

Struggle for democracy: Bangladesh and Pakistan perspectives

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THE next national polls in Pakistan are scheduled for early next year while the national ballots in Bangladesh will be held anytime between October 2013 and January 2014 as per the existing constitutional provisions of the two countries respectively.

The latest constitutional changes in the two countries, however, set their domestic politics on different directions and both the countries are moving ahead amid fear of possible political uncertainty ahead of the national ballots.

After separation in 1971, when Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) emerged as an independent country, both countries had experienced military rule twice. The military generals' high political ambition was largely responsible for the long military rule in the two countries.

Bangladesh, where two elected parliaments completed their tenures after restoration of democracy through a mass upsurge against military dictator General Ershad, is now facing new challenge in the continuation of democratic process. The unilateral cancellation of the non-partisan caretaker government system by the Awami League-led government in 2011 triggered fear of a possible political unrest before the next parliamentary polls. The abolishing of the system paved the way for the current government to remain in office during the next polls. But BNP-led opposition camps rejected the constitutional amendment, and announced that they would boycott the polls if held under the AL-led government.

If the prevailing political standoff remains unresolved, Bangladesh will certainly face a political turmoil ahead and during the next parliamentary polls.

The situation is different now in Pakistan, a country that was labeled as a "failed state." Pakistan, which is still struggling for democracy, is going towards a rare achievement its national assembly is set to complete its tenure in February next year for the first time since the country came into existence in 1947. Amid growing uncertainty over the future political landscape, the incumbent federal government in Pakistan brought various constitutional reforms by amending the constitution thrice during its tenure since assumption of office in early 2008. The very crucial and significant amendment was brought to the constitution in early of 2010. A year before the Bangladesh Parliament scrapped the non-partisan



AMDADUL HUQ/ DRINK NEWS

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Before the constitutional amendment in 2010, Pakistan's constitution had given the country's president sweeping authority to appoint an interim/caretaker prime minister and a cabinet on dissolution of the national assembly. The interim cabinet was supposed to run the country during the parliamentary polls. In fact, how the interim cabinet would be formed was at the sole discretion of the president, and if the system had been retained it could have benefited the ruling party during the next parliamentary polls.

But the latest constitutional amendment did something different. Now, on dissolution of the national assembly on completion of its term, or in case it is dissolved earlier, the president shall appoint a caretaker prime minister in consultation with the prime minister and the leader of the opposition in the outgoing national assembly. If there is no consensus between the prime minister and leader of the opposition, then what will happen? The latest changes in the constitution have the answer.

If the prime minister and leader of the opposition do not agree on any person to be appointed as a caretaker

prime minister, then within three days of the dissolution of the national assembly they shall forward two nominees each to a parliamentary committee to be immediately formed by the Speaker of the outgoing national assembly, comprising eight members of the outgoing national assembly, or the senate or the both, having equal representation from the treasury and the opposition bench, to be nominated by the prime minister and the leader of the opposition respectively. The committee constituted shall finalise the name of the caretaker PM within three days of the referral of the matter.

In case of inability of the committee to decide the matter in the aforesaid period, the names of the nominees shall be referred to the Election Commission of Pakistan for final decision within two days.

The process of formation of the EC in Pakistan is not like the one in Bangladesh. None of the successive governments in Bangladesh moved to enact a law in line with the constitutional provision to outline the procedure for formation of an EC acceptable to all. In absence of a law, it is the government's discretion to make the appointments to form the EC. And, in the past, all the political governments formed the EC by making the appointments with their own choices and never consulted with the opposition parties. So, controversy has been a common

phenomenon in Bangladesh over the formation of EC. The present government in its electoral pledges promised to constitute the EC on consensus, but finally it made the appointment unilaterally in February this year.

In Pakistan, the latest constitutional changes have done something important to establish a truly independent and controversy free EC. The president shall appoint a chief election commissioner. But the appointment must be on consensus. How? The 2010 amendment to the constitution says the prime minister shall in consultation with the leader of the opposition in the national assembly, forward three names for appointment of CEC to a parliamentary committee for hearing and confirmation of any person who will be appointed as CEC by the president.

The parliamentary committee to be constituted by the Speaker shall comprise fifty percent members from the treasury bench and fifty percent from the opposition parties, based on their strength in parliament, to be nominated by the respective parliamentary party leaders.

In case there is no consensus between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, each shall forward separate lists to the parliamentary committee for consideration, which may confirm any one name. And then the president will appoint him as the CEC. A similar procedure is followed to appoint members of the EC.

The major changes in the constitution were brought through a consensus between the ruling and opposition parties only to avert the military takeover and to keep continuation of practice of the democratic process uninterrupted.

Information minister of Sindh provincial government Shazia Marri sees things in different way. During a visit to Karachi recently, this correspondent talked to her. In her words, Pakistan is now struggling for democracy.

But growing political animosities between ruling and opposition parties and alarming escalation of political violence, terrorism and targeted killings spark uncertainty over the fate of "struggle for democracy." Given the anarchic and unpleasant way in which Pakistan's political parties conduct themselves, many people fear that there are bound to be grounds for a military intervention in the future. Now the crucial question is will Pakistan's civilian leaders be able to keep continuation of democratic process uninterrupted? Or will history repeat itself military rule again?

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Living with multiple identities



MILIA ALI

A few weeks ago I wrote a column about the challenges that immigrants face in formulating an unambiguous definition of "home." My reflections were prompted by a question that I have been grappling with for some time: "Is home simply the house you live in or is it a set of memories that you carry with you?"

The question crossed my mind once again as I woke up this morning, mildly jet lagged, and looked out at the clear Virginia sky. Yes, I am back in the United States after a long vacation in Bangladesh. Gazing at the horizon, tinted with the reddish glow of the rising sun, it struck me that I had experienced the same beauty each morning during my stay in Dhaka. Despite the concrete jungle of apartment buildings and the high noise level on the other side of the globe, the morning on this side appeared the same ... or was it my imagination, coloured by a nostalgic longing for a country filled with memories of my childhood and youth?

Despite having spent a major part of my life outside Bangladesh, I still seem to perceive the world through the prism of my inherited Bengali traditions. I wonder whether we are all programmed in a way that makes it difficult for us to shed our ties to our origins, in spite of the fact that we form strong affiliations to our current surroundings. What's amazing is that, although one can only reside in a single physical location at a time, the mind can dwell in several places at the same time. For instance, while in Dhaka I missed my familiar setting and friends in the United States. And now that I am back in Virginia, I miss every bit of Dhaka. There is a part of me that is there and a part that is here. A part that is Bengali and a part that is American.

I often wonder how this dichotomy works in practice and how others perceive people like us with multiple identities. The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen explains the multiplicity of identities as a reality which often escapes the undiscerning mind. In his considered opinion, the same person

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"can be without contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a historian, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theatre lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician ..." In many ways I wish that we could all fit Professor Sen's all-inclusive description. It would help us become more tolerant and accepting of other perspectives. Let's admit that many of the problems we face today have been created by people who have fierce affiliations to a single belief and are unable to assume multiple identities. These are people who, mostly by choice, refuse to transcend the narrow boundaries of race, religion or politics and sometimes resort to violence to guard their insular ideologies which form the basis of their single identity. More seriously, such people are prone to stereotyping others since they tend to categorise people with the help of their restricted vision.

As I reflected on Amartya Sen's philosophical observations I asked myself: What defines the real me? Is it my culture, ethnicity, religion or my nationality? Taking a cue from Professor Sen, I could describe myself as a hyphenated Bangladeshi-American woman who is a Tagore singer with strong Bengali roots, a cricket lover, a liberal Muslim, a believer in women's empowerment and at the same time a mother and a wife! It would now be difficult for me to be pigeonholed into a single identity since my multiple identities have blended to mold the person that I am.

I have to admit, though, that carrying many identities can be challenging. The strong bonds that I have formed over time to each of these identities, sometimes, create internal conflicts. There is also the problem of balancing the multiple identities to achieve harmony and equilibrium. However, difficult as it may be to live with, the plurality of existence helps us straddle across cultures and nations and, in some ways, frees us of prejudices and biases. It brings us closer to accepting the fact that "we human beings are all much the same," yet "diversely different!"

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Countdown to the UN conference on arms trade treaty

PRIMA M. ALAM

ARMS control advocates and concerned citizens around the world are counting down to what they hope will be an historic and fruitful conference on the global arms trade. In just over a month, member states of the United Nations will meet in New York to negotiate a treaty regulating the flow of conventional arms; more than a decade after a group of Nobel laureates and non-governmental organisations first articulated the need for a standardised global arms control regime. But what exactly will the treaty entail and why is it important?

According to Control Arms, a global civil society network campaigning for a "bullet-proof" Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), one person dies every minute as a result of armed violence. Yet, unlike other global supply chains, regulation of the multi-billion dollar weapons market is lax. In fact, the sale of bananas is said to be more tightly-regulated than the sale of gunlike the same guns that fuel violent conflict, destabilise regions and contribute to human rights violations throughout the world. This alarming reality has led to calls for urgent and collective action.

In an effort to stop irresponsible

transfers of arms that circumvent existing international law, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Towards an Arms Trade Treaty: establishing common international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional

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arms." An overwhelming majority of member states, including Bangladesh, voted in favour of the ATT resolution in 2009, paving the way for multilateral negotiations. Many countries subsequently submitted their opinions on the convention and participated in four preparatory seminars.

The UN Diplomatic Conference on the Arms Trade Treaty, which will take place July 2-27, is set to address the lack of oversight of the arms trade by stipulating six goals: to promote the United Nations Charter; to establish the highest possible common international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional arms; to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit transfer and production of conventional weapons; to contribute to peace, security and stability; to promote transparency and accountability in import, export and transfers of conventional arms; and to be universal in its application.

Negotiators will now face the difficult task of building on these objectives and etching out an effective and detailed agreement.

In the context of Bangladesh, armed violence continues to be an ever-prevalent threat to economic and social development. The presence of political and religious extremist groups, human trafficking and smuggling of drugs and small arms are all concerns that should sway public opinion in favour of a "bullet-proof" treaty. At the least, the ubiquity of small arms should persuade citizens to speak out.

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of these issues, many believe that the implementation of internationally-recognised rules regarding the minimum standards of the arms trade can help to reduce gun-related fatalities and injuries.

The government has thus far been in full support of a strong treaty with broad participation from member states and agrees that such a framework is required to combat illicit trafficking of conventional weapons. Furthermore, a recent statement from Bangladesh's deputy permanent representative to the UN suggests that non-government actors can also be catalysts in achieving treaty objectives through advocacy and mobilising public support.

The challenge ahead for Bangladesh and other countries is to move beyond the rhetoric and establish a set of robust and legally-binding principles. This will not be an easy feat given that the outcome of the negotiations largely depends on the cooperation of those who profit most from the lucrative weapons industry. Although one expects opposition from major arms exporting nations, the conference is undoubtedly a steppingstone towards much-needed regulations.

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