An ideal vision of democracy in Bangladesh

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Considering that there is no universally agreed definition of democracy, let alone an ideal democracy, any discussion on an ideal vision of democracy may well be deemed as a futile exercise. But I contend that as Bangladesh is witnessing a reversal of democracy and, like elsewhere, anti-democratic forces are increasingly questioning the validity of democratic ideals, effectiveness of democratic institutions and suggesting an undemocratic system of governance as a new kind of democracy, it is imperative that we explore the meaning of democracy, both normatively and empirically, and lay out an ideal vision to aspire to and fight for. For constructing and elucidating an ideal vision of democracy I propose adopting a "puzzle" metaphor that includes at least three pieces—the foundational principles, the essential attributes, and citizens' expectations. Bringing these pieces would allow us to contextualise the concept and institutional arrangements of democracy in a particular country.

Granted, the use of "ideal" will be considered problematic by many. Robert Dahl, the foremost living theorist of democracy, noted that the very term "ideal" in the context of democracy is ambiguous. The term can be understood in two senses, he argued. "In one sense a system is ideal if it is considered apart from, or in the absence of, certain empirical conditions, which in actuality are always present to some degree. Ideal systems in this sense are used to identify what features of an actual system are essential to it, or what underlying laws are responsible, in combination with empirical factors, for a system's behaviour in actual circumstances. In another sense, a system is ideal if it is 'best' from a moral point of view. An ideal system in this sense is a goal toward which a person or society ought to strive (even if it is not perfectly attainable in practice) and a standard against which the moral worth of what has been achieved, or of what exists, can be measured" (Robert Dahl, "Democracy", Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). If we consider the former as empirical interpretation of the ideal, the latter is evidently the normative version. Comprehending democracy warrants exploration of both normative and empirical notions.

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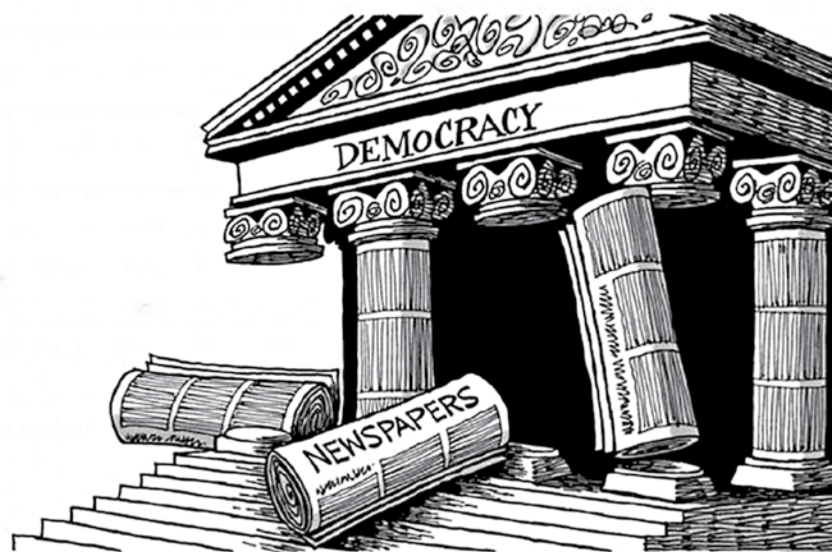

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

The ambiguity of the term "ideal" has not precluded political scientists from exploring the essential elements and principles of democracy. Such endeavours can be traced back to political philosophers such as Aristotle of the classical period in Greece. But it has taken the centre stage of academic discourses since the 16th century, thanks to the contributions of Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to name but a few. Their works span over a century, address a wide range of topics, and in many instances, not only offering different perspectives but advance contesting positions. But, their arguments' point of departure is against an absolutist state, and insists on personal liberty.

Hobbes' (1588-1679) had a penchant for absolutism, primarily on the grounds of individualism, but he too insisted on a social contract among the people; and the assurance of protection provided by the sovereign in exchange for giving away some rights. Locke (1632-1704), often described as the "reluctant democrat", has not only challenged Hobbes on social contract issue, but expanded the concept further, and argued that the contract must be between the governed and the state. His insistence that some rights are inalienable, that the King does not hold absolute power and that people can be governed only by consent, laid down the basic principles of democracy, although Locke did not outrightly reject the need for monarchy. His emphasis on the importance of government by consent and that consent can be revoked if the government and its deputies fail to sustain the "good of the governed" remains the fundamental premise of the relationship between the government and governed in any democracy. He has further underscored the need for separation of legislative and executive power.

Montesquieu (1689-1755) insisted that there are three types of governments: republican governments, which can take either democratic or aristocratic forms; monarchies; and despotisms. But most importantly, he underscored the sovereignty of the people—that they are the sovereign. Whatever way they govern themselves—either through ministers or their senators, Montesquieu insists "they must have the power of choosing their ministers and senators for themselves" (Hilary Bok, "Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Winter 2018). The form of a democratic government makes the laws governing suffrage and voting fundamental.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), particularly in his oft-quoted book titled Social Contract (1762), emphasised that people will enter the social contract, which requires giving up some rights, but not to a king, rather to "the whole community," all the people. The people then exercised their "general will" to make laws for the "public good." According to Rousseau, all political power must reside with the people, exercising their general will. "Sovereign authority is the people making the rules by which they live."

The "general will" will be implemented by the government, it is assumed by almost all the theorists mentioned thus far; the question that remained is how we ensure that it will not be engaged in excesses. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and James Mill (1773-1836) addressed this issue in detail. For them accountability of the governors to the governed is an important issue. Bentham wrote, "A democracy… has for its characteristic object and effect… securing its members against oppression and depredation at the hands of these functionaries which it employs for its defence." As such, democracy requires protection from despotic powers, even from those who have been assigned to act for the purpose of the general will. Both Bentham and Mill, therefore, insisted on "vote, secret ballot, competition between potential political leaders (representatives), elections, separation of powers and liberty of the press, speech, and public association could the interests of the community in general be sustained" (David Held, "Introduction: Central Perspectives on the Modern State").

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) addresses two issues, democracy, and liberty (Considerations on Representative Government and On Liberty). Mill argued that liberty is vital to our lifestyle; without liberty people will be stifled and unable to explore new ideas, make discoveries, and fully develop as people. The best defence of liberty is an active population living in a democratic system. Of the three kinds of liberty that Mill discusses at length, the first one is, the freedom of thought and emotion, that is the freedom of expression. Mill states that the "establishment of constitutional checks by which the consent of the community, or of a body of some sort, supposed to represent its interests, was made a necessary condition to some of the more important acts of the governing power."

Brief summaries of the works of prominent political theorists show that there are four foundational normative elements of democracy—popular sovereignty, representation, accountability, and freedom of expression. Popular sovereignty means that government is created by and subject to the will of the people. This notion not only rejects the despotic power or oligarchic rule, but underscores the rule of law, that is equality in the eyes of the law, as the bedrock of democracy. The sovereignty is inalienable, therefore cannot be appropriated in the name of divine power, development, national security, or a political ideology. Representation is way of providing consent by the governed to those who govern. The US Constitution, for example, affirms that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights, and "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The consent of the governed provides legitimacy to the government and the moral right to govern. In the words of English poet John Milton, "The power of kings and magistrates is nothing else, but what is

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