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Poverty of political prescriptions

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E H Carr, a British historian and the author of *What is History?* argued that history was “an unending dialogue between the past and present.” Carr also contended that historians arbitrarily determine which of the 'facts of the past' be turned into 'historical facts,' and we constantly interpret these 'facts' to explain the present. There are numerous examples of such 'historical facts' which have unsuccessfully tried to address fundamental and enduring political problems by pulling out quick remedies from the figurative 'magician's hat.'

Let us pick two such examples to highlight this phenomenon. A notable case of such 'quick-fix' blunder was the Treaty of Versailles, signed after World War I, which compelled Germany to accept its culpability in starting the Great War and imposed on them a huge amount of reparation for causing loss and damage during 1914-1918. One school of historians feel that the harshness of the treaty towards Germany seeded the conditions for World War II, since it failed to provide a meaningful role for Germany within the political process of Europe.

The second example is from South Asia. After the surrender of the Axis Forces in Europe in 1945, the United Kingdom, exhausted by the debilitating war, decided to quit India in undignified haste resulting in the partitioning of the Indian Sub-continent, which amounted to unprecedented loss of lives and division of communities. Today, most political scientists point out that if the creation of a separate nation-state for the Muslims was indeed a solution for creating a political space for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, then probably a three-nation solution would have performed better than what was implemented.

Thus, the motivation behind re-visiting these two central political tragedies in Europe and South Asia is to remind ourselves that political conflicts emerging out of deep structural deficiencies are unlikely to be mitigated if we fail to recognise the severity of the problem. Furthermore, such

conflicts might even endure for generations because of the failure of the political and civil society actors to prescribe long-term remedies to address the core causes of the conflicts. Consequently, to go straight to our point on the current political debates in Bangladesh, we feel that the present political situation demands a sincere reflection and avoidance, at all cost, of the urge to find an easy solution to the political issues that have brought about so much political violence and suffering over the last 22 years.

In other words, given the fact that the January 5 election took place despite significant political viciousness and without the participation of the major political party, there is little hope for participatory elections to take place in the immediate foreseeable future. This is because the fundamental difference that has influenced this outcome is unlikely to be resolved soon. Thus, any attempt to hold an election in the near future will not only lack pragmatism, but will also be ill-founded and based on an inadequate evaluation of the current political crisis. Nonetheless, the present political scenario does offer a genuine 'window of opportunity' to re-visit the fundamental institutional weaknesses of our body politic. More importantly, the crisis allows us to scrutinise our constitutional and parliamentary framework, the electoral process and the internal democracy of the political parties. An election just for the sake of an election will again concentrate power in the hands of the political winners, and it does not facilitate our polity to develop a framework where there is an appropriate level of balance of power between the key political actors. The centrality of this argument is perhaps best illustrated by Francis Fukuyama in his masterpiece *The Origins of Political Order* where he states, "...the miracle of modern liberal democracy, in which strong states capable of enforcing law are nonetheless checked by law and by legislatures, could arise only as a result of the fact that there was a rough balance of power among the different political actors within the society."

Hence, if our objective is to identify an institutional arrangement that is capable of aiding the development of liberal deliberative democracy, then the current political debate, which solely focuses on the necessity of another so-called participatory election in the immediate future, suffers from a poverty of imagination. As social scientists, we feel that the collective intellectual capacity of our nation must seriously start a process of self-reflection and honest debate on the issues mentioned above. Ultimately, the constitutional framework will have to accommodate the 'voice' of the citizens across the political spectrum. More precisely, we have to move away from the inadequate election-day democracy, which is only concerned with elections and transfer of power every five years.

Election which results in unprecedented political violence and loss of precious lives is not what we want to experience. Election, the outcome of which becomes an existential battle for political losers, is counter-productive. Therefore, without constitutionally addressing these phenomena where 'political losers lose it all,' the prospect of democratic consolidation is remote since under the present arrangement political incumbents will always have the incentive and capacity to re-

write the 'rules of the game' that favours them. As a result, let the constitutional revisions which will bring about a fair distribution of political power in our political space, be the subject of our current political discourse so that we can address the principal causes of our democratic deficit. More importantly, let this political discourse start in earnest and in good faith.

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