

Democracy is greater discipline

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MADAN SHAHU

TEACHERS supposedly teach their pupils proper conduct alongside lessons from textbooks at the primary level. And conduct obviously includes discipline. Discipline is a must for peace and ease in society. In its absence, not only indiscipline but also anarchy and chaos take place.

Such a state of affairs in a society is just not desirable. It not only erodes the security and weal of the members but also provides criminals refuge by default, even a stage for their nefarious acts, which might earn a bad name for the country itself.

Continuance of anarchy leads to violence, which forces an exodus of people -- to the inconvenience of neighbours. These are negative proliferations, where discipline does not prevail or is not enforced. So, a state system without much consideration for discipline cannot be viable for long.

Democracy is a system that is considered the best because of its virtues. But as it is not a regimentation of any sort, the people must practice self-discipline to keep the vices of indiscipline at bay. There are laws and rules, endorsed by the people themselves, for the people to abide by. However, strict enforcement of the same is also approved by the legislature in case of practices and acts not conducive to discipline.

We are but indulging in conduct and

behaviour that very much verge on indiscipline, although our craving for democracy has been deep and the sacrifice to achieve it so high. Abiding by rules and laws is going by the norms of discipline.

Democracy is a system that entails utmost freedom -- freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of faith and its practice -- but never to a point where it might conflict with or obstruct the freedom of others. And for this to be maintained there are perhaps more rules and laws in a democracy than in other systems.

But how much are we abiding by those for the sake of democracy? Rather, we have taken democracy as a free-for-all regime and are breaking away from all bindings, even moral and ethical. Have we ever cared to think where this "freedom" stance will lead us?

We are already in a hell of disorder, because we are pleased to violate rules more than follow them. This pleasure has landed us into corruption, into the mess of traffic jam and unplanned housing, into the pool of pollution and encroachment, and into many more such vices.

Many others are also violating norms, but are perhaps not in so much peril as we are -- maybe because they are not as much under the pressure of population as we are. We have much less elbow-room than others. Indiscipline will just reduce it further, to our extreme inconvenience.

Anyway, let's imagine for once -- what if we change overnight? We will no more

take bribe for illegal passage of things and will be relieved from the fear of being caught by the anti-corruption personnel; no more encroaching upon public or private property, thus getting relief from the fear of being evicted one day; no more indulging in adulteration or forgery, thus getting relief from fear of falling under public wrath any time. There are so many such practices we can refrain from for the sake of peace and discipline and for allowing democracy to function better.

Here, some may question the link between discipline and bribery or corruption and other deviations. Well, any violation of rules is, or leads to, indiscipline. For instance, corruption is allowing someone to violate discipline against graft; it facilitates one and deprives many, breaking the rule of democracy itself -- which stands for equitable opportunity for all. The majority of the people suffer from a sense of deprivation because of such unlawful facilitation. This often causes commotion, and even leads to violence to the further inconvenience of many others, ultimately disturbing democracy.

The irony is, in a democracy, people seldom speak against the rules because they are proposed and passed by the people's representatives in the parliament, but are most often reluctant to abide by them because of the absence of strict enforcement. In a regimented system, nobody seems to be happy with the enforced orders, and seldom tends to behave wrongly for fear of being persecuted.

Nothing should be forced on the people in a democracy. But then they themselves should not back off from doing what they vowed to do through legislation in their chosen system. So we should do whatever is necessary to protect and facilitate ecological balance. We should not allow any sector to embark on or indulge in any act contradictory to our own expressed will or to the deprivation



Result of lack of discipline.

or harm of others (majority).

For instance, we should not allow a bus driver to stop at will in the middle of the street to pick up passengers to his benefit and obstruct the movement of many other commuters. This is breaking of discipline, violation of rules and infringement of others' democratic right. Similarly, parking of vehicles on the street beyond the designated space is also a violation of rules, accruing similar inconvenience to many others (majority). So refraining from unlawful activities is enhancing democracy.

In a democratic state we are surely not for actions that could cause decline of democratic rights. Like city streets, rivers

are there for the benefit of the people. Just a few beneficiaries cannot deprive the vast majority of this benefit by encroaching upon the resource. How can the best system of governance allow a few to satiate their greed by depriving all others? Similarly one cannot construct or should not be allowed to construct buildings by violating the codes. For instance, if an owner does not leave 40% of his plot out of the building area, his/her neighbour would also tend to do the same. So if all the plot holders do not maintain any setback on any side and raise buildings that rub shoulders with one another, then the occupants just won't get any access to natural light and air. This will simply

jeopardise the lives of future generations, depriving them of the primary democratic right.

Everywhere, in any aspect of our occupation and life, this indiscipline or breaking away from rules seems to have become our way to achievement, success or even survival. Indiscipline ultimately ends up in chaos, and this chaos is just likely to undo whatever has been gained. Indiscipline is no credit, no virtue. One has to be disciplined to be creditable and virtuous, or at least a law-abiding citizen. Such citizens constitute a democratic polity.

Madan Shahu is Senior Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Women MPs still knocking at the door

Women MPs may come forward bravely since they don't need to show the lame excuses in dodging the constitutional responsibilities. They may use every parliamentary instrument to do the work to contribute to making the parliament effective.

SHAKHAWAT LITON

SPEAKER Abdul Hamid was asked by a reporter whether lawmakers elected to reserved seats for women, known as "women MPs," would be entitled to get the cars? The speaker replied: "What do you think of them? Aren't they MPs?" He boldly stated all were equals. In fact, he meant that lawmakers having specific constituencies from where they were elected in direct polls and lawmakers of reserved seats are equal in the eyes of the constitution.

Everyone knows the ground reality, which prompted the reporter to ask the question. On the functions, privileges and parliamentary immunities, neither the constitution nor the rules of procedure of the parliament use any words that could assist critics in alleging discrimination

against MPs on the basis of the nature of their election. By going through the black and white letters, one may easily understand their equality before the laws.

Women MPs very often seek some privileges that the lawmakers elected in direct polls are enjoying. These privileges include controlling authority of the functions of the upazila parishads as advisers, and distribution of test relief materials allocated to them for use in development activities in their constituencies.

Forty-five women MPs are being deprived of the said privileges, as they don't have specific constituencies to represent. But they have nothing to repent if they don't get the so-called privileges. They have ample tasks to perform in parliament. They are free from the pressures that face the lawmakers representing people of specific constitu-

encies. Women MPs did not make any pledges to the people of any specific area to do development activities in the area, before their elections.

But they represent the entire country, they are sworn in as MPs to protect, defend and uphold the constitution. They swear to discharge their duties according to the constitution. MPs elected in direct elections take the same oaths too.

It might not be so easy to expect the MPs elected in direct polls to begin the tasks, as they argue that they promised to the people to do development activities in their constituencies. If they do not do so, people will not pardon them, and will not vote for them again, no matter what promises they make in their constitutional oaths.

Questions may rise over their sincerity -- whether they really want to be faithful to their oaths -- when observing their enthusiasm to be involved in local development works, through which they allegedly make some money or do favours for their party men to strengthen their base in their constituencies.

But women MPs may come forward bravely since they don't need to show the lame excuses in dodging the constitutional responsibilities. They may begin

the works to hold the executive accountable to the people, can discuss the executive's policy in running the administration, can make suggestions for the executive, and can scrutinise the functions and expenditure of the executive.

They may use every parliamentary instrument to do the work to contribute to making the parliament effective; they may contribute to bringing a balance among the two organs -- executive and legislature. If a balance of power is ensured and visible, then the efforts for establishing good governance and removing unbridled corruption from public administration may be realised. If it is so, the people will get benefits and will be served properly.

Carrying out local development activities is not the function of an MP. It's the constitutional function of the local government units. The MPs, however, may contribute a lot to strengthen the local government system, by enacting new laws, amending old ones, removing hurdles in the way of local bids, giving advisory opinion and forcing the executive to allocate more resources and power to local government bodies. If the lawmakers work for strengthening the local government units for the welfare of

the people, then they should not fear losing popularity. The people must understand their contribution.

But MPs representing constituencies do not dare to do so! They are pulling themselves down to the level of local government representatives regarding carrying out of development activities and establishing supremacy in their constituencies.

Elected representatives to the House of the nation and to the local government bodies, particularly of upazila parishads, are now competing to take control over the local development works. Local government bodies' representatives constitutionally deserve the authority over the local development works.

Representatives of the House of the nation do not deserve it, they are the lawmakers, but they enacted the Upazila Parishad Act, establishing their supremacy over the upazila parishads. If they want to do welfare work only by carrying out development activities, they should have not sought people's mandate in the national election, they should have contested in the local bodies elections. In the past, lawmakers acted virtually as representatives of local government

bodies due to absence of an effective local government system.

If the MPs elected to reserved seats begin performing their real functions in parliament, if they speak for the countrymen as a whole, if they address the national problems and issues, if they start talking about national policies, if they start pursuing the government to initiate more steps to resolve problems facing people, then what will the MPs elected in direct election do?

They may be compelled to follow the women MPs' path! The desired change in parliamentary form of governance and politics will be visible only when all MPs will start delivering on their responsibilities!

To engage the women MPs in the mission, many of them may need to be given proper orientation and understanding of parliamentary practice and procedure. The speaker may play a pivotal role by taking a step forward. The leader of the House, who is also prime minister, may come forward with new ideas or contribute to the speaker's efforts to encourage the women MPs to concentrate on the parliamentary functions.

Shakhawat Liton is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

'The country can be run better'

Reformist leader **Mohammad Khatami** had a good shot at unseating President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in elections scheduled for June 12. But he recently pulled out of the race in favour of another candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi. The ex-president spoke about the upcoming election with **Newsweek's Maziar Bahari** in Tehran.

Do you think it will be a fair election?
It depends what you mean by fair. Naturally, there are some problems in new democracies like ours, where some officials are still have a pre-democratic and despotic mentality. But I don't think vote rigging will change the outcome.

Do you think Mr. Mousavi could carry out the reforms people are asking from him?

Mr. Mousavi believes in freedom and people's participation in the governance of the country. So he will definitely prepare the ground for us, reformists, to work among the people even if we will not be in power. Reforms require certain plans and ideas that should be carried in the course of time. We couldn't reach the reformist objectives during my eight-year presidency. Our nation has been fighting for reforms for the past 100 years. They have been fighting for freedom, independence and development. Our nation suffered from despotism, from foreign interven-

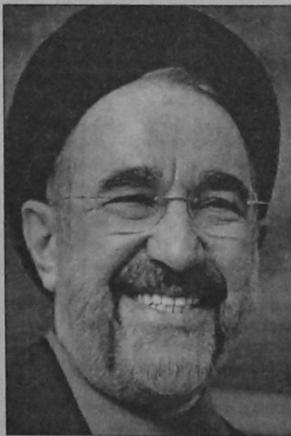
tion and most importantly from lack of development.

Why are you such a popular politician?
I'm not 100% sure why. Iranians can never tolerate humiliation and despotism, like under the dictatorships before the revolution. So when a leader respects the people and regards them as his masters, then people respect that politician.

Why did you withdraw from the race?
I changed my mind when Mr. Mousavi became a candidate. Mr. Mousavi is one of the best politicians in Iran and we always wanted him to be more active. He used to refuse to take part in the elections but this time around he thought that he should get involved.

You have said that many people are not happy with the current situation in the country. Why is that?

We had a revolution (in 1979) to establish an Islamic Republic based on people's votes. We have a historic opportunity to develop democracy in our country. I don't



Mohammad Khatami

think our current government moves in a direction that can reach those objectives, even though it was elected by popular vote and I'm sure it has the best of intentions. Our interests can be protected better. We can use the resources in the country better than we are doing now. For example, the rising oil prices in the past few years could result in a real progress and development of the country. I think the overall situation in our country could be better than it is now.

You recently mentioned that Iran has

lost place in the region and in the world. Could you elaborate?

I think we could adopt more logical policies so that we could have more of a say in what is going on in our region. We are a great nation because of our culture and history. The Western countries think of Iran as a problem that should be solved. I always tell them: "You should see Iran as part of the solution rather than part of the problem."

We, Iranians, also have to ask ourselves whether we have used this unique position we have to improve the situation in Iran. I do not think so. Because of some of our wrong policies, sanctions and pressures against Iran have increased. Iran has some principles for which it is ready to pay a price. The question is if it's necessary to pay such a price.

What do you think about President Obama and his policies?

I think Mr. Obama truly wants to have a real change inside America and in terms of America's relations with the rest of the world. The question is whether these reforms will be cosmetic changes or substantial ones. The United States has a strong system of governance with its own policies and traditions, we can't expect one person to change the decision making process. I'm sure he will have many obstacles on his way to change, the same way that we reformists have problems in Iran. So I think we

should give Mr. Obama some time to carry out his plans. And I hope he has the courage to act upon his ideas for real change.

Do you think Iran and the United States can cooperate?

The history of the relations between the two countries is really dark. And it is America that is the main culprit. It's not only the Iranian government that is bitter about what America has done, ordinary people are also very angry about the past actions of the US. They remember events such as the 1953 coup ... and the sanctions and embargoes after the revolution. If Iranians believe that the Americans want to change their policies and if some real steps are taken in that direction, then, we can forget the past temporarily and look forward to a better future.

President Obama has also talked about mutual respect.

I think Americans should also change their attitude toward the rest of the world. The United States thinks of itself as the "big brother" of the Europeans and the industrialised world and thinks of itself as the master of the Islamic and Third World countries. If this attitude changes, then we can sit down and decide what are the common interests of Iran and the United States.

What should the American policy be vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program?

The same thing that happened during

my time. We had useful negotiations with the Europeans. They proposed package and we answered back. I told the Europeans that they shouldn't listen to the Americans and deliver what they had promised. Otherwise, Iranians may become suspicious that the Europeans don't really want to solve the problems and they just want to deny Iran of its natural rights. I told them if Iran becomes suspicious it will change its nuclear policy. This is exactly what happened. Europeans showed weakness and the Americans put a lot of pressure on them. The main mistake was to send Iran's case to the United Nation's Security Council. They thought they could change Iran's policy by threats even though Iran has always reacted even more harshly when it is threatened. The Europeans are saying that all negotiations were going well until Mr. Ahmadinejad started denying the Jewish Holocaust and threatening to wipe Israel off the map. That's not right. The Europeans started their wrong policies during my time. And I had conciliatory rhetoric. I think we should avoid using words that can be provocative and endanger our interests. But I think the Europeans just use those words as an excuse for their own inaction.

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