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Would Bangladesh Politics End in Chaos?

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Guest Column- By Kazi Anwarul Masud

Situation in Bangladesh is moving towards an explosion due in part to violence let loose by the Jamaat-e-Islami demanding the release of their leaders now being tried for crimes against humanity committed during the liberation war in 1971 in collaboration with the occupying Pakistani army.

While the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party(BNP) publicly does not oppose the trial of collaborators they have raised questions about the way the trial is being conducted though distinct from the Nuremberg to the trials at The Hague the accused if convicted in Bangladesh would have recourse to appeal against convictions.

BNP's main agitation's focus is the demand for reinstatement of caretaker government for holding the next general election in 2013. It may be recalled that the caretaker system had been declared illegal by the Supreme Court and abolished by the Parliament through an amendment to the Constitution. BNP's agitation has been violent as were the government's actions to maintain law and order during the agitations. BNP maintains that governmental police actions have infringed on their fundamental right to protest.

This unending struggle between the two factions is adding to the general public's discomfiture and proving costly to the business community affecting trade and export of the country. Though the World Bank in its latest report has praised Bangladesh for registering 6% growth despite global economic downturn structural problems remain arresting socio-economic development of the country. In Global Competitive Index for 2012-2013 published by the World Economic Forum Bangladesh has been placed at 118 out of 144 countries surveyed mainly due to inadequate infrastructure, corruption and lack of access to finance. If the situation does not improve chances of foreign direct investment, essential for economic development of cash strapped country would be difficult to attract.

Added is the strained owner-worker relationship currently being displayed in the country's Ready Made Garment Sector, a remarkable area contributing to growth of GDP and a significant foreign exchange earner. The trust deficit people have in the administration has been demonstrated by The Rule of Law Index for 2012 of the World Justice Project that has put Bangladesh at 87th position in limited government powers, 89th in absence of corruption, 72nd in order and security, 87th in fundamental rights, 89th in open government, 90th in regulatory enforcement, 97th in civil justice and 83rd in criminal justice.

The country scores poorly in government accountability and administrative agencies and courts are extremely inefficient and corrupt. The student and youth wings of major political parties are reportedly engaged in illegal money making projects tolerated and in some cases encouraged by the ruling party, whichever remains in power. In exchange they are used as musclemen to subdue their opponents. Student politics is rarely based on principles and more on money paid due to services rendered.

A case in point is the ruthless murder of Biswajit Das, an innocent tailor, who found himself in the midst of armed cadre of a political party who killed him on the mistaken belief that he was party to agitation called for opposition political combine against the government. The people throughout the country rose up in disgust demanding exemplary punishment be meted out to the alleged killers. This incident along with several others in recent past has highlighted regression of communicative action essential for the survival of democracy.

Most political scientists and philosophers (German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas is prominent among them) consider unfettered communication among equally informed citizens necessary to build an informed and consensus based society in which the minority's views are also considered. In such a society James Madison's advice is critical to rein in the majority so that their will is not imposed on the minority which could lead to identity politics to the detriment of the growth of democratic polity especially in multicultural society.

This term "multiculturalism" has become debatable of late and Oxford Professor Timothy Garton Ash has suggested that the "term should be consigned to the conceptual dustbin of history". In the current global narrative after 9/11 multiculturalism has become synonymous with the Muslim "threat" in Europe. For Bangladesh fortunately overwhelming part of the population having same ethnicity and religion persecution of the minority, though not totally absent, is a rare phenomenon. But we have a no less greater problem in the form of acute intolerance of

opposing views leading to senseless violence.

A case in point, as mentioned earlier, is the demand for election under caretaker government that is totally opposed by the ruling party. Public debate on this issue resulting in violence has produced concern and anxiety both at home and abroad. Foreign friends of Bangladesh and our citizens alike are repeatedly requesting the feuding political parties to sit for dialogue to thrash out their differences and relieve the country of an uncertain future. One wonders whether the inability of our politicians has its roots in our antecedent.

Some social workers believe that wherever in the world, people have developed through structured educational systems; they are more inclined to continue along that path. Those people who have developed within tribal cultures are less inclined to adapt to formal educational systems. A survey of people from various regions of the world would show a significant difference in their development. Those people who came from structured societies had significant social, cultural and economic adaptability. On the other hand, those people who came from primitive tribal cultures have been more adaptable to the slum and ghetto type environment.

One may trash this point of view on the ground that unlike some countries Bangladesh never had tribal system and as such primitive traits of tribalism cannot exist in our mental makeup. But if “tribalism” were to be interpreted as akin to nepotism, districtism, crony capitalism, blind loyalty to political party and its leader, and other narrow views clouding our judgment then one may not be too far off in tracing the root cause of our political leaders’ inability to compromise, and more so, when such compromise can lead to loss of state power.

Tragedy of the people of Bangladesh lies in the fact that despite repeated broken promises by political leaders they have little alternative but to vote to power the same set of politicians, albeit of different combines, because rule by extra-constitutional forces in Bangladesh on several occasions did not produce the desired results. They too were allegedly corrupt while during their rule the people lost their political liberty. Then again unlimited power given to the chief executive under democratic system in developing countries virtually devoid of checks and balance bestows upon him/her almost regal power to reward loyalty and deny “rewards” to holders of independent thought regarded as “disloyalty” to the leader.

Bangladesh does not have the American system of the Congressional scrutiny and approval of nominations by the President to important positions of authority. Though undeniably in certain cases politics intrudes into this process and excellent candidates may be rejected but such cases are rare. A case in point is the withdrawal by Ambassador Susan Rice from the race of the next Secretary of State as she felt if nominated her approval by the Senate may be delayed due to faux pas committed over the armed assault and the murder of Ambassador Stevens in Benghazi. But the possibility that the next Secretary of State may be John Kerry, a distinguished politician with long experience in foreign affairs, would more than compensate the loss of Susan Rice.

The point being driven at is that in the absence of institutional checks and balance in parliamentary system in fragile democracies the chances of abuse of power by the duly elected leader yet exercising powers of an absolute monarch cannot be discounted. Such possibility

was evident when the military backed government popularly known as 1/11 tried to implement minus-2 formula aimed at removing from politics the two leaders-namely the present Prime Minister and the present Leader of the Opposition and create a new political party. The endeavor failed miserably and in the general elections that followed the two main political parties was returned by the electorate- one to power and the other to the opposition. This proved that the success of General Ziaur Rahman in establishing Bangladesh Nationalist Party and that of General Husain Mohammad Ershad in establishing Jatyo Party could not be repeated by the military backed government after 1/11.

One can account for the failure of the Moin-Fakhruddin government to recreate Ziaur Rahman-Ershad scenario by the fact that both General Zia and General Ershad retained power much longer than Moin-Fakhruddin duo. Another factor could be that the establishment of BAKSAL in place of multi-party system was controversial. This compression of liberty in no way reflects that fact that the assassination of the Father of the Nation in August 1975 had shocked the entire population of Bangladesh and the trial and conviction of some of the killers have been universally welcomed by the people.

Ziaur Rahman got the lease of life through his rehabilitation of the Jamaat-e- Islam political party and the Rajakars who had fled the country after liberation and the restoration of citizenship to the Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam and subsequent inclusion of Jamaat leaders in the cabinet by his widow who became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. General Ershad also dallied with the Islam-pasand political parties to remain in power. In short both the BNP and Jatyo Party survived through political association with religion-based parties and by playing with the religious sentiment of the people. Contrarily the capture of power by Mionuddin-Fakhruddin duo, though initially acquiesced by the people lost popular support, particularly of the youth, due to their corruption-ridden administration.

The people also did not like the minus-2 formula and the peoples' dislike was eminently proved by the overwhelming victory of Awami League in the election of 2008. But for the interruptions by extra-constitutional forces Bangladesh alternated between the rule by either Awami League or the BNP. The initial periods of these extra-constitutional rules were not disliked by the people mainly because of peoples' perception of corruption by the parties in power and their disillusionment with broken promises. Added was the element of the absence of transformational leaders like the Father of the Nation in the politics of Bangladesh.

Current political leaders appear to be less dedicated to peoples' welfare and more engaged in conduct of public affairs for private gains. Since public perception is more important in politics than reality our politicians have a grave responsibility to convince the people of the fallacy of their perception. But then it is difficult to guarantee that extra-constitutional forces would not stage a comeback. Historically autocracies have emerged in modern times (barring absolute monarchies of the past) due to ideological reasons (e.g. Communism) with a strong selectorate(e.g. army where a group is not solely dependent on a single leader and the group is capable of replacing a poorly performing leader or Central Committee/Politburo in communist system) if people are dissatisfied with the elected government's inability to provide economic goods.

From Brazil(1965-1974) to Chile of Pinochet to Salazar's Portugal to Franco's Spain to Pakistan from the late fifties and Bangladesh in the late seventies and eighties have seen autocrats ruling for years. In China, for example, the impressive growth of the economy along with attachment with ideology have strengthened the grip of the Communist Party over the people making it possible for a strong elite to co-opt dissidents. "...Frequently popular uprisings are co-opted or taken over by the members of the existing elite. Sometimes this is defensive, to ensure the elites' survival, after the sacrifice of a few leaders ... other times, as recently in Kyrgyzstan, the revolt was simply an extra-constitutional, intra-elite, reshuffle"(Nick Grono of International Crisis Group). Nick Grono suggests that the army, once in power, should be got rid of as soon as possible because "all too frequently Western nations seem comfortable with this, as the militaries are known entities, create a semblance of order and normality, and their commanders have often been trained at Leavenworth or Sandhurst. But more often than not, the military just ends up undermining democratic development, as in Pakistan."

It is difficult to believe that the major players in this region and in the international community would accept an extra-constitutional government in Bangladesh. Western nations, in particular the USA, have already expressed their hope for a free and fair election that will result in the formation of a democratically elected government in Bangladesh. President Obama was applauded by his audience at the Cairo University in June 2009 for his unstinted commitment "to governments that reflect the will of the people" and of his belief "that peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please; choose their own leaders or assemble without fear".

As the situation in Bangladesh is dissimilar to the one in Pakistan bedeviled by terrorism it is unlikely that the Western powers and our closest neighbor will support a military installed government in this country. The question, however, remains as to how long friends of Bangladesh will retain patience if the two major political combines refuse to listen to their advice and that of the people of the country to the feuding parties to come to an understanding on the modalities of holding the next elections due next year.

Will the ruling party allow a civil war like situation to evolve in Bangladesh? Can the ruling party be confident that they can pull off an election held on their terms without the risk of a large scale chaos in the country? Can the ruling party be confident that the opposition parties will not get peoples' support for repeated hartals(closure of business, offices and roads and completely halting transportation of vehicles of all types) though such political actions will mean untold suffering to the people? Can the ruling party be confident that the amendment to the Constitution declaring the caretaker government illegal will have the support of the common people who are not well versed in law and of the sanctity of the judgment of the Supreme Court on this issue? It is difficult to answer many of these questions yet the politico-economic future of the country may depend on satisfactory answers.

Then again though the chances of a Syrian or Arab Spring situation in Bangladesh is not envisaged because of difference in the level of violence and the nature and subjects of protest one has to take into account Jamaat-e-Islami's destructive agitation that, many suspect, have external financial support and possible rightist-conservative internal support. There is already demand of the left leaning political parties and by the liberals for banning religion-based politics in Bangladesh. Given the religious extremist Islamists' armed violence and consolidation in

some parts of the country in the past, denied by then government in power, the left-center Awami League defeated these forces and hanged some of their leaders.

But the recent violence let loose by the student wing of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party has caused concern in some quarters about the possibility of the resurgence of Islamism in Bangladesh. The international community would be well advised to take note before such a movement gathers momentum and support from among deeply religious, albeit moderate Muslims, of Bangladesh. If the conservative rightists were to capture power on the strength of negative vote against Awami League in the next elections then JI would certainly form a coalition with BNP and such a combine could open Bangladesh territory for trans-border terrorism from Pakistan into India notwithstanding the leader of the opposition's commitment given to the Indian leaders during her recent visit to India that Bangladesh would not be used as transit point for anti-Indian terrorists.

The failure of the Indian authorities to deliver on the commitments made during Bangladesh Prime Minister's visit to Delhi and the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Dhaka has frustrated people across the political spectrum in Bangladesh. It appears that in the face of opposition by BJP and Trinamul Congress on ratification of Land Boundary Agreement and apportioning of Teesta River water it is unlikely that these two issues can be solved before the general elections in India expected to be held in 2014. Conservative rightists and Islamists may exploit this situation to put Awami League government on the defensive on Indo-Bangladesh relations by pointing out their failure to secure legitimate interest of Bangladesh from India.

Increasingly it may become difficult for the government to convince the public that maintaining best of relations with India will serve the best interests of the country. As both countries will have to face the electorate within the next two years it would be prudent for India to come forward with positive attitude on deliverable issues so that trust deficit of the skeptical Bangladeshis are removed and they are convinced that Indian difficulty in delivering the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement and on the sharing of the Teesta water may be removed once the Indian elections are over. This optimism is contingent upon the UPA government winning the next elections with convincing majority with parties sharing the present government's policy towards Bangladesh.

In short Indo-Bangladesh relations may play a part in the Bangladesh elections next year. Yet like in most countries foreign policy will not determine the future course of politics in Bangladesh. Determining factor will be the compromise formula on the mechanism of holding the next elections. Other elements are likely to be poverty reduction, corruption scandals, price rise of both food and non-food items, success and failures of the government in education, health, disaster management, agriculture, manpower export and remittance, law and order situation, religious extremism etc. In short, people may ask themselves whether they are better off today than they were before the Mahajot government was voted to power.

Like the last time the youth is likely to be a major factor in determining who will win the elections and consequently extent of youth unemployment should be watched (a study reveals that Young people aged 15 to 29 make up one fourth of Bangladesh's total population.

Of 85 million working-age people in the country, 41 % are youths. Some 1.5 million young Bangladeshis are unemployed and 8.5 million are underemployed in the sense of not having work that suits their skills). In gist economic condition and law and order situation are likely to top the concerns of the people on the election day.

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