

Power politics and its consequences

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

If the legitimate power can be illegitimately used toward partisan ends, especially to repress the opposition, the prevailing balance of power between the competing political parties can be disrupted.

THE political situation in Bangladesh has degenerated so much that our major political parties are now only interested in capturing power, and they leave no stone unturned, including the use of the power of money, muscle and incumbency, to do so. They do not practice internal democracy. Rather they are entrenched in authoritarianism and dynastic politics. They are not interested in politics based on ideology or principles, and have also become adept at politicisation and distributing patronages.

Such conditions represent symptoms, not the real disease afflicting our politics. In my view, our main disease is corruption. Self and coterie interests, rather than public service, are the principal attractions behind the capture of political power in our country. Thus, if we are to have a true democratic system, we must make all-out efforts to uproot corruption and criminalised politics from our soil.

At present, the parties, when in power, can loot and plunder, and enjoy the loot almost with impunity. They can also use the spoils as patronage to 'buy' political allegiance. Thus, politicians who came close to those in power have become, with only a few exceptions, fabulously rich even though many of them have no known sources of earnings. The rise of the likes of Noor Hossain, the main accused in the recent gruesome killings in Narayanganj, is the product of this criminalised process. Thus, we rarely see any 'poor' politician in our two major parties that have taken turns in capturing power. Ironically, these rich people have now become a special class -- the ruling class -- and the government's highest priority is to cater to them.

Buying allegiance through patronage distribution causes divisiveness in society. That is why we see divisions along party lines in the ranks of teachers, journalists, lawyers, doctors and cultural personalities, which usually form the core of civil society. Catchy slogans and symbols are generally used in this politics of divisiveness. Speeches that spew

venom and hate against opponents are also generously used. As a result, our nation, which was united in 1971, has now become sharply divided into two almost warring camps.

The members of the ruling class do not have to go to jail for looting public exchequer or distributing patronages illegally. They get away by using their power of money, influence and connections. Cases filed against them are usually withdrawn on political considerations. They also do not have to pay any price in the social and political arenas because the perception of corruption no longer carries any stigma.

In Bangladesh's 43 years of life, no powerful individual, other than Ershad, had to suffer conviction and incarceration for corruption. However, in spite of his being a convicted felon, he did not become an outcast in the social and political circles. Rather, he became a 'kingmaker,' and our two major political parties have been in shameless competition to get his support.

In a criminalised political structure, it is important not only to capture power, but also to continue to stay in power. However, staying in power requires centralising power. That is why top government and party positions are concentrated in the hands of two individuals, their families and those extremely loyal to them. And the absence of internal democracy in our political parties is merely the reflection of such a condition.

To centralise power, partisan individuals are generally appointed in constitutional and statutory institutions. Even the autonomous institutions are not spared such partisan aggression. Through this process, incompetent and undesirable individuals often get appointed in important positions, causing the institutions to gradually get weaker. Weak institutions, led by partisan individuals, are often unable to deliver the needed services to citizens. Worse yet, they often cater to the vested interest groups, sometimes in return for monetary or other benefits. In such a situation, the system of checks and balances breaks down, and the rule of law and human rights are seriously undermined, perpetuating a culture of impunity and injustice. The result is

that the state becomes weaker.

Political parties enjoy various types of powers, one of which is official state power. Official power is the power to legally use force. The other type of power originates from political parties' ability to unleash violence on the street. If the powers of the ruling and opposition parties to cause violence on the street are more or less equal and the official power cannot be used illegally for partisan purposes, a state of 'equilibrium' exists and they become inclined to reach political settlements regarding their disputes. Such a settlement paved the way for the adoption of a caretaker system in 1996 in Bangladesh, ensuring the peaceful transfer of power, and the institution of a type of minimalist or 'one-day' democracy in the country.

However, if the legitimate power can be illegitimately used toward partisan ends, especially to repress the opposition, the prevailing balance of power between the competing political parties can be disrupted. Politicisation of the bureaucracy, law enforcement agencies and various institutions can cause such a 'disequilibrium' to occur, and provide an opportunity to misuse power. With the power balance destroyed, the political settlement breaks down and those in power try to use various nefarious means to continue to stay in power, as it happened in 2006.

The use of the law enforcement agencies, especially of Rab during the elections of January 5 earlier this year, is a perfect example of the illegitimate use of legitimate power, causing serious consequences. Rab was created in 2004 to deal with the hooligans created through clientalism and political patronage by successive governments. But the government's use of Rab along with other law enforcement agencies against the opposition parties before January 5 destroyed the power balance, which closed the doors for a political settlement between the parties, resulting in a non-inclusive, one-sided election. It may be noted that because of their use in undesirable and illegal activities, the discipline of Rab was greatly compromised and a tendency to indulge in criminal activities was created in its ranks. The

recent killing in Narayanganj appears to be the manifestation of such tendencies.

It is relatively easier for the ruling party to attract people with muscle power to its ranks as it can not only offer patronage but also immunity. With the rapid spread of patronage politics over the years, there has also been a sharp increase in the number of hooligans in the country. These hooligans, empowered by their new-found riches earned from tender-snatching, toll collection, illegal occupation and other illegitimate activities have been entering electoral politics in significant numbers in recent years, driving their old patrons from the electoral arenas. That is why we now see increasing number of undesirable elements getting elected and holding important positions both at national and local levels. Thus, our politics has increasingly become a den of criminal elements.

Because of the prevailing dynastic politics, we have been experiencing a serious dearth of talented people in our politics. With the increasing encroachment of hooligans, honest and committed individuals interested in public service will be increasingly pushed out of the political arena, which will have enormous implications for our future. This will bring harder days for politicians, who are already facing daunting challenges because of increasing cutthroat competition for patronage and the resulting violence within the political parties -- especially the ruling party.

The proliferation of hooligans in our politics may also usher in a rule of the incompetent, unqualified and corrupt in the country. Such a rule of the self-interested undesirables is also likely to foment chaos and instability in the country, creating opportunities for the extremist forces to fish in troubled water. We are already witnessing the rise of the fundamentalist forces in our sub-continent. The prevailing situation in Bangladesh will only hasten the spread of extremism and undermine progress in our country.

The writer is Secretary, Citizens for Good Governance (SHUJAN).

'Demographic dividend' could turn into 'demographic burden'

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

ACCORDING to international donor agencies and economists, 2014 is when Bangladesh can start utilising demographic dividend which will last till around 2040. Demographic dividend is accelerated economic growth resulting from country's declining mortality and fertility rate and subsequent changes in the age structure of the population. It occurs when the majority of the population is of working age and can contribute to the country's economy, so the economy grows.

As per the latest population census, 33% of our population now belong to age group 0-14 years, while 18.8% population belong to age group 15-24 years and 37.6% belong to age group 25-54 years. It means that, after 15 years, most of our population will be in the workforce. Surely, we can take advantage from this transition. However, there are some challenges related to those seemingly favourable demographics. The first is finding jobs for all these people. Second, and more importantly, our young people will need to develop the right skills for the modern job market. The critical question is, are we ready, and how well are we prepared for the "demographic dividend"?

If we analyse our economy of the last ten years, we will see that we are maintaining a healthy 6% plus growth rate, mainly because of our strong export, remittance earning and hard work of poor farmers. Goldman Sachs puts us in its list of 'Next 11' countries (those most likely to become the world's largest economies after Brazil, Russia, India and China), and it is one of JP Morgan's 'Frontier Five' economies. Citigroup has identified us as one of the 11 countries it terms Global Growth Generators (or 3G countries). We have also made significant progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly relating to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality and empowering women, ensuring universal primary education and reducing child mortality. Life expectancy has also increased by 10 years, infant mortality has declined by nearly two-thirds, and female literacy has doubled.

Apparently it all sounds good, but on closer examination, rather than a reason to rejoice, certain issues and the situation invoke serious concern; we still remain one of the poorest, overpopulated and inefficiently governed countries in the world, with about 45% of the



population employed in the agriculture sector. More than a quarter of the population (26%) earns less than \$2 a day, and two in every five children are malnourished. More than 25 million people lack access to safe water source. Over 67 million people don't have access to improved sanitation and over 7,000 under-5 children die because of poor water and sanitation every year. According to a Usaid report, at least 15% of primary school age children never entered the educational system. Together with the 25% primary school dropout rate, it means 40% of Bangladeshi children never received a full primary education.

As per the latest literacy survey report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the country's literacy rate of the population aged above 15 reached 59.82% while the illiteracy rate is 40.18% and the literacy of women is 55.71%. We have made remarkable progress in expanding primary education, especially in raising enrollment of the students and bringing gender parity. But our education system is not yet pro-poor and the and curriculum does not serve the goals of

human development and poverty eradication. There is a lack of communication and collaboration between the government, academia and industry, so we are not producing quality or skilled persons for modern industry. Industry insiders says that beside poor infrastructure, lack of land, acute shortage of power and gas for new industries, finding the right people and getting them to work productively are the biggest problems of Bangladesh today.

In 2004, United Nations Population Division (UN PD) revealed that our population would reach 218 million by 2050, but later upgraded the figure to 243 million by taking into account the decade-long fertility plateau (1993-2002). Therefore, let's assume that our population in 2050 will be 230 million.

Where will productive jobs for this extra population come from? What will be the sources for higher economic growth? What is the capacity of agriculture to feed the growing population? Also, will Bangladesh be able to make adequate investments in education and health to ensure a healthy, skilled and produc-

tive future workforce? Unfortunately, for the last several years, we have been suffering from economic growth stagnation with GDP growing between 5% and 6.8%, and the investment-GDP ratio has stood at 24%-26% for a decade. Though public investment has increased nearly 1 percentage point in 5 years, private investment has declined this year. Investors' confidence has been destroyed due to the recent political instability and businesses are suffering from insecurity too. Private-sector investment in the country remains at a low ebb, which resulted in a surplus liquidity of Tk. 96,000 crore in the banking sector. If we want to achieve higher economic growth then government should give top priority to restoring investors' confidence because overall investment which is now at 22% should be 36% for higher growth.

According to The Asian Development Bank (ADB), Bangladesh is expected to have 78 million workers by 2025, up from 56.7 million in 2010, of whom two thirds have only minimal education and 4% have received any kind of training. Different studies also show that

around 2.2 million people enter the job market annually, while nearly 1 million get jobs and rest remain unemployed or under-employed. Currently, 47% of graduates are unemployed. Moreover, our employment structure is characterised by the predominance of low-productivity and low-wage, and around 80% of the total labour force were employed in the informal sector, which is insecure, poorly paid and has no social security which in turn cannot contribute much to poverty reduction.

In a pre-budget meeting, the finance minister said that this year government will not allocate any new fund for agriculture and has no plan to increase the agriculture research allocation either (The Daily Star May 20). Every year, we are adding 1.8 to 2 million people to the national population, because of which we are losing 1% of agricultural land every year. Currently, there are 8.774 million hectares of cultivable land available, of which 88% is cultivated, so there is limited scope to expand the cultivated area and on top of that if we lose 1% land per annum, we will not have much land to cultivate. The question is, what is our plan to accommodate and feed the extra population who will join soon?

From above analysis and seeing the present economic scenario, it seems Bangladesh will not be able to take advantage of this demographic transition, unless it continues to invest in education, health and nutrition, infrastructure and economic policies, and creating favourable environment for local and foreign investment. Demographic dividends are not automatic. To realise the dividends, we will need educated, healthy and productive labour force. Only new and enhanced infrastructure will provide jobs, increase attractiveness for foreign direct investment, improve productivity and urbanization, and ultimately, connect us to the global economic markets which we desperately needs to access. We need to adopt an expansionary economic policy so that we can increase production, productivity and consequent employment generation for future workforce through higher investment in above mentioned sectors. This massive number of young working people, if provided jobs, will definitely generate economic activity. On the other hand, they can become a threat to stability and turn into 'demographic burden,' if we were unable to provide them work or business.

The writer is a businessman.
E-mail: afsarulhaider@gmail.com

QUOTABLE Quote

The best things in life are free, but sooner or later the government will find a way to tax them.

Author Unknown

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Plane part

5 Worldwide

11 Radius partner

12 Muralist Diego

13 Goes bad

14 Dodged

15 Utmost

16 Use tactic

17 News subject

19 Film's Lupino

22 Smallest mammal

24 Viper's poison

26 Bank offering

27 Lab particle

28 Bring together

30 Doofus

31 Fellows

32 Turning tool

34 Easter bloom

35 Central

38 Mississippi port

41 Effortless

42 Egypt neighbor

43 Legal claim

44 Wild parties

45 Patella's place

DOWN

1 Go around

2 Loads

3 Getting soaked, perhaps

4 - Vegas

5 Inexperienced

6 "SNL", for example

7 Egg outline

8 Garden plot

9 Verb for you

10 Young fellow

16 Handful of

18 Let off steam

19 By and large

20 Downfall

21 Clip contents

22 Run-down area

23 Sharpen

25 Singly

29 Magic medicine

30 Messy room

33 Rap sheet item

34 Ear part

36 "Go it"

37 Unit of force

38 Hotel feature

39 Writer Levin

40 Drop back

41 Caribou's cousin

Yesterdays answer

L	A	K	E	S	P	U	R	S
O	P	E	R	A	T	E	N	E
T	H	I	R	D	D	E	G	R
S	I	T	D	E	M	I	K	E
A	D	E	L	E	S	O	P	E
S	L	I	N	K	R	E	D	S
A	D	L	A	I				
A	J	A	R	A	D	O	P	T
R	O	T	S	M	A	N	O	R
E	S	T	A	P	P	L	I	E
T	H	I	R	D	S	T	R	I
H	E	C	H	E	S	T	R	I
A	R	S	O	N	M	E	S	S

CRYPTOQUOTE

RAW RFJ UJXR WTODOXTO NJFWGX JH DT DKRAJG DGW, RJ UDCW TWF RAZTOX HDUJZDZG DTP HDUJZDZG RAZTOX TWF.

-- XDUKWI EJATXJT

Yesterdays CRYPTOQUOTE:

IT IS SHEER GOOD FORTUNE TO MISS SOMEBODY LONG BEFORE THEY LEAVE YOU.

-- TONI MORRISON

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte