

The 10th Jatiyo Sangsad: Some questions from the youth

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In his address to the 10th Parliament on January 29, the president urged the election-boycotting parties to "help reach a consensus by shunning the path of confrontation and anarchy ... to contribute to the establishment of a tolerant democratic system through removing hatred, violence." It wasn't named, but the call was aimed at BNP-led alliance. The speech has been viewed as one-sided, reflecting the government stance, an inherent weakness of the highest office of the State.

As important as the call is, it will remain only words unless those who approved it to be read by the president have the courage and capacity to take their own portion of responsibility for confrontation, hatred, violence and lack of consensus.

During a visit to Jatiyo Smriti Shoudho the Speaker said: "The 10th Parliament has added a new chapter in the country's democratic journey." She hoped that the opposition in parliament would play a vital role in making the House effective through constructive discussion and criticism.

The 10th Jatiyo Sangsad (JS) has, however, some unusual features that severely undermine the capacity to deliver its key role. It is the result of an election held in conformity with the words of the relevant provisions of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, though not necessarily with its true spirit. Its legitimacy in terms of popular mandate will always remain questionable.

It is a parliament born of bloodbath and gross violation of fundamental right to life, liberty and security of the common people caused by unprecedented violence for a zero-sum game of power in which one side wanted to prevent the polls pushed through by the other. Hardly any aspect of life, society and economy has been spared. The education system has suffered unprecedented damage; kids and families have been told that politics means denial of access to education; politics means uprooting trees; politics means petrol bombs; politics means killing and maiming people; and politics is about power at the expense of democratic norms and public interest.

The worst victims, as in the past, have been the religious minority, easy targets of indiscriminate vengeance for a perceived defiance of the call to boycott the polls, which in turn made a convenient opening for those in the power structure, irrespective of political colour, who always benefit from such atrocities. Impunity was granted by failure of the administration and law enforcement agencies and, above all, the Election Commission whose responsibility was to foresee and prevent the atrocities.

The 10th JS will not probably experience opposition boycott, but it will be even worse, with no true opposition. It is a JS with no public mandate, as recognised at high levels of the ruling party when they announced that the election manifesto it published was not meant to gain people's verdict. Commitment was made that dialogue would be opened soon for an inclusive election for the 11th Parliament, though by now they have retracted from that stance and have been competing hard to emphasise how important it is to remain in office for full five years.

The parliament will have no true standing committee to hold the government to account; no real debate in public interest; no institutional means of checks and balance, leaving unlimited discretion in the hands of the executive. It may open the floodgates for abuse of power. Protectors of law may break laws with greater vengeance, which may unleash victimisation of the innocent. Politicisation of administration, law-enforcement and justice may accelerate further. Accountability institutions like Anti-

Corruption Commission and Election Commission may be rendered more prejudiced and ineffective.

If the first month since January 5 is any indicator, risk of increased threats to fundamental rights in the form of crossfire, enforced disappearance, torture in custody looms large. Profitability of abuse of power to arrest, or threaten arrest, may flourish. The space for critique may shrink further and voice of dissent may be perceived as conspiracy and sedition, or at best siding with political opponents, while "shoot the messenger" syndrome may capture the mindset of the high and mighty.

Some highly thoughtful questions and concerns raised by a couple of hundred students of Dhaka University on February 5 in a lecture session that I had the privilege to attend are pertinent. Bulk of these related to the constitution: whose constitution it is; what is the spirit and relevance of Article 7(1) that stipulates all powers of the republic to rest in people; where are the people in a power structure that practically vests all power to one individual?

Why can't I find myself in the constitution; my voting right was forfeited, who do I complain to; I did cast my vote, but as a first time voter I am more disappointed than delighted because an election of constitutional obligation has undermined the true spirit of the constitution.

Concerns ranged from politically patronised campus violence to indiscriminate abuse of the quota system in education and jobs. Other questions include abolition of the constitutional provision of referendum; why tenure of chief executive cannot be fixed for two terms; why shouldn't we have a meaningful balance of power between president and prime minister; why should the offices of chief executive, head of the ruling party and leader of the House remain in one person?

Do our political parties care about democracy and democratic practice; why can't we move to proportional system of representation; why shouldn't we meet the constitutional obligation of establishing ombudsman; why shouldn't we try bicameral legislative system; can we introduce a law by which a certain percentage of free, fair and inclusive turnout of voters will be mandatory for an election to be credible; isn't it time to ban boycott of parliament; why should we have Article 70 if it undermines Article 39?

Why do we allow the spirit of liberation to be politicised along partisan lines; in a multi-religious state that asserted national identity challenging politicisation of religion why should we have a state religion; why should we push ourselves to the brink of religious cleansing; shall we ever be able to identify the beneficiaries of violence against minorities so they can be brought to justice; on what ground in a multi-ethnic society should one particular identity be forced upon all?

Isn't it time that our political leaders realised how their mutually antagonistic relation, having very little to do with ideology or political agenda, is creating the space for undemocratic and militant forces to gain strength; why do they embarrass the nation by inviting external intervention in resolving their intransigence-driven political conflict; how long will they allow corruption to be the key motivation for zero-sum game of power, thereby driving public interest oriented politics out of political space; can we adopt a code of conduct of MPs to stop acts, words and gestures that embarrass the young generation?

When can we expect a truly inclusive election to the 11th Parliament? Above all, will our political leaders be sensitive to public interest and conduct themselves in such a manner that the new generation will no longer see the devil in politics?

The writer is Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh.

The enduring city

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

ACH time I come to Dhaka for a visit I am faced with the same question from friends and acquaintances: "So, how does it feel coming back to this chaotic city with its horrendous traffic, noise and pollution?" I am at a loss for an appropriate answer. The point is, I may have left Dhaka but it has always been there for me -- never failing to welcome me in its warm embrace. How can I be judgmental about a city that gives me a sense of being and belonging?

As I was preparing for my trip to Dhaka in December, friends in the US cautioned me about the dangers of visiting the city at a politically volatile

period. I reasoned that as someone who has been a part of Bangladesh's freedom struggle, I am too connected to the roots to be intimidated by *hartsals* and shutdowns. In any case, if 15 million people live in Dhaka in health, sickness, happiness and suffering, who am I to claim that my life needs more protection and care than theirs?

However, the truth is, I, too, am critical about the city's congested streets, crowded shopping plazas, high noise level and smog. Moreover, the *hartsal* days are fraught with a kind of uncertainty that I rarely face in the US. But, despite all the aggravation and tiring routines, Dhaka is like a mother with whom I can never sever my emotional ties even though the umbilical cord was cut long ago.

The amazing thing about Dhaka is its incredible resilience. Once the election fever subsided, the city reverted to a normal pace. By "normal" I mean traffic is once again unbearable (a trip from Gulshan to Dhanmandi could take 3 hours). The policemen are still clueless on how to manage the mayhem created by honking cars maneuvering their way to get ahead, rickety rickshaws meandering through narrow gaps and wayward pedestrians crossing roads at all odd points. The street vendors are busy peddling everything from pirated books to poached birds. The construction of high rises has started with renewed vigour. These steel, cement and glass structures continue to encroach on streets, announcing their ugly existence with a callous disregard to aesthetics!

Yet I keep returning to Dhaka for a glimpse of the hazy sunset from my balcony and the sound of the cuckoo's early morning call from my neighbour's garden. These small pleasures provide me with a sense of comfort that I can find nowhere else. True, Dhaka is not Istanbul with its museums, mosques and the Sea of Marmara. It's not even Kolkata where visitors line up for a tour of the Victoria Memorial. But this is the city where I grew up chasing butterflies in my front yard, getting wet in the sooty showers of the monsoons, watching Elvis Presley movies with friends in Naz cinema and accompanying my aunts to an old town theater to see Suchitra Sen in *Harano Sur*.

Dhaka is where I first fell in love and also suffered my first heartbreak. I sang in the shade of its wooded parks and marched down its tree-lined streets to protest against the autocratic Pakistani regime. Even today, when I pass by my old school it evokes memories of my teachers who inculcated in me a love for learning and an appreciation for the beautiful things of life.

Sadly, the city's trees have almost disappeared, Naz cinema no longer exists, and my old home is now a jungle of apartments. But this is still my Dhaka -- where I have friends and relatives who have been constant in their love and loyalty, despite the many changes that all of us have been through. It's these friendships and associations that make this town special for me.

Beneath Dhaka's unattractive facade lies a compassionate soul. The city and its people have a great ability to accept and adapt. From a quaint town of the '70s it has transformed into a bustling city -- reinventing itself to accommodate the rapid changes. But, despite all its urbanisation Dhaka still retains touches of its rusticity... The other day I was shopping in Gulshan 2. A hawker sitting with his basket of Dhaka cheese offered me a big chunk. When I told him I had no cash left on me he said: "Apa, please take it, you can pay me tomorrow." I was surprised that in spite of the pressures of urban living the cheese seller had preserved his innate goodness and trust in others. The kind gesture touched me.

At that moment I realised why Dhaka is so close to my heart -- it's "my city."

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

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