

PARTISAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLLS

PARTIAL REFORM WILL NOT WORK MONEY, VIOLENCE AND MUSCLE POWER WILL RULE

TOFAL AHMED
I have some reservations about the way the government has unilaterally decided to amend the local government act and introduce partisan election system for the local bodies.

the existing local government system. First, a unified law, known as framework law, should be formulated for administering all the local bodies. In Bangladesh we have different laws for different levels of local governments which create confusion and hinder

and the chairman, make him accountable to the council members, and strengthen the decision making process at the grassroots level with increased participation of the elected members.

Thirdly, adequate funds need to be allocated for local governments and local bodies must be able to participate in planning how they will be spent. Fourth, the government should strengthen the local bodies with adequate manpower. They can recruit new officials or delegate existing officials to the local bodies so that they can work in tandem with elected local bodies.

A partisan election system has some positive features. When a candidate participates in an election with party symbol then the party will be responsible for their candidates. The candidate must also be a member of the party. It will definitely strengthen the party mechanism at the ground level and ensure participation of the grassroots members in the decision making process. It will certainly help democratisation of party politics. But these positive changes will not happen until and unless political parties change their behaviour. The ruling party should not interfere in the election and activities of the local governments. They should rise above petty party interests and respect the rule of law. I would like to request the government to include the above mentioned reform proposals in finalising the local government act.

The commentator is a local government expert and Honorary Visiting Fellow at BIGD, BRAC University. Comment taken by **Shamsuddoza Sajen**.

NASEEM AKHTER HUSSAIN

PARTISAN local government polls are not necessarily a bad thing. However, in our context, we can't help but be cautious. WE have noticed that there was violence in every election held under political parties. In our country, the party that wins the election has all the power. It uses the administration, the law enforcement agencies, and the state machineries for its own political interest. And the party that loses gets nothing. So the competition among political contestants gets violent. Those who fail to get power take to the streets and get involved in violent politics as seen since 1991. But the local government elections, for example, the

union parishad elections, were mostly violence-free. This was because the political parties were not directly involved in these elections. If political parties nominate candidates in local body elections, it is beyond any doubt that the elections will be a game of money and muscle power. There will be nomination trade. When someone will buy a party's nomination for, say, Tk 1 crore, he will try to win the election at any cost. Because it's an investment the candidate has made to get back, maybe, double the amount. Money, muscle power and violence become the main working force in such elections.

Researchers have found that the 2014 national election was the bloodiest election since independence. A party that 'wins' such an election fails to consolidate its power and becomes vulnerable. The current ruling party has less influence at the grassroots level. So now they want to institutionalise "partyocracy" in the local bodies through partisan elections.

The 'bourgeois' political parties are not as organised or strong at the grassroots. When they are in power they get involved in corruption and when they are not in power they resort to violence. Now that the political parties will be involved in the local body elections, their activities at that level will increase. As Jamaat's registration as a political party has been cancelled by the High Court, candidates of Jamaat won't be able to participate in the local elections. And the BNP is now divided into many factions and is facing a leadership crisis. In this context, it will be easy for the ruling party to dominate at the grassroots level.

The commentator is Professor, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University. Comment taken by **Naznin Tithi**.



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They should have taken such a major decision only after having discussions with all the major political parties and stakeholders.

However, party based local election is not an exception. Both India and Britain have been practicing this system effectively for many years without any intervention from the ruling parties. I am afraid how effective it will be in our existing political culture where even the non-partisan local elections are highly influenced by the ruling parties and their acquiescent administrations.

Furthermore, this single change in election procedure is not sufficient to make the local government strong and effective. Major reforms are needed in

coordination among the local bodies. In West Bengal, local governments of district council, panchayat samity and village panchayat work under a unified bill. They hold elections on the same day so that all the elected local bodies can work within the same timeframe. We should also include this provision in our local government regulations.

Secondly, our local bodies work in a presidential system where the chairman dictates all the activities of the local government. This is an anomaly as our national government follows a parliamentary system. At the local level we should elect only members who will have the power to elect the chairman. It will reduce the gap between members

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THE QUARTET OF FREEDOM

The story of Tunisia's civil society movement should inspire us all



UPASHANA SALAM

FOUR years back, it would probably have been difficult for Tunisians to imagine that a coalition of the country's civil rights groups would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the near future. Tunisia, ruled by autocratic leaders like Habib Bourguiba and later Ben Ali for a good 54 years after its independence from French colonialists, was besieged by

rampant corruption, lack of economic opportunities and police violence.

When the country was at the brink of a civil war in 2013, following Ben Ali's ouster after the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia that resulted in the Arab Spring, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, comprising a coalition of four major civil society groups of the country - including Tunisia's national labour union, employers' union, order of lawyers and human rights league - negotiated talks between secular parties and the ruling Islamist-leaning Ennahada Party, ensuring that they agree to a "road map" that would be the founding stone in developing pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.

The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet had their work cut out for them since they launched their activities in the summer of 2013. Through coordinated efforts, the Quartet was able to bring together leaders of two dozen political parties and secular groups to find a solution to the country's political crisis, following Ben Ali's departure and the murder of opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi, which was beginning to threaten the country's unity and stability.

As Tunisian expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sarah Chayes, aptly put it, the hard-won democracy of the country was a result of the "breakdown and widespread disavowal of standard political processes, and the ability of external actors to step in and serve as bludgeons and mediators, both." The roadmap presented by the quartet - a coalition between the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers - was accepted by all stakeholders, including both the ruling and opposition parties. In fact, the then ruling Ennahada Party agreed to dissolve the incumbent government and form an independent election commission, among other terms mentioned in the road map.

The quartet was made of different, unrelated groups with distinct goals. "The quartet was a disparate entity, made of groups that did not necessarily see eye to eye, historically," says Sarah Chayes in *The Guardian* (October 9, 2015). "So there had to be a kind of peacemaking within the quartet before it could perform its function." The quartet did not have a token role of speaking "elegant words" or taking a "certain stance" on the issues. It spent sleepless nights trying to come up with a consensual solution to the political crisis, and helped as well as "threatened" political leaders to come up with a long term solution that could put an end to the impasse.

While in many other countries, including Bangladesh, it's difficult to imagine such a powerful voice outside the government managing to take the frontline to address and resolve issues of national import, the members of the Quartet have succeeded in having that kind of influence that can mobilise an entire population, while commanding attention from the upper echelons of the state, after years of trying to cement their role as true representatives of ordinary people. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), for example, fought for the rights of Tunisians since its inception, beginning with the fight for independence from France during the 1940s and 50s. UGTT's founder Farhat Hached is revered as a hero of the Tunisian independence movement, and was fundamental in ensuring that the body retained its distinct, non-partisan entity - something that labour unions in other Arab countries have been unable to achieve. In late 1983, UGTT participated and led the bread riots (resulting from a rise in bread price due to an IMF imposed austerity programme), and during Ben Ali's

regime, it was steadfast in its demand for wage hikes and improvements in working conditions, thus winning the hearts and loyalty of the working population of the country. In fact, many Tunisians have expressed that the UGTT represents Tunisians better than any political party and certainly enjoys more legitimacy from the citizens of the country. Just consider the fact that this is the only institution in the country that rivalled Ben Ali's ruling party only through the basis of its large membership and focus on multiple local structures.

Tunisian Human Rights League was forced to shut down following a crackdown on the 20-year old organisation during Ben Ali's regime but still persisted in carrying out their activities in secrecy. The League's Vice President Ali Ziddini has gone on record to say that they would hold secret meetings in someone's house, while the government's security services surrounded the building, keeping it under surveillance. After Ben Ali's ouster, the association's role in ensuring democracy in the country was further entrenched, as they rebuild the organisation while handling a "flood of citizen complaints about treatment at the hands of Ben Ali." The Tunisian Bar Association is the oldest member of the quartet, as it was founded in 1887. The members of the association, like their counterparts of UGTT, led the movement for independence through their understanding of constitutional principles and republican values. As the president of the association Mohamed Fadhel Mahfoudh said in an interview, they succeed in standing their ground because their bylaws were democratic which "vaccinated" them against "efforts at co-option."

Like in several other countries, the employer's union of Tunisia enjoys adequate economic clout in the country. What sets them apart, however, is their decision to join the quartet, joining forces with the country's labour union for the first time since independence, thereby enabling the quartet to be a powerful, united force to reckon with.

The Quartet's triumph in ensuring a smooth democratic transition can also be credited to their successful attempts at getting the then ruling Ennahada Party - that won the first election in the country - to agree to share power with other parties and civil society groups. Ennahada also accepted the reforms demanded of them and voluntarily ceded power to a technocratic, national unity government - Nidaa Tounes - in 2014, following protests. In fact, in a *Washington Post* article (October 24, 2014), Rachid Ghannouchi, founder and chairman of Tunisia's Ennahada Party, stressed that "sacrificing party interest in this way was a small price to pay for national unity."

Even though the context of the Quartet's triumph in paving the road to democracy is unique, there are lessons that we can take from Tunisia's success. The role of Bangladesh's civil society in ensuring democracy - be it during the Pakistani regime or the 1990's Movement of Democracy or even the demand for fair trials for war criminals of 1971 - is widely acknowledged and accepted. However, the function of the once powerful civil society has more or less been diluted in the last decade or so. A vigorous civil society can play an important role in strengthening citizens' positive engagement with the state, thereby proving to be a vital partner for the government. Instead of considering their suggestions as "anti-state", the government needs to be willing to allocate a space where civil society is given the liberty to question political actions and present their recommendations without fear or doubt. The civil society is one body that should be allowed to function freely in any country that professes to be democratic.

On the other hand, we should also look at the reasons behind the National Dialogue Quartet's success in entrenching democracy in Tunisia. Instead of focussing on individual interests, they worked together to, in Sarah Chayes words, compel "inexperienced and sometimes bitter and refractory politicians to bridge the divides." Over the years, civil society groups in Bangladesh seem to have moved away from mass movements that provoked a change in the way things are run, to a more individualistic stance, where every group

seems more interested in pursuing their own agenda.

The members of Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet have also been able to hold solid bargaining power in the country's political sphere, because they have, over time, been successful in securing the approval of the Tunisian population at large. Their "road map" was a detailed, laborious exercise that took months but was eventually accepted by all - be it the ruling party, the opposition or ordinary Tunisians. It's probably time for the civil society of Bangladesh to be more connected to general people of the country, to seek their approval. Instead of focusing on a seemingly elitist stance that gives more importance to rhetoric than action, our civil society members should closely involve and engage the general populace, thereby letting the citizenry know that they hope to work for

them, with them.

It goes without saying that in order for democracy to survive in a country, we need an active, productive, engaging civil society that needs to be given the space to function efficiently. While it's the civil society's responsibility to engage stakeholders to consider them as serious negotiators of change, the government needs to realise that it is not the sole agent of democracy; it needs (a lot of) help from those that represent the public - and in this case, this role is fulfilled by our civil society. That's the biggest lesson that we, as a nation, can learn from Tunisia's achievement.

The writer is a Senior Editorial Assistant, *The Daily Star*.

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