

Politics needs a breath of fresh air



SHAKHAWAT
LITON

It was an exceptional year in politics. No major street agitation was waged by either BNP or any other opposition parties against the Awami League-led government. BNP did not enforce *hartal* for a single day in 2016. This is a new record in our confrontational culture in politics. The two major political parties AL and BNP, whenever not in power, have frequently enforced *hartals* in the past against the government. Political pundits, however, have analysed the calmness as unusual and suffocating as this situation in politics has not evolved from any good initiatives or practices. The present situation should be considered as a culmination of violence in the political landscape in previous years, particularly in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

The political crisis was born following the cancellation of the election time non-partisan caretaker government in 2011. The following years turned violent because of the street agitation waged by the BNP-led alliance. They had demanded that the government restore the election time caretaker government system. After having failed to force the government to do so, they boycotted the January 2014 parliamentary election, which resulted in a long period of political violence and unrest.

When the AL-led government, formed through the one-sided January 5 election, was preparing to celebrate its first anniversary as "Victory Day of Democracy", the BNP-led alliance observed the day as "Democracy Killing Day". The government launched a crackdown on the opposition parties to foil the agitation programme. Denied by the government to observe the day, they enforced unprecedented countrywide blockade from January to March in 2015. The blockade turned violent as around 100 people were killed and many burnt alive as arsonists threw petrol bombs on vehicles. The law enforcement agencies continued their crackdown on the opposition parties to thwart the agitation efforts. Numerous BNP leaders and activists were sued in connection with the violence. The agitation came to an end in March but these cases are still pending. They refrained from waging any street agitation in 2016 and focused on strengthening the organisation. But they are still unable to move ahead with its plan. The party that formed the government thrice since the restoration of democracy has been almost dysfunctional due to some of its political blunders. The party policymakers are now searching for ways to make a comeback in politics.

The issue at hand—mode of election-time government—remains unresolved. The BNP-led alliance has not accepted the

present system in which the AL will remain in power during the next parliamentary elections. But the AL remains rigid and is against the restoration of a non-partisan election-time government. With regard to the mode of the election-time government, politics may generate heat again in the new year or next year ahead of the parliamentary election which will be held at the end of 2018 or early 2019. In such a situation, many people fear the deterioration of the political situation as the seeds of the crisis still remain.

Though there was no major street violence against the government, the overall situation has not been peaceful. The staggered Union Parishad elections held in between March to May destroyed the stable atmosphere in rural areas. Around 100 people were killed in electoral

to elect new leaders. But none of the parties followed democratic norms as councillors were not allowed to exercise their voting rights to elect new leaders. Intra-party democratic practice remains a far cry though all the parties have been advocating for democracy in the country.

The first ever elections in zila parishads in December were one of the good signs in politics in 2016. However, the elections generated debate over their mode. General people are not allowed to elect chairmen and members to the zila parishad. Elected representatives of other local government bodies are the voters in the elections. A writ petition has been filed with the High Court challenging the mode of the election and the court also issued a rule in this regard. Yet, the parishad for the first time will be constituted by elected

true for many countries. For the sake of sustainability of development, an environment in which democratic practices can thrive is needed.

The Narayanganj mayoral elections at the end of December were conducted peacefully without any intimidation or interference from ruling party members. With the victory of Selina Hayat Ivy, the second time winner, and acceptance by her rival, the BNP candidate, there is hope that politics is turning to a more positive path. This time Ivy was nominated by the ruling party and former archrival MP Shamim Osman actually supported her.

Formation of the new Election Commission, one that is largely acceptable to all, in February, seems also to have brought some fresh air amidst a suffocating political atmosphere. In the



President Abdul Hamid and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia talk to each other on December 18, 2016 at Bangabhaban when a BNP delegation met him as part of a dialogue on the formation of a new Election Commission.

PHOTO: PID

violence. It was the bloodiest election in Bangladesh's history. Incidents of widespread rigging were reported in the polls. Ruling party men were allegedly involved with almost all cases of violence and electoral irregularities. Ruling AL men were also engaged in intra-party conflicts sparking violence that left a good number of people dead.

Some steps taken by the government to gag free speech generated criticism. Proposal of the Digital Security Act was one of them. The government has also showed intolerance towards protest against the Act. Protesters of the proposed Rampal power plant faced police intervention on several occasions when they took to the streets against the construction of the plant.

The major political events were national councils of AL, BNP and Jatiya Party. In their national councils, they are supposed

representatives. Upon the completion of the zila parishad elections, the ruling AL has established unprecedented control over all local government bodies with almost all of the representatives belonging to the party. The AL-led government does not face any strong opponent in parliament due to the unusual character of the main opposition party. Therefore, the ruling AL is almost alone in the political landscape with no strong political force to hold the government accountable for its activities in and outside of the parliament.

The overall political situation is not congenial for a healthy democracy. The policymakers however have been claiming for the last three years that their focus is now on the overall development of the country, not democracy. But without a healthy democratic atmosphere development projects may not be sustainable. This has been proved to be

absence of a non-partisan caretaker government system, a strong and acceptable EC has become more important than at any time in the past. Khaleda Zia proposed forming the new EC on the basis of consensus among political parties. In a major development, the president is likely to come up with a formula by holding talks with the political parties. The mode of formation of the next EC may also dictate to a large extent the fate of the political situation in the coming days. If the new EC is acceptable to all, it will lay the groundwork for the ruling and opposition parties to resolve the dispute over the mode of the election-time government. All present signs suggest that the new EC may either prove to be a game changer in politics or a complete disaster.

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