

Is democracy a plaything of the 'M3'?

M. ADIL KHAN

If you think that democracy is about 'government of the people by the people and for the people', you are dead wrong, not these days. The way democracy has evolved in recent years in both developed as well as in developing countries, it has become more of a system that may be, just may be 'of the people' and to an extent (i.e. after accounting for rigging which is a norm in many countries) 'by the people,' but certainly not 'for the people.'

Also democracy's sole lingering claim to legitimacy that it allows people the opportunity to remove leaders/parties that displease them is still valid but hardly inspiring. Indeed, in every democracy voters frequently change governments that they are unhappy with but such changes hardly bring much change in policies or in the style of governance!

With the rise of neoliberal economic system the vortex of the moneyed, the muscled and the morons (M3) has taken over the political landscape and colonised democracy. This shift has resulted in governments working not so much for the vast majority that put them in power but for a network of vested interests and mainstream politicians that help each other.

The 2008 United Nations World Public Sector Report reveals that the discrepancies between public policies and citizens' expectations have widened so much that in a worldwide survey when people were asked whether their governments do what they expect them to do, a resounding 75% said, "NO." Surprisingly, dismay with policy incongruities seems more rampant in the developed than in the developing countries. Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin Page of Northwestern University in their research on the representativeness of America's democracy in public policy conclude that "it makes very little differ-

ence what the general public thinks" when it comes to policy, what matters is the "interest-group alignments and the preferences of affluent Americans."

Of late, in some countries the rich are seen to be using their wealth to form their own political parties and participate in elections to ensure that policies complement and not compromise their interests. For example, Mr. Clive Palmer, a billionaire mining magnate of Australia formed the Palmer United Party, participated in the 2013 Parliamentary election where he spent a huge sum during the campaign, got himself and few of his party members elected (enough to change the direction of policies). Since then, he has been instrumental in abolishing carbon tax, the mining tax etc., that unmistakably has paved the way to fattening his bulging purse and at the same time, halt Australia's progress in achieving climate change and wealth redistribution goals.

What is also quite disturbing about democracy these days is that you could be the dumbest and the most uncouth person on earth but if you play the game right, you would be elected. Take the case of Ms. Jacqui Lambie, a senator from Tasmania (Australia) who lately announced that as a single young woman her biggest ambition is to marry (not the welfare of her electorate but 'marry') someone who is rich. You cannot get crasser than this. Indeed, there is no dearth of clowns and morons in politics these days -- in some countries you have ministers who sleep through the meetings and sing in seminars!

Democracy's infection by the M3 is total in developing countries. Referring to the ever increasing intrusion of India's political space by the rich and the corrupt, Rammanohar Reddy observes that most of today's Members of Parliament are so "obscenely" rich that the Lok Sabha [Parliament] is no more "...a Hall of the People but of the Wealthy." Reddy further argues that in India the link between the elected repre-

sentatives, business, and the executive (and organised corruption) is now so intertwined that it is difficult to think that any government, elected or otherwise, can ever break this axis of evil. Farid Zakaria also thinks that most developing countries that conduct elections under the patronage of a nexus of profiteering politicians, businesses and also, sadly, a section of self-seeking civil society and media (largely a corporatised entity these days) and in conditions of weak rule of law and non-existent checks and balance do not practice democracy but, in the name of democracy, a system that rotates "plundering governments."

Add to this the rising spectre of geopolitics, and you will find that democracy starts to look more like a weapon of mass destruction. These days, hegemony use the excuse of democracy to demagogue leaders who resist their predatory demands and attack them militarily (and unlawfully), occupy their countries, kill their people and plunder their assets. At the same time, the obliging states, democratic or otherwise, that cooperate with and submit to hegemony are given free hand to govern in whatever manner they like. In these countries less 'democracy' is better for this allows the ruling parties to muzzle opposition and allow plunder in a mutually predatory unrestrained manner. Thanks to geopolitics and its patronage, we now have an example where government has been formed with an 'election' that virtually had a no-show voter turnout. Referring to its handy relationship to geopolitics Arundhati Roy observes that 'democracy' has now become "Free World's" whore, willing to dress up, dress down, willing to satisfy a whole range of tastes, available to be used and abused at will."

So how does the coterie of M3 manage to capture political space and ignore the vast majority that elects them in the first place? According to Gilens and Page it is not that elected governments do not

give nothing to the mass, some concessions are made but the pernicious thing about today's democracy is this that the politicians hide their plutocratic straggle through promotion of "politics of nationalism, sectarianism, and identity - a politics based on cultural values and symbolism rather than bread-and-butter interests." Indeed, sudden worldwide surge in the political discourse of nationalism, sectarianism, scare-mongering etc. that manifest themselves in some contexts as 'fight against terror' and in others as 'fight against anti-liberation forces' and yet in others, in the form of bellicose sectarianism such 'Hindutva,' etc. are nothing but attempts at inflaming passions, distracting attention, and hiding from the people the acts of theft by the cabal of corruption.

This, in short, is the political economy of present day democracy. It is indeed quite depressing but should we despair?

The good news is that those that subvert democracy, corrupt systems and dent ethics are in the minority and, as expected, they are not hugely popular -- a recent poll in USA reveals that "Congress is less popular than cockroaches and traffic jam!"

Thus, given that the human capital for goodness is in the majority, change is possible. The gutsiest way to bring change would be through mass upsurge but success cannot be guaranteed. Besides, this would be both messy and bloody. The other option is, use democracy to cure democracy.

Since all major political parties -- regardless of who these guys are, what they say and where they belong (East, West, North, and South) -- are infected, voting for these guys alternately gives you 'the government that you vote for but not the government that you want.'

So stop voting for the major political parties, result will be astounding!

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The police: Proper investigative body in money laundering cases?

MD. RIZWANUL ISLAM

UNDER the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, 2004 (ACCA), all corruption related offences as specified in the Act have to be investigated by no other agency but the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). Newspaper reports indicate that the government, acting on the proposal of the ACC, is now considering the case for stripping the ACC of the power of investigation into certain offences specified in the ACCA. According to the proposed change, the ACC would continue to investigate frauds committed by government employees, including public representatives, and employees of banks and financial institutions but frauds committed by private parties would be investigated by the police.

From a logistical viewpoint, this proposed lessening of the burden of the ACC which apparently does not have sufficient manpower; makes very good sense. The ACC should not be burdened by the duty to investigate allegations of petty frauds committed by private persons and the police should be able to take care of this. On this issue, clearly a line should be drawn between a graft (the act of securing advantage through the dishonest use of political power and influence) and a petty fraud as the proposal of the ACC appears to do. However, the same cannot be said about the thought of entrusting the police with the power to investigate cases filed under the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012 (MLPA).

The investigative power of police in violent and other crimes punishable under the Penal Code and various other penal laws has been criticised for long. Some critics have argued that the police is overburdened with various law enforcement duties and this impedes their ability to conduct painstaking and timely investigation into offences. Critics also often argue that the members of the police force in general do not receive adequate training for conducting investigation into crimes and, because of this, they often feel that resorting to coercion of suspects is the principal way of investigation and securing convictions for crimes. In view of these issues, some analysts have recommended the setting up of a separate investigating agency.

While the actual operational independence of the ACC has often been questioned by many, at least legally the ACC is an independent statutory body. The commissioners of the ACC enjoy far greater security of their tenures than that of the members of the police force, and if the ACC wants it surely can act with greater latitude than the police force can do. This is due to the fact that the police force works under the direct control of the government and would naturally be subject to undue pressure by the government. The process of investigation into crimes in this country can at times be so much politicised that in numerous occasions an investigation taking place during the regime of one government has been totally thrown apart by the subsequent political regime and started afresh. And the finding of the subsequent investigation has not only differed from that of the prior one, but also in some cases it has been completely contradictory.

Of course, investigation is a process of unearthing cogent evidence, and it is a dynamic process. Hence, discovery of new facts can lead to new directions in the investigation process and, accordingly, the conclusions may legitimately vary. However, the frequent incidence of such radical change in conclusions reached by police investigations would imply that either there are some systemic flaws in the investigation process followed by the police force which made the first investigation ineffective or that in exercising their investigative functions, the investigators have not been able to work freely.

Possession of power and engagement in corrupt practices, especially the ones which would have severe adverse consequences, would often go hand in hand. For this reason, more often than not, politicians or public servants would be the perpetrators of corruption related offences. This would make the police force even more susceptible to political pressure and may restrain its members from freely conducting investigations into corruption cases which would include offences under the MLPA.

Another concern with the proposed change is that rigorous investigation into some of the offences punishable under the MLPA requires very extensive and specialised training. This would particularly be applicable in case of various financial offences as mentioned in the MLPA, all of which can now be investigated only by the ACC. It is difficult to think that the members of our police force are endowed with the expertise to investigate them.

Although we fail to find merits in the proposed move of empowering the police force to investigate offences punishable under the MLPA, we do not imply that the existing investigative powers of the ACC are functioning efficiently. Probably not many would claim that the investigation procedure of the ACC is functioning well. Nonetheless, the alternative lies not in the police force, but rather in strengthening the ACC. The move of the government is likely to cause a malfunctioning system to deteriorate even further.

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First as tragedy, then as farce

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

TODAY, I take a close look at her. She is everywhere, of course, yet to a majority of us enjoying the fruits of her labour, she remains faceless, nameless -- invisible almost, even in her hyper-visibility. She is one of our "Golden Girls," the backbone of this export-driven neoliberal economy. The one we proudly point to in order to denote women's empowerment in the country; the one whose figure -- whose supposed freedom -- we are never too shy to deploy to justify an exploitative sector.

Standing in a street corner in Badda after a long day of demonstrations, Mita Parveen, a Tuba worker, looks at me appraisingly, as if trying to decipher if I'd be able to hear her through the blinds of my apparent privilege. I hasten to tell her I am in solidarity with her cause. She smiles at me, wryly. Perhaps she decides I am not a class enemy, after all; or perhaps she realises she needs the media (no matter how elite or anti-worker) on her side. She explains how she has been protesting in front of BGMEA Bhaban, labour ministry and the Press Club for the last few weeks for the wages for August-September and Eid bonus. "Why this circus before every Eid?" she exclaims. "We may be mere workers but don't we deserve to be with our families, celebrating Eid instead of begging for our due? We're not greedy, money-hungry people. We just want what is ours."

Mita, a single mother with a nine-year-old son, tells me she has had to protest to get her due wages for three consecutive Eids. History, after all, does repeat itself, if first as tragedy, and then as farce. Her last Eid was spent sprawled over an ironing table at a Tuba group factory in Badda, an IV drip in her arm

to keep her from passing out because of dehydration. She, along with more than a thousand coworkers, occupied the factory premises after repeated failed promises from BGMEA to pay them their due -- three months salary, overtime and Eid bonus.

What happened in the next 11 days was a systematic disavowal of the rights of garment workers that made transparent the collusion of the state and the silent complicity of the elite. On August 8, the police cut off water supply to the factory building, locked them from the outside such that no one could get in, and finally dispersed them using rubber bullets and teargas canisters. Allies, too, were beaten and disbanded.

During this ruckus, the High Court granted an ad-interim bail to owner of Tuba Group, Delwar Hossain, on July 24 for two months to clear off his arrears. Even though the government pledged to appeal against the bail, it did not do so for reasons 'mysterious' to us all, essentially facilitating his release from jail. This is the same Delwar Hossain, mind you, whose blatant disregard for fire safety and regulation in his quest for profit led to the deaths of at least 117 workers at Tazreen Fashions on November 24, 2012. After a protracted battle led by activists and Tazreen workers, Delwar was finally arrested earlier this year.

Upon his discharge, he sealed off the factory premises and began to remove the machinery from the floors. On August 18, he issued a notice that the factory was being closed indefinitely under Section 13 (1) of the Labour Law 2006. The notice blamed the workers for illegally occupying the factory, looting and vandalising machines and goods and causing huge loss to the company.

By terming the peaceful protest as an "illegal strike" under Section 13 (1), Delwar wanted to get away with not paying any compensation to the workers for being laid-off. However, the labour ministry, responding to pressure from workers and 15 labour groups under the banner, "Tuba Garment Sangram Parishad," determined that the section was not applicable to the Tuba Group factories. It also urged the owner to pay compensation as per the law.

Tuba workers, meanwhile, soon learnt that no one in Badda or surrounding areas would hire them in their factories: their involvement in the protests had made them "undesirables." Their last hope remains a compensation package/due wages that would enable them to at least relocate to a different place and find a new job.

All the while insisting that he had no money to pay his workers, Delwar nevertheless extended his bail by 6 months on September 25 on the ground that he would pay festival allowance and other service benefits due to Tuba workers. Two days later, however, he said he could only pay the workers if he got the insurance claim for Tazreen. Well-wishers of Delwar (and there are many, including those in the highest echelon of power) can applaud the shrewdness with which Delwar has managed to squirm his way out of a difficult situation. He succeeded to get himself out of jail by using the workers' demands as bait; and now, using the same bait, he wishes to get his hands on the insurance money that he's been so far denied because of his alleged involvement in the fire. Meanwhile, lose-lose for both Tazreen and Tuba workers.

Given Delwar is free, BGMEA now wants to absolve itself from any and all responsibility of Tuba workers; but it

begs the question: what exactly is the role of the exporters' association if it isn't to hold its members accountable for their dishonest activities? The answer's in the question, of course: the role of an owners' association is clearly to protect the interest of owners, not workers.

Every Eid, there is an inevitable brouhaha surrounding wages and festival allowance. The owners justify their unwillingness to pay workers by insisting that they give bonus because of their "big hearts," not any legal obligation. Section 120 of the Labor Law 2006, however, includes "bonus" as an inseparable part of wages. While it's true that the law does not specify what this bonus entails, it does say that any allowance, once given, cannot be withdrawn arbitrarily.

On September 21, the government determined that workers of all garment factories would be paid their bonus by September 28 and September's wages by October 2. The BGMEA claims that 20% -- and labour groups 40% -- of factories failed to pay their bonuses by the stipulated time. A monitoring cell apparently has been formed to overlook the payment of bonus and wages. One wonders what action, if any, will be taken against factories that fail to comply with the government's directive. Probably a very light tap on the wrist, if that.

The workers have long lost their faith in the goodwill of owners and BGMEA, and they are slowly but surely losing confidence in the government. Mita doesn't need fancy theories to tell her that the role of the state, under neoliberalism, is to facilitate the market, as she concludes, matter-of-factly, that the owners have "bought the government."

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QUOTABLE Quote

I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying.

Oscar Wilde

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

Across

- Commotions
- Turns left
- Frenzied
- Stampede cause
- Texan landmark
- Fight site
- Ready to go
- Scintillate
- Straw hat
- Fuming feeling
- Animal trail
- Utter
- Tie type
- No longer active: Abbr.
- Deplete
- Animation frame
- More willowy
- Crawl expert
- Opposite of post
- Playful sprite
- "-- like"
- Stand
- Fathered
- Adopted son of Claudius
- Turner and Danson

DOWN

- Accumulate
- "Doctor Who" baddies
- How police may act
- Virtual person in a computer game
- Injure
- Lack of vitality
- Port producer
- Startle
- All there is
- Twosome
- Sleuth Poirot
- Protective ditch
- Goblet part
- Good of the dead
- Do electrical work
- Magic potion
- Strike caller
- Made coffee
- Congress coverer
- Hook's helper
- Oboe parts
- Japanese bean paste
- Set fire to

CRYPTOQUOTE 8-15

S HGVAU UV CBB BSTV FD NV YVJDHISQWY
 IDF RDY DIV XSVJV DR RSYVUDYTA, NGF RDM
 FWV BVMHVY DR DGY MCSBP UDYT.
 -- IVSB CVOAFYDIH

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF; THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THAT'S WRONG WITH HISTORY.
 -- CLARENCE DARROW

Yesterday's answer

SITARS HEAP
 ACADIA OGLE
 TEXAS RANGER
 GEARS
 GAIN SHAG
 SOSO GOULET
 OFT MANGE E
 BARHOP BAKE
 ROOT GREY
 MOORE
 POWER RANGER
 ODOR ENDIVE
 PENS STAGED

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

OTTO HAS A DATE?
 YES, BUT HER OWNER IS VERY PROTECTIVE

GREG + MORT WALKER
 HE INSISTED THAT I CHAPERONE

HENRY by Don Trachte

CITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL TODAY

STAGE ENTRANCE

HEAR A HARMONICA CONCERT BY HENRY, WHO HAS PERFORMED WITH THE CITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA ADMISSION ONLY 2 CENTS.

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.