

# 'No matter who wins the election, people will lose'

Eminent thinker and writer Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, in this interview with Badiuzzaman Bay of The Daily Star, outlines his views about the current state of leftist politics, the upcoming election, and the future of politics and youth leadership in Bangladesh. Here are selected excerpts from the interview:

In Bangladesh, leftist politics is still seen as being associated with fringe movements, removed from the centre. For all its pro-people ideology, socialism is failing to get people to vote for its advocates. Why is that? Bangladesh's politics is controlled by the forces of capitalism, which is also the reason why leftist politics is still outside the "mainstream" of our power structure. The rich and powerful, the venal representatives of the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, dictate our politics and control the media. Their ascent to, and hold on, power is predicated on the suppression of dissent, while people's fight for their rights gets lost in the urgency to pursue their more immediate needs for food, shelter and so on. This is what capitalism does: it seeks to deflect attention away from the bigger picture, the more pressing issues affecting people's life. It manipulates opinion to support its own agenda. One outcome of the continuation of this system is that the socialists are left with a shrinking space.

But in terms of morality, the socialists are far ahead of the

nationalists were divided over "one-nation" politics vs two-nation theory, but the socialists knew that the sub-continent had at least 17 different peoples, not just two, and the basis for their nationality was not religion but language. They failed to press ahead with this issue.

During the Pakistan period, the popular struggle was against the oppression of Bengalis by their Punjabi rulers. It was a key constituent of the nationalist politics. The leftists were aware of that, too; in fact, they were the ones who first called for independence of East Bengal, even before the nationalists did, but they failed to identify it as the key challenge of the time. As a result, the nationalists, whose interests aligned with that of capitalism, came to the fore by making it the highlight of their campaign.

After the country's liberation, the nationalists took the helm and identified the leftists as their natural enemy. The pro-Moscow bloc thought it best to side with the nationalists while the pro-Peking bloc found itself disintegrating, due in no small part to repression from the nationalists.

Meanwhile, a section of the nationalists emerged on the scene, who identified themselves as socialists but in reality, all they did was hurt the socialist movement. The socialists were dealt a further blow by the fall of the Soviet Union. A section of the pro-Moscow bloc, who until then stayed true to the cause, went into self-extinction. The tragedy is, many people who sacrificed their lives in the War of Liberation would have joined the socialist movement had they been alive. Many talented youths also left the country. They would have stayed back and joined the movement had it not lost its way like that.

people are deprived of their right to select their own representatives.

I hope the upcoming election will be a free and fair one, but one cannot be faulted for cynicism considering our bitter electoral experience in the past.

But do you think there is a favourable environment for election at the moment?

I must acknowledge that there is no favourable environment for an election at this point. An enabling environment for free speech and a strong, well-respected Election Commission are important prerequisites for a free and credible election—neither of which are present at the moment. People's freedom of speech is being curtailed through judicial and extrajudicial means. Mass prosecutions and mass arrests are rampant. People are being disappeared or killed, and there is no level playing field for the opposition parties. These events and developments are not conducive to holding a free and fair election. The situation must change because there is no alternative to a fair election.

too, a couple of coalitions have been formed, including the Jatiya Oikyafront and the Left Democratic Alliance, the latter a coalition of eight leftist parties formed in July. There is already the ruling 14-party Grand Alliance. How would you evaluate the chances of these alliances?

I think the leftist alliance is different from those other alliances. Because those alliances want only one thing: to win the election, using whatever means necessary. Our two major parties, bourgeois as they are, cannot reach a durable political consensus because they both hanker after money and power, a toxic mix that keeps them in a perpetual state of war. The two major coalitions have been formed around these two parties. The main reason for their forming the coalitions is that they have neither the moral authority nor enough public support to assist an independent bid in elections. Hence the effort to rope in smaller parties who would be content with a few seats, leaving them with the bigger slice of the pie. The smaller parties, on the other hand, happily play along because they

they stay away from each other, the better. In the foreseeable future, the bourgeoisie will continue to be the political mainstream although their politics will turn more fractious and violent. In fact, the bourgeoisie worldwide are more bigoted and abusive today than ever before, their politics dangerously bordering on fascism. Bangladesh's bourgeois politics will be no different. It might see a further decline in quality as the years roll in.

Which is why, we need socialist politics—the politics for social change. An objective reality in favour of socialist politics is being created but the future of our country will depend to a large extent on how the subjective elements shape up to be. Politics for social change will grow in intensity as people's fight for their rights will continue to fuel calls for social change. Bangladesh has a long history of pro-people struggle which makes us confident that the future will turn Left, and that our collective future and the future of the socialist movement are one and the same.

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bourgeoisie. Socialist politics is guided by the common good while bourgeois politics seeks to further profits. While the former is driven by social interests, the latter, consumed by greed, pursues only personal interests. But a superior moral position alone cannot bring success; for a successful movement, you need intellectual superiority as well. By that I mean not just theoretical knowledge but precise, actionable knowledge which recognises the nuances of local history, culture, people's aspirations as well as issues and challenges facing that society and the state. I think the Leftist movement in Bangladesh has failed on this front. It failed to understand the contemporary socio-political dynamics. The result was, despite being a driving force behind all democratic movements of the country, the Left failed to lead them, allowing the bourgeoisie to be the leader instead.

The main reason for this failure is the lack of unity in the Leftist camp, its fixation on its Communist past in Moscow and Peking, and its inability to make critical interventions into key public issues.

Can you elaborate on what you mean by critical interventions? For example, during the British rule, the

The Election Commission has recently announced the schedule of the upcoming parliamentary election. What's your view on that?

Election is a central feature of our parliamentary democracy, and for it to express the will of the electorate, it must be held in a free and credible manner. The responsibility to ensure the credibility of an election is primarily the government's—for two reasons: first, the government has absolute authority in the affairs of the state and naturally holds sway over the Election Commission which it forms. So it can't skirt its responsibility to ensure that all parties can campaign for voter support without running into impediments at every corner, and that all voters can vote without fear or intimidation.

Secondly, the ruling party is contesting the election, too. This makes it extremely important that there is no discrimination of any sort in the electoral process. The opposition candidates have a right to be not discriminated against or treated unfairly, otherwise those elected will have a big question mark hovering over their legitimacy post-election. The trust deficit will also weaken them internally. We also need to keep in mind that accountability is the most important element of democracy, and there will be no accountability if a fair election is not held. Above all, there might be an outbreak of chaos and unrest if the



Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury

In a column last August, you said that no matter which party wins the election, people will lose. Why do you think so?

People are doomed to defeat whichever way the election turns. They lost before and will lose again. It is because they have no party of their own. Let me explain. The winners, whichever party or coalition they belong to, will inevitably be individuals who: 1) have money; 2) are driven by the principles of capitalism; and 3) are members of a large party. Money is their chief weapon and source of sustenance. Without money, you cannot even get the nomination of a major party, let alone win should you choose to contest independently. Those investing in the election business will naturally want to optimise returns on their investment. But this money is not theirs. They are taking it from people whose labour runs the engine of our economy and who are just as well entitled to its benefits but hardly ever get any. After the election, these very individuals now seeking election will ditch their people and may even turn against them, if need be, for their own benefits.

In Bangladesh, a familiar election scene is the formation or re-formation of coalitions. This time

know that, alone and unaided, they don't stand a chance. Their union is not one of ideologies but one born purely of material interests.

I believe the leftist alliance will not turn into an electoral one. The reason for my belief is the small truth that there is no guarantee this alliance will deliver an electoral victory. They don't have money or the media to aid in their endeavour. Election, for them, is part of their movement—an opportunity to engage people and propagate their ideas, increase their organisational strength, and expose the fact that ordinary people end up losing no matter who wins the election and that election today has rather become an occasion for the people to choose their own "oppressors" for the next five years.

The responsibility of the leftists is to initiate activities that would usher in a socialist revolution, which is not the desired outcome of an election, but election does help to advance the socialist cause.

How do you view the future of politics in Bangladesh?

Politics in Bangladesh is mainly divided into the bourgeoisie and the socialist camps. Their goals are different and irreconcilable, and I think the further


In light of the existing situation, how do you view the future of leadership in Bangladesh?

There are worrying signs at the educational institutions that usually produce future leaders. An apparently small but politically significant event is that there have been no elected student bodies at the public universities for 28 years. It's inconceivable that such a thing should happen in democratic Bangladesh when elections to the student unions were held even during the autocratic rule of Pakistan, or that of the British prior to that. You hear our president, ministers and political leaders romanticise the glorious history of student unionism and yet they do nothing to revive it. Even a High Court directive on holding union elections is falling on deaf ears. This is a clear indication that the ruling class has no regard for the development of socio-cultural awareness among the students, and has scant interest in empowering them through unions.

Our students today have lost touch with the true purpose of education. They are suffering from depression, drug addiction and myriad other issues. They are getting involved in crimes. Once in power, defenders of the bourgeois politics, irrespective of which party or coalition they belong to, exploit this situation by getting their own student wings to drive away all others, spreading terror and encroaching on free speech.

This is completely antithetical to the basic principles of leadership development. And once allowed to linger on, it may cripple an entire generation. But I think the situation will change as the youth won't be bound by the shackles of control for long. When all avenues seem closed, the youth can create their own way, just the way they sought to do during the student movement for road safety. But a society cannot transform itself without empowering its weaker members, the workers and poor people, the downtrodden. I hope the youth will understand this as they set out to take the helm.

**QUOTABLE Quote**



**IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)**  
GERMAN PHILOSOPHER

*Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

<b>ACROSS</b>	30 Swell	7 Made flat
1 NBA star Anthony, familiarly	32 Break up, in a way	8 Polite chaps
5 Golfer Norman	34 Homer's bartending pal	10 Ultimate goal
9 Rust, for one	35 Paid for a hand	11 Days gone by
11 Irritate	36 Quite impressed	16 Pancreas
12 Roused from slumber	38 V fliers	product
13 Mayflower name	39 -- up (preened)	21 Accomplishment
14 Summer in Paris	40 Blunders	23 Botched
15 Opposing opinion	41 Hotel units	24 Black eye
17 Remote	<b>DOWN</b>	25 Spring holiday
19 "Sure thing!"	1 Did a yard job	27 Newly fashioned
20 Puts on ice	2 Strangely different	28 Deceived
21 Nourished	3 In this manner	29 Maxim
22 Fancy feather	4 Poem of praise	30 Miami -- County
24 Take in	5 Styling stuffs	31 Title documents
26 Deceitful people	6 Late flight	33 Porgy's love
29 "So that's it!"		37 Essence


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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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**Mahmuda Farhad**

June 23, 1943  
November 12, 2017



*I thought of you today - though it is nothing new,  
I thought of you yesterday - everyday since you bid adieu.  
I remember you in silence - yet often speak your name,  
I keep looking at your portraits in my heart & in the frames.  
Memories of fifty four years of splendor together, are a precious keepsake.*

*Allah now has you in His arms,  
You dwell in His garden - but remain in my heart.  
I love you as I always did & will do so till we meet again.  
May you rest in the highest Jannah until then.*