

Democracy means more than the ability to vote



STRATEGICALLY
SPEAKING

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (ret'd) is a former associate editor of The Daily Star.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

NOT unnaturally, democracy and people's right to vote are hogging the headlines, occupying the time of political observers and providing subjects to columnists to write on for newspapers. The next general election is scheduled for next year, and the prime concern of the major political parties is either how to cling to power or how to dislodge the incumbent from power.

Unfortunately, winning an election has become the synonym for achieving power – whatever level of election that may be. Thus, when an office is attained through elections – or in our case, to be more accurate, “so-called” elections – power becomes the sole tool of governance. It becomes the instrument of the opposition's chastisement. Every bad law, every anti-people regulation that is vilified while in the opposition, is forgotten once in power. Not only are these laws and regulations not repealed, but they are employed with a vengeance, in a more stringent fashion than by the previous regime who enacted those laws in the first place.

The most abhorrent aspect of the matter is that these laws become direct encumbrances on democracy, democratic practices, freedom of speech and assembly, etc. Not that such exercise of power was not demonstrated in the past by the other political parties while in power, but the last 10 years is a glaring example of how “power” is exercised to curtail rights in a most stringent manner. The recent example is the way police was used to scuttle a political party's programme in the southern district of Bhola, in which at least one person was killed by police fire and several sustained injuries.

The Bhola incident exposes how democracy and politics have come to be dictated by force. A perfectly peaceful gathering – to protest fuel price hike and load-shedding – turned into a chaotic event that caused deaths and injuries, because the BNP had not taken permission to bring out the procession, according to police; the BNP's version of the event is different. They argue that verbal permission was taken for both the rally and the procession, while the police argues that permission was taken only for the rally. Be that as it may, one would like to ask: What precipitated the firing? Is the police's threshold level so low that opening fire becomes the first option? If the crowd had to be dispersed, could safer methods not have been employed, instead of using live rounds on protesters? Bhola is one of the many examples of denying a political party its fundamental rights during the tenure of the current government.

Regrettably, some of us have fallen into the definitional trap of democracy, which would have us believe that democracy and elections consist only of the day people cast their ballots – if and when they get the chance to exercise this option. Unfortunately, the chief election commissioner (CEC) seems to be suffering from that same irised mindset. And he is supposed to be one of the guardians of our democracy.

Since the day the new CEC was sworn in and put in that exalted office – which in many countries that are democratic to a fault has been haloed by people who sanctified that appointment by their unflinching commitment to not only the precept, but also the application of the principles

of democracy – he has been harping on one single issue: vote, vote, vote. He has been doing so without recognising that an election is a process and democracy a principle, that admits of no encumbrances to be successful.

The CEC exposed either his outdatedness or his willingness to accept reality when he put the onus on the people for the survival of democracy. The fact is, democracy as of now is moribund – if not completely dead. Comments of leading political

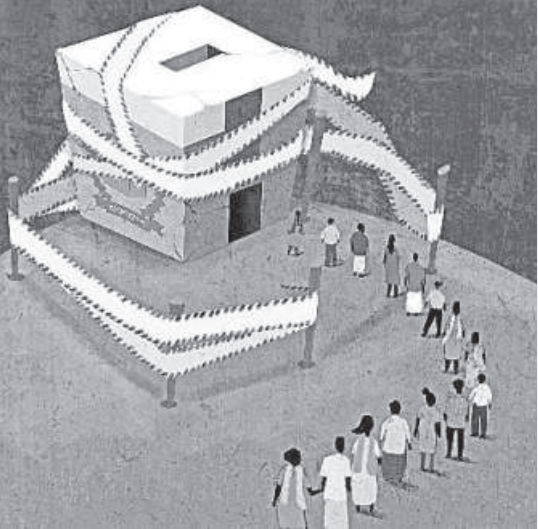


ILLUSTRATION: NAFIA JAHAN MONNI

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leaders, at least one belonging to the ruling party alliance, have categorically exposed concerns about people's apathy towards elections and politics, and its deleterious consequences on democracy. But who cares! As long as power is attained, the manner and means matter little.

We admit that it is not the Election Commission's remit to ensure that all the parties participate in the elections; it remains the choice of individual parties. But it is its bounden duty to make sure that the process is free and fair. That the Election Commission, by its words and deeds, engender confidence in the minds of voters and political parties to convince them that the voting will not be a sham, as it was in the last two national elections, and that the proverbial playing field would be level. That innovations in the voting process, which does not garner trust or credence in people, are not imposed on voters. Electronic voting machines (EVMs) are a nonstarter as far as a majority opinion among the political parties is concerned, no matter the clean chit given by some professors and party activists. Its possible use, misuse and exploitation to serve the interests of the party in power have already been exposed by some ruling party men. It is also a majority view that a free and fair election would not be possible with the incumbent running the administration during the election. Citing examples of other countries won't wash with the public. It's the past experience that matters. Some sort of a temporary dispensation has to be put in place to oversee election and shield it from the ruling party members' unwarranted influence.

The prime minister rightly expressed her eagerness to see that the major political parties join the election. It behoves her, as the leader of a political party, to see that the game is fair, that corners are not cut, and no new doctrinaire political philosophy is introduced. Let the system work without let or hindrances. Trust in the people and the party's performances over the past 10 years – and let the chips fall where they may.

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What the “Woke” Left and the Alt-Right Share



Slavoj Žižek, Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School, is International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London and the author, most recently, of *Heaven in Disorder* (OR Books, 2021).

SLAVOJ ŽIZEK

THE Canadian psychologist and alt-right media fixture Jordan Peterson recently stumbled onto an important insight. In a podcast episode titled “Russia vs. Ukraine or Civil War in the West?,” he recognised a link between the war in Europe and the conflict between the liberal mainstream and the new populist right in North America and Europe.

Although Peterson initially condemns Russian President Vladimir Putin's war of aggression, his stance gradually morphs into a kind of metaphysical defence of Russia. Referencing Dostoevsky's Diaries, he suggests that Western European hedonist individualism is far inferior to Russian collective spirituality, before duly endorsing the Kremlin's designation of contemporary Western liberal civilisation as “degenerate.” He describes postmodernism as a transformation of Marxism that seeks to destroy the foundations of Christian civilisation. Viewed in this light, the war in Ukraine is a contest between traditional Christian values and a new form of communist degeneracy.

This language will be familiar to anyone familiar with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's regime, or with the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol. As CNN's John Blake put it, that day “marked the first time many Americans realised the US is facing a burgeoning White Christian nationalist movement,” which “uses Christian language to cloak sexism and hostility to Black people and non-White immigrants in its quest to create a White Christian America.” This worldview has now “infiltrated the religious mainstream so thoroughly that virtually any conservative Christian pastor who tries to challenge its ideology risks their career.”

The fact that Peterson has assumed a pro-Russian, anti-communist position is indicative of a broader trend. In the United States, many Republican Party lawmakers have refused to support Ukraine. But does accepting Peterson's premise that Russia's war and the alt-right in the US are platoons of the same global movement mean that leftists should simply take the opposite side? Here, the situation gets more complicated. Although Peterson claims to oppose communism, he is attacking a major consequence of global capitalism. As Marx and Engels wrote more than 150 years ago in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*:

“The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. ...All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

This observation is studiously ignored by leftist cultural theorists who still focus their critique on patriarchal ideology and practice. Yet surely the critique of patriarchy has reached its apotheosis at precisely the historical moment when patriarchy

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has lost its hegemonic role – that is, when market individualism has swept it away. After all, what becomes of patriarchal family values when a child can sue her parents for neglect and abuse (implying that parenthood is just another temporary and dissolvable contract between utility-maximising individuals)?

Of course, such “leftists” are sheep in wolves' clothing, telling themselves that they are radical revolutionaries as they defend the reigning establishment. Today, the melting away of pre-modern social relations and forms has already gone much further than Marx could have imagined. All facets of human identity are now becoming a matter of choice; nature is becoming more and more an object of technological

manipulation.

The “civil war” that Peterson sees in the developed West is thus a chimera, a conflict between two versions of the same global capitalist system: unrestrained liberal individualism versus neo-fascist conservatism, which seeks to unite capitalist dynamism with traditional values and hierarchies.

There is a double paradox here. Western political correctness (“wokeness”) has displaced class struggle, producing a liberal elite that claims to protect threatened racial and sexual minorities in order to divert attention from its members' own economic and political power. At the same time, this lie allows alt-right populists to present themselves as defenders of “real” people against corporate and “deep state” elites, even though they, too, occupy positions at the commanding heights of economic and political power.

Ultimately, both sides are fighting over the spoils of a system in which they are wholly complicit. Neither side really stands up for the exploited or has any interest in working class solidarity. The implication is not that “left” and “right” are outdated notions – as one often hears – but rather that culture wars have displaced class struggle as the engine of politics.


Where does that leave Europe? *The Guardian's* Simon Tisdall paints a bleak but accurate picture:

“Putin's aim is the immiseration of Europe. By weaponising energy, food, refugees and information, Russia's leader spreads the economic and political pain, creating wartime conditions for all. A long, cold, calamity-filled European winter of power shortages and turmoil looms. ...Freezing pensioners, hungry children, empty supermarket shelves, unaffordable cost of living increases, devalued wages, strikes and street protests point to Sri Lanka-style meltdowns. An exaggeration? Not really.”

To prevent a total collapse into disorder, the state apparatus, in close coordination with other states and relying on local mobilisations of people, will have to regulate the distribution of energy and food, perhaps resorting to administration by the armed forces. Europe thus has a unique chance to leave behind its charmed life of isolated welfare, a bubble in which gas and electricity prices were the biggest worries. As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently told Vogue, “Just try to imagine what I'm talking about happening to your home, to your country. Would you still be thinking about gas prices or electricity prices?”

He's right. Europe is under attack, and it needs to mobilise, not just militarily but socially and economically as well. We should use the crisis to change our way of life, adopting values that will spare us from an ecological catastrophe in the coming decades. This may be our only chance.

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