



Politics is dead, long live politics

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BANGLADESH'S political landscape was full of suspense and uncertainty in 2014 with the fear of escalation of violence. At the beginning of 2014 politics held the entire nation hostage. The Awami League and BNP failed miserably to reach a consensus over the mode of holding the parliamentary election. The United Nations and many other countries, including the USA and UK, had made hectic efforts to break the political deadlock, but in vain.

Top politicians, particularly two top leaders Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, remained stuck to their respective guns. None cared about the norms and values of democracy. Their failure to negotiate and break the deadlock presented the country a one-sided and controversial parliamentary election. Khaleda Zia-led opposition alliance was hell bent on resisting the January 5 polls. The Sheikh Hasina-led government on the other hand was desperate to hold the election. Therefore, the polling day turned into the deadliest ever in the history of Bangladesh. Their failure to break the political stalemate denied people their voting rights. More than half of the parliamentary seats were systematically made 'uncontested'. The remaining 147 out of the 300 seats were up for a farcical polling. Voters found no interest in exercising their right of franchise to elect their representatives. So, voter turnout was low. The election was over before the polling day, and the remaining formalities were completed on January 5. Politics of stubbornness finally won, democracy was defeated.

Politics, after the January 5 polls, took a more peculiar look to distort further our

parliamentary democracy. MPs elected in the one-sided election took oath before the dissolution of the previous parliament. Thus, when the 10th Parliament was constituted after the January 5 polls 9th Parliament was still in existence. That meant that the country had two parliaments simultaneously for a period in 2014 January! Nothing could be more ridiculous than this.

After being sworn in as the premier, Sheikh Hasina inducted a few MPs from the main opposition into her cabinet. And chairman of the main opposition Jatiya

2014 began amid indefinite blockade enforced by the BNP-led opposition alliance. Although nothing like that is likely on the first day of 2015 there is no certainty that the political landscape will remain stable in the remaining days of the year.

Party, HM Ershad, was made special envoy to Premier Shiekh Hasina with the status of a minister. This was another mockery of parliamentary democracy.

The way violence had flared up in 2013 and in the first week of January made the entire situation unpredictable. But the political landscape suddenly and abnormally became calm after January 5 polls. This is in fact an abnormal political stability. Many people fear a sudden deterioration of the situation as the reasons for instability still exist.

However, the stability, though abnormal in nature, appeared as a blessing for Sheikh Hasina. Initially, the government policymakers were worried about the

violent situation prevailing then. They were not certain about the future. The records did not make them feel encouraged. In 1996, the then BNP-led government formed in the one-sided parliamentary polls was able to stay in office only for a few weeks. But the unprecedented scale of violence waged by Jamaat-Shibir men in 2013 in the name of movement had forced people to think more about their security, let alone their voting rights. Moreover, the BNP leaders and activists became frustrated, having failed to resist the January 5 polls, and lost the strength to wage fresh

agitation against the government.

The AL-led government started using and abusing the advantages of the situation to consolidate its position. Its strategy was to keep BNP under pressure through different means including pursuing the cases filed in 2013 and early 2014 against numerous BNP leaders and activists. The government also introduced new rule for the BNP for holding public rallies. It was not allowed in some instances to hold public rallies. Several times the BNP was given permission by the government to hold rallies but with conditions. The government also exposed its attitude against public dissent by not allowing protest even by some non-political organisations -- people and students who took to the

streets for their own causes. This has unmasked the government's authoritarian mindset.

Various instances show how politics has been made dysfunctional. For this the process had begun long ago. In 2014, it had reached almost its final stage. Many consider the current state of stability as suffocating and unhealthy for democracy.

What is the solution to the present situation? Are the government and the BNP thinking about a solution? The BNP has been threatening to wage street agitation from January 2015 to force the government to call for a fresh parliamentary election under a non-partisan government. The BNP wants state power and only a fresh election can pave the way for fulfilling its desire. The AL on the other hand wants to stay in power for the full five year term anyhow. So it will apply all means to foil BNP's street agitations as it did before the January 5 polls.

So 2015 brings little prospect of healthy politics for the people of Bangladesh. 2014 began amid indefinite blockade enforced by the BNP-led opposition alliance. Although nothing like that is likely on the first day of 2015 there is no certainty that the political landscape will remain stable in the remaining days of the year. The two major players, AL and BNP, want to enjoy state power by any means. Political ethics and democratic norms and values do not matter to them. This mindset has destroyed country's politics. For better politics, mindset of the AL and BNP high commands must change. All should keep in mind that a state without leaders cannot move forward and leaders cannot lead the state without clean politics.

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