

Miseries of misconceived democracy

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IN a simplified version, democracy is a system which allows people to rule their country. This in turn ensures equality of rights and opportunities among people in a society. There is no scope in democracy of running the country by one single person as per his own desire.

The beginning of a Bengali Tagore song, "amra sobai raja amader ei rajar rajatwe," meaning, "We are all kings in this kingdom of our king" depicts the main essence of democratic governance. Obviously, it is not practically possible that each and every individual citizen will rule the country on their own. So, the system of selecting or electing the representatives to bear responsibility of governance on behalf of each individual has been thought of. The main objective of those representatives, while governing the country, will have to represent the views and desires of each and every citizen as much as possible.

In Bangladesh, the principle of parliamentary democracy as against presidential has been accepted unanimously as the form of governance by making an amendment to the constitution in the year 1991. Just prior to that, a mass movement was raged against the then Ershad led government accusing that to be autocratic, corrupt and election manipulator. All political parties agreed to free the country from autocracy, corruption and election manipulation by establishing practice of democratic culture in politics.

But, Subsequent governments after the said incident were alleged to appoint partisan people to man the EC to work in favour of ruling party candidates. No effort was ever taken to nominate any consensus candidate.

It is believed by many that due to wide scale use of muscle, money and threat of back lash, election results are decided not on popular support but on raw strength of physical might. It is felt that due to the lack of sufficient control over the situation EC has to compromise on rules and procedures and fails to conduct the election properly even if they desire to do so. It is widely believed that due to the said situation patriotic and capable people who could have

run the government and the politics better are not good at winning the election. On the contrary, the people who can perform better in election battle are not good for running the government or overall politics.

To practice democracy the government needs to have means to get people's views and desires; there should have mechanism and intention for meeting those and a system of accountability. Without those it is not possible to keep the government on track to democratic norms.

The Parliament is the main institution responsible for doing that job. It is the place where voices of the people are to be raised and to be heard by the government or executive -- action programmes are made and the implementation monitored.

During the tenure of all the governments formed after the said change opposition parties boycotted the parliaments most of the time. So, voices of about half of the population are not raised in the parliament due to the absence of their representatives. As such, a big portion of people are being deprived of their right to participate in governance through institutional means.

The reason for abstention has been given as that the opposition MPs are not allowed to voice their views by the partisan speakers. Moreover, it is also alleged by opposition members that even when they are allowed to talk, due cognizance is not given to their views by the government. As such, argues the opposition, it really makes no difference whether they attend or not -- the government runs the country autocratically ignoring their views.

Any political party or alliance when in government calls for participation in parliament for making the parliament effective. The opposition says the opposite as above. But, the same party or alliance after interchanging their positions also interchange their logic and actions. As such, both the views are considered correct. It may be

concluded that the parliament is not functioning properly.

Another point that needs attention here is that there is a provision in our constitution (Article 70) which bars the MPs to vote in parliament against the party decision. Anybody doing so loses the membership in the parliament. The prime minister (PM) being the chief of the ruling political party and its parliamentary party, as has been the case in Bangladesh since 1991, holds control over the party MPs.

The ruling party MPs are generally the majority in numbers in parliament and almost all decisions are taken there on majority support. So any decision of PM is sure to get approval with the help of captive support. This provides scope for the PM to

quent governments after the introduction of parliamentary system, made almost all efforts to implement the development and benefit oriented programmes with the objective to fulfill the partisan interests only.

Appointments, promotions, businesses, contracts, land and property leases, distribution of social safety network facilities etc. are allowed mostly to government party people if necessary through irregular means. People belonging to opposition camp or even people with no definite political inclination are deprived of the benefits and services of the government in many cases.

Political parties in opposition after the changeover, have been alleging that government appoint partisan judicial officials, including judges, and use them to influence the outcome of the trial in favour of the ruling party people. Credibility of judiciary is being constantly undermined in this way and people are losing confidence in this important institution.

Public Service Commission (PSC), Anti-corruption Commission (ACC), Human Rights Commission (HRC), Information Commission (IC) etc. are institutions which have to play important roles in maintaining democratic environment. But the effectiveness of these institutions is not considered quite visible as yet.

On the contrary the activities of some are found to be detrimental to practice of democracy. There is allegation from the opposition parties that party in power form PSC with their own people for the purpose of appointing government servants on partisan bias; ignoring merit and quality. This violates the principle of equality of rights, opportunities etc. and creates barrier to good governance.

Political party comes to power through election and a new government is formed for tenure of 5 years. Election gives them the legitimacy to govern as people's repre-

sentatives. But, it is believed by many that these governments hardly represented the people while governing the country as they lacked reflection of the hopes and aspiration of people by and large. They concentrate mostly on fulfilling self and partisan interest.

Bangladesh was ranked as the most corrupt country of the world consecutively for five years with effect from 2001 to 2005 as per Transparency International. Though not at the top now, it is still among the group of countries considered most corrupt. People now wonder whether legitimacy to govern through election for five years is being conceived by the subsequent governments as a legitimacy given to them to treat the people as subjects and also plunder public money during that time.

The intention as declared by all the political parties during the anti-government movement of the late eighties, for establishing a functional parliamentary government and practice of democratic culture in the politics, could not be achieved even after different efforts for two decades. This country was put to the grip of Islamic fundamentalist militancy in between; during the rule of four party alliances.

However, it could make itself clean of that nuisance during the current grand alliance government. Bangladesh was unable to establish proper election processes, failed to get rid of the autocratic dispensations of the governance or the menace of most corrupt rating.

High corruption, ever rising violence and irregularity, constant violation of equality of rights and opportunities and a culture of denial all in the name of democracy has been dominating the politics of the country. This has created an un-compromising confrontational atmosphere which seems to be pushing the country towards a black hole of uncertainty and despair.

Political parties need to find a solution towards betterment as soon as possible. Or else people will lose faith in democracy. That may create an undesirable urge for acceptance of undemocratic alternatives as was done in the past.

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STAR



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BOTTOM LINE

PM's visit to Myanmar: New opportunities unfolding



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Hasina has left for Myanmar for a two-day visit from December 5. The visit takes place at a time when the Myanmar government has been undertaking reforms towards democracy. The key to this is the new President Thein Sein's willingness to accommodate in the political process the pro-democracy leader Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi who will be contesting a by-election soon.

Myanmar is the other neighbour of Bangladesh besides India. Bangladesh is adjacent to two states of Myanmar-Rakhaine (Arakan) and Chin. Bangladesh shares 271 km of its border with Myanmar - both land and water. The boundary on Naaf River between the two countries is a fixed one as had been settled by the 1966 Naaf Agreement.

Myanmar is the 7th country to recognise Bangladesh on January 13, 1972 as an independent state and Bangladesh remembers this friendly gesture very well.

Somehow or other, Bangladesh and Myanmar have not consolidated its bilateral relations as much as it deserves. The main reason appears to be the continuing military rule in Myanmar since 1962 under which the country became insular and was

not interested in interactions with other countries, unless they are needed.

Although Myanmar is close geographically, it is too distant to travel by air because one has to fly first to a third country and then to Myanmar from Bangladesh and vice versa. There are no air links, no road links and no coastal shipping connections between the two neighbours. This is unacceptable in the age of globalisation where countries across the world have been efficiently interconnected. For example one can take train from Singapore to Bangkok without any hassle through Kuala Lumpur.

Although there are about 10 Agreements between the two countries including those in areas of land boundary management, trade, transport, and prevention of narcotics, many of them are only in papers; except the border agreement.

The amount of bilateral trade is meager. It is reported that in 2010-11 Bangladesh's exports stood at \$9.65 million and imports from Myanmar at \$175.7 million.

Since the present government in Bangladesh came into power, there has been an attempt to inject momentum and dynamism in bilateral relations. On May 16, 2009, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni visited Myanmar and held official talks with her counterpart U Nyan Winz.

In January 2011, Bangladesh Foreign Minister attended the 13th ministerial level meeting of BIMSTEC in Myanmar and on sidelines where she discussed bilateral

issues with her Myanmar counterpart as well. Both the foreign ministers reportedly discussed a host of issues which are related to closer engagement in various areas of bilateral cooperation.

To increase trade, the joint trade commission (JTC) of Bangladesh and Myanmar held its 5th meeting on July 2011. It was agreed that the two countries would raise bilateral trade to \$550 million from \$185.3 million now.

With the availability of all weatherproof roads, people-to-people contact is bound to increase and consequently the commercial and trade opportunities will receive a further boost between the two countries. The roads could also be used to establish links with China and Thailand.

At the JTC meeting both countries agreed to increase the ceiling for transaction value to \$50,000 per consignment from \$30,000. Officials also discussed the potential for setting up wholesale border markets at Bangladesh's Teknaf and Myanmar's Maungdaw, a border town.

They also discussed how to complete border transactions through the Asian Clearing Union payment system as Bangladesh imports now settle their payments for bulk shipments through bank drafts issued by foreign banks to a third country.

There had been visits by foreign secretaries, the first taking place in Dhaka on December 28, 2009v and again on August 24

this year. They discussed how to strengthen cooperation in mutual beneficial areas.

Last month, the Bangladesh commerce minister visited Myanmar and met with his Myanmar counterpart, minister for finance, minister for energy and chairman of the foreign relations and foreign trade committee. He urged that the trade gap between Bangladesh and Myanmar be narrowed down and the bilateral trade volume strengthened for mutual benefit.

During this visit by the PM it has been reported that the following agreements are expected to be signed on the following areas:

- Banking
- Road, Air and Shipping,
- Cooperation in Fisheries,
- Cooperation in agriculture, and
- Cooperation in gas and hydro-power.

With the availability of all weatherproof roads, people-to-people contact is bound to increase and consequently the commercial and trade opportunities will receive a further boost between the two countries. The roads could also be used to establish links with China and Thailand. Meanwhile China has agreed in principle with Bangladesh's proposal of road connectivity through Myanmar to China's Yunnan province.

One of the bilateral issues that often cause a misunderstanding is the issue of Rohingya refugees. It first cropped up in 1978. Within a year, it was resolved amicably with Myanmar. Another flow of refugees came to Bangladesh in 1991 and in 1997.

About 38,720 refugees reportedly remained in Bangladesh and negotiation on the issue continues still.

The migration of the Rohingya people to Bangladesh is a complex matter. It should not be seen merely as a refugee problem; partly because many militant Rohingya groups including the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front have been reportedly fighting for decades for a separate land in Rakhaine state.

Bangladesh cannot support the secession movement in a neighbouring country. Given the background, both countries may jointly develop an effective border management to prevent the flow of migration of Rohingyas to Bangladesh.

The geographical proximity makes both countries natural partners. Both countries have access to the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal and both need to cooperate in combating non-military maritime threats including piracy, illegal entry of weapons, drug trafficking, and oil-related and natural disasters. Both nations share many of the challenges that will shape our region in the years ahead.

Both countries should see cooperative efforts and interconnectivity as catalysts for economic growth and prosperity for the people of Bangladesh and Myanmar. The visit of Bangladesh prime minister to Myanmar has unfolded unique opportunities for building a comprehensive partnership. It is clear that we can and should do more together.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.