

# The slow death of democracies

## IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

LATELY, democratic erosion in many countries has been less dramatic and more deceptive. There are no tanks in the streets. A formal or constitutional architecture of democracy remains in place, but the

actual substance of it is enervated. Elections are held. Democracies still die, only by different means.

In their book *How Democracies Die* published in 2018, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both professors of government at Harvard University, tell us how. Most democratic failures these days are caused not by generals, but by politicians who are elected through free or somewhat free elections.

In fact, they argue, the primary way in which democracies have collapsed over the last thirty years or so, since the end of the Cold War, is at the hands of elected leaders who used and manipulated democratic institutions to weaken or kill democracy.

They maintain a veneer of democracy while weakening its substance. Like Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, elected leaders have subverted democratic institutions in Russia, China, Turkey, the Philippines and Malaysia, to name a few.

Democracy's slow death today begins with the polls. With a classic coup d'état, the demise is instant and apparent to all. The presidential palace falls. The president is assassinated, imprisoned or sent into exile. The constitution is suspended or scrapped.



ILLUSTRATION: BRYAN SOCHAYSENG/SCOUT MAGAZINE

None of these things happen in the new formula which is carefully designed to be misleading. Many governments have successfully managed to elect legislatures that approve, and set up judiciaries that accept, government efforts to subvert democracy, thus making them "legal." Sometimes they even claim to be improving democracy by combating corruption, reforming the judiciary or making the electoral process more transparent.

Newspapers still see the light of day but are coerced into silence aka self-censorship if they cannot be bought off. Conscientious citizens or groups who criticise the government often find themselves in legal limbos. Those who denounce government abuse are dismissed as unpatriotic.

Democratic backsliding thus takes many shapes, the hardest to see can be the ones right in front of our eyes. The abuses fail to

trigger society's alarm bells because they are periodic and systematic—there is no single defining moment in which the government "crosses the line" into authoritarianism by declaring martial law or suspending the constitution.

These electoral authoritarians—as the authors call this new breed of politicians—enjoy democratic legitimacy because they were elected. It becomes harder and harder to remove them through democratic means because they tilt the playing field to their own advantage by gradually chipping away at democratic institutions. Elections are no longer fair.

It turns out that they often stay in power not just through elections and appealing to the public but by allying themselves with a populist demagogue. They strike a Faustian bargain with the demagogue whose popular

appeal they think they can tap into all the while keeping him in control. But this is a dangerous miscalculation. They are not able to control the demagogue. The demagogue starts controlling them.

Professors Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that the Constitution, which is widely revered and praised, cannot fully guard us against such problems. The Constitution is a set of rules, they say, and a set of rules, however well-crafted, are not enough to ensure that democratic institutions prevail.

Our behaviour, therefore, needs to be guided by informal rules, by norms. And we must focus on two of them in particular. The first is mutual tolerance which is fundamental in a democracy. It is the acceptance among major political parties that their rivals are legitimate. They may disagree with the other side on several issues, they

may dislike the other side but at the end of the day they recognise publicly that the other side is equally patriotic, and it can govern legitimately.

The other one is what they call forbearance, which is restraint in the exercise of power. To make it clear, they cite the example of the US system of government. Think about what a US president can do under the Constitution. He can pardon anyone he wants. He can pack the Supreme Court. He can, in many respects, rule by decree. He can bypass Congress through a series of executive orders if Congress is blocking his agenda. So, what it takes for these institutions to function properly is restraint on the part of politicians. They must underutilise their power.

Politicians on both sides are often confronted with the dilemma, which is, if one side seems to be breaking the rules, why shouldn't we? If we don't, can we go to power or stay in power? A party would do well to call on that forbearance when it is faced with this dilemma.

Building and defending democracy requires more than outrage. Political parties must not nominate and support candidates who have a questionable commitment to democratic norms, the professors suggest. And the citizens must be committed to democratic norms.

These unwritten rules are the guardrails of democracy that protect us, prevent the erosion of democratic norms, and keep us on track.

If unchecked, "Tyranny naturally arises out of democracy," as Plato observed.

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## What will Bangladesh look like in 2050?

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

THROUGHOUT history, people have turned to astrologers, pundits and gurus in their quest to unlock the mysteries of the future. Businesses show a big appetite for a peep into the future as the existing climate becomes highly uncertain. Nevertheless, predicting the future has always been a difficult business, especially if the prediction is proved wrong. Almost immediately after the independence of Bangladesh, Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State, dismissed the country as a "perpetual economic basket case". But Bangladesh has proved Kissinger wrong. In the last 46 years, Bangladesh has undergone an amazing transformation. There has been some good progress in almost all spheres of life. Therefore, instead of making any predictions, it is appropriate to analyse all the available statistics, facts and figures and speculate how the current developments will affect our life in the next 32 years—till 2050.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in its report titled "The long view: how will the global economic order change by 2050?" predicts that Bangladesh would be the 28th largest economy by 2030, up from 31st in 2016, and has the potential to become the world's 23rd largest economy by 2050. Gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) terms is expected to grow from USD 628 billion in 2016 to USD 1,324 billion in 2030 and USD 3,064 billion by 2050. In FY 2016-17, the country exported garment and knitwear products worth around USD 28.15 billion, and the inflow of remittance was USD 13.53 billion in 2017. Foreign exchange reserve now stands around USD 33 billion. Apparently, these look nice, although there are paradoxes difficult to reconcile.

On the one hand, Bangladesh has achieved these impressive statistics that show an outstanding national income, rising exports and impressive flow of foreign earnings. On the other hand, these statistics do not reflect the dismal

state of the country in some sectors—hazardous urbanisation, overpopulation, inadequate nutrition, lack of public health, low standard of living, land scarcity, vulnerability to natural disasters, rising anti-social activities, rising unemployment, growing disparity of rural and urban income and inadequate infrastructure.

Currently, 35.7 percent of the country's population (59 million) lives in urban areas. In the 1960-70s, the entire population was 70 million and 6 percent of them lived in urban areas. It is undeniable that urbanisation is the inevitable destiny of the human civilisation. But the cities are growing in an unsustainable manner. Parks, open spaces, rivers, canals and water bodies are gradually disappearing. The rivers and waterways are gradually shrinking and drying up due to the huge depositions of silt and waste. As per a survey of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), there are three hundred and ten rivers in Bangladesh. Out of these rivers, the condition of one hundred and seventy-five is miserable, and sixty-five are almost dead. Eighty percent of the rivers lack proper depth. If the government fails to protect the rivers from pollution and land-grabbing within 2050, these will turn into canals and Bangladesh would turn into a desert.

According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the population of Bangladesh would reach between 230-250 million in 2050. Presently, the country is adding 2.0 million people annually to the national population and for that it is losing 1 percent of agricultural land every year. There are roughly 8.774 million hectares of cultivable land available, out of which 88 percent is cultivated. So, there is a limited scope to expand the cultivated area. Rapid growth of population in conjunction with unplanned urbanisation has generated numerous transport problems in different cities. Citizens constantly

complain about the unbearable traffic jams where vehicles remain stuck for several hours. Besides, the urban infrastructure does not match the scale of the urban population. The minimum road requirement for any city is 25 percent, whereas the large cities of Bangladesh have only 6 to 7 percent of roads. A country of roughly 147,000 sq. kilometres, having a population of over 160 million, would have to cater for transport needs of 230-250 million people by 2050.

According to the study titled "Assessing the costs of climate change and adaptation in South Asia" conducted by the Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh's economy is more at risk to climate change than any country. Without changes to current global behaviour, the country could lose around 2 percent of its GDP by 2050. Since two-thirds of the country is less than 15 feet above sea level, a three-foot rise in sea level would submerge almost 20 percent of the entire country, reducing cultivatable land and potentially displacing 35 million people by 2050. The report also predicted that climate change could have devastating impacts on water resources and agriculture; rice production could decline by 8 percent and wheat by 32 percent, creating a very high risk of hunger.

As per the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017, the country's infrastructure competitiveness was ranked 114 out of 138 countries. Because of weak infrastructure, the entrepreneurs have to wait long for connectivity of gas and electricity after setting up their industries. Poor infrastructure of the country also hinders the prospect of local and foreign investment too. Currently, investment is facing a pitiable situation in Bangladesh. In FY 2016-17, investment as a share of GDP was 30.5 percent, a marginal increase from 29 percent in FY 2015-16. As a result, economic growth is not getting the desired momentum and job opportunities are

not being created.

According to the recent Labour Force Survey released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the industrial sector, which was a major employment generator between 2000 and 2010, employed only 0.3 million people in the last seven years till FY 2016-17. On an average, the sector created 42,857 jobs a year during the period. The survey also found that 1.4 million new faces joined the labour force between 2015-16 and 2016-17, taking the total number to 63.5 million. Finding no jobs and seeing no options in the country, a recent trend has arisen among many unemployed youths to resort to desperate means to leave the country. They are taking risky journeys (by boat to Malaysia, for example) in pursuit of fortunes.

According to a report published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), some 47.6 million or 30 percent of the total population are young (10-24 years), and of them, 25 percent—numbering around 11 million—are currently inactive, i.e. they are neither in the education cycle nor involved with any economic activity. Unfortunately, unemployment is greater among the higher educated group of the youth. Worrying still is that almost 1 in 4 Bangladeshis (24.3 percent of the population) live in poverty, and 12.9 percent of the population live in extreme poverty. The menace of rising inequality, anti-social activities, corruption, etc. are also affecting our progress and hampering our development.

Now, the ultimate question is: will any of this change by 2050? There is a wide range of plausible futures, and which one happens depends to a great extent on decisions and actions taken today. Nothing is preordained.

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PHOTO: MOHOSIN AGA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

## QUOTABLE Quote



ELIE WIESEL (1928-2016)

An American Jewish writer, political activist, Nobel Laureate, and Holocaust survivor

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                   |                    |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| ACROSS            | goddess            | 10 Catcher's need  |
| 1 "Cheers"        | 33 Farewells       | 16 Crunch targets  |
| barmaid           | 35 Baseball need   | 18 Dollop          |
| 6 Sacred song     | 38 Dressed in      | 19 Took the bus    |
| 11 Mexican        | 39 Deplete         | 20 Bus. sch.       |
| farewell          | 41 Mistake         | course             |
| 12 Circle spokes  | 45 Note from the   | 21 Yankee great in |
| 13 Batter's high  | boss               | the Hall of Fame   |
| hit               | 46 Sports venue    | 24 Optimistic      |
| 14 Dizzying       | 47 Buccaneers'     | 25 Lake near       |
| designs           | base               | Buffalo            |
| 15 Bike part      | 48 Expert          | 26 Pertness        |
| 17 Yoga need      | DOWN               | 28 Chinese food    |
| 18 Packers' place | 1 Ballpark         | veggie             |
| 22 Scottish lake  | souvenir           | 31 Sticky gunk     |
| 23 Mall           | 2 Commotion        | 34 Aspiration      |
| businesses        | 3 Tear             | 35 Small statue    |
| 27 Smells         | 4 Yankee great in  | 36 On the ocean    |
| 29 Greek          | the Hall of Fame   | 37 Abound          |
| marketplace       | 5 Colorado resort  | 40 Ballpark        |
| 30 Annette of     | 6 In fair shares   | official           |
| "American         | 7 Maple fluid      | 42 Gun, as a       |
| Beauty"           | 8 First father     | motor              |
| 32 Egyptian       | 9 Old Italian coin | 43 Count start     |
|                   |                    | 44 Spirited        |



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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## BEETLE BAILEY



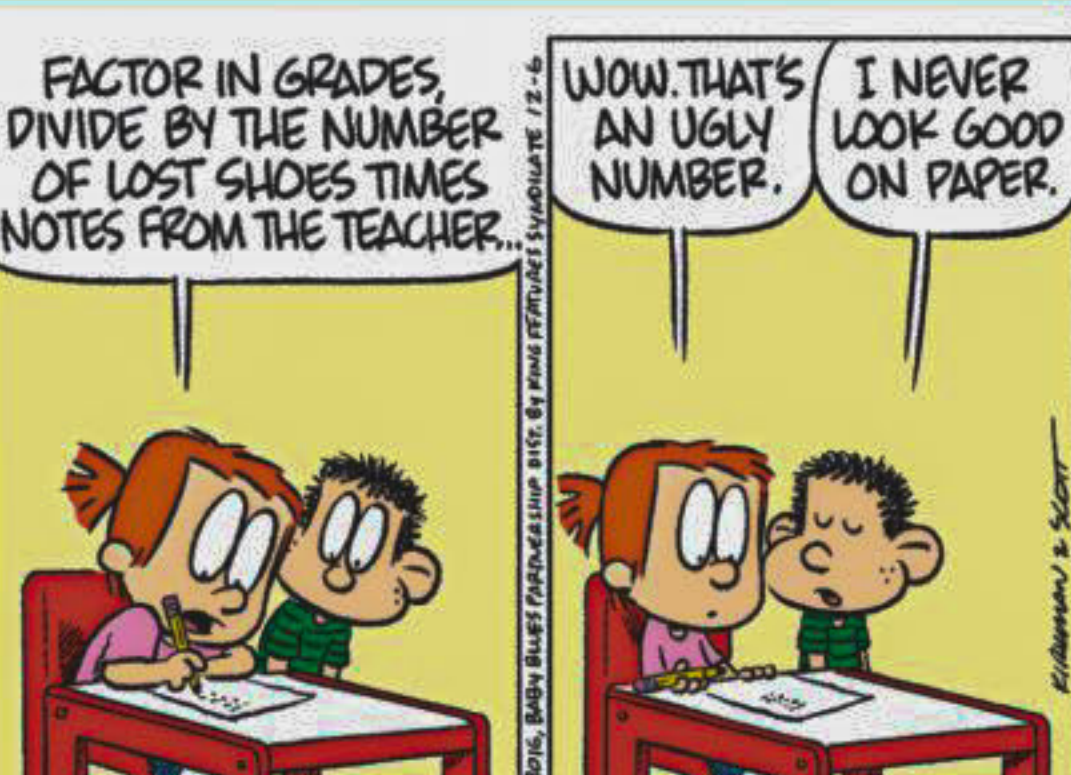
## BABY BLUES



## BY MORT WALKER



## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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