

No merit in quotas



THE MIDDLE PATH
ADNAN R AMIN

ANYONE who has played "alley cricket" will know that it has its own rules: e.g. two "chiefs" get to select players in tandem, and (s)he who sends the ball over the wall must fetch it. Another such rule is that the owner of the bat will have an automatic place on the team. This last provision is an everyday example of a "quota system" where able performers are replaced by those wielding power over the selection process.

Quotism is the organising of society through a quota system, whether by racial, gender, language or other demographic attributes. A "quota system" is a way of artificially regulating sub-group representation. It is as ancient as in-group favouritism, and variously employed by authorities to regulate and manipulate group representation.

Often quotas are used to increase representation, e.g. Union Councils in Bangladesh have three reserved positions for women leaders. Certain missionary-run schools and colleges ensure quotas based on religious affiliations. New Zealand has parliamentary quotas for the indigenous Maori people. In India, acid attack victims have recently become eligible for quota-protected central government jobs. Such enforced quotas can help achieve equitable socio-political-economic outcomes for societies.

But "increased representation" is not always the best idea. In 1909, the British East India Company enacted separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, thereby ensuring a healthy quota for Muslim leaders. Good news, right?

Wrong. As history shows, this sowed the seeds of eternal discord between two communities that had lived side by side for millennia, and arguably expedited the communal and secessionist politics that followed.

Nearly a hundred years later, US-led forces in Iraq were using the same scheme. In the name of "bringing democracy", the invading coalition conjured a "governing council" to fill the void created by regime toppling. They designed the council to be divided into



Police foiled a march of anti-quota campaigners in the capital's High Court area on their way to the Secretariat on March 14, 2018. The police also charged batons and fired teargas shells, leaving at least 15 of the agitators injured.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

sectarian and ethnic quotas. This move further institutionalised ethno-sectarian divides and contributed to one of the bloodiest episodes of sectarian violence of the century.

Quotas are also used to keep "undesirable" representation at a minimum. For example, in the aftermath of WWI, Yale University's ethnic quota formula was thus: "never admit more than five Jews, take only two Italian Catholics, and take no blacks at all."

Let us take away three key lessons from here: Quota systems often require distinct, identifiable sub-groups whose representation they are to regulate. Secondly, state actors can enact uplifting or oppressive measures against underrepresented sub-groups. In the process, they may also deliver a certain measure of privilege to particular social groups. Lastly, because "quotas" are (seemingly) arbitrary constraints upon an existing system, they are only as beneficial as their underlying motive.

When, in 2013, students gathered to protest Bangladesh's significant government jobs quota reserved for various groups, they faced stiff opposition from law enforcement agencies. The protesters were dispersed and driven away from the very space occupied by the Shahbag Movement the same year.

The fact that the Shahbag Movement enjoyed police protection while the anti-quota protests were tear-gassed seems to suggest that law enforcement agencies had a problem not with the mode of protest, but the issue at the core.

This year, new activists have surfaced. The anti-quota protesters want not to abolish, but to reform the quota system that reserves 56 percent of government jobs through 258 types of quotas. Experts, including former PSC leaders, have argued that decreasing the percentage of quotas will actually help nurture a more meritocratic bureaucracy. Naturally, this is seen as an affront by the

few who enjoy the privileges of such quotas. Of them, Muktijodha Sangsad Santan Command (children of freedom fighters, eligible for 30 percent government jobs) has been quite vocal. According to their president, "It's a conspiracy. It's Jamaat-Shibir activists who have been staging demonstration demanding reformation of the quota system under the banner of the general students."

It is important to note that neither camp, in principle, opposes the 1972 Executive Order that promulgated the freedom fighters' quota in the first place. It is the indefinite "continuation" of the system which is being questioned.

Let us first establish that how any nation recruits its public officials is of paramount importance. It has lasting impact on policymaking, civil administration public service delivery, development work and everything else that shapes the future of modern nations. In that sense, it is far from

being "a movement against the incumbent government," as quota-beneficiaries were quoted as saying. If anything, it is a movement to complement the current government's modernisation and democratisation efforts.

Let us, therefore, eliminate infantile name-calling and trolling from this all-important debate.

The High Court has ruled that this matter is a "policy decision of the government," i.e. not a sub-judice or constitutional matter per se. Therefore, it should be open for discussion. To facilitate reasoned, civil debate around this issue, we may refer back to the framework presented earlier: Who is/are the sub-group? What is their disadvantage? What role do the "quotas" fulfill? What is the macroeconomic cost of foregoing a merit-based system in 2018?

No rational soul can deny Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's magnanimity and keen foresight in instituting a quota system for our freedom fighters. Those involved in the armed struggle were especially disadvantaged—having sacrificed studies, income, jobs, limbs and lives for the motherland.

However, one can question whether—nearly half a century later—the same level of disadvantage still remains. It is, after all, possible and admissible to evaluate "quotas" as a socioeconomic tool or intervention, right? If the level of disadvantage is unchanged (or higher) for beneficiaries, then the quota system hasn't been an effective intervention. And if the level of disadvantage has decreased, then the privileges should be revisited, and if needed, channelled to more deserving quarters.

Former cabinet secretary (head of the civil service) Dr Akbar Ali Khan has reflected: [the quota system intended to] "elevate the poor, not to award anyone." That sure sounds like a vision forged in the flames of a bloodied, war-torn nation. Yet, the quota-reform activists have been labelled "traitors", "subversives", and 800 of them have been sued by law enforcement agencies. If all the quota-reform activists and their supporters are asking is that due consideration be given to this system of privilege that comes at the cost of meritocracy, then there is merit there. And I, for one, would support a quota reserved for such public-policy debates.

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Stephen Hawking's unparalleled legacy

SHAZZAD KHAN

THE world-famous physicist Stephen Hawking passed away on March 14, 2018. His death has left me saddened like millions around the world. But I was happy to see that *The Daily Star* had published a couple of articles on Stephen Hawking, one of which was written by a Bangladeshi academic. It inspired me to express my thoughts and feelings about how Hawking's work has influenced me.

Reading Hawking's most famous book, *A Brief History of Time*, made me realise the sheer vastness of the universe. The book took me through a wonderful, eye-opening journey—giving me insight into the creation of the universe. Published in 1988, *A Brief History of Time* was the *Sunday Times* bestseller for 237 weeks. In the book, Hawking talks about the history of physics, gravity, how light moves in the universe, space and time, elementary particles (such as quarks, which are very small objects that make up things in the universe), black holes, the Big Bang (the theory that the universe was created from a single point), and time travel. At the time, the book was groundbreaking in more ways than one, including the fact that it put complex subjects in simple words for laymen like me.

Hawking introduced us to the ideas of philosophers such as Aristotle and Ptolemy. Aristotle had figured out that the earth is round. He also thought that the sun and stars went around the earth. Ptolemy

too thought about how the sun and stars were located in the universe. Ptolemy made a planetary design that described Aristotle's thought. But today, it is known that the opposite is true: the earth goes around the sun. The Aristotle-Ptolemy ideas about the position of the stars and sun were disproved in 1609. The person who first thought of the idea about the earth going around the sun was Nicolaus Copernicus. Around that time Galileo and Johannes Kepler, two other scientists, also helped to prove that Copernicus' idea was right. They looked at how the moons of some planets moved in the sky, and they used this movement to prove Copernicus right. Isaac Newton also wrote a book about gravity, which helped to prove Copernicus' idea.

The origin of the universe represented another great topic of scholarly exercise debate over centuries. Early philosophers like Aristotle thought that the universe had existed forever, while theologians such as St Augustine believed it was created at a specific time. St Augustine also believed that time was a concept that was born with the creation of the universe—a belief that has been articulated in religious books.

Very interestingly, in 1929, astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered that galaxies are moving away from each other. That means, there was a time, between 10 and 20 billion years ago, when they were all together in one single extremely dense place with infinite gravity. This discovery brought the concept of the beginning



The world will always remember the great theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking.

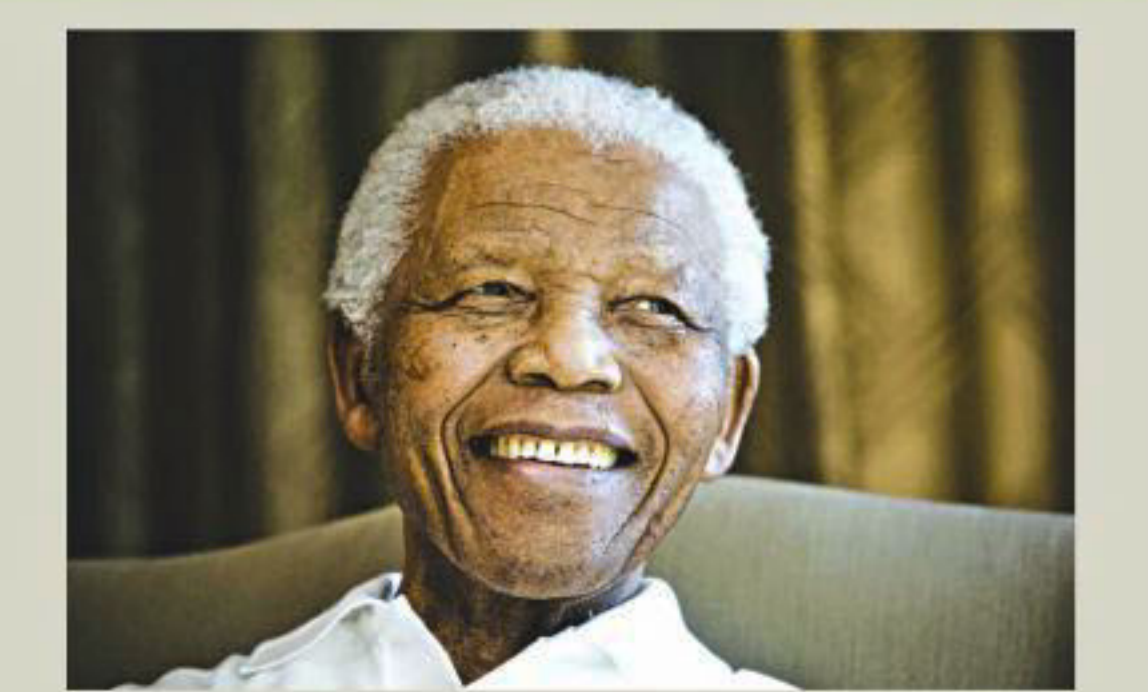
universe is expanding in a manner such that life can exist, at least for a certain period of time. Interestingly, the Big Bang has generated the idea that the universe will one day come back to its original shape through a "Big Crunch". This whole idea of expansion and crunch is articulated in religious books.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century scientists became convinced that the universe's structure and evolution could eventually be precisely explained by a set of laws. However, the origin of these laws was left in the domain of God. The Big Bang implied by the general theory of relativity of Albert Einstein indicates that a creator of the universe or God has absolute freedom to choose the origin and all the laws of the universe. According to Einstein, time is relative and flexible, and "the dividing line between past and present, and the future is an illusion." So, reality is ultimately timeless...

Stephen Hawking's work has influenced millions around the globe, and ignited an interest in the minds of many about the origins of the universe. When he was diagnosed with a motor neurone disease at the age of 21, Stephen Hawking was given two years to live but he went on to live to the age of 76. We may have lost his presence but science's biggest star since Einstein has left behind an unparalleled legacy.

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QUOTABLE Quote



NELSON MANDELA
ANTI-APARTHEID REVOLUTIONARY AND FORMER PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| ACROSS | 33 -- de deux | 7 Writer OZ |
| 1 Judi of "Chocolat" | 34 June honoree | 8 They're worn with ties |
| 6 Elephant of stories | 36 Scatter seeds | 9 Typically |
| 11 Curacao's neighbor | 37 Salad herb | 10 Stopwatch button |
| 12 Tickle | 39 French article | 17 Big shot |
| 13 Grain to grind | 40 Court event | 22 Bar bill |
| 14 Attendance count | 41 Portland setting | 24 June honoree |
| 15 Ethane, e.g. | 43 Noble's pride | 26 Components |
| 16 Slippery | 44 Duo quadrupled | 28 Peter Pan's creator |
| 18 Seventh letter | 45 Some answers | 29 Chum |
| 19 Clamor | 46 Comfy spots | 31 Shakespeare creation |
| 20 Court divider | | 32 Messates with followers |
| 21 Harangue | DOWN | 33 Burger part |
| 23 Rock beater | 1 Macbeth prop | 35 Bourne's portrayer |
| 25 Engine part | 2 Book goofs | 38 Strong wind |
| 27 Sinking signal | 3 Frivolous legal actions | 42 Expert |
| 28 Jazz genre | 4 "60 Minutes" airer | |
| 20 Sibilant summons | 5 Reviled | |
| | 6 Split centers | |

BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG AND LEARNING, YOU MAKE LOTS OF MISTAKES

YOU SURE DO

THEN WHY IS IT WHEN YOU GET OLDER AND MORE EXPERIENCED, YOUR MISTAKES ARE EVEN WORSE?

10-21

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

OH--MOM PUT NEW BATTERIES IN YOUR ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH!

THANKS FOR THE WARNING!

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