

# Democracy thus far?

Thus far, democracy has at least found its honours through these two conventions. We should go yet further to honour the democrats for whom election is oxygen. As for now, I would remind the democrats that patience is a virtue.

Z.A. KHAN

DEMOCRACY in Bangladesh recorded another milestone when Awami League (AL) the oldest political party and Jatiya party (JP) held their National Conventions on July 24. It is indeed heartening to note that the Representation of the People Order (RPO) issued by the Election Commission (EC) has been taken by these two political parties with "due" seriousness.

Many congratulations to the leadership of AL and JP for putting their act together to make it happen. This is a novel move for leading the nation to the long-desired destination, which is protecting democratic institutions and, thus, giving impetus to democracy.

Our happiness would have been boundless had both AL and JP opened a new chapter by demonstrating their earnestness to practice democracy at its best. Although there were no other leaders to seek the vote of the councillors for the top spots in AL and JP, there should have some initiatives to invite candidates to contest for the top job. I think this has dealt a severe blow to the process of democratising the parties, a

stipulation enacted by the EC.

In the case of the post of secretary general (SG) the story is not different as election did not take place because none among the councillors present thought that he could be the SG. What took me by surprise is that the councillors unanimously authorised the president in the case of AL and the JP chairman to choose their colleagues for the presidium, central working committee, national executive committee etc., which may not augur well for the growth of democracy within the parties. JP made it look like one man's party when its re-elected chairman declared that he would like to be the president for life as there was no other competent leader who could have a hold on the party.

We must remember that we fought a bloody war for liberation to usher in democracy and development. Who will believe that the political parties will practice democracy at the national level if their leaders are disinclined to practice the same within the party? The leadership in all strata is hardly kind and endearing to their opposition within and outside the party. Top leaders of almost all the parties violate the party's constitution with impunity to consolidate their

hold on the party.

Any suggestion to consider flexibility is met with severe displeasure of the leaders, and extreme reactions bordering on violence by their cronies have been experienced in the past. We are about to step into the fourth decade of our independence.

No worthwhile development of our political institutions has taken place so far, therefore parties have become platforms of leaders of choice, leaders by accident and leaders catapulted. So the parties run at the whim and whims of the leaders, who remain so "till death do them part."

This deprives the parties of the dynamism, fresh ideas, inexhaustible energy of the aspirants and un-diminishing zeal of the grassroots rank and file, who find no possibility of rising and are resigned to their fate -- hoping for a worthy designation to be handed down one fine morning. In one breath they shower rhetoric and semantics to run crusades to save democracy, and in the same breath they privately bless those cronies who please them by saying loudly that their leaders can commit no wrong.

The one-day national conventions of both the parties have not really shown the way for consolidation of democracy but firmed up their own hold. One is likely to apprehend that this is not the surest way to lead the nation to its long-awaited destination, where one can thrive on freedom of choice of leadership and enjoy the pleasure of making a leader now and the becoming a leader in



They have started at least.

the foreseeable future.

I have a few suggestions to make such conventions worthwhile insofar as injecting a flavour of democracy within the party is concerned. To all those who say democracy thrives on the leaders' aura and charisma I would say "hail" and, at the same time, would like to add that leaders should belong to the people and should encourage them to speak freely to correct and not merely to criticise.

Leaders should retire, not to become recluses in the wilderness but to guide the new generation. Thus, new leadership will go grow, who, in all likely hood, will savour democracy.

Leaders should insist on repairing of the weaknesses of the party constitution instead of taking advantage of its inad-



vertent loopholes. This step alone can bring about substantial changes in the attitude of new entrants, who seek encouragement to cultivate democratic culture with divine commitment as against worshipping the demons of power.

The over-heavy hand of the top leader may seem to quell any subdued agitation, but may, at some stage, unleash a specter of terror that is sure to put the party and its leaders in disarray.

The consequences of such a gesture will make the party ranks more distressed than interested. We should not forget that the emotions of most of the party activist and sympathisers are both subtle and passionate about their leader.

Even a distant show of contempt, or

unwillingness to follow the party constitution, may set into motion trains of discontent that will endanger the party discipline. Although the activists are radiating serenity and understanding, it may start decaying as they go back to their constituencies to face those that voted them to be councillors.

I sincerely wish the reelected leadership of the AL and JP success because I believe they too will understand when the emotions are on the wane they should re-evaluate and take measures to uphold their party constitution.

The leaders in their wisdom will not mask their understanding of the situation and will take steps to construct a future where the wishes of the activists will get primacy over the desires of the leadership.

I would very humbly suggest that in future the activists should know prior to their coming to the convention that election to all the posts would be held through secret balloting, as per the party constitution. Even if there is no second candidate to contest for one post secret voting will still be held to find out how many have voted against him. This will help the elected leader to assess for himself/herself where the leader stands.

Thus far, democracy has at least found its honours through these two conventions. We should go yet further to honour the democrats for whom election is oxygen. As for now, I would remind the democrats that patience is a virtue.

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## IN MEMORIAM

# Farewell to a freedom fighter

TAWFIQ-E-ELAHI CHOWDHURY

Dhaka Central Jail: August 4, 2008.

MUSTAFIZ passed away yesterday. General Mustafizur Rahman, Bir Bikram, a war hero, once the chief of staff of Bangladesh army and, above all, a comrade-in-arms and a good friend of mine.

We met by chance. Mustafiz along with Salahuddin, then young captains of the Pakistan army, had been trekking the country for a safe haven in March 1971. They landed in Meherpur with Mustafiz's elder brother Matiur Rahman, who was a magistrate in my office of SDO. Post March 25, 1971 Meherpur was up in arms -- students, politicians, ordinary folks -- ready to cross swords with those who had defiled our motherland, killed, tortured, maimed tens of thousands, and wanted to silence us and humble us to subjugation. Our Armageddon.

On a rain-soaked night we met in half-light and half darkness. Mustafiz and



Former chief of Army Staff General (ret'd) Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, Bir Bikram

Salahuddin joined us at my suggestion -- it was a great morale booster to have two professional soldiers among us. It's a long story after that. We served in the same sector, Sector 8, as sub-sector commanders during the Liberation War -- Mustafiz was at Jessore while I was fighting around Kushtia. We got together at Calcutta on our occasional

furloughs. A photograph of the four of us -- Mustafiz, Col. Huda, Capt. Mahub and I -- still adorns my library (our rebellious youth, poised at rest for a while, frozen in black and white). Mustafiz was a mild-mannered, soft-spoken person who, in civilian clothes and professorial discourses, could pass for a reflective academic, almost belying his true profession. Having studied engineering, he had developed a structured, orderly and focused approach to any problem, which impressed me even more in later years. After a spotless career in the army, he went into retirement in the late '90s.

Mustafiz died of cancer and a host of other diseases.

But there is more to Mustafiz's life and ours. With the change of political regime in 2001, Mustafiz was implicated along with the then ex-prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, and a host of other senior officials in a "corruption" case. The case went into hibernation after some initial dust was raised but was resurrected when the "crusade" against

corruption was launched in 2007.

I last met Mustafiz at Bashundhara some 10 months back at a wedding. He raised the story of the alleged corruption case, according to him it was a blatant attempt to taint his image (his only fault being that he had submitted the file to the higher authority as PSO, a role that is routine and offers no choice or deliberation), the whole case was a fabrication for political harassment.

Mustafiz was beaming as he recalled how he argued his position before the judges of the High Court, who politely advised him to do the same at the lower court -- the trial court. As I was myself in the process of being put behind bars for no less a fabricated lie, and having watched the doings of those in power, I had advised Mustafiz to forget about the merit of the case for there would be none to listen to him; better attend to the dinner at hand and brace for unforeseen dangers. I wish I had been wrong.

A few months back, when Mustafiz's case came up for trial, he was in the ICU of Apollo Hospital with his cancer exac-

erbated by blocked arteries. So keen were his persecutors to get him to appear personally before the Court that his bail was cancelled and he was arrested in the ICU. Later, lying on a stretcher in an ambulance, he was driven to the court. The victorious system and its invisible goons relished having done something unthinkable -- a retired chief of staff of the army and a hero of the liberation war, humbled and brought before "justice" -- a sight the Pakistan army would only have longed for to redeem their honour from the defeat Mustafiz and others had wrought on them, the defeat they would never get half a chance to undo.

As his name was read out, Mustafiz stood up, unsure on his feet, his words slurred by his disobedient tongue, yet with a firmness that was the remnant of a victorious soldier, and demanded that his name be read with Bir Bikram, the award he won for gallantry during the liberation war when he was wounded in action. Without looking, the judge, with a dismissive gesture, went ahead with

the day's work -- the dispensation of "justice." While our jurisprudence states that an accused is innocent in the eyes of the law till he is proven guilty, the legal system was hurrying to convict Mustafiz before trial, lest he slip out of its grip as the fatal diseases took hold. For once, Mustafiz looked defeated.

Mustafiz was buried with "full military honours." The three chiefs of staff saluted as the bugle played the "last post," the denouement of a grim tragedy played out in full public view. Mustafiz was spared in death.

Farewell my friend. A soldier should not weep or else I would bathe you in tears. Such is our destiny.

*His life was gentle and the elements  
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world "This was a man!"*  
(Shakespeare: Julius Caesar)

This is from the diary the author kept during his incarceration in 2008.

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# Agonies of indigenous people

The indigenous people and minorities of Bangladesh struggle for survival. Despite having an ancient history, the indigenous people do not have a "present" or a "future," their daily lives pass in insecurity, uncertainty and distress.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY and ISHTIAQ JAMIL

INDIGENOUS communities, popularly known as adivasi or jumma, are the majority population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs). There are about 49 different indigenous communities living in the plains and hill areas. Although they constituted about 98% of the total population in this region in 1941, however, the increase in non-ethnic jumma people in CHT had reduced their strength to 51% in 2003. The governments' policies played an important role in the decline. As a consequence, CHT suffers from continuous violence among different groups.

In order to end the violence and conflict and to establish peace in this region, the then AL government (1996-2001) signed a peace treaty, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT Peace Accord), in 1997 with the representatives of the indigenous people. Although the treaty was vehemently opposed by the main opposition (BNP), it was considered as a milestone in the history of Bangladesh. It promised to bring an end to the long-standing armed conflict, provide limited

autonomy and facilitate socio-economic development. But the fact is that the indigenous communities are still subjected to misery, harassment and exploitation.

From the very beginning, the BNP-led government was more inclined to solve the CHT's political problems by military means. Although the accord stated that all the temporary army camps, Ansars and the Village Defence Party (VDP) should be withdrawn, no time limit was fixed. Consequently, even a decade after signing of the accord, only 31 out of 500 security forces camps have been withdrawn. Human rights violations against the jumma people are still taking place. Even the movements of the jumma people have been controlled through reopening of check-posts in some places.

The policy to resettle Bangali Muslims from the plains to the CHT has made the jummas a minority in their ancestral land. The Bangali settlers have been occupying the lands of the jummas and committing ethnocide with the direct help of the government. Thus, once a predominantly non-Bangali Muslim area, the CHT region is fast becoming a Bangali Muslim area. Recent statistics show that the Bangali

Muslim population, only around 2 percent of the total population of the CHT in 1947, had risen to as much as 49 percent in 2003.

It has been widely reported that indigenous leaders who advocate autonomy are often victims of oppression by the security agencies. Amnesty International has expressed deep concern regarding the harassment of the indigenous political leaders. Most often, such harassment is done in order to convey the message that no movement towards autonomy would be accepted by the government. Such harassment has continued even after the treaty was signed in 1997.

The government has caused discontent among returned refugees and internally displaced jummas by providing free rations to illegal settlers under various food security schemes supported by UN agencies and international donors. Many of these settlers have been entitled to free rations for the last two decades. New settlers are also provided free rations, whereas the indigenous jummas who have been uprooted from their homes and suffer human rights violations and criminal acts are denied this entitlement. This is tantamount to racial discrimination on the part of the government of Bangladesh.

The CHT Peace Accord urges the government to "give preference to the eligible tribal candidates" when appointing the chairman of the CHT Development Board. The BNP government (2001-06), however, appointed Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan as chairman, under whose lead-

ership the CHTDB undertook several development programs biased mainly towards settlers.

Moreover, power struggle between several groups within the indigenous communities is also responsible for their agonies. Violent conflict between two jumma groups, the Parbattya Chattagami Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), have not helped the situation either, resulting in the killing, maiming and kidnapping of hundreds of jummas. This intra-indigenous violence is perhaps hurting the indigenous people's demand for political rights and natural resources, and is weakening them.

The indigenous people and minorities of Bangladesh struggle for survival. Despite having an ancient history, the indigenous people do not have a "present" or a "future," their daily lives pass in insecurity, uncertainty and distress. Although it was expected that the 1997 peace accord would protect them from exploitation and suffering, it has failed to do so, instead it is caught in a political crossfire between the Awami League, which has used it as a means of partisan capital, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which has denounced it.

How can the agonies of the indigenous people be reduced? To resolve the existing conflict in CHT, we need strong political ambition and sincere will on the part of the government to implement the peace accord to ensure more political and social rights to the indigenous people. At the same time, it should be



Where does the baby's future lie?

anchored in the mainstream politics so that the accord gets due recognition and respect from all successive governments.

It is encouraging to note that the newly elected AL government has formed an implementation committee of the 1997 Accord under the chairmanship of the Deputy Leader of the Parliament. Now, the government should think about withdrawal of military camps, which would ensure that the indigenous people do not face further exploitation and unnecessary harassment. The government should also consider an end to

moving Bangali Muslims into the CHT, which would reduce the conflict between the two groups. In addition, harmonious relationship among different indigenous groups is essential. PCJSS and UPDF should work together in order to preserve the interests of the indigenous communities in the CHT.

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