

## Revisiting democracy and its practice in Bangladesh



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Bangladesh has had a troubled political history since gaining independence in 1971 and is also beleaguered by poverty and natural environmental disasters. In particular, political instability is blighting its prospects for economic growth, undermining the rule of law and damaging the legitimacy of the political process. Beside that, we live in a democratic country and it has been

almost 22 years that our country is running under democracy. However, we are not sure whether we are having the best outcome from this democracy.

**Political parties:** Political parties are one of the core institutions of democracy. In democracy, the party who got the majority support from the people by election forms the Government in the Parliament. Even though the main function of Parliament is law making, ruling political party operating inside and outside the House are effectively serving as a check on the Executive, thereby providing the political balance needed in a multi-party democracy. [Thomas Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve]

The role of political parties particularly who are in power to ensuring probity, accountability, transparency and preventing corruption, especially among government officials, is a regular feature of every democracy. However, in our parliamentary democracy the above mentioned 'must do' features are not very visible from the Government.

**Loyal opposition:** The concept of the loyal opposition is central to any democracy as well. It means that all sides in political debate — however deep their differences — share the fundamental democratic values of freedom of speech and faith, and equal protection under law.

In a democracy, the struggle between political parties is not a fight for survival, but a competition to serve the people.

Political parties, despite the differences in policies, ideologies and manifestoes, have the common objective of ensuring peace, stability and unity for national development.

No single party has a magic wand to the country's problems and all parties would be expected to work as a team to sustain and consolidate the country's fledgling democracy towards national development.

**Bangladesh scenario:** What is the situation of our major political parties and how are they working for national development?

Eviction, murder, extortion, violence, extra-judicial killings, extra-judicial penalties, non-effective investigation of grave crime and intimidation continue unabated in Bangladesh while both the main political parties spend their time and energy wrangling in discussions. People are suffering due to lack of law and order, uncontrolled inflation and high commodity prices.

It is a common belief among the people that the leaders are oblivious to the problems of the people and do not feel obligated to serve the general public. Political leaders are hungry and thirsty for power.

We have witnessed that the government takes extreme measures to control the opposition movement by way of implicating the opposition leaders in false and baseless case and sending them to prison. On the other hand, the opposition parties have not launched any effective movement for the welfare of the people. Rather we have seen the parliament become meaningless

as opposition members of parliaments play no effective role in the parliament as they have not joined most of the parliamentary sessions.

Political tolerance: Lack of political tolerance is a very big problem in our country. Political tolerance means accepting and respecting the basic rights and civil liberties of persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own. Political intolerance is engendered by a willingness to restrict the rights of a disliked person or group based on their differing views. It represents a threat to democracy since it discriminates against and may even silence certain parts of the population.

We observe this political intolerance in all our political leaders. If we cannot bring ourselves out of this situation then our country and our democracy is in real danger.

It is also important for our leaders to remember that our country is a very small country and a young one too. We have serious problems like over-population. On top of that a much organised active force is working against our country's development – the same that played a vigorous role during the Liberation War against our independence. So if our leaders do not work together, the fate of our mass public will never change.

We have seen an autocratic attitude in the ruling Awami League (AL), which could have been more accommodative. We have not seen any real initiatives been taken by the government to make the parliament work with the participation of the Opposition. The world would not have gone upside down if one more front-bench seat in the House was given to the lawmakers belonging to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Do we really have parliamentary democracy in our country? Does our public vote to see this? How will our country develop if such practices continue? I am sure Noor Hossain did not want to see this sort of democracy. I am sure Dr. Milon would have been shocked to see this situation.

The public is now fed up of this political culture. They have voted for their representatives to see them in the parliament, talking and presenting their problems on behalf of them. They did not vote them to boycott the parliament over silly matters. They want to see a parliament where all members of parliament work together for national development, where the ruling party is more cooperative and where the opposition criticises the government policy in a constructive way. As long as this sort of practice is not followed, the people of Bangladesh will never get the best outcome of parliamentary democracy.

Citizen participation: One of the most basic signposts of a democracy is citizen participation in government. Participation is the key role of citizens in democracy. It is not only their right, but it is their duty. However, the norm in our country is that only the government has the right to participate and the rest has to wait until the next term when they are in power.

In a democracy, the members of the parliament who are elected by the people have to be accountable to the people. They are responsible for their actions. They must make decisions and perform their duties according to the will and wishes of the people, not for themselves.

Democratic societies try to prevent any elected official or group of people from misusing or abusing their power. One of the most common abuses of power is corruption. Corruption occurs when government officials use public funds for their own benefit or exercise power in an illegal manner.

In theory, all democracies strive to respect and protect the human rights of citizens and human rights mean those values that reflect respect for human life and human dignity. But extra-judicial killings in the name of “crossfire”, “gunfights” or “encounters” or “disappearance”, “GHUM”, custodial deaths and torture are going on unabated in the country.

Leadership commitment: The people of our country become hostages again and again at the hands of our leaders. The Leader of Opposition has indicated that after Eid they will announce a number of new programmes which might include hartal. The ruling party may eventually try to prevent any hartal. Any confrontation between them may bring back the hot season of hartals when the wheels of national progress will get clogged once again. Such a situation is a regular feature, irrespective of which political party may be in power or in the opposition.

We cannot, however, ignore the fact that real development of our country has taken place under the democratic leadership since 1990. So there is no way we can undermine the leadership. But the question now is: can the present political leadership maintain the tempo of the on-going positive social re-engineering in the nation? For any intended change to occur in a society the people must be convinced by the leaders that such a change is both possible and desirable.

Leadership commitment is essential to the survival and progress of Bangladesh. The people have an important role to play too. But the people’s participation would be difficult to secure if the leaders, who are calling on them to make sacrifices, do not themselves make any sacrifice.

We need to clearly redefine a vision of the Bangladesh we want and the core political values upon which to build the nation. That vision and those political values need to be owned by all and together, not just by one political party or a particular group of people. We need to come up with strategies as to how this can happen.

Our vision is that of a democratic nation characterised by good governance as reflected in all its structures and operations at all levels and in all our institutions; a nation united in its diversity, free, tolerant, peaceful, and prosperous; a nation that respects the rights of all its citizens regardless of creed, gender, age, race and ethnicity as defined in the Constitution. We need a leadership that puts the interests of the people of the country above all personal gains.

It is our collective responsibility to create a better future for our future generations to come. We should not turn back the clock. (The article has been abridged.)

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