

## Democracy Day

### How far have we digressed?

IN 1991 we started our journey of being a parliamentary democracy that marked the end of autocracy and all that it represented. It also began with the dream that finally we would have a nation that would imbibe the values of our hard fought liberation.

Since that time until now, democracy seems to have been confined to holding elections, though many times this too, has been controversial. We had elections in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2008 and 2014. Each time whoever lost vehemently insisted it was rigged. In 2008, the AL came to power with an overwhelming people's mandate but by 2014, elections were reduced to being questionable with no participation of the biggest opposition party.

But the greatest disappointment in our democratic path has been the dysfunctional nature of the parliament which in turn has impeded governance quite significantly. The biggest debacle for the parliament has been the continuous parliamentary boycott of the opposition whether AL or BNP, thus preventing the national assembly from gaining the required maturity for democratic governance. Extreme violence on the streets has resulted in wreaking havoc on the lives of ordinary people, many of whom have perished in the brutal rivalry of two major parties. And finally we have a parliament with 153 uncontested seats occupied by the ruling party after a questionable election and a "unique" opposition in Parliament with three of its members in the government and its party chief as Special Envoy to the PM. Meanwhile, other watchdog institutions and statutory bodies such as the Anti Corruption Commission, the National Human Rights Commission and the Election Commission have not been allowed to acquire the stature or functionality required of such organisations.

At the end of the day we have failed to give institutional shape to our democracy and all we have achieved is to have elected leaders and little else.

## Enforced disappearances

### Finding them is the state's responsibility

WE have heartfelt sympathy for the families of 20 missing individuals who were allegedly picked up by law enforcers at least three years ago. In their grief, they again pleaded with the authorities to return their loved ones at a press conference held at the Jatiya Press Club on Sunday.

Nineteen of the victims were picked up between November 28 and December 11, 2013, and the other, in 2012. Meanwhile, out of the 20, eight were allegedly picked up by Rab-1 personnel and twelve, reportedly, by detectives and Rab members. Law enforcers have, however, denied having anything to do with their disappearances on numerous occasions. But the question remains, why are they missing then?

Furthermore, the fact of the matter is, in a society where people can disappear like this without leaving any trace, there are definite reasons for citizens to be frightened and doubt whether law enforcers are there to provide security of life. In such a situation, the Home Minister's comment that "there is no such thing like enforced disappearance" and that these people might just be "hiding" is insensitive. If they were just hiding, why would their families bring such allegations against law enforcers? And is it not the duty of the state to ardently look into their complaints and find the missing persons?

In regards to the allegations, a clear pattern to what is happening seems to be emerging. And if law enforcers are indeed involved, it would be the biggest blotch in the history of our democratic process. Whatever the truth is, the state cannot simply absolve itself of the allegations brought forth without conducting a sincere and credible investigation into the matter.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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We must remember  
our culture

Majority of the younger generation in our country isn't familiar with Dhaliwood or Bangladeshi TV programmes, drama and theatre, but have a comprehensive knowledge of Bollywood, Indian soap operas and so on. The popular opinion that all Bangladeshi channels produce low quality shows is wrong, especially in comparison to the overdramatic family conflicts glorified by the Indian media. Subject matters in Bangladeshi television often have a lot more depth and quality to them. It is unfortunate that our children, from a young age, are becoming addicted to the Indian language and culture while retaining poor grasp of proper Bangla. Despite having talented artistes in Bangladesh, directors tend to hire Indian media personalities in order to attract audiences and generate profit.

I urge our Information Minister to ensure a well-balanced exposure and practice of our rich art and culture. We have much to be proud of.

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ALI RIAZ

DECEMBER 6 is observed as 'Democracy Day' in Bangladesh, a day that marks the overthrow of military rule of General H M Ershad through a popular urban uprising in 1990. It was the culmination of years of protests demanding democracy, at least the right to express opinions without fear, to vote in freely held elections, to elect civilian governments and to hold the leaders accountable.

The observance this year, like previous years, will provide opportunities to those who participated in the pro-democracy movement since 1982 to reminisce what they did in the face of great adversity. Some reflections will highlight contributions in bringing back democracy while others will claim that they are the ones who have saved democracy since then. Since the downfall of the autocratic regime of General Ershad, the country has experienced a tumultuous quarter of a century - it has been ruled by both elected civilian regimes and unelected regimes, elections have been held, some free and some not - but the promise of establishing an accountable representative governance has remained elusive.

While the observance of the day is a reminder of the movement against military authoritarianism, particularly the Ershad regime, it is well to remember that it was only one episode of the long struggle for democracy in the country. After all, the Bangladeshi state was founded on the basis of democratic aspirations and democracy, which have been included in the Constitution as one of the state principles. Periodic popular uprisings, the presence of a plethora of political parties, and widespread participation in national elections until 2014 are indicative of the aspiration. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the past twenty five years, democracy has remained under stress.

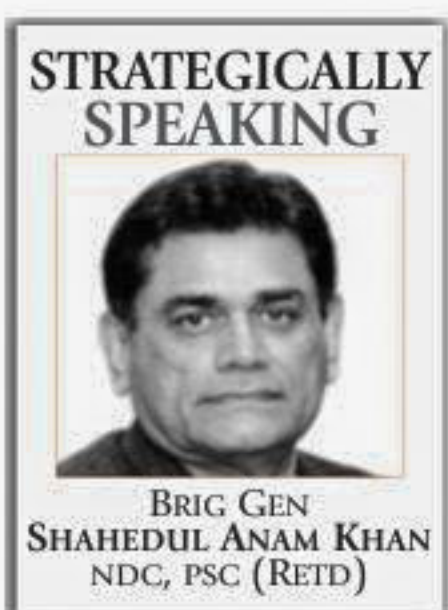
Since 2013, the nation has plunged into an unusual political environment. The unprecedented election of 2014 remains at the centre of this unusual situation. Several episodes of violence, for example, the Islamists' deadly protests against the verdicts of the International Crimes Tribunal in 2013, protests against the election in 2014 by the main opposition party, and serious deterioration of law and order for three months in 2015 during the opposition-led blockade in the wake of the anniversary of the controversial election, have cost the nation dearly.

These unfortunate developments have been accompanied by an increasing use of force by the government, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Media are either muzzled or have adopted an unstated policy of self-censorship in fear of retribution. The space for civil society, once a vibrant arena of debate and social movements, has contracted. Overall, the space for dissent has shrunk remarkably, thanks to the intolerance of the government on the one hand and both militant and mainstream Islamists, on the other. The use of extremist rhetoric has increased markedly and been accepted as a natural mode of political discourse.

Thanks to the 2014 election, the Parliament has become a one-party institution due to the absence of an effective opposition. The ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) seems to be engaged in decimating the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) through persecution and frivolous cases against its leaders. One cannot ignore that BNP's political miscalculation, wrong strategy, and inept tactics have also contributed to its plight. The ruling party's success in marginalising the main opposition BNP, at least in the short term, is a combination of these factors. But the overall impact of this growing authoritarian bent of the government and weakening of the opposition is that the mainstream political arena is being hollowed out: neither the Parliament nor the street is the arena of politics.

Concurrently, the country witnessed the dramatic growth of militant groups and experienced audacious attacks. Killings of bloggers and individuals with unorthodox views have been followed by murders of foreigners and a high profile attack on a café on July 1, 2016.

## Democracy's faltering steps



BRIG. GEN. SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
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TODAY is being observed as Democracy Day in the country, although given the moribund state democracy is in at present, one wonders whether the appellation for the day is justified at this point in time.

It was after nine long years, during which time the military dictator used all the ploys to perpetuate power, and succeeded that long, that the virtual uprising of the people forced Ershad out, and before that ad hoc arrangements were made for the transfer of power and subsequent elections.

Ershad's departure saw the end of khaki rule in the country, a regime that was initiated with the painful events of August 15, 1975. But if it was December 6 that saw the revival of politics and democracy in the country, August 15, 1975 was not really when the abridgement of democracy started. In fact, it started when in its wisdom, the majority party in the Parliament sought to replace multi-party system to one-party political dispensation.

The change in 1991 had rekindled hope for the people of the country who had constantly struggled for the right to

choose their leader in a free and fair atmosphere. Hope was rekindled too when we witnessed an unprecedented coalescence of thought and action on the part of all the parties, large and small, albeit split into three large coalitions, that promised to work together for democracy. Commitments were made in writing too in that regard.

But the hopes were soon dashed. Democracy faltered, parliament became dysfunctional. The trend to boycott parliament started with the then opposition AL choosing to abstain from it in support of its demand for a neutral caretaker government (CG).

Regrettably, the issue of CG has been made into a travesty simply because of the contradictory roles that the two parties played during the course of the 20 years since 1991 till the system was done away with in 2012.

When it was first mooted in 1992, CG was something unheard of. The idea of a supra political body assuming temporary power to run an election was a clear manifestation of the underlying distrust between the two major parties. And that has vitiated the political atmosphere in Bangladesh.

Although they had come together against a common "enemy", the khaki rule, there was very little else common that the AL and BNP could see eye to eye on. In 1991, it was as steadfastly opposed by the ruling BNP as it was propagated by

its main protagonists the AL, although by all accounts CG was not its brainchild, but that of the Jamaat, which is presently at the throes of extinction. But in spite of having a CG, none of the elections was considered as having been fair and transparent by the one that lost the elections. And the practice of parliament boycott became the norm rather than the exception ever since it was resorted to by the AL in the first tenure of the BNP after the revival of politics in the country.

The charade was completed in 2012 when the Parliament, after an adjudication by the court, did away with the system altogether, although the observations of the court, that two more elections may be organised under the CG was conveniently overlooked. And the irony of it is that this time it was the BNP that steadfastly resisted the idea of doing away with it as the AL was single-minded in seeing its end. The AL sought the legal means to settle a political question that should have been settled by the people.

The rest is history. What we have today by way of a parliament is an apology to the rule of the people. January 15, 2014 was a blot, and the BNP must take the share of its blame for the way things have turned out. Boycotting election is being unfair to the electorate.

Surely a political party's main objective is to get to power. Have we ever noticed how often the political leaders use the phrase 'we have come to power ... or will go to power' instead of saying "we have assumed power... or will assume power." And it cannot be blamed for the other party's folly. But then the January 15 election involved a lot of arm twisting of Ershad and offering of carrots to some of the more 'power' loving faction of his party, including Begum Ershad.

This is not really the democracy one had hoped for in 1991. Peace prevails but rather eerily. People are being made to eat the opium of development. BNP's type of violent politics have been shunned by the people. But it would be a folly to consider the calm in the political arena as an acquiescence of the people for the current political dispensation.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

NOTICE

We are unable to publish the  
Crossword and cartoons today.  
The answers to Monday's  
Crossword will be printed  
tomorrow. We apologise for the  
inconvenience.

## DEMOCRACY DAY

# What does democracy mean to Bangladeshis?

Some of these militant groups claimed to have organisational connections with international terrorist groups, which the government denied.

Against this background one can ask: Does the environment within the mainstream politics and mode of governance reflect the popular aspiration?

Generally speaking, there are two strands of discussions on democracy in Bangladesh; either they provide the description of events since 1990 or they focus on the normative qualities of democracy. Both discussions ignore what the people view as the characteristics of democracy. In my recently published book, *Bangladesh: A Political History of Bangladesh Since Independence* (London: I B Tauris, 2016) I have examined the popular views expressed in 13 surveys conducted by different national and international research organisations between 1996 and 2013. Here I highlight a few findings that deserve our close attention, particularly in the context of the extant political environment.

That these surveys demonstrate a wide and unwavering support for democracy among Bangladeshi citizens should come as no surprise. In a survey conducted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in late 2003, nearly two-thirds of the respondents (62 percent) chose a 'government ruled by demo-

cracy, followed by free public debate (71 percent), rule of consent (60 percent), ability to participate in decision making (50 percent), and ability to access information on government activities (40 percent).

In a survey conducted by the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) in 2000, where respondents were provided with a list of fundamental rights and were asked, 'How important is it to you that the following rights be respected in Bangladesh?' Rural respondents picked 'one can choose from several parties and candidates when voting' overwhelmingly while urban respondents indicated 'honest elections are held regularly' as the most important right.

As for the attributes of democracy, the Global Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2002 showed that Bangladeshis identified three major attributes of democracy: people can openly criticise the government (81 percent); there are honest, two-party elections (71 percent); and free press/the media can report without censorship (64 percent).

A similar perception is found in the survey among the younger population. 'Giving Youth a Voice: Bangladesh Youth Survey of 2011' informs us that "when defining democracy, a wide majority stated that elections are a core



Mass rally of Dhaka blockade on November 10, 1987.

cratically elected representatives' as the preferred system of governance. As for other choices, a 'government ruled by Islamic law, with respected religious figures as leaders' was favored by 21 percent, followed by 'a government ruled by a military leader who got things done' at 11 percent and 'a non-elected government ruled by specialists, experts, and business leaders who know what it takes to develop a country' at three per cent. A decade later, the sentiment remained almost the same; a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2013, showed that 70 percent of Bangladeshis preferred democracy as opposed to 27 percent who preferred a 'strong leader.'

What prompts such overwhelming support for democracy? Respondents of the USAID survey gave democracy strong marks for being the best system for protecting individuals' rights and freedoms (79 percent), ensuring equality of all citizens (69 percent), providing order and security (69 percent), keeping the country united (68 percent), and solving community problems because it gives everyone the chance to speak about their concerns and interests (59 percent).

These surveys also revealed what Bangladeshis mean by democracy. Weighted narrowed responses of the Governance Barometer Survey Bangladesh 2010 (conducted by BRAC University) showed that 80 percent of respondents felt elections were the critical ideal of

parameter". The report states, "Our survey reflects that Bangladeshi youths' perceptions about democracy are mainly defined by having free and fair elections. When ranked, this was given first priority by an overwhelming majority of 65 percent, in addition to 18 percent who ranked it either second (8 percent) or third (10 percent). Among all other options, rule by consent and access to information have been top priorities."

While these numbers and the details of these surveys may seem overwhelming, taken together they provide a clear message: democracy is not an abstract idea to Bangladeshi citizens. Bangladeshis' view of democracy as a competitive pluralistic political system which holds regular free elections, protects individual's rights and freedoms, and allows citizens to express opinions freely without fear of being persecuted, either by the state or by the non-state actors.

As the country observes 'Democracy Day' in 2016 it is worth remembering this message.

The writer is Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publications include the coedited volume 'Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh' (London: Routledge, 2016).

Photo: Dinu Alam on Facebook/Dinu Alam on English Wikipedia ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rally\\_of\\_Nov\\_10\\_1987\\_-\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rally_of_Nov_10_1987_-_1.jpg)), 'Rally of Nov 10, 1987 - 1', <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/ghalcode>