

Practicing democracy in political parties

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There is no denying the fact that democracy is synonymous with good governance. Therefore, a political party needs to cultivate a democratic norm within the party itself. Otherwise, the people cannot expect good governance if the party comes to power.

Since independence, we have witnessed eight parliamentary elections along with military rule, but unfortunately no political party, big or small, has been practicing democracy within itself.

Against the backdrop of the defeat in the last election, the 5th council of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on December 8 evoked enthusiasm among the party activists, which contributed towards raising the morale of the party workers. But the system of election of the party chief and other members of the working committee does not show that the party is committed to democratic norms. The authorisation of the party chief with absolute power in the newly created constitution is an example. Councillors of the party are not directly elected from the grass-root level.

Although the council was organised after 16 years many, including Awami

League and the Election Commission, described the event as a result of participation of activists and leaders from all tiers of the party. Many analysts are of the opinion that the magnitude of the council, participation of different strata of the party, political representations, media representatives and foreign observers has, in fact, evoked the spirit of unity in the party despite its humiliation during the last three years.

However, dropping of the clause from the constitution that war criminals convicted under the Bangladesh Collaborator Special Tribunals Order 1972 could not join the party, decision of the councillors to leave their rights to the chairperson to nominate members of the national executive committee and standing committee, and the move to assign too much power to Tarique Rahman by nominating him senior vice-chairman received severe criticism.

There is a similarity between Awami League and BNP where the question of nomination of members of national executive committee and central working committee is concerned. The same drama was enacted during the Awami League council on July 24, the president of Awami League, Sheikh Hasina was

given same rights as Khaleda Zia. Too much power has been concentrated in the chiefs of both parties. Is that really democratic?

It is really amazing to note that no one from the two major political parties appears to have contested against his/her president or chairperson, which gives the impression that either their leaders might have threatened them not to contest or leaders from both parties lack courage and political acumen to oppose their current leaders. For the sake of democracy, it would have been more appropriate if some candidates had filed nomination papers.

In the case of BNP's chairperson, any other leader from the party should have filed the nomination paper to challenge her leadership because of her failure in mobilising opinion in their favour in the election that took place in 2008.

It is regrettable to note that chairperson of BNP, who has been presiding over the destiny of the party since 1991, has promoted her elder son Tarique Rahman to the rank of senior vice-chairman, a newly created post in the constitution. Tarique Rahman did not come out as clean person because a number of corruption cases are pending against him.

There is a charge against the BNP that, during its reign from 2001-2006, the administration turned a blind eye to the growing militancy in the country, which had witnessed series of bombings and killings. There was also an allegation that the country was governed from Tarique

Rahman's Hawa Bhaban, not from the prime minister's secretariat. The allegation was so loud that BNP stalwart Col. Oli Ahmed had emotionally called on the prime minister to abandon the role of mother. Therefore, it was wrong to propose his name for senior vice-chairman rank. It is an insult to senior politicians in the party.

It is clearly indicative of the fact that there is dynasty rule in the party hierarchy. BNP was founded by Ziaur Rahman in 1978, when the country was under Martial Law, to provide himself a political platform.

The 5th council session of BNP remains embedded in the memory of the people because around 12,000 councillors participated, including many personalities from foreign countries. Only 5,000 councillors participated in the council session of the Awami League. Controversial British maverick MP George Galloway was one of the foreign personalities. Both Awami League and Ershad's Jatiya Party, a partner in the present grand coalition government, held their council sessions on July 24.

Holding of elections of the political parties or the Parliament does not mean democracy. The word democracy in the present day world implies accountability, transparency, good governance and rule of law, apart from holding of fair, free and impartial elections. Democracy affords the people the most opportunities for meaningful participation in making decisions that shape their lives.

No one knows the criterion on which members of the national executive coun-



Large crowds do not denote democracy.

cil and standing committee of BNP are selected. These leaders are apparently selected, not elected through secret ballot which is the fundamental principle for election. Therefore, the purpose of democracy is defeated. Political leaders in Bangladesh have failed to build an identity and a consensus around certain broad-based public policy goals.

Unfortunately, both major political parties govern the country on a partisan basis, where the opinions of the majority remain unheard. This is the result of non-practicing of democracy in political parties. It seems that no political party is

practicing democracy. The great enemies of our political leaders are sycophants who are in most cases corrupt, dishonest and inefficient. If a national leader is surrounded by such people, it pollutes administration, helps breed corruption and retards promotion of welfare of the people. Unfortunately, no reform of political parties has taken place, which is a necessity in the present day world.

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Population and climate change

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ANISUR RAHMAN

There are people all around the world -- from the deserts of Sahara where temperature climbs to well over 500C to the permafrost Arctic regions where temperature dips below -500C. Human beings are extremely adaptable animals. But that does not mean that lives in the extremes are comfortable or endurable. The human population had been flourishing on the planet over the past couple of centuries within the comfort zone of 200C to 300/350C, primarily as a result of advances in medical sciences, better health care and enhanced food production. And that is where lies the present problem.

The lives of each one of us are intimately tied to the earth and the resources it provides. The water we drink, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the energy we use, the homes we live in are all part of nature's resources. The higher the population, the higher the demand is on these resources. With earth's limited resources (although we may devise more efficient production methods and better utilisation), there is inevitably a shrinkage of resources per head of population.

But when we forcibly extract more resources out of this planet, we come to a point when it becomes unsustainable. We are nearly at this point now. We are using up more resources than we can possibly put back, and virtually decimating nature by massive deforestation, aggressive fishing, unsustainable ground water extraction, etc. In short, we are ravaging the earth for our benefit without any regard to its capacity to maintain its intrinsic climate. As David Attenborough had put it in his *Living Earth* documentary, the earth is now fighting back for its survival.

The recent spectacle at the COP15 gathering in Copenhagen bears testament to the seriousness of the problem as viewed by the scientific community and the world leaders. The leaders of the world's industrialised, industrialising and fringe population groups wrestled with the climate change problems for 12 days, almost non-stop, but could not come up with an effective solution which would overcome them. Climate change is a serious problem by itself, but now I would like to throw a spanner into the mix -- the problem of over-population.

The root cause of climate change lies

not so much in industrialisation, but in sheer number of people undertaking industrialisation at the same time. Every country wants to improve the living standards of its population by offering adequate food, proper housing, education, health care etc., through increasing production and speeding up industrialisation. At the same time, the population in almost every country is increasing and so the economic development must outpace the population growth to have any impact on standard of living.

When pressed at the Copenhagen conference to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emission by a certain amount and that the agreed emission reduction must be verifiable, China (the biggest polluter in the world) took exception to it as a blatant attempt by the West to put a stop to its industrialisation process and, by implication, to deny the improvement of living standards of its population.

The US (under George W. Bush) did not sign the Kyoto Protocol because that would deny or curtail the exploitation or exploration of hydrocarbon resources (oil, gas and coal) in America and thereby stunt the growth in living standards of the Americans. The EU, comprising 27 countries, has only agreed to cutting emission by 20 percent by 2020 when, it is thought, it would be good for the economy to use renewable sources of energy and that the emission reduction could be managed by technological innovation without risking the living standard of the population.

Neither population nor climatic conditions are static. But the driving force is the

population growth, some would even dub it "population explosion." It is obvious that the sheer volume of people would place an unbearable demand on the limited resources of the earth, even though the demands are not uniformly spread across the globe. Let us look at population growth.

At the start of the industrial revolution in Europe, ca 1750, following the discovery of the steam engine, the world population was a meagre 791 million, of which the European population constituted only 20 percent. Between 1750 and 1950, the world population increased by over 215 percent (to 2521 million) and the European population increased by about 235 percent to 547 million. This period also saw the rise of science and technology, which resulted in improved medical science and health care and the corresponding reduction in death rates, child mortality etc. The benefits of these improvements were largely confined to European countries and latterly to North America.

Asian countries had always had a large proportion of world population. In 1750, Asian countries had nearly 63 percent of world population. By 1950, it dropped to about 55 percent, as Europe enjoyed the benefits of industrial revolution, better hygiene, higher standard of living and so forth; whereas much of Asia under the colonial rules of the West was deprived of such benefits.

Since 1950, and particularly after the end of WWII, these industrial benefits started to cascade down to Asian as well as African and Latin American countries.

The result was a spectacular increase in population worldwide. Within just 50 years, from 1950 to 2000, the world population increased by 135 percent.

It may be noted that over the last two centuries population increased by 75 percent per century, whereas in 50 years, between 1950 and 2000, the world population more than doubled. This increase was largely driven by the Asian population growth. In fact, Asian population in 2000 recovered to over 60 percent of the world population.

With the increased awareness of the impact of population growth, the increase right across the world has been brought down by better education of the population. But once population goes up, it is well nigh impossible to bring it down. The proportional increase may be reduced, but still the sheer number will go up. For example, it is projected that over the next 50-year period, from 2000 to 2050, the world population will increase by 50 percent to 8.9 billion (an increase of 2.8 billion, which is higher than the entire world's population in 1950). During this 50-year period, the Asian population will increase by 45 percent.

What is the implication of population growth on climate change? It should be noted that the European and largely American population, constituting just 17 percent, had virtually completed their industrial processes within the last two and half centuries and now have very high standards of living. The large majority of the world population, over 80 percent (including 60 percent Asian), is now at the threshold of industrialisation.

If a small fraction of the population, numbering 1,000 million, can cause a devastation of the global climate to such an extent as to initiate melting of the ice caps, increases in sea levels etc. due to global warming, what the 80 percent of the population can do if similar industrialisation process is undertaken is simply too awful to contemplate.

It is not the intention at all to advocate restraint by the developing countries from industrialisation, which is an essential step to alleviate the poverty of the masses. But there are other ways to improve the economy of the country and raise the living standards of the population than by following traditional hydrocarbon route to generate energy. For example, the energy need can be adequately met by green energy solutions, which will not only cut the GHG emission but also be sustainable.

Developing countries should seek not the financial handout from the rich developed countries to tackle global warming, but technology transfer so that they can solve their own problems. Of course, there would be an upfront cost for the technology transfer and the development of technological infrastructure. They should seek such assistance, rather than register vociferous demands for hundreds of billions of dollars, as had been done at the Copenhagen meeting.

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A memorable evening at Shilpakala Academy

Bijoy Dibosh is a defining day for Bangladesh: a day of pride and of pain. The way I saw it conducted in Dhaka, it brought out the best of a nation that strives to unleash at least some joy while continuing to rank as one of the world's poorest countries.

JONATHAN RICHMOND

"My son sacrificed his life for liberation," said the gentleman sitting a couple of seats away from me at Shilpakala. He did not give his name, but the loss defined his identity with a pride in his son's memory accompanied by the unthinkable pain that never goes away: the pain suffered by a parent when a fundamental rule of nature is broken and a child passes out of their life.

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Bangladeshis are a gentle people. Walking around the Dhaka University area, there were endless smiles. People approached to say hello and ask who I was. They smiled and chatted and smiled some more. This is not London where someone approaching closer than a couple of feet without invitation is regarded as an invader of personal space!

There were tons of young people with Bangladeshi flags wrapped round their heads. Their families created Bangladesh

heroically, releasing the country from tyranny. The young identified with history as they climbed onto the Martyrs Memorial to have their pictures taken next to the statues of freedom fighters.

One of the only foreigners in sight, I was stopped many times. I was asked what I thought of the day. I replied that what Bangladesh suffered is beyond belief. I confessed I could not understand the murderous behaviour of the Pakistani government.

Is this something anyone could understand? I wondered.

There were two young guys standing all of a couple of inches from each other. I think Bangladeshis stand close to each other for mutual protection. They were standing but a couple of inches from me also, listening to me react to Victory Day.

I turned the question they asked me around: "Is it a complete victory when the nation suffers such extraordinary poverty and is burdened with such corruption?" I asked.

Kids pretending to be freedom fighters tore past, borne on bike-pulled carts. They pointed their make-believe "stickguns" at me and giggled, but I wondered if this re-enactment was entirely a joke. At a young age their parents have told them of the horror out of which this

nation was born, and they have learned that freedom must be defended, at times with great sacrifice.

Bangladesh enjoys not only a population that rose together heroically to guarantee liberty but other significant marks of high civilisation also. Its higher education sector is excellent, with many universities meeting world standards. And the artistic life of the country is on a very high plane, with a depth and breadth of offerings that command attention and involvement. The array of art galleries in Dhaka seems endless, while crowds congregate every day to hear music crafted as a universal language of suffering and redemption.

Shilpakala Academy hosted a special Victory Day evening to commemorate the valour of those who sang over the radio to encourage those fighting in the battle for liberation. Now older and joking that they weren't quite what they used to be, this claim from the old-time singers proved to be not quite true. As a group on stage, the energy of their patriotic songs brought back the taste of freedom-craving youth. The singing was startling in its freshness and energy. I looked round and saw slabs of sardine-packed youth standing in concentrated awe at the side of the overflow performing space. In how many countries do young people mass like this to honour those who valiantly went before them?

We heard solos from the former radio singers too. I could not directly understand the Bangla words, but the language of music conveyed moods ranging from a devastating sadness driven home by mesmerising *tabla* playing to a power-



"Freedom fighters" inspired by Bijoy Dibosh.

fully hurled and uplifting vocal call to the promise of freedom to banish evil.

Shilpakala juxtaposed the tortured and the sublime seemingly without contradiction, music of hope following sounds of despair, and rapturous dance interludes providing moments of calm in-between.

A recital of poetry of war and liberation by a group of actors was at once agonised and jubilant: the voices projected with precision and clarity hit like machine gun fire but also reached into the realm of the

serene, intimately evoking the soul of a nation struggling to be free.

I left this extraordinary evening both full of admiration for Bangladesh and feeling troubled. I could not forget the child I'd seen in Old Dhaka digging through the most disgusting trash to retrieve the used syringes of drug addicts and separate the plastic from the needles to sell for recycling. Can someone explain the following to me: We have in Bangladesh a nation with the precise organisation and heroic willpower to

come together to expel a life of oppression. This is a people of gentle disposition but also equipped with a strong identity and love of country. This is a place where literature and the arts are conducted at the highest level, where higher education thrives, and with a vibrant youth eager to build for the future.

Why, then, so many years after liberation, does Bangladesh suffer from some of the worst poverty in the world? Why do so many children have to work in appalling conditions rather than go to school? Why do so many of the country's most talented flee for opportunities in other countries when they are most needed at home? Why is Dhaka, a place of high culture, one of the globe's ugliest and most dysfunctional cities; a place of haphazard and unharmonious development; a place full of dirt and decay where no city services function adequately; a place of broken pavements, endless power cuts and burned out street lamps; a place where raw suffering is on daily display; but also a dark container from which even those with money cannot find escape. They too are trapped in an all too often grey life imposed in a city that has spun out of control.

Why can the glories of this country, shown in the united fervour of Dhaka's Victory Day street parades by people who are both patriotic and charming and in the greatness of Shilpakala's performances, not also govern the conduct of everyday life?

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