

The afterthought in the democratic process

Shahid Alam studies victors and disgruntled losers

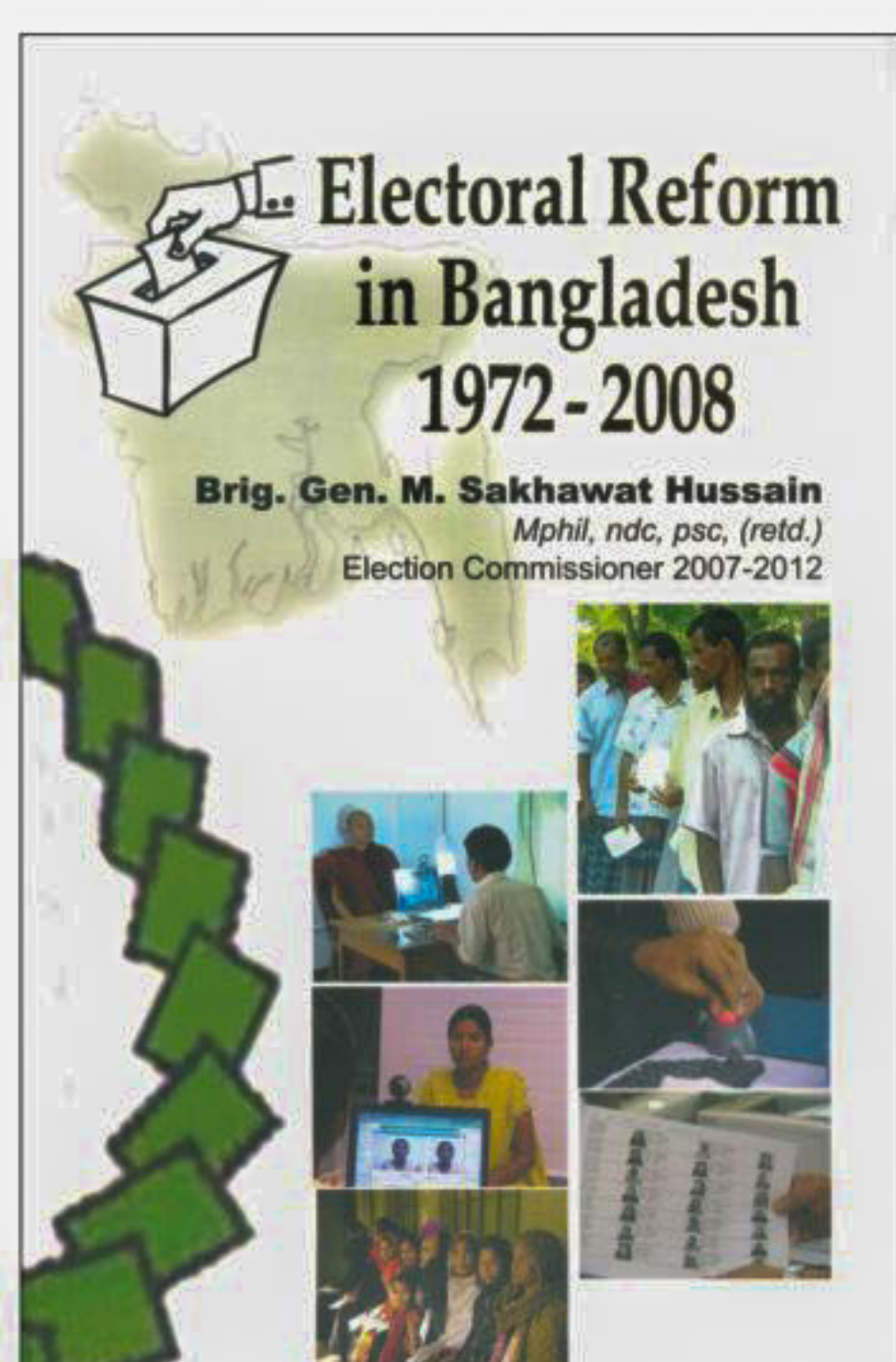
Quite simply, periodic elections are an integral part of the philosophy and process of liberal pluralist democracy. Election is the mechanism by which modern representative democracy operates. Yet, at least in Bangladesh, it has been treated as a poor cousin of the political ideology, as an afterthought of the process, only to be placed in the spotlight come election time. And, more often than not, that spotlight is riddled with shadows when directed at the electoral process. While politicians of all shades indulge in this dubious exercise, academics in this country have largely tended to ignore it as a subject of serious study. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Sakhawat Hussain has noted their relative lack of interest and, although not a pedant by profession, has undertaken to enlighten the readers on the subject matter, relying primarily on his experience as an Election Commissioner. The outcome of his endeavour is *Electoral Reform in Bangladesh 1972-2008*. Just how much he has enlightened is another matter, and the reader can make up his/her mind on the issue.

Hussain issues on an impressive-sounding objective: "...to probe the correlates of confidence in the conduct of elections, in order to determine what accounts for differential perceptions of electoral integrity both within and across the country," although one might legitimately wonder if he was not indicating "outside" rather than "across". After all, he includes a chapter on "Experience of Electoral Reform in Regional Countries". And, what does he find in his study? For one, although under Article 118 of the 1972 Constitution the Election Commission (EC) has been guaranteed power, independence and strength, it could not grow as a credible institution because of political manipulation. Fair enough. "In fact," as he points out, "the independent Election Commission secretariat did not come into effect till ordinance No. 5 of 2008, later turned into law, under the act of 9th parliament No. 5 of 2009, during the Caretaker Government (CTG) of 2007-08." However, he cautions, and this is particularly germane to Bangladesh, "Unless some basic democratic values are in practiced (sic) by the society it is difficult to sustain the reforms brought into the electoral system." Precisely. The institu-

tional arrangements for democracy might be there; the constitutional provisions guaranteeing their existence might be written in golden letters, but unless the mindset for the spirit and norms of liberal pluralist democracy is ingrained in the persona of the general citizenry, none more so than in the political activists, true democracy will be hard-pressed to function in a society.

Hussain provides a fairly comprehensive account of the electoral system of Bangladesh in the lengthiest chapter of the book (Chapter 3). Not coincidentally, given his personal involvement in the process, the next lengthy section is devoted to "Electoral Reforms: 2007-2008" (Chapter 7). Eight chapters and a host of annexure make up the book. Much of its content and emphasis may be found in Chapters 3 and 7. The author draws attention to some serious problems afflicting the electoral process, but which have equal relevance in other areas of the state and its governance. One is the politicization of the civil service, which potentially negates the principle of neutrality during elections, when their services are extensively and critically required. Similarly, the police has also been politicized, which, again, makes it difficult for it to act in an impartial manner. Of course, the abysmal political culture obtaining in the country for some time now has to shoulder much of the blame, and, unless this state of affairs is arrested and, then, reversed, the proper functioning of liberal pluralist democracy would be severely compromised. Hussain also details a number of institutional problems the EC has encountered, including that of redistricting of constituencies (gerrymandering) according to the whims of influential local politicians.

Hussain is understandably proud of being part of the electoral reforms undertaken by the EC headed by Chief Election Commissioner Dr. ATM Shamsul Huda, and of which he was a Commissioner. One can understand his pride, but not his belittling of earlier Commissions, or his categorical, often contradictory, claims. The introduction of the voter identity card and the compilation of a revised voters' list to rectify the seriously flawed previous one were outstanding achievements, but these and a few other reforms undertaken certainly have



Electoral Reform in Bangladesh 1972-2008
Brig. Gen. (ret.) Sakhawat Hussain
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not placed the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) and the election system "ahead of other South Asian countries." Certainly, such a claim would be justifiably subject to much contentious arguments. Pride in ones achievement should not automatically lead to jingoistic attitude or patting oneself on the back, or to the denigration of earlier efforts, especially as so much remains to be done to improve the electoral process, besides that the Huda Commission has also, rightly or wrongly, been subjected to criticism.

Given the political history and culture of the country, it is more reasonable to expect gradual evolution of any institution into one that is functioning reasonably efficiently. The same holds for the electoral process, one that has been held hostage more often than not to the whims of all the major political parties since sovereign independent Bangladesh

came into being. Therefore, keeping this in perspective, it might have been imprudent to have contemptuously dismissed as half-hearted or feeble the previous Commissions' efforts at reform. It might be recalled that many held office when elected civilian governments were in power, and did not have the luxury of the backing of a protracted caretaker government fronting a military cabal. Even then, as the author points out, the EC headed by Huda found that some of its reform proposals to improve the election process were opposed by the same political parties who had supported the 2007-08 reform package. The point is that the political culture of this country dictates that political parties and politicians often will support or oppose political reforms or good intentions if that only suits their interests. That culture requires a thorough overhaul.

Hussain might want to be more consistent in his assessments. The atrocious 1994 Magura bye-election ushered in the contentious non-democratic caretaker government system, and the author on several occasions categorically called it most questionable. However, elsewhere in the volume he thought the bye-election to have been "alleged to have been rigged." Furthermore, he should have made up his mind over whether to designate Dr. Huda as "then Chief Election Commissioner" or as "present CEC." This discrepancy has occurred in several instances, but uniformity is required. Then there is this factual error. While discussing the French electoral system, Hussain states that the country's President is elected after "two rounds of poll." Actually, if any candidate receives over 50% of the votes cast in the first round, then s/he is deemed to have been elected President. Only in the absence of absolute majority by any candidate is the runoff election resorted to, with the two candidates with the highest percentage of votes gained in the first round contesting. Furthermore, the book suffers from an inordinate number of grammatical and spelling errors. Also irritating is the numerous unnecessary repetition of the same points at seemingly regular intervals throughout the book.

Hussain makes it a point of asserting at

different times that the election held on 29 December 2008 was the best-ever witnessed in Bangladesh, had been hailed as the most free and fair ever by local and international observers, and that the losing BNP and its allies were not as vociferous as the previous losers were in castigating the elections as having been "engineered" because of "the greater transparency brought in the system." He backs his claim by stating that all the previous elections had led to the venting of popular protests, but not that of 2008. Actually, a perusal of the news media of the time will show that the losers of 2008 had cried foul at the election results as had the losers in the three previous polls, this time the allegation having been that of massive electronic rigging. And this charge continued to be heard for quite some time. Then there were street protests like on the other occasions. And, as the author records, international observers had also certified the other elections as having been free and fair!

The point is that the political culture of mirror imaging each other by the two major political parties, of mutual political intolerance and distrust, of winning at almost any and all cost, and of virulent partisanship will cause carping by disgruntled losers. Therefore, it is imperative that the political culture be cleaned up first by the political leaders showing the way. Here truly will be a case of if the leader leads, the followers will follow. The institutions of democracy, like the electoral system, can only do so much without the backing of a mindset for the norms and spirit of liberal pluralist democracy displayed by the general citizenry, especially the political activists. The electoral system is in a process of evolution. As Hussain concludes, "...the BEC initiated a massive electoral reform which has been acclaimed at home and abroad yet much remains to be done for strengthening BEC for future challenges by developing further infrastructure."

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In Nazma Yeasmeen Haque's book report last week, "easy chair" appeared as "early chair". We are sorry.

Tales of war and peace

Tulip Chowdhury explores life in its diversity

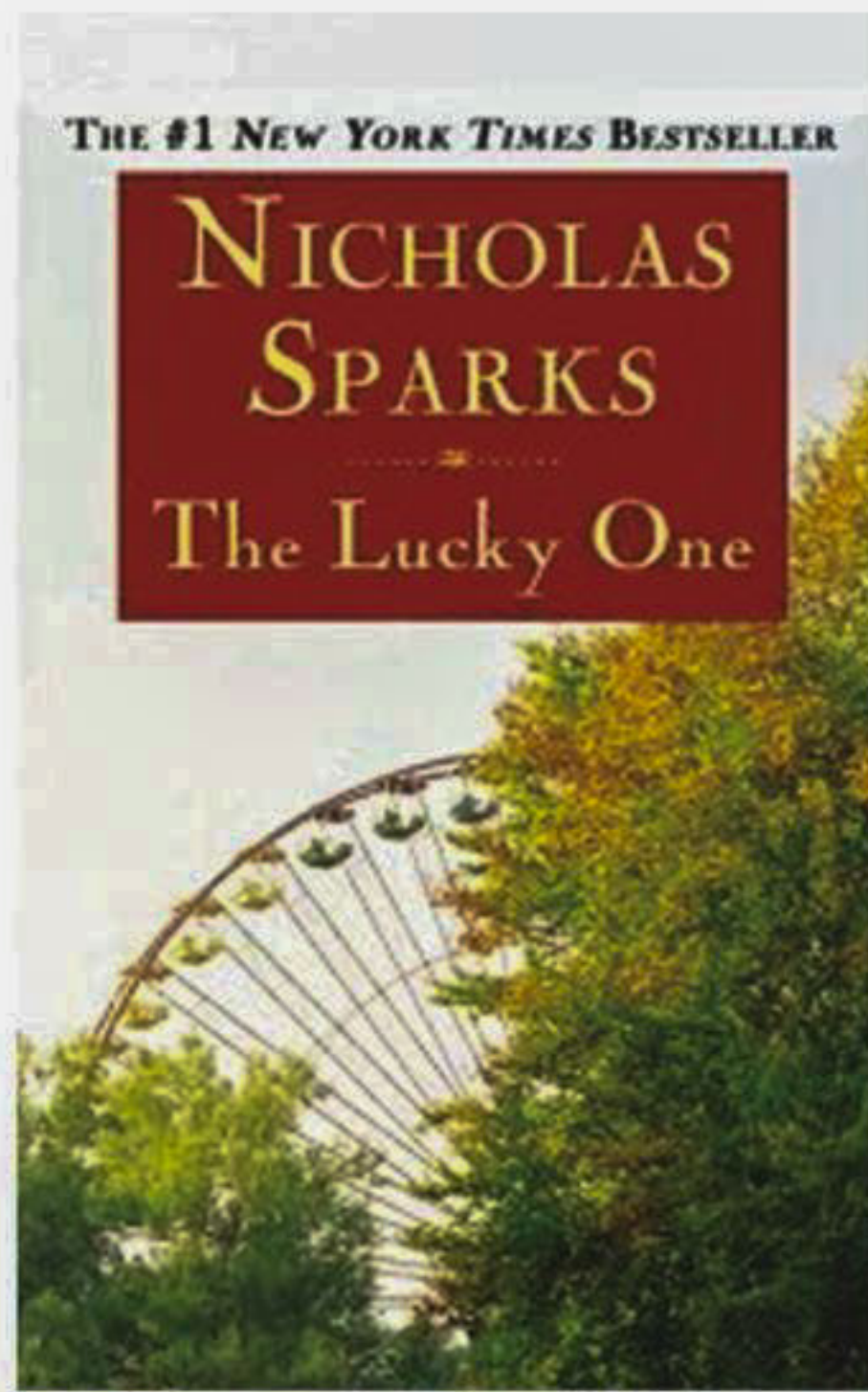
The US armed forces were fighting in Iraq when US Marine Logan Thibault, during his duty finds a picture of a smiling young woman buried in the sand. He knows that he is being superstitious but ever since he has started keeping the photograph in his pocket he seems to get lucky. He is winning series of poker games and even surviving deadly attacks. His best friend Victor seems to have an explanation and says that the photo is a "lucky charm".

True to the Victor's prophesy, the master of words, Nicholas Sparks wounds the reader around the web of superstition as he sets his protagonist on the test of beliefs. Holding his own belief in superstition Victor tells Thibault about the photo, "There is yet more to come." Thibault lands in an aura of mystery. He is more perplexed when on a day of deadly assault with the enemies Victor dies in front of him and once again Thibault is spared. A few days later Thibault is called back home in Colorado. At home he finds his thoughts engrossed with thoughts of the young woman who has become his lucky charm. With the help of some background land marks he finds out that the picture was taken in Hampton, North Carolina.

Thibault is the soldier, the fighter who does not give up to fear. There is a "down to the bone" feeling that he has to find the young woman. He takes Zeus, his German shepherd and starts his walk to North Carolina to find the mysterious woman who fills his every day thoughts.

Nicholas Sparks certainly keeps his readers on the toes as Thibault starts on his great journey. Will he finally reach his destination? Will he find the woman of his dreams and what will happen if he does find her? Hiking from Colorado to North Carolina is no easy travelling. But Thibault is ready to face the hidden lurking obstacles that stand in the way, he is forever the indomitable soul of the soldier. The reader's mind also becomes engrossed, will Thibault find the woman? What will happen if he does meet her? Is she a normal human being? Why does her picture become a lucky charm for him?

The answers to all the questions on the reader's mind do not unfold in one page. Sparks builds up this super story of love and trust, betrayal and empathy that are on test of time. Thibault finds the young woman in the picture. She is Beth, running an animal shelter in Hampton. Beth works with Nanna, her grandmother. Beth is



The Lucky One
Nicholas Sparks
Vision

divorced with a young son Ben. When Thibault meets Beth he feels a strange urge to know her better. He is caught off guard in his attraction to her and hides the truth about his coming to Hampton. When he looks for a job Nanna agrees to take him in to aid her in maintaining the shelter.

Thibault, now so close to Beth becomes a part of her everyday life. He is aware that like all broken families, Beth has difficulties when her ex-husband Sheriff Keith Clayton comes to take Ben for the weekends. Ben and Thibault become great pals. Thibault feels sorry for Ben when with every visit to his father, Ben looks more and more depressed. From Nanna he learns that Clayton is often abusive to his son. He tries to hold out his friendship to the boy so that he would open up and find some solace. Watching Thibault and Ben bond so closely makes Beth wonder if there is any truth in Nanna's saying that the young man was heaven sent and that she should pay more attention to him. The soldier in him wakes up and wants to defend the little boy, to help him reach a healthy adulthood.

The writer leads the reader by the nose reading into Thibault's life as he seems to

be the "lucky one", chosen by the lucky charm. The daring young man wonders if he will also be the lucky one to be chosen by Beth as a soul mate. A series of episodes Thibault is saved from brewing trouble with Clayton, he gets lucky with his new work; all seem to lead to the picture of Beth that he carries with him. In fact he has a feeling of being on safe side with everything while he has his lucky charm.

One day there comes a spell of bad weather and the whole of Hampton is flooded. Just at that time Clayton once again comes with cross words for Ben and the boy heads for his tree house that is just above the flooded creek. There is a race for survival. Clayton, realizing the danger his son is in rushes towards the creek. Thibault arrives on the scene to see Clayton being swept away by furious flood water after he hits a rock. Thibault heads towards the tree house where Ben was facing danger, but Thibault held on to his calm knowing that he had given Ben the lucky charm the day before and that Ben had it with him. And that that meant he will be safe.

The family drama surrounding Beth's broken home pulsates with suspense as Thibault becomes more and more an inseparable part of her life. Calyton, though is the estranged husband of Beth detests anyone who comes near Beth. Beth learns of his involvement in driving away few dates she had in the past. Even if Beth starts to dream of a spark of happiness in her life she is still apprehensive about accepting Thibault in her life. And indeed will Thibault try to save Clayton from the flood after he had openly shown his dislike for the stranger who was entering Beth and Ben's life?

The reader is glued to the story as it reaches its climax and the characters take surprising turns to weave the story into exploding events. The characters seem to lead the reader by the hand and absorb them into the so life-like a story. The gripping plot keeps the reader glued to the story as does Spark's other novels. The last sentence of the saga has the reader sighing with contentment for having found so good a story about life and how it can change the land marks of life. The story may be just another family story but what comes with simplicity often holds the final sparks of life! It's a must read for all Spark fans!

TULIP CHOWDHURY IS A POET.

The decline of parliament

Shakhawat Liton finds much sense in a work on it

The prevailing situation is really very funny--- the interest of MPs in discharging their parliamentary functions has been declining alarmingly while donors' interest in the strengthening of parliament is still on the rise. Many of us do not have any real idea about the ongoing activities by different donor agencies toward strengthening the Bangladesh parliament.

In the view of Nizam Ahmed, a leading researcher of parliamentary affairs, numerous actors and agencies are now involved in parliament development activities. Their number has increased over the years. So also have their programmes.

What are the actors and agencies doing now to strengthen parliament? And what did some other agencies do in the past to this effect? Nizam Ahmed, professor of public administration at the University of Chittagong, has made efforts to answer the questions in his latest book, *Aiding the Parliament of Bangladesh: Experience and Prospect*.

He wrote the book by carrying out a comprehensive research. He has directly worked a number of times in different initiatives to strengthen parliament. Therefore, his personal experiences, of course, assisted him in making the efforts successful in analysing the overall situation.

In this work, Prof Nizam Ahmed examines the scope and limits of donor-assisted parliament strengthening programmes in Bangladesh. He has made efforts to identify the types of activities undertaken by different donors to strengthen parliament and explores the factors that account for the gap between the expectations of project planners and the actual outcome.

Aiding the Parliament of Bangladesh is almost as old as the country itself, writes Prof Ahmed, with a brief description of projects by different donor agencies since 1975. The scope of such assistance, however, has varied in recent years, particularly from the 1990s, witnessing a major surge in donor interest in the strengthening of parliament.

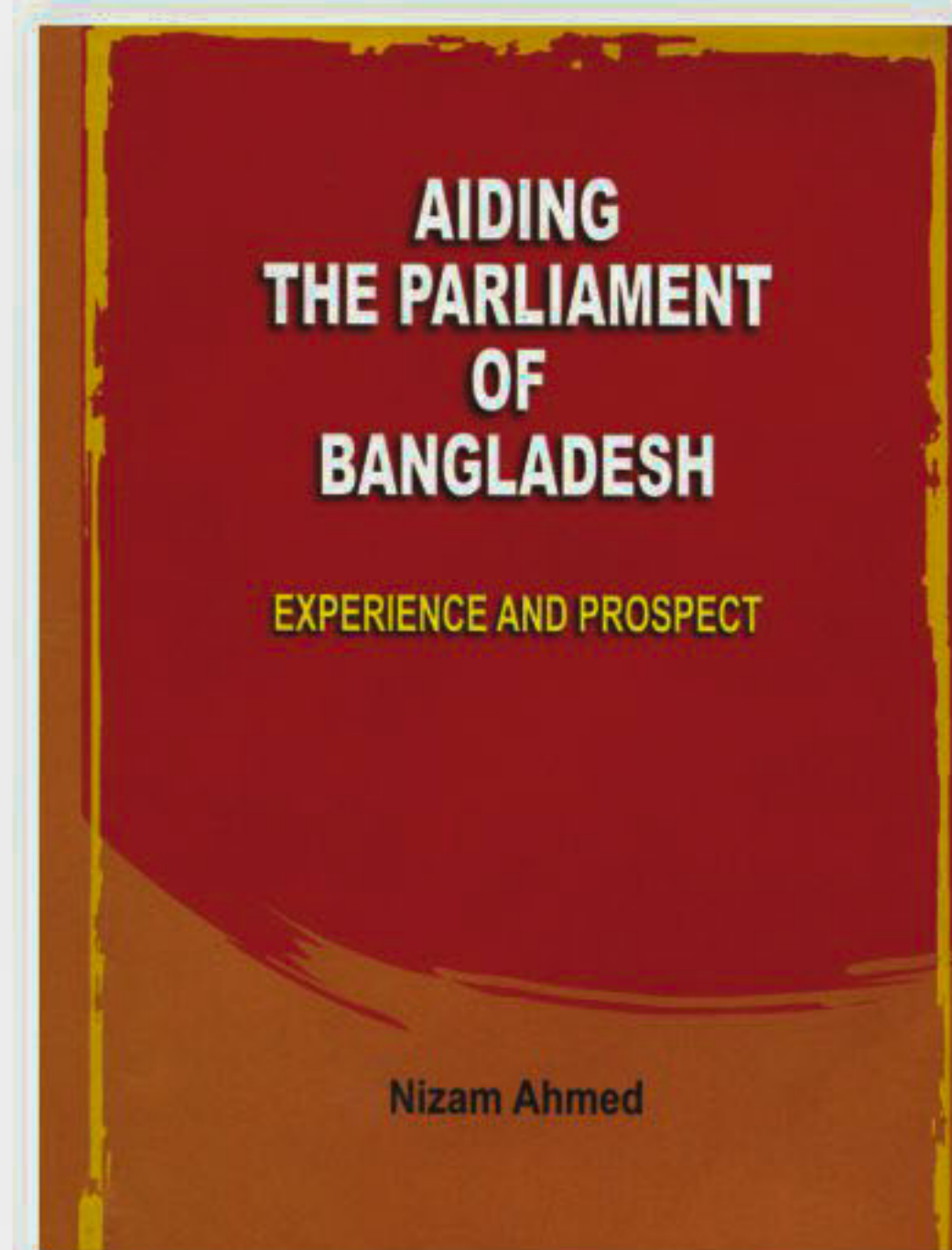
In his view, probably the most important reason underlying the surge in international interest in parliament strengthening in the 1990s was the emergence of a large number of Third Wave democracies in different parts of the world. Of course, Bangladesh was one among those countries where the Third Wave of democracy emerged.

After the fall of the autocratic regime-led by HM Ershad in 1990, people had envisaged the restoration of a true democracy in the country. As the struggle to topple the autocratic regime was hard and long, their expectation also appeared to be skyrocketing.

And in line with the people's expectations, the country switched over to a parliamentary form of government from a presidential one through a unanimous amendment to the constitution in the fifth Parliament in 1991. The Jatiya Sangsad, in the parliamentary form of the government, was supposed to be the centre of all political

activities.

But the reality turned out to be quite something else. Since the restoration of parliamentary democracy, the ruling parties' 'winner takes all attitude' and the opposition parties' mindless boycotting of parliaments only worsened the situation. MPs now seem to feel less interest in performing their real functions. Rather they, if they join the House proceedings, feel comfortable in spending hour after hour in parliament praising their parties' 'supreme leaders' and blasting their political rivals, instead of discussing important issues of public concern and government policies.



Aiding the Parliament of Bangladesh
Experience and Prospect
Nizam Ahmed
The University Press Limited

And the result has been a deterioration in the quality of parliament, typified by its failure to contribute to establishing the rule of law and good governance in the country.

However, one thing is crystal clear: through donor funded projects parliament may be strengthened in terms of logistics. Through projects, many reform proposals may even be prepared as was done in past. But for qualitative changes and implementation of reform proposals, political will on the part of the ruling and opposition parties is a must. The political will is the driving force for any qualitative change. And we have a severe lack of the political will.

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