

Time for a re-reading of Bangabandhu



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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A historic leader, no matter how great or powerful, needs to be discussed, debated, and learnt from—not blindly followed. That goes for Bangabandhu, too. Until recently, saying this out loud would have been tantamount to sacrilege in an environment of total adulation cultivated over the past 15 years or so. But the sheer, unadulterated disregard shown for the chief architect of our independence soon after the Awami regime’s collapse has upended all calculations. Perhaps equally telling has been the relative lack of surprise or even sympathy—at least of the kind you would have expected—which calls for a re-evaluation of Bangabandhu’s legacy in this new era of revolution.

An argument can be made about how much of the anger directed at Bangabandhu’s statues and murals on August 5 was really aimed at the man himself. Indeed, during the mayhem that followed Sheikh Hasina’s escape, many other monuments and landmarks of historical significance were also attacked. Even the parliament building, Gono Bhaban, and the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) were not spared, as mobs swarmed and vandalised them, many making off with furniture, bedding, potted plants, etc. However, if there was a common target in this outburst of raw emotion, it was the key symbols of power—and what better symbol of it than the figure that Awami League had so unabashedly exploited to assert its supremacy? Many of the 1,220 statues and murals the party had erected of him across the country were damaged or pulled down. The historic Mujibnagar Memorial Complex in Meherpur, where he stood tall among other sculpted heroes of the Liberation War, lies in ruins. Even his residence-turned-museum in Dhanmondi was looted and burnt down.

Observers have offered various explanations about the men behind this vandalism. One involved angry mobs taking it out on anything associated with Awami League. Another involved a vague reference to the re-rise of anti-liberation forces. Some observers simply blamed unruly elements taking advantage of a fluid security situation. But few acknowledged that Bangabandhu’s murals or statues had been destroyed even during Awami League’s iron-fisted rule. This suggests that the latest vandalism was not just a momentary madness—any resentment



Bangabandhu commanded respect of the ordinary people, rather than forcing it upon them.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

was long in the making. And the fact that the national holiday on August 15 would be cancelled soon after, in a unanimous decision by the Council of Advisers and political parties, further represents the shifting ground beneath the once-inviolable image of Bangabandhu.

How have we come to this point? How has a man who deserves the highest honour for his role in our independence struggle come to be treated with such disrespect? At the risk of sounding clichéd, let’s just say this is what happens when respect is imposed, legislated, and weaponised. Over the years, we have seen how the Awami regime and intelligentsia cultivated blind adulation, suppressing any attempt at a nuanced, dispassionate study of the man who led a very eventful life. We have seen how the personality cult around him was continually enhanced through an infinite mix of Bangabandhu-centred

would be silenced through various legal tools.

Even Bangabandhu would have found this deification quite distasteful, had he been alive today.

This is unprecedented not just in the subcontinent, but perhaps anywhere in the world. In India, where we saw Congress live off Mahatma Gandhi for decades, he was not subjected to such wholesale deification. In Cuba, you will hardly see any statues of Fidel Castro. While he, too, still lives bathed in absolute adulation, his name is not as ubiquitous. Even the idolatry encouraged by other communist leaders, such as Mao Zedong, Josef Stalin or North Korea’s Kim family, would pale in comparison.

For many in today’s Bangladesh, Bangabandhu was a story narrated to us through a carefully chosen medley of pictures, historical accounts, audio clips, and video footage. It kept you in awe of the person. It

kept you at a distance. We were raised to bow before his altar without really understanding him, and marvel at his greatness without knowing, beyond the highlights of his career, what made him great to his people. He was, for us, not someone we could easily relate to—a mortal man with human triumphs and failings—but one shrouded in reverent mystique.

But the way to appreciate a great leader

Coming back to Bangabandhu, he was known for his remarkable affinity with the ordinary people. The ease and candour with which he interacted with them is legendary. He commanded their respect, rather than forcing it upon them. However, like many revolutionaries who later became statesmen, Bangabandhu was not without his fair share of mistakes. Sometimes he learnt from them, sometimes he failed to. Sometimes he made bad judgement calls, distanced himself from trusted aides. Sometimes his decisions had the inadvertent effect of isolating those very people he loved and fought for. Those were not his brightest moments—those were his “human” moments. But this is precisely what makes him relatable for a generation who would like nothing better than to see a role model they can identify with.

The challenge of the post-truth age is that no legacy is innately secure, and truths in politics are invariably partial and contingent. In post-truth politics, you appeal to emotion rather than objective facts to shape public opinion. Emotion excites the mind and lasts for a while, but for a lasting impact, there is no alternative to a narrative based on facts and truths. Bangabandhu as a subject of study should be approached with an openness to embrace truths, however unflattering.

In the new age of revolution, Bangabandhu can be just Bangabandhu—or Sheikh Saheb, or Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, or plain “Mujib”—without the obsessive, cultist praise but also without meaningless criticism along party lines. He will still remain the Father of the Nation, but more human, more relatable, more in alignment with other heroes of our independence. And for that, it is necessary that he be restudied, reimaged, and reinvented by subjecting his life and work to broader interpretations.

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Can a proportional representation system ensure better democracy?



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KAZI HABIBUL AWAL

In Bangladesh elections, we practise the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. The candidate receiving the highest number of votes in a constituency wins a seat in parliament. The political party winning the highest number of seats in parliament forms the government alone, or through coalition. If the FPTP system is changed to the proportional representation (PR) system, in full or in part, it may bring about improvement in the existing political system of the country, providing for peaceful elections and more free, fair and credible representation of voters through their elected representatives in parliament.

In the PR system, an election is among registered political parties. There will no longer be 300 constituencies; the whole country will be one single constituency. Each party may declare names of its candidates well ahead of the day of election (three to six months ahead). In the alternative, for convenience’s sake, lists of candidates may be closed ones. Except for a few top members, no one in a party will know the names of nominated candidates, until the results are declared.

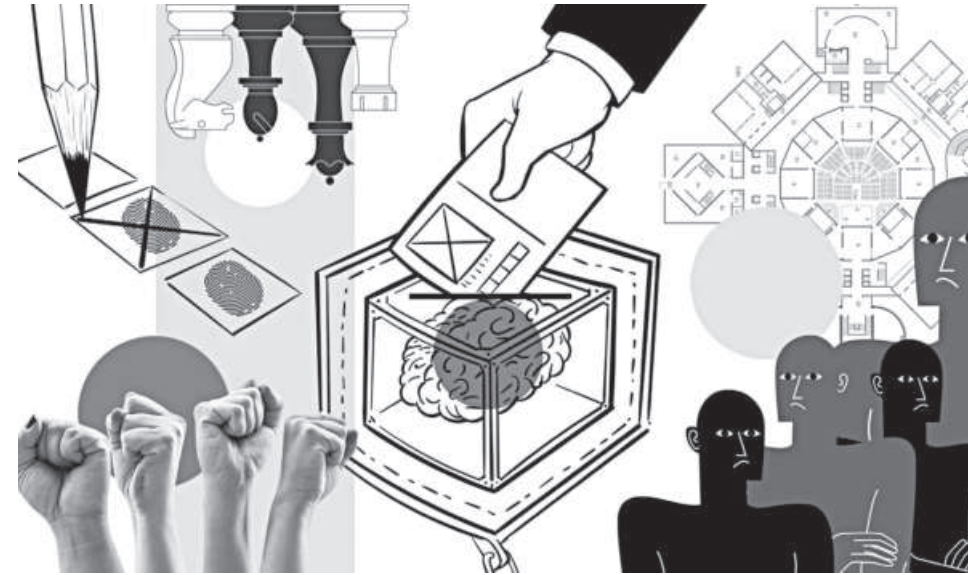
In the PR system, each party may be required to pay a certain amount of money as security fee against each of its nominated candidates. A party believing that it may win only 100 seats based on proportion should field 100 candidates or a few more, like 130 candidates. That will help the party save security money. A provision may be there that if a party, for instance, fields 100 candidates but gets 120 seats based on proportion, it will be allowed to give 20 new candidates to be declared elected, subject to payment of higher (as penal) security fees against the additional candidates. In the alternative, a provision may be made that those 20 seats shall stand forfeited to

be redistributed by a re-election, or that those 20 seats may be distributed to other winning parties according to the ratio of proportion subject to payment of additional security fees. A provision may be made that a party winning less than 10 seats, as against 100 candidates fielded, shall be deregistered for future elections, and the seats won shall be forfeited so as to be distributed among the remaining qualified parties proportionately. Or, if not, the security fees of those 90 candidates not elected shall be forfeited. That may act as a deterrence to help sensitise parties to field a reasonable number of candidates.

For an easier understanding, the matter may be illustrated as follows in the context of Bangladesh’s unicameral legislature. If four parties—namely parties A, B, C and D—contest, each nominating 300 candidates from the centre, and after polling and counting it appears that Party A has received 50 percent of the total votes cast, Party B received 30 percent, Party C 10 percent, and Party D 10 percent, then Party A will take 50x3=150 out of 300 seats, Party B will take 30x3=90 seats, Party C will take 10x3=30 seats and Party D will take 10x3=30 seats. Thus, all 300 seats will be occupied. If a party gets only one percent of the votes cast, it will get three seats in parliament. If a party gets only 0.34 percent votes, it will get one seat in parliament. If the ratio of votes received by a party is less than 0.34 percent, that party may or may not get a seat, based upon an arithmetical formula to be made regarding that. If a party gets fewer than 150 seats, it will have to make a coalition to raise its seats to more than 150. This system is working in many countries, and can be further studied by examining how it works in countries practising the PR system.

No by-election will be necessary in case

of deaths, etc of a member of parliament. The party concerned will fill in the position of the demised member from the original list as per the order of precedence for the rest of the tenure. Or in the alternative, that party may be allowed to auto-elect a new candidate as the new MP. This way, the proportional representation system may reduce expenses as well as hassles of holding by-elections. Reserved seats for women may



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

be done away with. To ensure adequate representation of women in parliament, each contesting party may be required to declare two lists, i.e. a general list for all and a reserved list for women only. If 10 percent of the seats should be reserved for women, a provision of law may be that any party nominating candidates shall be required to enlist two women candidates among each 10 candidates. In that case, a party proposing 300 candidates shall propose 60 women candidates. Hence, there shall be 60 women MPs among 300 MPs. A separate election to reserved seats for women shall not be necessary then. That also simplifies the overall electoral process.

If a party does not win more than 50 percent of the seats, and a coalition is, therefore, needed to be made and cannot be made readily within a certain specified time,

the largest party may be allowed to make government, and its seats in parliament may be declared deemed (by legal fiction) raised to 151 for the formation of the government and all ordinary voting purposes in the legislature. No right away stalemate in government or parliament will be created in that case. If a coalition can be made, a coalition government can run for a full term of five years or as long as the coalition

further amending the RPO in 2008, it was made three seats. There was no rationale for it. In the PR system, there will be no scope of that. Constitutional amendments will be necessary to introduce the PR system. Not many amendments—only a few amendments may do.

Such a system, if introduced, will do away with many prevalent malpractices like muscle and money power, bribing, violence in and around polling stations, ballot snatching, ballot stuffing, rigging, etc. The hassle of maintaining 300 constituencies will no longer be there. Delimitation of constituencies will not be necessary. The hassle of contest by independent candidates will be done away with. The hassle of contest in more than one seat by one candidate may also be done away with. Another major advantage of the system will be that the hassles of nomination submissions locally all over the country will be substantially reduced. Nomination will be submitted centrally in Dhaka, the capital, directly or online. All (100 percent) voters will be represented in parliament. Now a party, receiving only 25 percent of the votes cast, may form government. That never happens in the PR system.

Parliamentary elections may be more transparent, free, fair and credible in the PR system. In the existing FPTP system, incidents of false voting, centre-capturing, ballot-snatching and ballot stuffing, rigging, manipulation, influencing the police, administration and polling officers with money or threats, etc are quite many and random. If the proportional representation system is introduced, such incidents will reduce substantially.

More than a hundred countries in the world practise some form of the PR system in national elections. The demographic homogeneity in Bangladesh may be conducive to the introduction of this system. The pros and cons, merits and demerits of the proportional representation system may be studied in the context of Bangladesh, and if found suitable and introduced, the conduct of elections in Bangladesh may become much easier. Elections will be far less expensive. That may help develop a healthy political culture and a better democracy.