

Reflection on Bangladesh's democratic governance

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After the turmoil of earlier months, Bangladeshi politics presently appears eerily quiet. There is no shortage of analysis ranging from 'calm before the storm' to 'democracy to take a back-seat and time to consolidate development'. Whatever may be the final scenario, this tranquillity, be it real or fake, provides us with an opportunity to self-reflect. We



should look back and see what really went wrong or right and why. In any transitional democratic governance framework, like ours, there are a number of critical actors and stakeholders that contribute to the making or unmaking of the political governance structure. Among them, three actors are mostly prominent - the government (the ruling party), the opposition (of course, the 'real' opposition), and the civil society, despite the fact that the term is nowadays used in derision.

An examination of events that have led to today's seemingly serene Bangladesh politics raises questions regarding the wisdom of all of the three prominent actors of our national politics. From a cost-benefit analysis point of view, it may appear that one of the actors has benefited at the cost of others, but the truth is that the sustainability of the embryonic democratic governance framework of Bangladesh is being questioned. Needless to say that all the aforementioned stakeholders, more or less, had a role to play in bringing about the present situation and they have to be apportioned some blame for the present state of politics in Bangladesh. Regardless of their relative position today, the situation poses an extraordinary existential challenge for all the stakeholders. If the actors fail to comprehend the gravity of their respective situation and demonstrate wisdom, not only will democracy be in peril but the sovereignty of the state will be

severely threatened. Such a course can be avoided through discourse among the key actors, and in this analysis we will attempt to shed light on their responsibilities and discuss their future course of action to get us out of the present predicament.

The present ruling party, Awami League (AL), set an example in 2001 by voluntarily relinquishing power for the first time in Bangladesh's short history and thus allowed a smooth transfer of power. That allowed the party to appeal to the electorate and ask for another chance. The voters reciprocated by installing them back to power in 2008, despite an interregnum of military-backed civilian rule. This is the grace of democracy; despite its imperfections, players will always be given another chance if there is a level playing field.

But history tells us that politics is complex and Machiavellian, and we are aware of the famous saying that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. This universal logic holds true for every regime and for all time. If we study the rise and fall of dictatorships around the world, there is one common pattern: excessive power is normally a one-way ticket to oblivion; a political party can sometimes 'enjoy' excessive power for a long time given a particular set of situation. But such a situation can be terribly deceptive and lead the power-hungry politicians to a dead-end, even worse, over the precipice. This affects not just them but the whole nation. Democracy, however defective, is a better alternative than such a suicidal course because democracy allows regimes to be changed, leaders to be replaced, and the electorate, rather than solely the ruling party(ies), sharing the blame for either the good or bad governance outcomes.

Awami League is a grand old party in Bangladeshi and sub-continental politics. It has a glorious past and the party has already earned a respectable place in Bangladeshi and world history. Now at this very critical juncture of Bangladeshi politics, AL has to choose its own future. After the controversial January 5, 2014 election, AL tries to defend its position, citing an excuse that the main opposition alliance wilfully decided not to participate in the elections and that it was a constitutional obligation to hold the elections. In the absence of the main opposition, the election became one-sided and the results were a foregone conclusion. Even if one argues that the electoral outcome is legal, its legitimacy will always be in question. Democracy gains legitimacy through the involvement of the electorate, which did not have the chance to exercise its right to vote on January 5, 2014. Without getting sucked into the blame game for the one-sided election, it would suffice to mention that the ruling AL government cannot continue to capitalise on this one-time excuse for far too long. The party can only pass the litmus test of another free and fair election by soul searching, self-reflection, good-enough governance, and by re-inventing the values of the 1950s and 1960s. Only then will it receive the mandate of the electorate before the opportunity perishes. As the ruling party, it also has the responsibility to take effective confidence building measures, accommodate dissents and differences in political opinion, and provide room for national reconciliation. It can only achieve this by inviting all the concerned stakeholders for an inclusive national dialogue to find ways to overcome the extraordinary challenges Bangladeshis are facing. AL, the grand old party, should ensure a place in history that it deserves.

BNP, the 'real' opposition in our democratic governance structure, has always experienced difficulty in transferring power - both in 1996 and 2006. Therefore, to understand the current conundrum, BNP too needs to undertake some deep soul searching. Both AL and BNP have to

share the blame for bad governance in Bangladesh since 1991. But many analysts claim that some of the extraordinary mis-governance fallouts of the 2001-2006 BNP regime (August 21 grenade attack on the opposition rally, resulting in scores of death, including some of the top AL leaders, the rise of militant Islam and Hawa Bhaban are some notable ones) have placed BNP in a very defensive position. BNP is presently struggling to reclaim the authority to assert itself as a legitimate democratic actor. Those events have grievously harmed BNP, not only from an electoral point of view but have also severely eroded the support of the civil society and other stakeholders. In order to reclaim its appropriate role in Bangladesh's democratic governance, and to reassert itself as a legitimate actor to challenge any authoritarian turn of our democracy, the party has to rejuvenate itself. It has to ask the difficult questions as to what went wrong in the past and why. More importantly, in order to re-emerge as a democratic contender of power, the party must democratise its rank and file, allow differences in opinion among its leadership, and revamp its leadership by removing controversial senior leaders, whose names have become synonymous with corruption. If the party can be led by a new generation of leaders, who can speak from their heart and whose message will be trusted, the party has every chance to rebound. If BNP is not re-vitalised, the party will continue to spiral into the black hole of politics and its appeal to build a democratic Bangladesh will fall on deaf ears. It would suffice to mention that BNP's re-emergence is an absolute necessity in order to arrest the Jihadi radicalisation of our society and to give democracy the lifeline it badly needs.

The civil society, the third most significant actor in our transitional democracy, is also facing an unusual but existential crisis. Not unlike the opposition, the civil society has also almost lost its relevance to influence our policy discourse and its voice is not taken seriously either by the electorate or any other stakeholders. Many commentators blame the bipartisan nature of our civil society, while some also blame its detachment from the general populace. But we often miss the most critical failure of our civil society. The civil society, with all its relative strength, faced the most significant setback in 2007, when it came to be seen in collusion with other centres of power, and the most damaging event became the half-hearted attempt to float a political party to dislodge the established political parties. Theoretically, a group of citizens can and should be able to come together to form a political party, but there are two very distinct issues that one must bear in mind: first, all political activities were suspended during the army-backed caretaker government in 2007-2008, and the other is that the political parties were forced to refrain from any outdoor or indoor political activities. But when an individual or a group is allowed to float a political venture when other established parties have been told to suspend their activities, it is nothing but the formation of a king's party. Our respected civil society 'leaders' have made that colossal mistake. In a consolidated democracy, the civil society never seeks power and its strength is the sum total of neutrality, independence and the high moral ground it occupies. The 2007 adventurism severely damaged that credibility of our civil society. The message was clear and unequivocal that Bangladeshi civil society 'wants' power. Today the civil society has a monumental task – to accept its mistakes and re-invent itself in order to regain the trust of an independent and honest broker. It can start the process by acknowledging its behaviour of 2007-8. The next big task for them will be to offer a comprehensive reform package for rearrangements of our democratic institutions, with plausible alternatives for the government or the ruling party, and the opposition. The recommendations must take into account the local context, the cultural aspects of our democracy (not the ideal ones), and must avoid any externally funded 'consultancy for democracy'. The civil society has also the task of devising a strategy for a workable relationship between the political parties - only then can it have any relevance or influence in policymaking.

It is high time for all of us to accept our own mistakes that led us to the present state of play. Rather than transferring blame onto others, all the stakeholders must talk among themselves first, and then reinvigorate from within. Once we have done that, we can then take the next step to put a common agenda together and place it before the citizens for national consideration. "As long as the differences and diversities of mankind exist, democracy must allow for compromise, for accommodation, and for the recognition of differences" (Eugene McCarthy).

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