

‘Nothing will change, everything will be managed’

GM Quader, chairman of Jatiya Party, the main opposition in parliament, discusses the upcoming general election, external pressure, politics and the internal feud in his party, in an exclusive interview with Rashidul Hasan of The Daily Star.

You recently said elections under the present government would not be free and fair. Why do you think so?

After resuming power following the last election, the government highly prioritised one issue: how to win the next polls. This is not unusual – every government wants it. But what they have done so far is not normal. They have politicised everything. They have selected people who are loyal to them to be appointed as returning officers, polling officers, superintendents of police, deputy commissioners, and other officials who will carry out the election activities. They have taken preparations to hold a staged and managed election in line with their strategy. Another thing they have done is not run the country in the traditional manner. They are following the course through which BAKSAL was formed. Usually, in a government, ruling party leaders join the government and serve the people and treat everyone equally, and the administration cooperates with them. In the BAKSAL system, the ruling party rules the country with its own people. These chosen people, be it in the law enforcement agencies or the defence sector, are talking in favour of the Awami League and chanting party slogans. In the present form of government, all decisions to run the country are made by the prime minister.

Besides, through amending the constitution, the ruling party has politicised different pillars of the state, such as parliament. The speaker [of parliament] talks and delivers speeches in the language of AL.

The lower courts are basically under the jurisdiction of the government. They are under the control of the prime minister through the president.

Thus far, the higher court has its own identity due to various reasons, although the government appoints its own people. The government took measures to control it through the 16th Amendment of the constitution, although this was not implemented later.

The rest of the constitutional posts do not have any impact in reality, and the way these posts are being filled are on a partisan basis.

The difference between BAKSAL and the present form of government is that anyone can be a member of BAKSAL.

All the organisations that are supposed to talk about the people and their rights have been taken under the control of AL and its leader. In reality, Awami League Plus has been formed, which is controlling everything in the country – including the elections and the Election Commission.

Therefore, I will say that there is no democracy in Bangladesh at present, if we define democracy to be a system of the people, by the people, for the people. Now, it is the government of AL Plus, by AL Plus, for AL Plus.

The opportunist section of our society is looting the country's wealth in various ways and syphoning it out of the country. This is only possible if the government has no accountability. This system has been put in place for this purpose.

I am not sure whether any big revolution will happen, but we think a government can be changed if a free and fair election is held. If that government wants to engage in any anti-people activity, people have the ability to change that government through their votes.

How is it possible, then, to hold a free and fair election in Bangladesh? According to the constitution, there will be a poll-time government under the incumbent prime minister.

As per the existing system, 100 percent of the power is vested in the prime minister. Therefore, keeping the prime minister in her post and changing all others, including the entire cabinet and parliament, won't bring any results. It is madness to expect that the prime minister will lose an election that will be held under her authority.

The electoral system will have to be out of the purview of the government's power. Back when Sheikh Hasina was the opposition leader, she had demanded to keep the caretaker system for good. But now, we need a new system.

Can you elaborate on this new system?

There may be various options regarding this new system. But I don't want to give away any details. We have some ideas. When we see some fruitful discussions taking place and the government showing interest, we will present our ideas.

Our prescribed system may not be 100 percent correct. We want to discuss it in a forum to find out the best way. And the government will have to join

either wilfully or through persuasion or pressure. Until the government agrees, there is no point in sharing such ideas.

Are you talking about something like the caretaker government system?

No, a new system should be introduced in which the government won't be able to influence or control the electoral system.

Once, we fought for the caretaker government. But then we realised the caretaker government system had failed as it could be manipulated and corrupted, so we abandoned it.

We have a new proposal. But first, we believe the government will have to have the mindset of accepting such a proposal.

How would you evaluate the recently held city corporation elections? In most cases, Jatiya Party candidates did very poorly and even lost their security deposits in those elections. But you are also talking about contesting in all 300 constituencies.

If you want me to talk about this right now, I will say that this is not practical, our politics has been subjected to conspiracy many times and a division has been created among us. On different occasions, we were forced to work against our party decisions. Confusion was created among the people about the politics of our party. Our target now is to revamp and re-organise the party with a focus on the weak areas.

We want to do proper politics. Only then will the people be encouraged to join our party. And we will get quality candidates to contest the elections. We are hopeful in this regard.

How do you evaluate the US visa policy, and the letters from EU MPs and US Congressmen?

About the visa policy, I will say that if they seriously implement this, there will be an impact.

It is those loyal to the government who carry out various acts following the instruction of the government to amass illegal wealth. In most cases, they transfer that wealth to the Western world where their children are living and they, too, plan on living there at some stage. If they feel uncomfortable about doing that, many of them may keep away from carrying out the government's orders. Many won't be directly

involved. About the letters of US Congressmen and EU MPs, they have spoken in favour of Bangladesh and portrayed the real picture of the country. The people of Bangladesh will be benefited by these letters.

But isn't that tantamount to interference into the internal affairs of Bangladesh?

Those who are saying that are acknowledging their own fault. Why are those people taking this demand for a free and fair election in our country as a threat? Because they are afraid of getting in trouble if elections are free and fair.

Are you going to form an electoral alliance with the Awami League or BNP?

Election battles in Bangladesh will remain limited between the two big parties until the voting system is changed. And we will have to join one of them. Any third alliance apart from these two will not work here. Given this perspective, we will decide on this matter closer to the election. Until then, I think it is better to keep all the options open.

Internal feud in Jatiya Party, especially between you and Raushan Ershad, has been going on for years. Why is that?

It is not as though there is a division, so there is no question of resolving it. Raushan Ershad has time and again told me that she was not well and did not want to continue in politics. She understands and has told me that the party will not survive without me. The government is actually behind all this and Raushan herself is not doing anything. The government for a long time has been trying to make our party weak and create divisions. And such efforts are still going on. This is actually not benefiting the government; rather, it leads to losses for them.

In which direction is Bangladesh's politics heading?

It is on an uncertain path. This BAKSAL-like government system may continue for a long time as only they will win if the election is held in this manner. There will be no other party and politics in the country. Bangladesh is heading towards an entirely autocratic system. I think it is just not possible for us to create any momentum against it. The government has done two things very effectively: creating fear among the people so that they are afraid to speak up, and a lack of faith in the future. Nothing will change, everything will be the same, everything will be managed.



VISUAL: BRGFX/FREEPIK

Sharenting and how it violates our children's rights



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The term “sharenting” is believed to have been coined in 2010. It is a portmanteau of (over)sharing and parenting and refers to the practice of parents posting photos and other information about their children on social media platforms. Though widespread and growing, this habit is highly controversial. Many scholars of social media argue that it risks children's long-term safety and may negatively affect the future relationship with their parents. However, the practice is defended on the grounds that sharenting is an “expression of parental pride” and a way of being happy and increasing happiness.

I am a father of three children, but I have never shared their photos, videos or current statuses on Facebook or other publicly accessible social media. In this respect, I belong to the minority group of social media consumers. However, that didn't stop photos of some of my children from appearing on my Facebook feed. Others “tagged” me while posting group photos that include my children. Thus, sadly, their images landed on my Facebook page.

The reason why I dissuaded myself from sharenting was instinctive and influenced by my personal taste. Now, in order to write this essay, I did some research, which vindicated and strengthened my confidence that the harms of sharenting greatly outweigh its benefits.

I believe that I don't have the right to flaunt photos or mementos of my children, and they aren't at the right age to give me their (informed) consent to do so. To me, it is all about online etiquette, respecting my children's privacy, protecting their rights and ensuring their security.

What parents usually share online about their children builds a data structure with which the latter may not be happy once they grow up. When we share information on social media

platforms, we are conscious of the fact that their owners may use it for commercial purposes. But underage children whose information their parents share on various sites are not aware of these commercial motives. Nor do they understand that owners of social media affordances are involved in data profiling and data trading. Perhaps there are (and/or will be) so many other pitfalls and (privacy) loopholes in social media use, about which we know hardly anything.

This leads us to the question that Linda Geddes asks in a *Guardian* (UK) article published on September 21, 2014, “But is it safe, or even ethical, to publish something about someone who can't give their consent? And as the business models of social networking sites change and digital technology develops, could these innocent snapshots someday come back and bite our children on the behind?”

The BBC essay “‘Sharenting’ puts young at risk of online fraud” makes this clearer. Referring to a warning by Barclays Bank (UK), it says that sharenting “will account for two-thirds of identity fraud facing young people by the end of the next decade [2020s] and will cost £667m per year.” According to Barclays, parents “fail to realise they are making their children ‘fraud targets’ in the future, by publishing so much personal information which will remain online.”

Even if a particular piece of information is deleted, does deleting really erase that data from the archives of social media platforms? Arguably, deleting digital data does not delete anything.

What is more important to me is that children are human beings, not objects. They have their likes and dislikes, their predilections and prejudices. Parents are carers of their children, not owners. It is the children's right to decide what

information about themselves they would wish to see stored in metadata repositories; and they will do so once they reach the right age.

Most of us are aware of facial recognition technology (FRT) and its uses and abuses. By the time today's underage children become adults, such technology will likely be “far more sophisticated and widespread.” Therefore, it will be unsurprising if the algorithm for data mining is advanced to such an extent that one photo of today's toddler will be enough for the ill-intentioned media owners or fraudsters to steal their identities or to compromise their privacy and security.

The fact of the matter is that, once a parent posts their children's photos (often even prenatal ultrasound images) or mementos on the internet, they immediately lose control of the digital footprint that is generated on systems and laid down in databases. The multitude of “likes” and “shares” that are placed beneath a status update may take it to places beyond our reach. It is not humanly possible to police all the recipients or to prevent them from forwarding it to others. It is foolish of us to expose ourselves to this peril. But to bring our children to such peril is more than foolishness – it is a violation of their rights and of the trust they place in us.

Let me cite another example. The UK's *Daily Mail* on March 11, 2014 ran a story on then UK Prime Minister David Cameron carrying his three-year-old daughter to childcare before rushing to the office to chair a cabinet meeting. Being a father myself, I was touched to see the human side of the prime minister as he was carrying his daughter on his shoulder and walking along the pavement of Whitehall in the morning.

The *Daily Mail* printed a full-page photo that demonstrates this very human side of the UK prime minister. But, while it ran the full-face photo of Cameron, it blurred the image of his daughter's face. This is because Cameron or the newspaper does not have the right to expose her identity to the public. Nor was she of the right age to make such a decision. I believe that was the reason why her face was not shown on the newspaper page.

Like Cameron's daughter, all children on Earth are entitled to this right to privacy, and we must respect it, be it offline or online.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

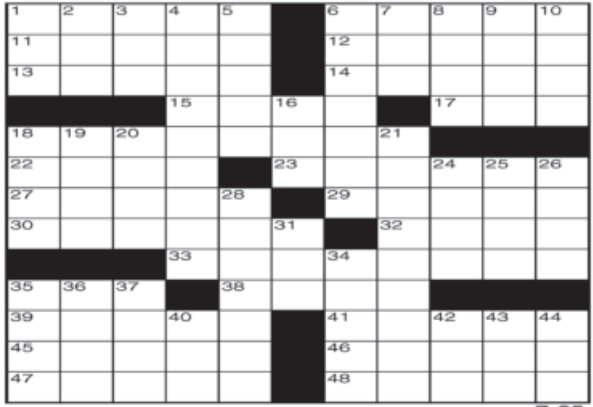
- 1 Learn to cope
- 6 Jazz dance
- 11 Feminine
- 12 Private teacher
- 13 Like draft beer
- 14 Banish
- 15 Calendar span
- 17 Pigpen
- 18 Displaying ostentatiously
- 22 Finished
- 23 Wall paintings
- 27 Does some modeling
- 29 Craze
- 30 Require as a result
- 32 Longings
- 33 Seattle team
- 35 Sandy color
- 38 Mix up
- 39 Throw out

- 41 — four (small cake)
- 45 Pago Pago setting
- 46 “Common Sense” writer
- 47 Easy runs
- 48 Japanese port

DOWN

- 1 In the past
- 2 Clamor
- 3 Gallery fill
- 4 Sites of swings and a sandbox
- 5 Used a keyboard
- 6 Breastbone
- 7 Groom's wear
- 8 Singer Redding
- 9 Shed feathers
- 10 Hunted animal
- 16 Target

- 18 Vatican VIP
- 19 Stratford's river
- 20 Take it easy
- 21 Unclear situations
- 24 Over again
- 25 Chain unit
- 26 Pert talk
- 28 Afternoon breaks
- 31 Back muscle, for short
- 34 Safari sight
- 35 Exam
- 36 Not quite closed
- 37 Nautilus captain
- 40 Barracks bed
- 42 Aunt, in Acapulco
- 43 Pen fill
- 44 Coffee alternative



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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T	I	N	E	S		E	T	H	A	N
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