

A detriment to democracy

The rigid positions of AL-BNP will only lengthen the political deadlock

There is little to be hopeful about following the two rallies held by the ruling Awami League and the BNP in Dhaka. Although rallies are not typically where political compromises/concessions are announced, we still expect some hint of a way forward from the present deadlock. Wednesday's events unfolded under the shadow of visits by the European Union's election exploratory mission and a changed political dynamic in the wake of the recent US visa policy. While both AL and BNP appeared to allude or respond to these influences, both claiming to enjoy the support of the public, the question is: Do the methods they advocate to achieve the objective of a free and fair election best serve the public?

In a way, the two rallies, held about a kilometre apart but thankfully timed differently, mirrored each other. While the BNP used its event as a launching pad for its one-point movement for the government's resignation in favour of an election under a non-party interim administration, the AL used its rally to post a resounding response: that there will be no entertaining of such demands. While both stress the importance of free and fair polls, thus giving them a common ground, neither signalled readiness to advance this cause through peaceful means, with the latter even ruling out the possibility of dialogue. If their lack of flexibility on this issue is any indication, we cannot help but be worried about the future.

We must say, however, that as the party in power, for three consecutive terms no less, it is the AL that holds the primary responsibility for leading us out of the stalemate. Even if a solution to the bone of their contention is not imminently expected, the party can at least ensure that it doesn't escalate tensions by countering every public event of the BNP with one of its own. This as well as other obstructive activities by police and ruling party men have led to unnecessary violence in the past. Anything that hinders constructive political discourse and cooperation must be avoided, and that goes for all other political parties as well.

As things stand now, it is crucial that all parties see the value of dialogue and compromise instead of rigidly pursuing their agendas. In the spirit of democracy, they must work together to ensure elections that truly reflect the will of the people.

Dhaka needs better sewage treatment

Newly inaugurated STP raises hope but much remains to be done

We are pleased that the Dasherkandi Sewage Treatment Plant was finally opened after the PM inaugurated it on Thursday. Being the largest such plant in South Asia, it has the capacity to treat 20-25 percent of the 2,000 million litres of sewage generated in Dhaka city daily. The issue of untreated sewage polluting our rivers and other water sources has long been a problem for Dhaka. Given its lack of a proper waste management system, the newly launched STP in Aftabnagar comes with the hope that the city will start to become more liveable going forward. However, some concerns about the extent of its effectiveness remain.

Although the plant is supposed to treat sewage coming from a number of areas – including Tejgaon, Badda, Banani, Gulshan (in part), Ramna, Mouchak, Hatirjheel, and Dhammandi (in part) – it currently has only a 5km trunk sewer line connecting Rampura. Experts and even officials have, in the past, raised concerns about the additional years and funds that would be needed to create the remaining networks. Meanwhile, the existing Pagla sewage treatment plant, which treats around 10 percent of Dhaka's waste, is being renovated. Additionally, many of the drains in the capital are also broken or clogged. All this suggests that there is still a lot that needs to be done to save our rivers and canals from being contaminated with waste every day.

In this connection, one may also recall how poorly the central effluent treatment plant (CETP) project at the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate has gone. As a recent report by this daily revealed, the contractor that built that facility handed over an incomplete CETP. We sincerely hope that the Dasherkandi STP will fare better than its counterparts. If successfully run, this plant – part of Wasa's master plan to construct five STPs to treat 100 percent of the sewage generated in Dhaka – can save the city's water bodies from the incessant pollution and contamination. We, therefore, urge the relevant authorities, especially Dhaka Wasa, to ensure that all areas are properly connected to the sewage treatment plants.

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EDITORIAL

Need for a change in our political culture



THE THIRD VIEW

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We are greatly relieved that no violence occurred in Wednesday's showdown between our two biggest political parties. What did the showdown prove? That both parties could gather thousands for rallies, that both had mass support, etc. Didn't we know all that? BNP announced their plan to hold a rally. Immediately after, Awami League had to hold a counter-rally on the same day, and also close to their rival's venue? Why? It reminded me of two competing schoolboys gesticulating in various ways, trying to prove that their muscles were bigger than each other's.

Was public convenience thought of when calling for these rallies? Given Dhaka's paucity of roads and dependency on a few arterial avenues for traffic flow – which on a normal day is extremely challenging, to put it mildly – calling for such rallies on a weekday in the heart of the city is actually calling for shutting down the city centre for a whole day. Did it all matter to them?

An interesting answer emerged when asked why the two parties didn't hold these rallies on the weekend, which would have greatly reduced public suffering. BNP leaders said they wanted to show the EU and US visitors how much public support they could garner, thus strengthening their case to the foreigners. So, is AL's accusation true that BNP's politics is to attract external attention and goad them to get involved? But why did the AL call for a counter-rally on the same day? Was it also to show our visitors their strength? Are we to conclude, then, that both rallies were for the benefit of the visitors and not for our people? Would it be out of place to speculate that if the US were to suddenly say, "Election is an internal matter of a country," AL would suddenly stop all their ramblings about foreign interference? So we can further speculate that all of this is a matter of party interest, not national interest.

This is but a flicker of a glimpse of the hypocrisy of our politics. It is all about power. For the party already on the buttered side of the bread, politics is about how to remain there and destroy every legitimate attempt to



COLLAGE: STAR

counter it. As for their rival, politics is only about getting to the other side. It is seldom, if ever, about public interest.

So what did we get from the much-hyped rally and the counter rally? BNP said, "No election under Hasina" (something that we knew), to which AL countered, "No election but under Hasina" (that also we knew). This reminded me of a cartoon in *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine in the early 1970s, when Kissinger launched his efforts to bring North and South Vietnam to the negotiating table. The cartoon showed the North saying, "We shall never talk to the South," and the other side saying, "We shall never talk to the North," and Kissinger saying, "I see that both sides agree on one point." We also have a similar agreement – no talks with the other side. So where do we go from here?

If we are concluding on the basis of the last 32 years (since the fall of Ershad) of negotiated settlements of our political disputes, the sad and anxiety-triggering answer is: "nowhere." For AL-BNP's record of

minister and BNP had the majority in parliament. It was a very encouraging example of a mature negotiation between political rivals in which the treasury bench in the House accepted the proposal of the opposition.

In our view, the reason we can't negotiate is because we are stuck with fossilised views of some key concepts of political negotiations. For us, to discuss is to show weakness (what is there to discuss? We know who they are and what they represent), to negotiate is to surrender (how can we negotiate? Our position is the perfect one), to accommodate is to give space to those whom we must try to destroy, to acknowledge some good aspects of the opposition is to sow the seeds of self-doubt, etc.

During the last 32 years, except for the two years of army-backed government in 2007-08, we have been ruled either by the AL (nearly 20 years) or the BNP (10 years). Over time, from being political rivals, they became enemies, and mutual destruction became the name of the game. The

Restrictive laws became a convenient weapon that gave oppression a veneer of legal cover. Manipulating elections was an obvious choice, to pull off which one had to empower the police, the bureaucracy, the intelligence agencies, etc – everybody but the people. So now we are in a state where police and the agencies can do anything, and bureaucracy is so powerful that nothing can be done without them.

It is in these circumstances that we are heading for the next general election, and the two main political parties have one agreement – not to talk to the other.

Marcus Aurelius, one of the wisest of Roman emperors (161-180 AD), pleaded with the senate to give autonomy to the captured German prisoners, while the latter wanted to turn them into slaves, said, "Honourable Fathers of Rome, we have changed the world, can't we change ourselves?" BNP to some extent and AL to a far greater extent have changed Bangladesh. Can't we expect them to change themselves, even a bit?

Self-sufficiency in healthcare: The Florida case



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Bangladesh can revolutionise health and social care by modelling after "Hope Florida." In 2021, Florida's First Lady Casey DeSantis launched the programme to promote self-sufficiency among the citizens. The innovative approach has integrated all social and economic services in the state into one platform, and has since been expanded multiple times. As someone who has led his agency to manage a project under this programme, I strongly suggest that Bangladesh build a similar infrastructure to not just advance healthcare, but also self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency starts with social care, which was once thought to be a distinct phenomenon outside of economic and health domains. However, as more data is available, the World Health Organization (WHO) has concluded that social services inherently enhance individual, population, and community health. Recent numerous studies have demonstrated that many health-related issues stem from the lack of adequate social and human services, and that we must treat social services as the precursors to self-sufficiency.

Income inequality is a stubborn issue that deeply hurts health and social care for low-earning individuals. As I have said before in a column published in this daily, the poor in Bangladesh are cornered against the massive wall of income and health

inequality, even though the country continues to make progress in these areas. However, we need a smarter and bolder approach that will achieve results fast. To this end, Bangladesh can better align its resources to address health and wellbeing for all after the Hope Florida example.

First, we must break down silos between healthcare and social care and bring them under one umbrella. According to a recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Bangladesh has 114 social protection programmes. These programmes operate mostly in isolation. I recommend that all of these services be integrated under one comprehensive framework. My team and I have learnt one surprising lesson while working on Hope Florida: there are more social programmes than we initially thought, and combining them under one aegis expedites services across socio-economic backgrounds as it streamlines disparate initiatives.

The approach benefits all citizens, especially those dependent on charities and government benefits by allowing them to age in place, i.e. without requiring them to travel to receive assistance. This is particularly beneficial for children, pregnant mothers, at-risk and justice-involved youths, low-income families, older adults, and the disabled – the populations that incur the most health and social services costs. By allowing

them to get care at their places of residence, we can cut transportation costs and healthcare visits while increasing their comfort and wellbeing. We must introduce social programmes in every neighbourhood, especially in areas with the greatest need.

Secondly, we must adopt and innovate digital services to support infrastructure and initiatives. In Florida, all 75 self-sufficiency services are digitally accessible, allowing a wide range of online services. People can electronically submit their applications from home. Unfortunately, even though Bangladesh is pursuing a "Smart Bangladesh" goal by 2041 and has celebrated its accomplishment of the "Digital Bangladesh" mission in 2021, achieving internet sufficiency is still a far cry. It is imperative that the government commits substantial resources to implement the Smart Bangladesh vision, which will accelerate self-sufficiency.

Universally, a culture of social stigma and naming and shaming exists about receiving free or subsidised food or services. By digitising health and human services, we can help remove the sense of guilt in beneficiaries by transitioning them from "asking for help" to a "self-help" environment. When digitised, social services meet people at their places, rather than people meet services in their locations. This approach allows people to find and avail care for themselves in their neighbourhoods, empowering them to pursue self-sufficiency.

Digitisation of services will also promote the efficiency of operations in terms of transparency and gap analysis. Staff at the serving agencies can electronically review information, conduct screening, eligibility, referrals, etc – all without in-person encounters with the clients – saving space and costs, and reducing administrative

overheads. Most importantly, it will allow data collection across the ecosystem, assess outcomes, and bridge gaps, facilitating a more scientific and transparent path towards achieving self-sufficiency.

Lastly, even though it seems banal, educating people on the importance of seeking help when needed is paramount. Domestic violence, loss of housing and transportation, food deprivation, etc cause stress and destroy families. Behavioural and mental health issues can threaten the safety of the patient and their caregivers. Political violence and unsafe neighbourhoods force communities to live in fear, causing long-term psychological and physical repercussions. These episodes must be addressed immediately.

We also need specialised professionals and care navigators to promote 24/7 help and quickly connect people to available services in their neighbourhoods, as applicable. Non-profit organisations, faith-based entities such as mosques and temples, and government agencies are the most resourceful in promoting and staffing round-the-clock call centres. Nurses, social workers, and community volunteers are best suited to assist and refer people to appropriate services. We must develop a culture of outreach and education, as client participation is critical in successfully implementing these endeavours.

To promote self-sufficiency, we must build a connected experience of care that is based on effective policies, high-quality digital services, and outreach and education. Private and public agencies and non-profit organisations must promote a concerted approach to reaching those who need care. We must synergise our efforts, and Hope Florida can be a model.