistan, posed to be the defender of its ideology soon after its creation.

We can see a similarity with the scenario in Bangladesh today. Jamaat-e-Islami, that opposed the Bangladesh Liberation War on the plea of defending an Islamic state, is today posing to be the defender of Bangladesh's ideology. Such are the twists of manipulative politics.

The two-nation theory stands rejected by the Muslims of India, Bangladesh, and even many in Pakistan, but people of Nizami's hue appear to be more Pakistani than many Pakistanis.

That playing politics with religion ultimately brings ruin is proven by the sad spectacle in Pakistan -- a nation that had the highest number of suicide attacks in the world in 2008. We need to learn from others' mistakes for we may not live long to make those ourselves.

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Follow your dream

NURY VITTACHI

FOLLOW your dream. Three times in the past month I have been at talks where I've been told that the most important thing I must do is Follow My Dream.

That's fine, but which dream do I follow? The one where I am naked in the supermarket? Or the one where a giant pre-schooler is chasing me with a cigar clipper as I wade through a lake of noodles?

I asked my colleague Eddie for advice.

"I think they mean you should follow your DAYDREAM," he said. "Not the

weird dreams you have at night."

This made it even harder! How do I arrange to be hotly pursued by a love-struck Scarlett Johansson? Or be tickled to a state of delirium by novice nuns?

Achieving one's full potential is not easy, you know.

Anyway, why exactly should one follow one's dream? According to all three speakers, one NEEDS to do so to achieve true happiness.

Well, that's a major downer. I am destined to be miserable all my life. Unless some kind, well-connected reader can give me Scarlett Johansson's email address. (Or has a

nun costume.)

Hearing about my dilemma, Eddie came up with a good idea: "Why don't you just change your daydream to something easy to achieve? And then you can get ultimate happiness."

So I decided to spend that morning (I was at a boring business conference) daydreaming that I would have a cappuccino and a slice of carrot cake for lunch.

I then found a café and purchased a cappuccino and a slice of carrot cake.

Did I achieve ultimate happiness? Did I heck. I achieved a snack.

The fact is, this sort of modern philos-

ophy stinks. Yet people like author Paulo Coelho ("The Alchemist") have made massive fortunes telling people to do this sort of thing.

What about the downsides, huh? Huh? Do they tell you about THAT?

I once knew a lawyer whose fantasy was to be an actor. After more than 10 years as a barrister, he abandoned the law and signed up with the actor's union.

After "resting" for a few months, he got a job playing a lawyer. He was stiff and tall, he always dressed in black, and he had a crisp, deep, powerful voice: what else could he play?

"I'm still striding around a court saying, 'your honour'," he mused. "The only difference is that I have gone from the most secure, high-paying job in the world, to the least-secure, lowest-paying job in the world."

But from Mr Coelho's point of view, he'd followed his dream.

On the last day of the conference, I was chatting to a young woman and I asked what her husband did. She replied: "Actually, you are living his dream."

"You mean he wants to be a non-entity napping at a business confer-

ence?" I said, astonished.

"Yes," she replied. "But a non-entity whose novels actually get published."

Clearly this woman's husband had been talking to Eddie and had decided to aim low on the achievability index.

"And what's your dream?" I asked.

"Nothing much, really," she said. "But I would kill for a decent cup of coffee."

I smiled and pointed at the coffee shop I had discovered earlier. "In that case, I can make your dreams come true," I said. "And manslaughter will not be required."

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