

From a winter of discontent to a spring of hope

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

A year ago from today not even a savvy soothsayer would have dared to predict the change in our political climate that we are witnessing now. A year ago the streets of Dhaka and elsewhere had turned into battle grounds with marauding gangs throwing petrol bombs at random, police charging rioting youths while buses and trucks were set ablaze. The main opposition party and its strident leader had gone on a war path to bring down the government taking the whole future of politics in the country into a downward spiral where an abyss appeared to be the only destination. There was no telling if the chaos and anarchy that ruled that time would end anytime soon. Therefore, what we are witnessing now a year later is nothing short of a miracle.

I do not know where or to whom the accolades are truly due. Some might attribute the change to rethinking in the leadership of two parties; some might attribute it to internal pressures within the parties. But an impartial analysis of the events of the last two years points at only one contributor of this change; it is passive resistance of violence by our people. The endless hartals and oborodhs in the last two years brought work life and day to day business of common people to a standstill for days together. The fights between so called workers of two parties wrought enormous damages to life and property of ordinary people. Schools remained closed, exams were scrapped, travels between cities became nightmares, and yet the main opposition struck to its agenda of violent opposition relentlessly duping themselves with illusions of people support. On the other hand the government interpreted passivity of people as indirect support to its strong arm tactics. Both were wrong. People neither applauded the opposition's recourse to violence to press their demands nor cheered the government's response. It was a stalemate, but eventually the wordless dislike of political violence of the silent majority seems to have won.

The change in the political weather came in slow doses. First, the opposition's participation in the municipal elections, and a relatively peaceful completion of the elections. Second, was absence of political violence associated with past elections

either during or after the elections. Both of these were way out of the ordinary considering the confrontational politics of the country of last decade. Both government and the main opposition had shown great intransigence in accepting the democratic way of resolving problems beginning with elections of 2008. BNP participation in municipal elections was, therefore, a big but pleasant surprise. However, the party's acceptance of the election results that overwhelmingly went in favour of government party nominees without resort to massive protests was even a

bent on a do or die battle. The mood of the participants in the rally which was huge by any standard was a far cry from the acts of arson and anarchy shown by the perpetrators of street battle a year ago. The utterances of both the leaders and workers of the party (that were revealed through the media) were to a point of incredibility since these were so different from the acts of only a year before. They spoke of responsibility, national unity, and faith in the democratic process of elections. The silent majority that had only seen inter-party wars and internecine political battles could not be more pleased by

will be consensus among the contestants on a process and institution to hold these elections. The past elections were held in a cloud of misgivings, mistrust, and with utter lack of participation. The silent majority may not have supported violence in changing government, but they also do not want repeat of a non-participatory process in changing government. They would like to endorse a process that gives them voice.

The wind of change that we detect now in our political climate cannot be sustained by efforts from one end only. This has to be matched by

No implementation of building codes!

Time to treat violations as criminal offence

IN the wake of yet another earth-shattering earthquake and amidst threats of even more devastating ones in the near future, we are horrified by the overwhelming number of buildings that have been built in the country violating the Bangladesh National Building Code. According to experts, the situation is so dangerous that should an earthquake measuring 7 or higher in the Richter scale hit Dhaka, as many as 90 percent of the buildings would be razed to the ground. This is a catastrophic picture, and one, we hope, we never have to encounter.

However, questions arise as to how so many buildings could be built flouting the most basic of building codes, why so little institutional effort has been put in implementing the building code enacted in 1993, and why little or no action is taken against those who breach the law. In particular, the role of development authority, Rajuk, needs to be critically evaluated. According to a Rajuk official quoted in *Prothom Alo*, of the thousands of buildings erected every year, monitoring teams only visit around a 100. This is completely unacceptable and highlights the alarming extent to which the regulatory body has been neglecting its duties.

The ministry of relief and disaster management has already identified over 72,000 risky buildings in Dhaka, including the Dhaka Medical College Hospital as earthquake-prone structures. However, it is unclear what action is being taken by the ministry to ensure that their inhabitants are protected in case of a disaster.

It is high time that we consider violation of building codes a criminal offence, and take appropriate action not only against the errant owners and construction companies, but also against corrupt and/or negligent Rajuk officials.

School dropouts high in Dhunat

Poverty of families must be addressed

THE *Daily Star* report that around 2,500 students have dropped out of school in the last three years in Bogra's Dhunat upazilla, due to extreme poverty and child marriage, is a cause for worry. While the government has had significant success in achieving high enrolment rates in primary schools for both boys and girls, it is crucial that this trend is sustained. Primary students must have the opportunity to continue to the middle and secondary levels of education.

The report further states that although parents are aware of the importance of education they are forced to pull out their children from school because they cannot afford the study materials. Poverty resulting from land erosion that leads to landlessness, compels parents to make their children work or get their minor daughters married off to relieve themselves of an extra mouth to feed.

This is hardly the scenario we can allow to persist when we are aiming to become a middle income country. The government must amplify its efforts to reduce poverty in the most remote and impoverished areas where more and more children are discontinuing school. Dhunat may well be one of many other upazillas in the country where this alarming trend continues.

It goes without saying that the government and organisations must work together to create more jobs and greater opportunities to set up small scale businesses. If government schools are supposed to provide free education till secondary school there should not be extra charges for anything else. Unless we address the root causes of the increase in school drop outs, more and more children will be deprived of the light of gaining knowledge. That is something that will be a huge setback for Bangladesh's developmental aspirations.



PHOTO: CDN.CAVEMANCIRCUS

greater surprise. It had walked away from the Upazilla elections of 2014 complaining of vote rigging and ballot box stuffing. Curiously BNP stayed the course despite complaints of similar nature in the municipal elections.

Call this political maturity or a strategy to shape the party's image in the public eye, the municipal elections seemed to cast the political climate in the country in a fresh mold that came to light in the most recent rally of BNP and address of its chairperson. Both the rally and the address spoke of a party agenda more focused on a democratic process to change in government than on violent opposition

this emerging phenomenon.

The million dollar question is whether this new climate can be sustained. The credits for allowing holding of a peaceful election and upholding the results (despite flaws) are as much due to the two major parties, as to the public in general. But the municipal elections are in the past now. There are more roads to cross in a country's future than holding local body elections. Soon there will be demands for new general elections. It is not important to know if these will be held in two years or three years. What is important to know if there

responses from government and government party that promote accommodation, mutual respect, and understanding. Rhetoric can be answered with rhetoric, a vitriolic speech by another. But these are not ways to seek a common ground among parties to lead the country to a democratic future. We may be glad that a reprise of the past winter of discontent between the two major parties did not happen, but it will not morph into a spring of hope until the two parties reach a common ground of understanding.

The writer is a political commentator and analyst.

We are better off but not happy!

M. ADIL KHAN

I have just finished my three-week long Dhaka visit. I returned to Dhaka after nearly three years. During this period a lot seemed to have happened.

There are new flyovers, new nicely paved roads that embarrass the old potholed ones that still exist and bear signs of neglect; less traffic jams (relatively, that is) and same if not more pollution but remarkably, no power cuts. Bangladesh seems to be evolving as a country of many islands – economically, socially and culturally!

Most people appear busy and have something to be busy about and earning. There is more show of affluence at posh restaurants where many spend-thrift Bangladeshis frequent. Weddings are lavish but there is less diversity in food (same old *kachchi biryani* – the wedding staple); wedding guests are the same and they repeat same old stories of diabetes, blood pressure, plundering local hospitals etc. etc.) in every occasion they grace. Also thanks to proliferating membership of facebook (FB) and newly acquired skills in mobile phone photography and instant FB posting, selfies have assumed a new art form! I am aware that Modi loves selfies too but let us not blame Indians for everything.

However, what I also found quite significant this time around is that the ruling government that looked visibly shaky in 2014 is now fully in control so much so that ministers these days com-

pose poems caricaturing the opposition and recite them at cabinet meetings, not as obscene as Nero's fiddling in burning Rome but inane as kicking balls into a goalkeeper-less net.

Another noticeable thing - although the economy is not exactly booming it is recording a healthy growth rate of 6.2 percent per annum and with opposition virtually diminished some semblance of stability is in place but remarkably, not the investor's confidence. To appreciate this one has to simply look at many unfinished buildings that dot the present day Dhaka city. These investors have either ran out of capital or are refusing to sink more money into investments that show poor prospect of profit.

What is also remarkable is that many of the lounge room discussions that I have had the privilege of attending, many – mainly from the better-off and professional class – ask how long and what next, virtually saying we are rich and privileged but we are not happy. I have also had the opportunity of talking to one or two ordinary people such as taxi drivers – they echo same frustration.

Seems to me that even though people are better off economically it is the political deprivation that they resent most and this is also intruding on the economy.

The argument that Bangladesh needs 'development' before democracy and thus controlled democracy is not only desirable but a sin qua non does not

seem to be gaining much popularity with the rank and file. On the other hand, with suppression and diminishing of liberal and open opposition, the real opposition may have gone underground and if indeed this is true then Bangladesh has much to worry about.

Many believe that a spectre of

Bangladeshis simply cannot allow extremists to triumph over liberalism and the way to defeat extremism is neither through dagger nor through 'development' but through unadulterated democracy.

seething discontent that is brewing underneath is being worked on by extremist/ fundamentalist opposition. Furthermore, with the weakening of open opposition and thus accountability, another scenario may also be emerging and on the rise. Corruption and thuggery are likely to become more intense in the context of the

culture of patronage based politics that Bangladeshi politics is known for. There may also be a proliferation of intra-party infighting (the rise in the number of rival candidates against the party nominations in the recently held local government election indicates this as an emerging trend) in the ruling party, that in the end may promote opposition from within, prompting some to seek strange bedfellows.

Indeed, given the number of dynamics that are currently raging both within and across the nation it is difficult to predict exactly how things would shape up in the coming years but one thing has to be ensured which is that whatever happens, Bangladeshis simply cannot allow extremists to triumph over liberalism and the way to defeat extremism is neither through dagger nor through 'development' but through unadulterated democracy. There should be no illusion that development is the panacea to all ills. It is not.

In fact when development is pursued within the frameworks of corruption and authoritarianism, it breeds inequality, embeds injustices and spreads frustrations that fill the ranks of militants – in case of Bangladesh by the Islamist fundamentalists/extremists that sanctify themselves as crusaders of truth!

The writer is a professor at the School of Social Science, University of Queensland, Australia and a retired senior policy manager of the United Nations.

COMMENTS

"4G mobile network 'this year'"

(January 7, 2015)

Karl Ahmed

Good news; hope it works properly.

Amiruzzaman Nomaan

Too funny. We've lots of zillas and upazilas where we don't have internet and the government is going to introduce 4G!

Shihab

Wow! That's really great news! But the truth is in many villages, people don't even have 3G yet.

Khan Hasanuzzaman Bin Kasem

Ridiculous! The government should introduce 3G first.

Sarwar Jahan

3G network does not work properly in many places in our country and now the government is introducing 4G. Funny!

Shezan Mahmud Adnan

What will we do with 4G when we can't even use 3G properly? What a waste of money.

Nabhan Zaman

In my area I am still struggling with 2G!

Rakibul Islam

3G coverage is still so poor in rural areas and it is not even affordable. In the meantime, the government is introducing 4G and it makes no sense.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka is at high risk

On the morning of January 4, 2016, tremors from a 6.8 magnitude earthquake jolted the whole of Bangladesh, leaving all of us severely traumatised with the possibility of further quakes in the near future. The epicentre of the earthquake was Imphal, the capital of Manipur province of India, which is only 353 km away from Dhaka.

We already know from news reports that there are 72,000 earthquake-

prone buildings in Dhaka city. If another earthquake like this one takes place and if it lasts more than a minute, it would mean tremendous disaster for Bangladesh, especially for Dhaka. We even fear to imagine the number of deaths and amount of damage in that situation. We urge the authorities to immediately take effective measures to tackle the situation and have action plans in case of an earthquake.

Jahanara Begum
On e-mail

All Muslims are not terrorists

In some ways, we understand why there are anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. Muslims were implicated in the 9/11 attacks and have been involved in some other terrorist attacks around the world. But reactions have been such that now adherents of Islam are being targeted. More than a billion Muslims all over the world are

peace-loving people.

I would argue that the disastrous invasion of Iraq—something that I strongly opposed—has destabilised the region and led to the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The American invasion of Iraq was the incubator for the Islamic State, because they threw millions of Iraqi ex-soldiers and ex-officers out on the streets, leaving them without any hope, dignity, pensions—nothing at all.

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