

## Of politics, parties and politicians

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**I**n many ways, Bangladesh is unique. Perhaps it is the only country in the world where no political consensus on any national issue exists. The only consensus one could possibly reach is: you are either with me, or against me. Bipartisanship is a word that ceased to exist in the political dictionary of Bangladesh. Partisan politics has thoroughly divided the country -- both vertically as well as horizontally. Political violence and the confrontational nature of politics; frequent and unnecessary hartals; deterioration of law and order situation and a nexus between the politicians, police and the criminals are the norm.

It doesn't seem to bother anyone involved in politics - including the ones running the government or the ones active in the opposition running it down. Neither does it bother anyone that this state of affairs is scaring foreign direct investment away from the country, hurting the nation and adversely affecting the economy. Any sensible person would like to think that this state of affairs simply cannot continue any more and has to stop. Perhaps, the only political party that agrees with this view is the one that happens to be in power and has to face the music. However, the ruling party being at the helm has the special burden of actively initiating moves to break the ice, which successive ruling parties have clearly failed. The rest, including the mainstream opposition party calling the shots, couldn't care less. As a result, the country's polity has become a vicious circle of hatred-driven politics that is feeding on itself.

Since 1991, following the restoration of democracy in the country, three governments were elected through parliamentary polls and two mainstream political parties replaced each other peacefully - BNP won the first and the third elections in 1991 and 2001 respectively while the Awami League won the second in 1996. All the three elections were, by and large, acceptably free and large number of foreign and local independent election observers agreed that. Only the party that lost the elections did not.

Contrary to democratic practice and norms, the two mainstream political parties cannot tolerate each other and one hates to see the other running the government. As both of them cannot remain in power at the same time, the one in the opposition tries to make governance extremely difficult for its opponent. They routinely

boycott the parliament to make it dysfunctional and call for frequent hartals and work stoppages to make the government look stupid and sulky. The political leaders disregard the fact that the people have elected MPs, belonging to both the ruling and the opposition parties, in the hope that they would discuss their (people's) problems in the parliament, and would like both the government and the opposition to deliver. Instead, for no fault of theirs the people become the main sufferers of this partisan politics.

This intensity of mutual hatred between the two parties first became public in 1991 when the Awami League boycotted the oath taking ceremony of the newly elected BNP government. They seemed to have felt cheated that the people have chosen BNP and not the Awami League, the party that spearheaded the war of liberation in 1971; to form the first elected government in the post-Ershad era. It was the beginning of a new political culture and instead of establishing an exemplary polity, a bad precedence was set. Subsequently it became the norm and both the BNP and AL had boycotted the oath taking ceremonies of AL and BNP governments in 1996 and 2001 respectively. Stalwarts within the two parties failed to convince their two top leaders that occasional boycott of parliamentary session and the boycott of the oath taking ceremony were totally different ball games. It is bad politics and it should not happen in a functioning parliamentary democracy. None of the leaders dared to pronounce this openly; though some of them grumble in private. They are all like the run of the mill politicians and lack the materials to be transformed into statesmen.

This is probably happening because the political leaders of the two mainstream parties appeared to have developed a peculiar mindset: they firmly believe that whatever they do, they do it for the people since they are the natural leaders of the people. They represent them and therefore they have the right to do anything on their behalf. This goes to prove that statesmanship cannot be imposed or thrust from above; they are to born with certain qualities to graduate into statesmen.

Meanwhile, the ghastly grenade attacks on the Awami League rally in Dhaka on 21 August, 2004, killing about 20 including the front ranking AL leader, Mrs. Ivy Rahman, and injuring over 200, and the fallout from this shocking incident, failed to influence the country's nature of politics. One would have expected that such a shocking event, in fact a national calamity of sort, would galvanise the political leadership into seeking a national unity and consensus to face the situation. Instead, the ugly partisan politics got an upper hand and each side accused the other of engineering the incident. What a waste!

The mutuality of hatred amongst these two parties is so deep that the one that gets defeated in the election and thereby has to sit in the opposition refuses to accept the legitimacy of the election itself. Their leaders say that the people did not vote them to power; they managed it through rigging. So as far as these two

parties are concerned, the party in power does not have the legitimacy. Therefore, they feel that they are at liberty to try and topple the government of the time at will through means fair or foul. This rigmarole goes on all the time, as if nobody has anything better to do. The truth is uncomfortable. It cannot be hidden or compromised. At times it could be ugly and difficult to be accepted by all. It is perhaps impossible for some people to make necessary adjustment and face the reality; the politicians of this country belong to this category.

**The transparency question:** The opposition party leaders always demand transparency from the government but seem to forget all about it when it forms the government after winning the elections. Why? Because in their own make-believe world they believe that they are the people's chosen representatives and therefore they cannot do anything wrong and public fund is always safe with them. It is this mindset that matters and the political leaders, regardless of their party affiliations, never talk about ensuring transparency in the way the political parties fund themselves.

With the exception of those few who are either lawyers or businessmen, political leaders never reveal their own sources of income or how do they maintain their families. They also do not want to talk about how much assets they do possess either. But when they contest elections, most of them spend a fortune. Where does the money come from? No answer is available. Since there has to be a source of funding and dedicated old timers in politics hardly have access to legitimate sources of finance, politics has increasingly become a commercialized commodity, opening doors to the captains of commerce into politics. Party nominations at the election times generally go to the highest bidders. Nobody can tell how much one pays to get the nomination from either of the two major parties or for that matter, what happens to the money that changes hands in the name of the party.

Our political leaders did not learn any lesson in humility while in power and seemingly refuse to learn or acquire the same from others. In the next door India, for example, the rightwing BJP-led coalition government lost to the Congress-led coalition in the parliamentary polls earlier in May this year and the outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee immediately conceded defeat. When the President of India became convinced that Congress enjoys the majority support in the house, he asked Dr Manmohan Singh, nominated by Congress President Sonia Gandhi, to form the government. Soon after that, Vajpayee formally and genially handed over the reign to the new Congress-led Prime Minister.

The BJP, not known to be politically a very tolerant party, however, learnt the art of democratic norms and geniality while in power and demonstrated it when the time came and thereby earning the accolades from all and sundry. They may have suffered an electoral defeat but won some legitimate points politically.

Analysts feel that the country's politicians are mostly emotion-driven and not the

thinking type and are incapable of seizing the opportunity when it shows up. They seem to suffer from broad indecision while in the government but appear surprisingly decisive when in the opposition in single-mindedly pursuing the goal of ousting the government, without considering the possible adverse consequences that may follow. They also lack the patience to wait for their turn to return to power as the very thought of returning to power drive them crazy. The result? While one political party tries relentlessly to remove the other from power, the country's problems keep mounting; opportunities are slipping, and rest of the world surges forward leaving them behind.

লেখক জাতীয় প্রেস ক্লাবের সাবেক অবৈতনিক সম্পাদক