

# Saving democracy is not a 'thankless job'

M. ANWAR HOSSAIN

In all parliamentary democracies of the world the leader of the opposition plays an integral role not only by participating in and strengthening democracy but also safeguarding it. This responsibility bears added importance especially in those developing nations, like Bangladesh, where the foundations of a democracy are still being laid. Our attention has been drawn to a recent article published in *The Washington Times* authored by Begum Khaleda Zia, the Chairperson of BNP and the Leader of the Opposition in the Bangladesh Parliament. For the reasons mentioned below we have been forced to conclude that Begum Zia has severely undermined the sovereignty of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and also expressed complete disregard to the idea of democracy and the right of self-determination of our people. As a result, the contents of her article have deeply hurt our national pride and self-respect.

In her opening paragraph Begum Zia has stated: "Yet in the past year, relations have been strained to the point where the United States may be accused of standing idle while democracy in Bangladesh is undermined and its economic allegiance shifts toward other growing world powers." We would like to assert that Bangladesh as an independent country has every right to engage in economic activities with all nations of the world including the United States. To assume that a growing democracy like Bangladesh will have economic ties solely with one nation goes against the broad interests of the people and the economic realities of an emerging multi-polar world.

Begum Zia has drawn attention to the removal of Muhammad Yunus from the position of Managing Director of Grameen Bank. She has however failed to mention that this eventually came about through a

verdict of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

We too are concerned about the instances of human rights violations by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab). Ironically, Begum Khaleda Zia's government created Rab during her second tenure as prime minister, during which countless incidents of extra-judicial murders took place in the name of "crossfire."

Begum Zia has alleged that the "US Ambassador for war crimes" has condemned the current government for trying only opponents of Sheikh Hasina's regime. We take this opportunity to inform Begum Zia that the said ambassador has not stated anything of this nature till today. We are shocked at Begum Zia's attempts to hide the widely accepted knowledge that the Jamaat-e-Islami collaborated with the Pakistan army in the commission of genocide and other core international crimes during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

In fact the Jamaat-e-Islami played a role similar to that of the Nazi Party during the Second World War. We request Begum Zia to read the newspaper reports from 1971 published by the *Daily Sangram*, the official mouthpiece of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Begum Zia seems to be unaware of the reality that Bangladesh remains a vibrant democracy despite the fact that she and her handful of MPs from the BNP have refrained from joining sessions of the Parliament over the pettiest of reasons. Her article fails to acknowledge Professor Amartya Sen's lecture given on January 5, at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai, where he stated that Bangladesh has

outnumbered India in all social indicators. Since Begum Zia appears to find comfort in expressing her opinions in international dailies, she may consider reading the recent optimism expressed by *The Guardian*, where it has been said that Bangladesh is on the road to surpassing the most advanced countries of the West by 2050.

Begum Khaleda Zia has also expressed her utmost concern over the removal of the provisions for the non-party caretaker government from the Constitution. The fact remains that the original Constitution of Bangladesh did not contain any such provisions and the non-party system has been found by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh to be in contravention to our Constitution.

We would like to remind Begum Zia that during the tenure of the current government the Election Commission has already organised many elections which have been certified as "free and fair" by all concerned, including the opposition party. It is our belief that Bangladesh needs to reengage in holding national elections through an independent Election Commission because we consider it to be one of the most important ways of strengthening democracy in our country. At the same time, we would like to remind Begum Zia the possibility of unconstitutional takeovers from beyond the political sphere as the people of Bangladesh dreadfully recall from the army-controlled caretaker days of 2007-08.

We are simply appalled by Begum Zia's suggestions

to the US government to consider withdrawing its general trade preferences. Such irresponsible remarks by the leader of the opposition of Bangladesh disclose her poor understanding and concerns for the economy and the interests of the common people of Bangladesh.

Begum Khaleda Zia has concluded her article by stating: "It is time for the world, led by America, to act and ensure that democracy is saved in Bangladesh." Calling upon another sovereign state to ensure democracy in Bangladesh is tantamount to compromising the very sovereignty of Bangladesh. It displays a sheer lacking of statesmanship and behaviour unbecoming of the leader of the opposition.

In conclusion we would like to disagree with Begum Zia on her notion that saving democracy in Bangladesh is a "thankless job." Rather, fighting for democracy is the most fruitful job of a true politician and the people of Bangladesh have proven time and again that they embrace with arms wide open those who fight for establishing a true democracy.

Begum Zia, we would like to warn you that you are walking on thin ice. Whether by drawing references to the International Crimes Tribunals or calling upon foreign powers to solve your problems in *The Washington Times*, a conservative pro-Israel daily, you have exposed your moral and political bankruptcy. You have not only smeared the independence of our judiciary but have also sided clearly with the forces that opposed the independence of Bangladesh and struck at the heart of our sovereignty. If you fail to side with the people of Bangladesh, sooner or later someone worthier may take the privileged position you enjoy as leader of the opposition.

The writer is Vice Chancellor, Jahangirnagar University.

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# There is more to good governance than holding elections

RUBY AMATULLA

PRIOR to nineteenth-century monarchies, colonial rulers and autocracies dominated the pattern of governance worldwide. Family lineage and military power dictated the terms of legitimacy, and individuals were often compelled to accept this *modus operandi* by force if necessary.

Over time, an increased philosophical awareness of the natural rights of liberty and equality of all human beings changed the fundamental characteristics of governance. The American Revolution in 1776 placed these ideas as the source of legitimacy in governance, and much of the world has subsequently gravitated towards this idea of self-rule.

Many of these ideas were originally articulated by classical thinkers including Socrates, Plato, Aquinas, and European enlightenment philosophers. According to these theses, all human beings are born with inalienable rights endowed by their Creator, as well as an inherent and unchangeable nature that senses right from wrong, exercises reason, and demands liberty and equality for all.

It is pertinent to note that the Quran also alludes to this powerful unchangeable true human nature (*fitra*) the compliance with which constitutes the one ever true religion for humankind (30:30). By virtue of this endowment and empowerment -- the Quran alludes -- all humans are God's vicegerent or representatives (*khalifa*) on earth with inherent rights and responsibilities. Therefore, rationally, a vicegerent of God cannot be a subject of a ruler but he/she could be a citizen of a self-rule.

The founders of the American Revolution were deeply influenced by the concepts of natural rights of a human being. They came to the conclusion that only an impartial rule of law legitimised by popular will could meet the demands of human nature. They sensed that the disorder and turmoil of past eras were due to a failure to comply with the dictates of human nature. Thus, they struggled to devise a system of governance that would remain accountable to its people, by instituting strategically designed electoral systems, separation of powers, and proper checks and balances among three branches of government.

The founders also foresaw difficulties in democracy. For example, if the representatives of voters came to power via elections and the rule of the majority, they could potentially trample upon the inherent rights of the minorities in a society. The founders therefore framed a "constitution" that defined the rule of law to ensure the rights of every citizen including that of minorities. Thus, the concept of a republic came into existence.

Additionally, if nationhood is solely defined by a common culture, history, language, and religion, a society would remain vulnerable to migrations of people from other cultures and ethnicities. Therefore, the founders defined nationhood in terms of values and principles of

humanity that would integrate diverse communities regardless of ethnicities, cultures, and religions that can too often divide societies.

At the outset, America did not live up to what the founders laid down in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Slaves did not have the rights of citizens, and women could not vote until the 1920s. These inequalities brought about turmoil and instability. Through a bloody civil war and long arduous movements such as the collective bargaining movement, the women's liberation movement, the Hispanic-Latino immigrant rights movement, the indigenous Native American movements, and the African-American Civil Rights movement, the nation eventually charted a different course and began to comply in a more congruent manner with the founding ideals of liberty, dignity and equality of all citizens.

Good governance is not only about holding elections and establishing checks and balances in a government. These methods are only means to attain certain goals: to serve people by upholding their rights and dignity, by establishing equity and justice, and by establishing stability and progress of the society. Abraham Lincoln's

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famous quote about democracy -- a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" -- fits the general idea of good governance. The people should hold the ultimate power in the society.

If an election somehow brings in representatives who fail to attain these goals of peace, justice, and progress, the democratic system will have failed. Therefore, the people of a nation must remain vigilant as to their rights and must participate in the process of governance to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens. It is ultimately the people who will dictate their government to move towards deliverance of peace, justice, and progress.

Below, there are some essential principles, characteristics and measures of good governance:

- Proper checks and balances among the three branches of a government;
- A sociopolitical culture to ensure peoples' participation without which good governance is not possible. People must remain active and engaged in the process of governance. A large number of people should take part in the

broader decision making processes of a society. This participatory democratic culture is the key to sustain good democratic governance;

- Visionary, forceful and engaged civil societies are prerequisites of good governance. They are supposed to be the trailblazers in a society. On the one hand, they help raise dialogues with the people to establish and maintain a vibrant sociopolitical culture and a national consensus as to the priorities of governance, on the other, become a countervailing force in compelling the government to comply with the guidelines and standards of affairs they set;
- Political parties must operate democratically. Unless and until the political parties remain committed to the democratic principles in disposing their own internal affairs a nation cannot become democratic;
- There should be term limits for all political positions, including the prime minister, party officials, judges, and others;
- Judicial independence a must for a healthy society. In order to ensure independence, the appointment processes of judges of the Supreme Court and the high court systems should be rigorous and extensive, including but not limited to public hearings conducted by civil society committees and/or other kinds of public scrutiny;
- Freedom of the press and free speech a must for democracy;
- The right to assemble and the right to peaceful protest are fundamental rights of all citizens;
- Balancing between the individual rights and collective rights. In fact, both the pursuit of individual achievement and the pursuit of collective welfare are equally necessary in a society. However, there must be a balance between these two sets of rights. Muslim-majority societies may often remain preoccupied with collective rights, while Western societies are often obsessed with individualism. But neither of these extreme imbalances contributes to good governance in a society.
- As time unfolds, as societies become more interconnected and interdependent, as our concepts of nationhood change, as we learn to retain and value our own cultures and traditions while still peacefully integrating with the rest of humanity, as the world becomes more of a global village, as the divisions between the rich and the poor increase, and other dividers wrongfully divide us, our challenge remains to contribute to global good governance just as we endeavour to our own local good governance. That is the call of our collective conscience, dictated by our ever-true human nature endowed by the Creator.

The writer is Executive Director, US-based Muslims for Peace, Justice and Progress.

# How to split atoms at home



**D**ID YOU READ about the man who tried to split the atom at home? I wish I'd thought of that. I read the report out loud to the family: "Science fan Richard

Handl attempted nuclear fission on the kitchen table at his flat in Sweden." Then I looked up. "Shall we try it?"

My daughter headed to the kitchen, reappearing moments later with the bread knife. "I got a knife. Have you got an atom?" she asked. "Loads," I said. "Everything's made of atoms. But I don't think you can split them with a bread knife. Probably not sharp enough."

Unable to do any proper research because of my severe TL affliction (terminal laziness), I phoned a scientific friend to ask for guidance: "We want to split an atom as a kind of home science project. We have loads of atoms around the house which we're not really using."

There was a stunned silence. Then he told me that he had never before heard of anyone splitting atoms as a way of de-cluttering their homes. "Atoms are pretty small," he said. "It might take a while to make any appreciable difference to the clutter in your house." (He's been to my home, once.)

He said ordinary household atoms were hard to split. "You have to get a Uranium 235 atom, because they have crumbly nuclei. You've probably already got some. It's one of the components of household smoke detectors."

Yay! This was looking good. So all we had to do was open up the smoke detector, find the uranium and split it. But what with? He said: "The only way to cut an atom is to fire a neutron at it with a neutron gun."

I told him that the only neutron gun we had was a plastic one in my son's toy box, which was probably not fully functional, although it cost a whopping \$14.95 quite a few Christmases ago. "You can make a neutron gun," he said. "Hospitals store this stuff called radium. Get a doctor to get you some, put it into a tube, and drill a tiny hole: neutrons will shoot out."

And that was it. How amateurs can split an atom. It really works, in theory.

I had visions of beautiful but tiny mushroom clouds rising over my table what a cool dinner party trick that was going to be. But then an intractable problem arose in the shape of my wife, who always puts the kibosh on my pet projects thanks to this weird women-only mental trait she has called "common sense".

Folding her arms, she strictly banned us from splitting atoms of any kind on the dining table. "You might stain it," she said. "If you have to do it, do it out on the balcony." We turned our eyes to our tiny, damp terrace.

It was raining heavily. We decided to shelve the project. "The atoms will be wet," my daughter pointed out. "The neutrons will slide off the uranium atoms."

We played Monopoly instead. Still, it was a good learning experience.

We now knew the basics of atom splitting and could now understand why the tsunami caused problems when it hit the nuclear power plant in Japan. The Fukushima No 1 Nuclear Plant boss would have found it hard to split atoms with all that water sloshing around.

And his wife probably wouldn't let him use the dinner table.

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