

# The emphatic message from Malaysia



**BLACK, WHITE & GREY**  
**ALI RIAZ**

AN an autocrat redeem himself as a champion of democracy? What does it take to beat the incumbent in a dominant party system? Does electing a democratic alliance herald the arrival of democracy? These questions may sound academic and esoteric, but a real-life experiment is unfolding in front of our eyes in Malaysia. We must follow the unprecedented events in Malaysia but not lose sight of the forest for the trees.

The historic victory of the opposition alliance Pakatan Harapan (the Pact of Hope) under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, and Mahathir being sworn in as the prime minister, bring these questions to the fore. The humiliating defeat of the incumbent coalition Barisan Nasional (BN), after ruling the country for more than 60 years, is being celebrated as a victory for democracy. Many have reacted euphorically and are viewing it as a victory for the liberals. David Millet, in *Financial Times*, writes, "Liberals have been in retreat across the continent [Asia] for years in the face of rising authoritarianism and extremism, and the surviving democracies— especially in south and south-east Asia—have been looking increasingly fragile."

It is not only Asia that has witnessed this phenomenon. We are living at a time when democracy is backsliding at a dizzying pace. According to Freedom House, in 2017, "Democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades." The number of countries that regressed from the democratic path in recent years is astounding; almost 67 percent of the people of the world now live under political systems that are either "not free" or "partly free", or in other words, undemocratic.

We have seen many leaders with democratic credentials as popular opposition figures turning into autocrats, some more lethal than their predecessors. There are too many to list them individually, therefore I leave it to the readers to find their preferred examples. "Despots masquerading as democrats" is the order of the day, across continents, irrespective of cultures. Elections are used by authoritarian regimes as a tool to legitimise their undemocratic power and provide a veneer of democracy to their repressive measures. Unscrupulous regimes have rendered opposition weak and fragile through repression to the extent that elections have become theatrics, and in the process, the very essence of democracy is neutered.

The dramatic events in Malaysia should be located within this broad picture. As we are aware, the Najib Razak government, in the past years, had become authoritarian. The rampant abuse of the electoral system through gerrymandering and manipulation of the constitution were the hallmarks of the regime. Any dissent has been dealt with under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for years. In 2016, the government enacted the National Security Council Act, which is far harsher than ever before. Muzzling press and manipulating courts became normal. A new law called "anti-fake news"

was legislated to silence the critics. But the progressive attenuation of democracy began under the government of Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) and Mahathir was instrumental in electing Razak, his protégé, as the PM. Perhaps the trials of Anwar Ibrahim under Mahathir and Razak are the most telling examples of the similarity between these two regimes.

The "1MDB scandal", the embezzlement of more than USD 1 billion from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad fund, accelerated the movement which finally led to his defeat. Notwithstanding the scale of it, wasn't kleptocracy an integral part of the system that Mahathir Mohamad had created? One analyst pointed out that Mahathir "put in place institutionalised corruption, from the top all the way down, with power concentrated in the Prime Minister's office." The perpetuation of this corruption was possible because of a non-inclusive political system with no accountability and enormous concentration of power in the PM's office, or in simple words, in the hands of the PM. That was the gift of Mahathir, in addition to the economic growth, to the people of Malaysia. He defended his doctrine of "practicing democracy with limits" under the guise of "Asian Values" for



**Mahathir Mohamad, former Malaysian prime minister and opposition candidate for Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), reacts during a news conference after general election, in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. PHOTO: REUTERS**

decades. Mahathir, in a convocation speech at a university in Philippines in 2012, said "it is impossible for the people to rule themselves. There are too many of them and they cannot agree on anything."

Despite the appalling record of Mahathir, the opposition alliance has decided to accept him as its leader and as the PM because "desperate times require desperate measures." His charisma and popularity has helped the opposition to win the election, but it is neither an endorsement for Mahathir's economic policies nor his style of governance. Instead, the 60-point election manifesto is the basis of the alliance. The manifesto includes term limits for the prime minister, preventing the PM from holding multiple portfolios, reducing the budget of the PM's office, and removing the power of the PM to "manipulate important national institutions". It has been agreed that he will only serve until his former nemesis and current coalition partner, Anwar Ibrahim, is released and pardoned. Ibrahim is scheduled to be released next month. Notwithstanding the drama of returning from retirement after 15 years and being the oldest PM, Mahathir's victory is a repudiation of

an authoritarian regime. The question is, has the "retirement" changed his heart? We will wait to see whether this becomes his moment of redemption. But it will not erase the history of his doings.

The Pakatan Harapan's victory will also reignite a longstanding debate in political science as to how to beat the incumbent in a *de-facto* one-party system. The experience of Mexico with the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional—Institutional Revolutionary Party), which ruled the country between 1929 and 2000, raised a similar question. Its ouster through election raised the hopes that even flawed elections may provide an opportunity for the opposition to beat them in their games. But there are too few examples to generalise. Besides, the PRI returned to power 12 years later. In post-1990, hybrid regimes, which are ostensibly democratic but essentially authoritarian, have created more roadblocks than the autocrats. Thus, opposition political parties need to invent new strategies to involve citizens to bring the changes they deserve.

Malaysians have spoken, and spoken loudly and emphatically, that "enough is enough" and that "reform" is essential. The call for reform, *reformasi*, first voiced in 1998 against the authoritarian regime of

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at the Illinois State University, USA.

# Traffic jam: The ugly side of Dhaka's development

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

THERE was a time when commuters suffered traffic congestion only on the main city streets, but now it starts right from one's doorstep. Traffic jam has turned daily trips into nightmares. According to a World Bank report, in the last 10 years, the average traffic speed in Dhaka has dropped from 21 kilometres per hour (kmph) to 7 kmph, and by 2035, the speed might drop to 4kmph, which is slower than the walking speed. Another study, commissioned by Brac Institute of Government and Development, says traffic congestion in Dhaka eats up around 5 million working hours every day and costs the country USD 11.4 billion every year. The financial loss is a calculation of the cost of time lost in traffic congestion and the money spent on operating vehicles for the extra hours.

Researchers say dealing with heavy traffic can cause serious physical and mental problems, including stress and aggression resulting in road rage. A survey by the Passengers' Welfare Association revealed that at least 87 percent of buses and minibuses violate traffic rules. Every day at least 64 people are losing their life while 150 others are getting injured across the country. This year, between January 1 and April 20, 1,841 people were killed and 5,477 more injured. Of those injured, 288 were maimed. Last year, around 7,397 people were killed and 16,193 others injured; among the injured, 1,722 were maimed for life (*The Daily Star*, May 1, 2018). In addition to pain, suffering and loss of life, road accidents have a significant economic and social cost (rehabilitation, healthcare, material damages, etc.) which are not easy to measure in monetary terms.

All the megacities in the world suffer from traffic jam at certain hours of the day. But what we have in Dhaka is not traffic jam, it is total traffic chaos and mismanagement. In recent times, the government has taken some positive steps such as widening the roads, expansion of footpaths, and building flyovers and overpasses but yet, there was no improvement in the traffic situation. Cities are the main engines of our economic growth. Even though Dhaka is only one percent of the country's total area, its contribution to GDP is 36 percent, and it has created 44 percent of the country's total employment. Considering the economic potential of Dhaka, let us review its existing traffic situation and also possible solutions.

Unpleasant as it may sound, it is

not only in Dhaka, the whole country is full of undisciplined drivers and pedestrians who have no respect for traffic rules and regulations. In the modern world, traffic is managed by the auto signalling light, and one can hardly see a policeman. Whereas in Dhaka, in different important junctions, along with auto signalling light there are at least two policemen, including one sergeant. Still they are unable to manage the traffic.

I think the problem lies in our behaviour pattern. Many of us break the law in full knowledge of its existence and many don't even realise that they are doing something terribly wrong. This is a social problem and needs to be

*Many of us break the law in full knowledge of its existence and many don't even realise that they are doing something terribly wrong.*

addressed accordingly. The government, with the help of social organisations, can undertake a project to create necessary awareness by teaching ethical driving, road crossing, traffic management with audio-visual display, images, etc. The electronic media can play a huge role in raising the awareness by showing short documentaries on the subject. All this should be part of a long-term project and not just an eye-wash during the Traffic Week. Experts say the congestion may be reduced by 40 percent just by improving the management of traffic and public consciousness.

According to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), there are around 3.1 million registered vehicles in Bangladesh, and Dhaka has around one million of them. But different studies show that around 5 million vehicles, including the 3.1 million registered, are currently plying the roads; of them, 72 percent lack fitness clearance. According to the Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) of 2016, Dhaka's residents make around 30 million trips every day. Of them, some 47 percent involve buses, 32 percent are made in rickshaws, while nine percent are carried out by

private cars that occupy 76 percent of the streets. Public transports use 7 percent of roads.

It should be noted that our public transport system is not adequate and properly routed. If we can introduce a dependable public transport system, the pressure of private cars and other vehicles will be less on the road. According to the BRTA, 20,304 new cars were added to Dhaka's traffic in 2016, meaning over 55 new cars hit the streets every day. As the number of car increases, the demand for parking space also increases. But unfortunately, parking space is quite inadequate in our city. Most of the cars are parked on roads. Many intercity buses and trucks are parked on a regular basis on the streets in Mohakhali, Sayedabad, Gabtoli, Tejgaon, Malibagh and other areas. Trucks load and unload commodity items, construction materials and other goods in the middle of a road, causing huge traffic jams.

In order to ease traffic congestion, the government has undertaken some long-term projects, including three ring roads to deviate traffic from the city centre, five metro rail lines, two rapid bus routes, and 1,200 kilometres of new roadways. Some of these projects are already at different stages of implementation. But importantly, all this might prove insufficient unless we decentralise Dhaka. The city is already overpopulated and its infrastructure doesn't match the scale of its population (18 million). Every year, almost half a million add to this figure and this pressure of the population is making its traffic condition worse by the day.

We must acknowledge that this cannot go on for long, especially after Bangladesh's attaining eligibility for graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) bracket. Dhaka, as a city, needs to get ready for the progress achieved on the country's economic front. And to do so, decentralising it is an urgent necessity. We need to relocate its industrial units, particularly the readymade garment factories and tanneries, and some government establishments to areas such as Bhairab, Ghorashal, Mymensingh, Tangail, Comilla, Bogra, etc. and also improve the connectivity of our highways, railways, and waterways so that people can smoothly commute among these areas. This will not only change the socioeconomic scenario of Dhaka, but also of the entire country.

Abu Afsarul Haider graduated in economics and business administration from Illinois State University, USA, and is currently involved in international trade in Dhaka. Email: afsarulhaider@gmail.com



www.bfid-expo.com

**Bangladesh Furniture & Interior Décor Expo**

**BFID EXPO 2018**

**MAY 13-16 10AM-9PM**

Hall 04, Noborattri, International Convention City Bashundhara, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Entry complimentary.

Jointly Organized by






## Live in peace

with the assurance of bti advanced

EARTHQUAKE RESISTANT technology.





"I would like to thank bti on behalf of the University of Asia Pacific for taking this research initiative on how to make buildings earthquake resilient and thereby contribute to a safer built environment."

**Prof. Jamilur Reza Choudhury**  
 Vice-Chancellor  
 University of Asia Pacific

**AA3** Credit Rating

REHAB MEMBERSHIP 001

ISO 9001:2008 CERTIFIED

SALES HOTLINE

16604, 096 13 19 1919

www.btibd.com | 



building technology & ideas Ltd.  
 since 1984  
 in pursuit of excellence...