

Consolidating democracy in our region

Democracy has to follow the path of democratisation at all levels. The principle of responsiveness needs to range from the family to all state structures. This should apply uniformly within all institutions that affect political, economic and social realms.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

STRENGTHENING democracy and democratic institutions is complex and touches constitutions, electoral systems, political parties, legislative arrangements, the judiciary, central and local government, and formal and traditional government structures.

A discussion on "Democracy building in South Asia" was convened in Kathmandu by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in cooperation with the South Asian Center for Policy Studies (SACEPS). I was invited in my capacity as Vice President, Center for Democracy, Dhaka.

This was one of a series undertaken worldwide by IDEA. Their aim is to understand the parameters of democracy in relation to the achieving of growth, equitable opportunities and development. Experiences were shared between academics, lawyers, former senior government officials from South Asian countries and representatives from European civil society and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Views also covered the advantages and constraints within the "smorgasbord" of 27 democratic systems in Europe.

The exercise revealed several significant aspects pertaining to the support of institutions and processes that ensure democracy building and also impact on this dynamics within our region. The review clarified that conceptual coherence was required and that discrete strategic initiatives from external associates could profit from organic linkage within the overall framework that had been undertaken for consolidation of democracy.

Formal democracy is characterised by "regular elections, a competitive system of political parties, and a system of separation and checks and balances between different components of government." Anyone desiring to understand the process of democracy will have to take these elements into cognisance.

This equation also raises the fundamental factor of democracy and development being ultimately connected to the issue of power -- of power relationships between citizens and between states and their citizens. It would be appropriate to refer not only to the

Human Development approach as developed by Amartya Sen and Mahbubul Huq but also to the emergence of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I believe that this is necessitated due to the structural factors.

Institution building has to allow more equitable power relations, especially between different groups of citizens. This thesis had also been endorsed during the Wilton Park Conference series. The Swedes have taken it one step further by emphasising not only on gender but also on rights arising out of income or disparity thereof.

Transparency and accountability and the absence of partisanship will also have to be added, without which the democratic process loses its representativeness and legitimacy.

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The IDEA seminar was important because of the evolving conditions within our region, and the leadership at this juncture of democratic transition. Professor Sukh Deo Muni highlighted that inadequate leadership might eventually efface the gains achieved in some countries within the region. A case in point would be what is happening today in Pakistan.

The responsibility of initiating and implementing the structural, economic, social and political reforms necessary to institutionalise democracy has to be undertaken by the South Asians themselves. The external players can only play a supportive role, and their capabilities to bring about fundamental changes are limited.

South Asia is at a "conjunctural" moment in its history. Mass poverty and social vulnerabilities cast a shadow on the expected meaningful governance. As a result, even though people have the right to vote, they are unable to participate in the decision making process. This absence of participatory governance encourages corruption and informal practices that bypass democratic dispensation. Failure to systematically participate will eventually affect economic growth and create insecurity.

We have had local government elections in Bangladesh, but the process of devolution of power from centralised state structures has still not been agreed upon. There needs to be consensus so that there can be institutional linkage between each tier of government. Without this there cannot be consolidation of democracy.

Sustainable democracy needs capacity building within and among state institutions. The challenges pertaining to integration and enhancement can be overcome through the exercise of political will and the availability of resources from public-private partnership and



also that made available by external institutions. Civil society can facilitate gender equality and help in the building of inclusive structures of power in the production and distribution of goods and services, because we have the problems of low absorption capacity, deep inequities and developmental deficits.

Strengthening democratic perception will require bolstering the developmental approach to democracy. We need to build local capacity in secondary education by strengthening local universities and enhancing their academic capacity and their technical and practical

capacity in development planning. The existing paradigms of governance can be made more functional and user-friendly so that the social benefits of better management can be apparent and accessible.

Such IDEA workshops will be also held in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. The conclusions that will be arrived at will hopefully be made available to all developing countries and nascent democracies. It will greatly help in promoting democracy building.

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Victims of apathy and neglect

18 lakh street children in the country are eking out a miserable existence without food, nutrition and shelter, as revealed in a Unicef report. There are about one lakh and fifty thousand children working as domestic helps in Dhaka city alone.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN the backdrop of the observance of National Children's Day coinciding with the birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a clarion call for creating national consensus for establishing the rights of children. Her call to the affluent section of the country for improving the plight of the vulnerable section of the society must not go unheeded.

Despite the fact that child labourers have been withdrawn from the garments sector, there are still thousands of children in the country eking out a living under oppressive circumstances in other vocations. The number of children doing odd jobs, such as breaking stones, picking trash from the streets, or making imitation jewellery, or as coolies in rail stations and bus terminals, is larger than that of the ones withdrawn from the garments factories.

Abbas, a boy of 12 working in an imitation jewellery factory, had high hopes in life. He wanted to study and help the

family with a meaningful employment. But with his father, a rickshaw puller, being disabled in a road accident, all his hopes have been dashed to the ground. He had to take charge of a 4-member family including his parents after abandoning his school in the village.

Reports in a Bangla daily indicated that in wards 60 and 61 of the Dhaka City Corporation, there are about 700 small factories and about 2000 child workers below age 16, all coming from rural areas. Most of them are victims of river erosion, flood and other natural calamities.

Grim accounts of poor girls under 14 being sold are pouring in. A report by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) revealed that every year about 1000 children, mostly girls, are trafficked outside the country. In spite of the fact that the country has strict laws to stop repression and abuse, we have hardly been able to ensure protection to these underprivileged teenagers from exploitation, or to arrest this trend.

The staggering number of children, about 30 million under the age of eight,



Don't minors have any rights?

remaining without proper food and schooling, points to a grim future for the country. Although the number of children initially enrolled in primary schools ranges up to 87%, almost 60% of them drop out, mainly due to poverty. Only 40% can somehow cross the primary stage of schooling.

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city alone.

The seminars that are occasionally convened by our leaders in an effort to care for the vast multitude of underprivileged children remain confined to making recommendations. Undoubtedly, the plight of the vulnerable group remains unchanged. We have not so far witnessed any tangible program translated into appreciable action, other than what Underprivileged Children's Education Program (Ucep) has been doing over the years.

From its modest start with only 60

students in 1972, the enrolment of students under Ucep in different trades and technical schools now stands at 34,000 in 48 Integrated General and Vocational (IGV) schools. Ucep is still the only NGO working with the distressed urban working children.

Our failure to grapple with the issue of rural poor children has exploded into a catastrophic situation. Taking advantage of their poverty, children are being picked up by extremist elements, and ultra-religious groups with lure of money and food. This will mean turning the country into a snow capped volcano pretty and calm on top but with serious problems seething within.

How do we fight the problem that warrants our attention most, the horrifying drudgery and waste of human energy at the prime of one's life due to lack of economic protection, guidance and motivation? Sleeping in railway stations, picking through garbage and sifting for food in municipal dumps is the lot of these children. School is a luxury.

However, with such a precarious economic viability and scant resources at the disposal of the government, we can't get rid of the dreaded scourges like disease and poverty. Developed countries should allow their surplus funds to flow into the poverty-ridden countries like Bangladesh for the emancipation, education and healthcare of the less fortunate in this region. This would help tap the immense opportunities needed for economic

recovery and well-being of the people, allowing the children in this region access to better living and education.

With recession gripping all the countries, and more so the poorest nations, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki moon has issued a clarion call to the affluent nations to extend a helping hand to the distressed countries.

Political leaders and common people must wake up to the fact that the time for reckoning has arrived. If the country has to prosper, if it has to carve out a self-sustaining future, it should not have a lack-lustre education system, or an infrastructure that is falling apart.

We have a whole generation of human beings in the country who could be productive and helpful to humanity but are being lost. What has dismayed the vast majority of the people who want the society to move in the right direction is the tepid response of government and national leaders to this problem.

The way the whole country is plunging into chaos because of the apathy and neglect shown towards this vital section of the society signals a potential calamity for the nation. In fact, the whole country has inherited decades of neglect, misplaced priorities and outright incompetence at every level.

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Let there be dharmonirokekkhota

In Bangladesh, we tend to translate dharmonirokekkhota as secularism, though dharmonirokekkhota refers to only one of the many meanings of secularism current in the world today. This problematic translation initiates many unnecessary debates.

TARIK M. QUADIR

I think it would be wise for our nation to focus on the notion of dharmonirokekkhota, which signifies "neutrality in the choice of religion," and not get entangled in the concept of "secularism" as it is understood in European countries. In Bangladesh, we tend to translate dharmonirokekkhota as secularism, though dharmonirokekkhota refers to only one of the many meanings of secularism current in the world today. This problematic translation initiates many unnecessary debates.

The idea of secularism entered the European consciousness during the Renaissance. Early use of the term secular in Europe meant the temporality of a situation. For example, there were "secular priests" in France whose job was to temporarily visit towns away from the monasteries in order to preach their orthodox Catholic message. The concept of secularism evolved over the next few centuries as Europe went through huge transformation of consciousness primarily propelled by rationalism.

It is important to understand that rationalism is distinct from rationality. Rationality in thought does not exclude

revelations (the Quran, the Vedas and the Bible) as sources of objective truth. Hence, Krishna, Buddha and the prophets Muhammad (PUBH) and Jesus were rational. In contrast, rationalism excludes revelations and visions of avatars, prophets and saints as sources of objective truth. Hence, a rationalist understanding of secularism is opposed to the fundamental doctrines of every religion and the vision of every saint or wali. The problem with the term secularism is that in many circles the meaning is based on rationalism and not on rationality.

If secularism is understood to mean "the separation of the church and the state," we must understand the intent of that idea. The Muslim imam or the Hindu purohit does not have the same function as that of a Christian priest who can absolve the sins of a person. Christianity did not come with a Divine Law in the sense of Shashtra or the Shariah; the Christian church got into the business of making laws. Unlike the case with the Catholic Church, the power of mosques and temples are decentralised, and they do not make laws; their main work is to encourage followers to abide by the existing Divine Laws.

In post-Renaissance Europe, especially during the Enlightenment of the 18th century, the separation of the church and state was pursued to prevent the abuse of power by the all-powerful Catholic Church. Even more so, this separation of church and state was sought to prevent the church from legislating against the development of a rationalist science as well as against the wanton pursuit of commercial interests by the rich and the powerful.

The mosques and temples never exercised nearly as much control over our Muslim or Hindu societies as the near total control over European societies exercised by the medieval Catholic Church. Also, neither the central Islamic doctrine of tawhid (Unity of God/Truth/Reality) nor the Hindu Vedantic doctrine of advaita (non-duality) permits the dichotomy of the world into the sacred and the profane.

In other words, the concept of the separation of the church in the European sense does not really apply to our Bangladesh context. I believe that in dharmonirokekkhota our concern should be mainly to prevent religious discrimination against any person based on his/her religious affiliation. Also, it would be wise for the government and the public to encourage, wherever possible, the universalist elements within each religion without either denying the differences between religions or suppressing the expression of any religion. I believe that this universal understanding is identical in meaning and intention to what Bangabandhu meant by dharmonirokekkhota.

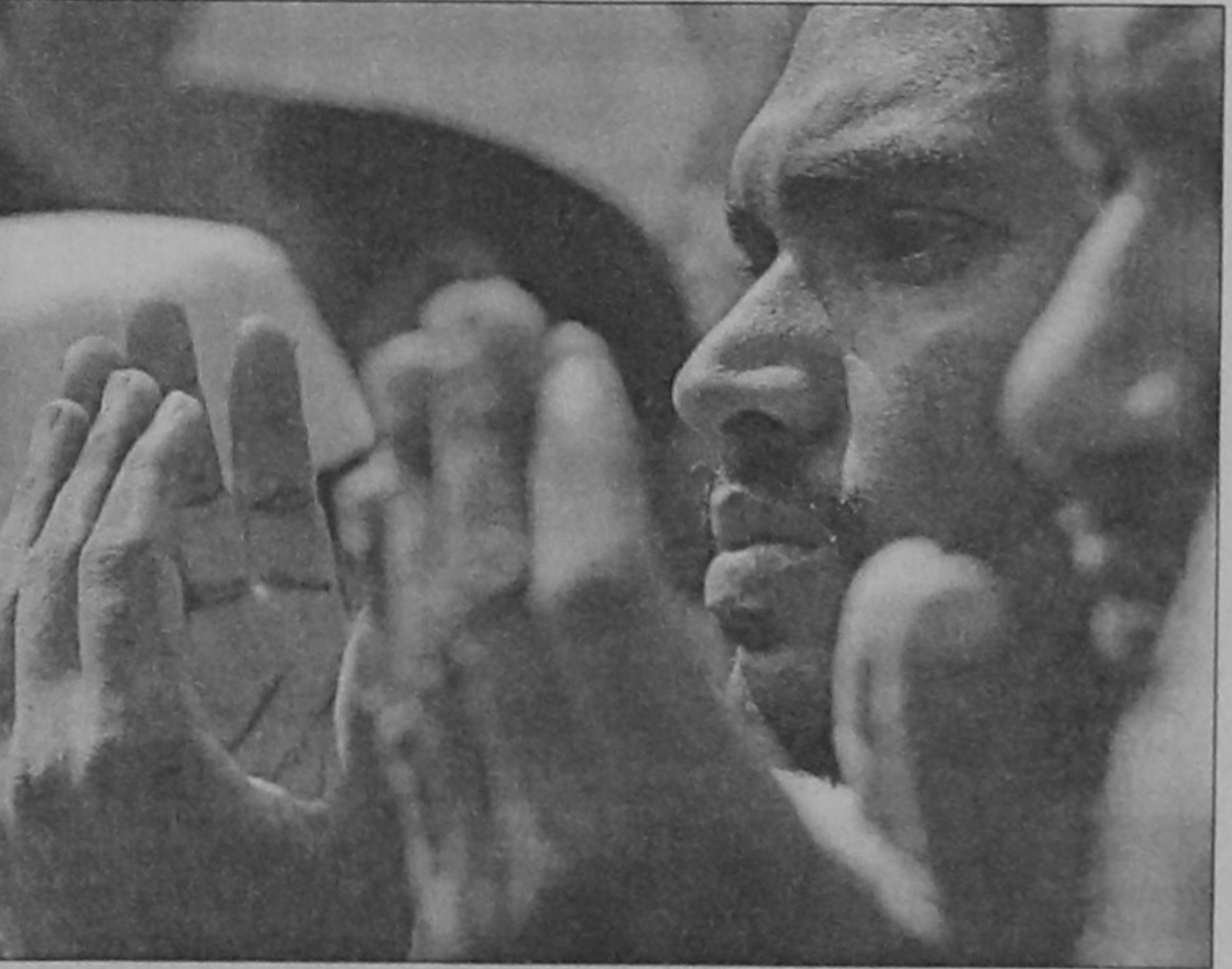
However, in personal practice, we do

have to be careful about how we understand dharmonirokekkhota. A religion must, by necessity, consist of a doctrine regarding man's ultimate purpose as well as a corresponding method for reaching that goal. Even if we understand that all religions teach the same fundamental values, we cannot practice more than one method, for each path has an integrity in the ways its different elements complement each other. I believe that the image of the same mountain-top being reached by distinct paths applies to the reality of the diversity of religions in the world.

People can shape their own lifestyle but cannot make their own religion, for religion by definition is given from a higher dimension for a purpose that reaches beyond the material plane. Therefore, in our choice of practice we cannot be nirokekkho (neutral). However, in the spirit of Islam, the religion of 85% of our people, we must allow adherents of other religions to follow their own paths in complete freedom. Islam does not urge us to restrict others from following their religions.

If we want others to follow Islam, we must first lead by our own good example, and not step on the rights of others. Only Allah can determine whether others will accept Islam -- no human being, whose vision is necessarily limited, can determine another's choice of religion or force Islam upon another. I believe that this is not only the spirit of Sufism (tariqah) but also of the Quran and of the Prophet (PUBH) himself.

I believe it is completely wrong to quote, as some people do, only the verse "Verily, the religion with Allah is Islam"



Religion is personal.

(Quran 3:19) to argue that Islam is the only true religion while ignoring other Quranic verses that say that Allah has sent different revelations to different people which they should follow (Quran 10:47; 14:49; 2:62; 5:69; 5:48).

In fact, there is no scripture in the world that affirms the universality of Divine revelation as explicitly as the Quran does. Moreover, the Arabic word "Islam" means "submission to the Truth." In that sense, the above verse (3:19) validates the essential intention of all religions, which is to make people "submit to the Truth," rather

than restricting it to mean only the religion of Islam and its particular Shariah.

If we follow the spirit of the Quran, we can build an exemplary religiously tolerant nation in Bangladesh. Let it be known that the children of Lalon Fakir, Tagore and Nazrul still have much to offer to a gravely ill world that has too often forgotten or abandoned its deepest spiritual Truth: God is One, humanity is One.

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