

Local government in fetters

Counterproductive for democracy

One hardly expects to see the chairmen and vice-chairmen of upazilla (UZ) parishads go on hunger strike unto death, and more so when they happen to be elected by the people on the basis of open adult franchise. And they are demanding that they be allowed to perform their respective duties and carry out their responsibilities as laid down in the constitution of the country.

The UZ parishad Chairmen and their deputy have a 10-point demand which has remained unfulfilled. And among other things they want the UZ parishads to be freed of the control of bureaucrats and MPs and be made autonomous for effective functioning. And there is ample merit in the criticism hurled at the lawmakers that they, together with the bureaucrats, have made the local government weak.

It is difficult not to agree with the position taken by the UZ parishad chairmen and vice-chairmen on the functioning of the UZ parishads. There is little doubt that, in spite of the commitment made by the AL-led grand alliance in their election manifesto, the local government institution is anything but strengthened as it stands today because of some of the policy decisions taken by the government in respect of UZ that has caused the parishads to be tied to the apron string of the lawmakers.

We would like to reemphasise that local governments cannot brook unnecessary interference, either bureaucratic or parliamentary. Unfortunately, through the changes in the UZ Parishad (amended) Act-2009 there is a predominance of the MPs in local government affairs. The changes, we feel, violate not only the letter of the constitution but also the spirit of how the framers of the constitution wanted to see the affairs of the local government conducted, not to say that it violates the electoral promise of the alliance government, clearly demonstrated by some of the alliance partners openly disassociating from the position of the government on the issue.

Effective local government helps effective decentralisation of the administration. This in turn reinforces local institutions that are so very necessary to reinforce democratic norms and practices. Needless to say, development process is also stymied without effective local bodies playing participatory and complementary role in the development process, where planning ought to be done bottom up.

We strongly urge the government to consider the demands of the chairmen and vice-chairmen seriously. It must take note of the likely conflictual position that the two sets of elected representatives of the people, the MPs and chairmen and vice-chairmen, would be put in under the new dispensation, and whether that will be beneficial for good governance. We wonder whether it is at all necessary to accord the MP an advisory role that is binding on the parishads and whether the parishads should become second fiddle of the bureaucracy. It is also important to consider whether it is prudent to have law to sack elected representatives of the people, in the manner that is being considered. These will, we feel, be disservice to democracy and good governance in the long run.

Reasserting faith on the banks of a river

The Bishwa Ijtema is a renewal of core values

The end of the first phase of the Bishwa Ijtema was marked on the banks of the river Turag in Tongi yesterday with tens of thousands participating in the Akheri Munajat. The prayers, organized annually, were one more indication of the myriad ways in which people across the spectrum are drawn to matters of faith. There is, always, something that transcends the worldly and attempts, as it were, a reaching out toward the higher perches of experience which only belief in the Almighty can explain. The Bishwa Ijtema, a yearly gathering which brings together men and women in an exploration of the religious spirit, indeed in a search for spiritual sustenance, is one of those moments which bring the one who remembers the Creator of the Worlds in deep communion with matters beyond the observed.

Every experience of faith is a substantive affair. On the banks of the Turag yesterday, the collective submission of the human will to the grandeur of Allah and the beauty of the universe came in linkage with an awareness of the need to live a life of purity untouched by the banality of the temporal. In a bigger sense, the sojourn of the faithful in Tongi, capped by the Akheri Munajat, was but one more assertion of the thought that much as individuals pursue life along the course determined by their needs and their inclinations, at the end of the day it is always a recalling of the end of life, of what lies beyond the world we inhabit, that takes hold of the soul. Therein lies the essential beauty of Islam as a faith. It does not abjure the worldly. Neither does it deny the metaphysical. What it does is remind people that as much as this world is a necessity and a truth we cannot shake off, it is a world which ought to prepare us for the end. And that preparation comes fundamentally through a reshaping of our perspectives on life in terms of our need to go for a bigger calling. And that is unquestioned adherence to faith.

Let a renewed belief in life's core values emanate from the Bishwa Ijtema. Love of country, an insistence on a practice of good and a common faith in our ability to belong with one another is a lesson we derive from the Akheri Munajat. It is not a coincidence that faith is resuscitated on

Culture of finger-pointing

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

As a people we appear to be very self-critical. Whenever we come across anything outrageous being committed by our fellow people, the common reaction of the observer is: what else can we expect of a Bangalee? However, such an attitude of being self-critical is limited only to the cases where one is pointing the finger at the other person or to something abstract such as the nation or the people in general. But when it comes to taking the responsibility individually, then no one would be found around to shoulder it. Individually, we are all infallible.

The debates we see in parliament or at the talk shows, which have become so popular nowadays in the electronic media, especially, between representatives of the two major political camps that divides the nation down the middle, are all centred on blaming the other camp for all the evils on earth. This has created the culture of making the other party the sole scapegoat for all the past misdeeds and mistakes in an attempt to pull the wool over the public's eyes about the failures and follies of the incumbent in office. So, pointing a finger at other is a very convenient ploy to avoid one's own responsibility or rebuff any criticism made by the adversary.

That is, in neither case are we demonstrating our ability to place the one in the first person the narrator or the finger pointer to accept responsibility for the event or action under scrutiny.

But there is another dimension to our inability to accept criticism or responsibility and pointing the finger at others. That is reflected through our incapacity, except in few instances, to give credit due to others. Which is why Dr. Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to caretaker government has suggested that we need a cultural movement to change our outlook so that we are able to properly evaluate other people's achievements and recognise those. This kind of soul-searching or cultural regeneration is necessary not only for its own

sake, but also, as Dr. Khan emphasised, to ensure that we may not give the wrong impression to the rest of the world that we are a mean people.

A comparison with some of our immediate neighbours and other successful economies of Asia is enough to show where we are lagging behind. Even our neighbouring India, which shares an identical history and cultural tradition with ourselves, has made its mark among the community of nations as a successful democracy and economy. Notwithstanding the fact that we have restored democracy a decade and a half back after a protracted struggle against autocracy, the nature of our political culture that was largely to blame in the past for the entry of extra-constitutional forces in politics has hardly undergone any change. Small wonder just two years back we had another experience of how the prevailing confrontational political culture created the condition for non-constitutional forces to usurp power. Who are to blame for such recurrent instances of intervention in our normal flow of constitutional politics that we had started with at the inception of our national independence? Was it not because we were very intolerant and unwilling to allow our democratic forerunners to give the time they were mandated by the people to perform?

In democratic parlance, the existence of more than one party with different ideologies is a historical reality. The essence of democracy is to accept this fact of life and at the same engage the opponent in a constructive engagement through debates and political discourses. That is how the culture of democratic politics evolved in our neighbouring India or even in Sri Lanka. It is not that these nations had always had a smooth sailing so far as the democratic essence of politics was concerned. They had also their share of slanging matches, name-calling and demagoguery. Bit in spite of those unhappy experiences, the tradition of constitutional politics or democracy was never compromised. As a result, their political culture could go through their normal path of evolution and thereby



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become more refined and enriched with the passage of time. And it is due to this continuity that extra-constitutional forces could never desecrate their premises of national politics.

The psyche of a nation grows out of its own history. A nation becomes proud about itself, only when it can hold its national leaders and heroes in high esteem, when it can project before the world as a united nation. That is how many of our peers in the South and Southeast Asia have been doing. Even if we are to hold even some of our national heroes critically, we must do that in a way so that it does not present ourselves in a poor light before the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, there is much to be

desired in that respect so far as our record goes.

To cut a long story short, we need to draw the line somewhere. Granted it is not possible to expect any big change for the better overnight. But we can at least be more tolerant about our political opponent. While being scathingly critical of our adversaries, be it in politics or in any other sphere of life, for their failures, we can at least develop the habit of recognising some of their good works. And for the sake of national unity, let us not at least be miserly about recognising the contribution of all those who were behind what we are today in every field of our national endeavour.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a Senior Journalist

US options in Yemen

MARK N. KATZ

WITH its large, growing population as well as its location next to Saudi Arabia and other petroleum-producing Gulf countries, Yemen's increasing problems could easily spill over and negatively affect both its neighbours and all who depend on them for oil and gas supplies. Can the U.S. do anything to ameliorate conditions in Yemen, weaken Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and de-link Yemen from the War on Terror?

One thing that the U.S. should definitely not do is intervene militarily in Yemen in response to AQAP's (usually unsuccessful) attacks outside Yemen. Unlike the Houthis or the southern secessionist movement, AQAP really does not have a large following inside Yemen. Indeed, many Yemenis describe it as a Saudi opposition movement that was driven out of the Kingdom and which has taken advantage of Yemen's internal weakness to find refuge among certain tribes at odds with the government.

Instead of fearing U.S. intervention, AQAP would like nothing better than to provoke it since Yemen's rugged terrain would not only prove as difficult for American forces as Afghanistan's, but foreign intervention could also be expected to inflame Yemeni nationalist sentiment, discredit the Yemeni government either for allowing foreign intervention or for being unable to prevent it, and perhaps even result in far more recruits for AQAP than it has been able to attract so far.

What the U.S. and its allies should do instead is to promote internal Yemeni conflict resolution between the Saleh government on the one

hand and its main opponents, the Houthis, the southern secessionists, and various tribal forces on the other. Although the Yemenis have fought among themselves on numerous occasions over the past half century, they have also engaged in some remarkable internal conflict resolution efforts.

The 1962 revolution that overthrew North Yemen's king and established a republic led to a civil war between republican and monarchist forces that dragged on until 1970. The conflict was brought to an end, though, by a conflict resolution process which integrated the royalists (with the exception of the royal family itself) into the republic.

Similarly, the 1990 unification of Marxist South Yemen with non-Marxist North Yemen was the result of an elaborate negotiating process between the two governments resulting in a detailed set of agreements over how they would integrate. This latter effort, unfortunately, broke down in 1993, which led to an abortive attempt to re-establish southern independence in 1994, and ended with reinforced unification on an authoritarian basis thereafter. The unsatisfactory nature of this outcome, though, eventually resulted in both a revival of the southern secessionist movement and to AQAP being especially successful at attracting recruits from southerners.

The U.S. and its allies should encourage Yemenis to do again what they did before in the realm of conflict resolution. Doing this successfully, though, may require them not only to discreetly engage in talks with the Houthis, the secessionists, and the tribes, but also to be less supportive of the Saleh government, if only because the more external support



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Saleh receives, the less incentive he has to negotiate with his internal opponents.

Nor should Washington accept at face value the Saleh government's claims that the Houthis are backed by Iran and that the southern secessionists and AQAP are one and the same. Its doing so is reminiscent of how during the Cold War, authoritarian regimes allied to the U.S. often branded all their internal opponents as being Marxist in order to dampen American ardour for democratic reform. But as the U.S. learned painfully back then, vigorous authoritarian rulers can often maintain order for years or even decades, but then completely lose control and be overthrown when they become old and infirm.

Recalling this phenomenon,

Saleh's efforts to be declared president for life, that were announced in January 2011, do not bode well for the future of Yemen. By contrast, while a federal democracy in Yemen would undoubtedly be quite messy (just like in Iraq), this form of government could be more effective at preserving unity through granting powerful actors (such as the Houthis, the southern secessionists, and the tribes) both local autonomy as well sufficient influence at the national level to give them an interest in preserving a unified Yemen. And also just like in Iraq, accommodating various locally powerful groups could serve to isolate and undercut Al Qaeda elements in Yemen.

Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA.