VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The challenge of breaking away from past undemocratic practices

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The dramatic downfall of Sheikh Hasina's regime has given rise to high hopes, particularly amongst the youth who participated in the July movement, about a new beginning for Bangladesh. The youth leaders are now demanding *rastra-sanskar* (reforms of the state), so that in future another autocrat would not rule Bangladesh.

The interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, installed in the wake of the mass uprising, has set up various commissions to work out reform proposals for different areas. Several political parties have also put forward proposals for reforms.

The reform proposals, now being debated, mostly focus on creating new structures and enacting new laws and rules. However, this preoccupation with changing structures and rules misses the significance of the role of political practices in defining the political system as it operates on the ground in Bangladesh. I would argue that the return of another autocratic ruler cannot be prevented by simply adding or changing structures, laws and the constitution. It is not the absence of laws and rules but the state's failure to implement them and hold violators of laws and rules accountable for their misdeeds, which have led to the perpetuation of undemocratic political and governance practices. Our priority now is to challenge and dismantle these undemocratic practices. I briefly highlight below a few of these practices, which have been entrenched over successive regimes since the independence of Bangladesh.

Election engineering and forming king's party

All regimes in Bangladesh, whether led by the military or political parties, have abused state institutions to perpetuate their regimes. Election engineering and party building through use of state institutions have been longstanding political practices which different regimes have pursued in Bangladesh. Military regimes (1975-1990) initiated the practices of election engineering, floating of "king's parties" and fake opposition parties. Unfortunately, elected civilian leaders who came to power following military rule also pursued the same strategies.

Election engineering has now become a routine political practice. It is widely believed that the intelligence agencies, civil administration and the police have been systematically used by different regimes for engineering election results.

We all know that in the past 12 national parliamentary elections, an incumbent regime never lost an election when organised under its supervision, but always lost it when the election was organised by a non-party caretaker government (NCG). In four parliamentary elections—the fifth, seventh, eighth and ninth—organised by the NCG, the incumbent regime lost power. But Sheikh Hasina, who had originally led a movement against the incumbent BNP regime in 1994/95 for constitutionalising the NCG system, abolished the NCG system in 2011. This enabled the AL led alliance to retain power in three successive rigged elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024.

Following the model of the military dictators, she also fabricated an opposition in the parliament. In the 10th parliament, Jatiya Party (JP) was both in the government and in the opposition; in the 11th and 12th parliaments JP worked as a friendly opposition. These repeated fraudulent elections and engineered parliaments ultimately resulted in people's loss of trust in our election system.

State-sponsored party building has been another longstanding undemocratic political practice. In 1975, one-party system BAKSAL was formed under regime sponsorship. The military rulers then started building their own parties using state agencies and patronage. Both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the JP were floated by military regimes. Again, this legacy of using state patronage to build and maintain support for political parties did not end with military rule. It was exacerbated during the subsequent years of electoral democracy. Under each regime, its supporters monopolised control over financial institutions and business contracts that funded party and election expenses. A vicious nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and business people emerged who used control over state resources to perpetuate specific regimes in power.

Erosion of institutions

Eroding the autonomy of institutions has been another entrenched undemocratic political practice. This led to malgovernance and corruption. Over the years, successive regimes used their own partisan interests in recruiting and promoting people in all institutions. The end result was the weakening of the institutions of democratic governance and the institutionalisation of the "winner takes all" culture. In the last 15 plus years, without exposure to any form of electoral accountability, the executive perpetuated the partisanship of the administration as well as the law enforcement agencies and eroded the independence of the judiciary. With increasing elite capture, where close to two-thirds of the members of parliament were businessmen, the legislature was disinclined to hold the executive accountable for its various misdeeds. This encouraged wilful bank default, weak enforcement of building codes and road safety rules, land grabbing, river erosion and a variety of other regulatory abuses.

Undemocratic party politics

Despite their original ideological differences, the policy preferences and support base of both the AL and the BNP became increasingly similar. Both indulged in undemocratic practices such as use of state patronage, clientelism, money, muscle power and violence as instruments of building and retaining political support. Both lacked internal party democracy. In both parties, decisions were taken by the top party leader, who was a dynastic successor and was given authority by the party to select party office bearers in different strata as well as candidates for elections.

Political violence

The divisive politics, the practice of "othering" the opponent, the absence of inner party democracy—all these led to the routine use of violence to win political competitions or business deals. Generally, student and youth organisations were used by political parties to carry out political violence. Some of this violence took place between political parties, but more violence occurred between groups and factions within the same party. According to data from Ain O Shalish Kendra, between 2002 to 2023, inter-party violence resulted in 266 deaths, whereas intra-party violence caused 447 deaths. Interestingly, the incidences of intra-party violence were always higher within ruling parties compared to opposition parties which implies that the former had greater availability of patronage resources over which contestations were taking place.

All powerful executive

From the beginning, Bangladesh has been ruled by an all-powerful executive where all key decisions have been taken *de facto* by the prime minister when we had a parliamentary form of government or the president when we had a presidential form of government. The practice of the same individual holding the position of the head of the executive and legislative branches of the government as well as the head of ruling political party has led to the rise of a single supreme regime leader who became unaccountable and controlled all state institutions.

The challenge ahead

The challenge before both the government and the people of Bangladesh now is the need to dismantle the above-mentioned undemocratic political and governance practices so that we can move towards a regime of accountability in both politics and governance. We can build democratic institutions only when we practice democratic norms and rules. Our plan of returning to a system of free, fair and inclusive elections must ensure an electoral process which minimises the influence of money and muscle power so that people of modest means can freely participate in the political process.

Meaningful, more inclusive elections will also require restoration of full freedom to the media, unfettered right of public assembly and a genuinely independent judiciary. Such institutions of good governance as an independent election commission, a credible anti-corruption commission, a strong public services commission and other empowered regulatory agencies should be appointed through a non-partisan process and their integrity should be protected through an uncompromised judicial system.

To achieve such goals, all political parties need to come to an understanding that they will give up the practice of the "winner takes all" culture that had made Bangladesh's politics confrontational and exclusionary, marginalised the loser, and has made political discourse intolerant, leaving little space for public reasoning.

Democracy means more than just free elections. Bangladesh needs to address again the challenge of democratising the democratic process to ensure that the representative institutions are no longer exposed to elite capture and are rescued from the influence of money and muscle power. Parliament needs to regain its rightful place as the source of constructive debate to address the problems of the country rather than serve as an arena for confrontational politics. Citizens' trust in the rule of law needs to be established so that they can believe that one law for all prevails without partisan application of law enforcement.

The prospects for meeting such challenges depend to a large extent on the commitment of the diverse political forces now competing to gain state power for building a sustainable democratic political order in the country.

Military regimes (1975-1990) initiated the practices of election engineering, floating of 'king's parties' and fake opposition parties. Unfortunately, elected civilian leaders who came to power following military rule also pursued the same strategies.

This is a brief version of a keynote address delivered at the 1st International Conference on Politics, Society, and Development (ICPSD 2025) at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology from January 31 to February 01, 2025.

12 YEARS OF TAQI MURDER

A case delayed, not forgotten

Rafiur Rabbi
is a writer, activist and father of Tanwir Muhammad Taqi.

RAFIUR RABBI

March 6 marks the 12th anniversary of Taqi's murder. It also marks a decade of impunity. On the evening of March 6, 2013, Tanwir Muhammad Taqi was abducted from Bangabandhu Road in Narayanganj on his way to the Sudhijon Pathagar, a local library. That night, I filed a general diary with the Narayanganj Sadar Model Police Station and wrote to RAB-11. Two days later, on the morning of March 8, police recovered Taqi's body from the banks of a canal of the Shitalakkhya River. On the night of March 8, I filed a murder case with the Narayanganj Sadar Model Police Station, mentioning unknown assailants. Five days later, from a phone conversation between Shamim Osman's brother, MP Nasim Osman, and his son, Azmeri Osman, we became certain about the cause of the murder and who the killers were. On March 18, we submitted a notice to the superintendent of police, naming eight individuals, including Shamim Osman and his son. However, when the involvement of Shamim Osman's family was found in the investigation, the police showed reluctance to proceed with the case. Later, under the direction of the High Court, the RAB took over the investigation of the Taqi murder case on May 28, 2013.

On July 29 of that year, Yusuf Hossain Liton, and on November 12, Sultan Shawkat Bhramar—two of the accused—gave confessional statements in court under Section 164, revealing when, how, where, by whom, and why Taqi was murdered. According to their description, they killed Taqi on the night of his abduction, before midnight, in the torture cell on Allama Iqbal Road, at the order of Azmeri Osman and in his presence. They first beat Taqi unconscious with a Gajari stick, and then Kalam Shikder climbed on his chest and strangled him to death. Later, they took Taqi's body to the banks of the Shitalakkhya River in Azmeri's car and disposed of it in the river by boat.

One year after Taqi's murder, on March 5, 2014, the Additional Director General of RAB, Ziaul Ahsan, claimed at a press conference held at the RAB headquarters that the mystery of Taqi's murder had been uncovered. He mentioned that 11 people, led by Azmeri Osman, killed Taqi. They cited three reasons for the murder: first, the strong stance of Rafiur Rabbi, Taqi's father, in favour of Selina Hayat Ivy in the Narayanganj City Corporation election in 2011; second, the movement he organised with the people of Narayanganj against Shamim Osman and his loyalists' widespread extortion in public transport; third, the leadership role he played in the people's movement against land grabbing by an identified group.

RAB prepared a charge sheet mentioning these three reasons, which angered the killers, and provided it to journalists in a press conference. RAB then informed that this charge sheet would soon be submitted to the court. However, on June 3, 2014, when then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged to stand by the Osman family in a parliament session, the investigation into Taqi's murder came to a complete halt. Although the trials of several high-profile murders in the country had been completed during that time, the charge sheet for Taqi's murder was not submitted to the court. As a result, the identified killers, including the accused who confessed under Section 164, either went abroad or roamed around the country on bail from the High Court. Although identified as guilty, Azmeri Osman was never arrested. He roamed around the city arrogantly, with the help of the administration and the police.

In the 12 years since Taqi's murder, Sheikh Hasina's government and administration have provided protection to Taqi's killers for eleven and a half years. Shamim Osman, on the other hand, failing to prevent those who sought justice for Taqi's murder through various forms of intimidation, resorted to attacking them and harassing them by filing cases. He threatened to cut us into pieces and feed us to the fish in the Shitalakkhya River, cut our tongues to feed dogs, trample us underfoot like ants, dismantle our homes brick by brick, and abduct our wives and daughters to prevent us from seeking justice. Many cultural and political activists fell victim to his attacks. They have even attacked various cultural events, including Rabindra Jayanti. Shamim Osman filed seven cases against me through his party cadres, his wife, his uncle-in-law, and various relatives and close associates. He filed cases against me under the Digital Security Act and also made the Hefazat-e-Islam leaders file cases against me, accusing me of blasphemy. He organised rallies and led processions against me with slogans like, "We want his head, we want his execution," etc.

Protests have taken place in 23 countries around the world demanding justice for Taqi's murder. For 12 consecutive years, various programmes such as rallies, human chains, press conferences, candlelight vigils, roundtable meetings, and symbolic hunger strikes have been held to demand justice. Writers, artists, and intellectuals in the country have continuously sought justice for this murder—through their writing, poetry, painting, song composition, documentary films, commemorative books, and the release of songs and CDs of recitation. Since March 8, 2013, the day when Taqi's body was found, the Narayanganj Sangskritik Jote has been holding a candlelight vigil on the 8th of every month for the last 12 years. Such continuous movement demanding justice for a murder is rare. We learned from newspapers that Sheikh Hasina told her party leaders that she knew who killed Taqi and that she had all the intelligence agency reports with her. The sad truth is that she had not ensured justice for Taqi's murder but rather stopped the process of justice.

Taqi with his parents. PHOTO: COURTESY

After the change of government in August last year, the case proceedings resumed. Six new accused have been arrested, and one of them, Kajal Hawlader, gave a confessional statement under Section 164. He has provided a detailed description of Taqi's murder in Azmeri Osman's torture cell, which is similar to the previous confessions.

The investigation revealed that, at the direction of Shamim Osman, his son, nephew, and party cadres killed Taqi in their torture cell. We demand that the investigation into Taqi's murder be completed quickly and that all the criminals, including those who ordered it, be brought to justice. Let us create a society where no such murder occurs again, where our justice system is independent, and the rule of law prevails.

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার
ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স অধিদপ্তর
কাজী আলাউদ্দিন রোড, ঢাকা।

স্মারক নং-৫৮.০৩.০০০০.০১২.২৭.০৬৮.২২-০৭

তারিখঃ ২০/০৯/১৪৩০ বঙ্গাব্দ
০৪/০১/২০২৪ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ

বিভাগীয় মামলা নং-০১/২৪

বরিশাল ফায়ার স্টেশনের ফায়ারফাইটার জনাব মোঃ আলমগীর হোসাইন (পিএন-৮৪৬২) এর বিরুদ্ধে ২০১৮ সালের সরকারি কর্মচারী (শৃংখলা ও আপীল) বিধিমালায় রুজুকৃত বিভাগীয় মামলাঃ

অভিযোগনামা

যেহেতু আপনি জনাব মোঃ আলমগীর হোসাইন, ফায়ারফাইটার, বরিশাল ফায়ার স্টেশন আপনি গত ০১/১১/২০২১ তারিখ হতে কর্তৃপক্ষের বিনা অনুমতিতে কর্মস্থলে অনুপস্থিত থাকেন। আপনার এহেন অনুপস্থিতির কারণে সহকারী পরিচালক বরিশাল তার ০৬/১২/২০২১ তারিখের ৫৮.০৩.০০০০.০১.২০. ০০৩.১৫.২০৩৩ সংখ্যক স্মারকমূলে এবং উপপরিচালক বরিশাল তার ০৩/০১/২০২২ তারিখের ৫৮.০৩.১০০০.০০২.০৮.০১০.১৫.১৮ সংখ্যক স্মারকমূলে আপনাকে কাজে যোগদানের জন্য আপনার স্থায়ী ঠিকানায় নোটিশ প্রেরণ করেন। কিন্তু আপনি কাজে যোগদান না করায় অধিদপ্তরের ২৭/০২/২০২২ তারিখের ৫৮.০৩.০০০০.০১৮.০৮.০০৮.১৮.১৩২ সংখ্যক স্মারক ও ২৪/০৩/২২ তারিখের ৫৮.০৩.০০০০.০১৮.০৮.০০৮.১৮.১৯৮ সংখ্যক স্মারকমূলে আপনাকে অনুপস্থিতির কারণ ব্যাখ্যাসহ পত্র প্রাপ্তির ৪৮ ঘন্টার মধ্যে কাজে যোগদানের জন্য রেজিঃ/এডি ডাকযোগে স্থায়ী ও কর্মস্থলের ঠিকানায় নোটিশ প্রেরণ করা হয়। তারপরও আপনি কাজে যোগদান না করে যোগাযোগ বিহীনভাবে ৩০/১১/২০২২ তারিখ পর্যন্ত ৩৯৫ দিন কর্মস্থলে অনুপস্থিত থেকে ০১/১২/২০২২ তারিখ কাজে যোগদানপত্র দাখিল করেন। আপনার এহেন কর্মস্থলে অনুপস্থিতির কারণে সরকারী অপারেশনাল কাজে বিঘ্ন সৃষ্টি হয়েছে।

২। এবং যেহেতু আপনার উপরে বর্ণিত আচরণ সরকারী কর্মচারী (শৃংখলা ও আপীল) বিধিমালার ৩ (গ) বিধিমতে "ডিজারশন" এর শামিল এবং শাস্তিযোগ্য অপরাধ।

৩। এক্ষণে, সেহেতু, আপনার উপরিউক্ত বে-আইনী কার্যকলাপের প্রেক্ষিতে আপনাকে সরকারী কর্মচারী (শৃংখলা ও আপীল) বিধিমালা ২০১৮ এর ৩ (গ) বিধিমতে "ডিজারশন" এর অভিযোগে অভিযুক্ত করা হলো এবং উক্ত বিধিমালার ৪ (৩) (ঘ) বিধি মোতাবেক কেন আপনাকে চাকুরি হতে বরখাস্ত করা হবে না বা বিধিমতে অন্য কোন প্রকার শাস্তি প্রদান করা হবে না তার লিখিত জবাব এ পত্র প্রাপ্তির ১০ (দশ) কার্য দিবসের মধ্যে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারী বরাবর সরাসরি দাখিল করার জন্য নির্দেশ দেয়া হলো। লিখিত জবাব প্রদানকালে আপনি উপরিউক্ত অভিযোগের প্রেক্ষিতে ব্যক্তিগত শুনানিতে হাজির হতে ইচ্ছুক কিনা বা আত্মপক্ষ সমর্থনে সাক্ষ্য প্রমাণ উপস্থাপন করবেন কিনা তাও লিখিতভাবে জানাতে হবে, ব্যর্থতায় বিষয়টির উপর একতরফা সিদ্ধান্ত গৃহিত হবে।

৪। যে অভিযোগ বিবরণীর উপর ভিত্তি করে এ অভিযোগগুলি আনয়ন করা হয়েছে তার একটি অনুলিপি এ সাথে সংযুক্ত করে দেয়া হলো।

সংযুক্তিঃ অভিযোগ বিবরণী।

মহাপরিচালক
ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স অধিদপ্তর
কাজী আলাউদ্দিন রোড, ঢাকা

জনাব মোঃ আলমগীর হোসাইন (পিএন-৮৪৬২)
ফায়ারফাইটার
বরিশাল ফায়ার স্টেশন।

GD-575