

## **Authoritarianism: An inevitable outcome of contemporary democratic systems?**

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In the year 1971, through a tumultuous war, Bangladesh won its Independence. The nine months of war between the highly-equipped regular armed forces of Pakistan and a small cadre of trained officers of the armed forces who defected to join, train and lead a motley, but a very large group of students, workers, peasants, cultural activists, performers, artists, bureaucrats to form what became known as the Mukti Bahini or freedom fighters resulted, with the help of the Indian government, in the birth of Bangladesh. The war began as the natural aftermath of the populist uprising against the authoritarian regime in Pakistan, resulting eventually in a general election where the Bengali nationalist, democratic, secular and socialist mandate won with a clean majority (East Pakistan having the majority seats in the Parliament). The autocratic government of Pakistan responded with a brutal massacre in its eastern wing, starting with the University teachers, students, the paramilitary force manning the borders, the police force and the general people at large, especially those who were homeless. The Bengali officers in the army stationed in the then East Pakistan were disarmed. The intention was to cower the people into submission as is the wont of autocratic regimes. The populist leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose party single-handedly won the majority seats, was immediately removed and jailed in West Pakistan, with the imminent threat of his death looming large. The effect was the reverse of what was intended. The people rose in unison to join and support the War of Liberation; there was no longer any doubt that the only way this land would enjoy democratic rights was through full independence.

I mention this, as it sets the tone of what this piece is about. How did a nation whose people actively participated to create their own State—founded on the four principles, incorporated in Bangladesh's first Constitution, of Democracy, Nationalism (basically Bengali Nationalism), Secularism and Socialism—allow itself in its forty-eight years of existence to be ruled for the most part by a series of authoritarian regimes? Though Bangladesh has seen popular movements to overthrow dictatorships and usher in democracy in the past, this was never sustained for long. Where does the malaise lie? What about the current scenario? Are the people able to speak out, to resist and ensure their rights are not being trampled upon?

This also forms the title of my piece. I have tried to describe briefly the current phenomena in the hope that this short piece may jog us from what seems to be our apparent apathy, to revive our right to our dreams to relive that which was positive in our past and towards what is needed for the future.

Though officially, the present Government of Bangladesh is a 'democratically elected' government, the reality shows the farce of a staged and badly-scripted scenario passing off as an election. Was it absolutely necessary to go through this? Since no opposition candidate, apart from those who were given the 'blessings' of the party in power, were given any space and scope to campaign, people too, were not too interested in casting their

ballots. Polling officers stated that they were forced to sign ballot papers the night before and fill up half the ballot box. The other half was left for people to fill as they wished. This way the party would ensure a 'win'. However, overenthusiastic party workers went overboard and in many cases, forced those who did turn up, to cast their votes for the ruling party candidate. The few who dared do otherwise had to face grievous consequences, including gang rape, for having the gall to cast her vote against their dictates. That the main opposition party, facing a myriad of cases, seems to have lost their ability to even campaign, let alone build up a credible movement and support base to reject the farce of an election, shows the current state of impoverishment in the political sphere. They took oath as MPs, after having at first given a statement rejecting the election results. There were certain voting centres where voting did take place as per rules, efficiently, and with no false votes whatsoever. These are a part of window-dressing needed for authoritarianism to flourish, when held up to scrutiny honestly state "Yes people were allowed to vote unhindered". The election monitors were skilfully veered to visit only such centres, both in Dhaka as well as in outlying areas.

All this leads to the party in power being all powerful. They do not need the people's support. All that is needed is to be able to 'buy' off any semblance of disgruntlement, keep certain thugs happy, to ensure that their control is total. In return these goons and thugs can continue to do what they wish with total impunity. Authoritarianism then becomes the only mode of control and means to govern the nation. Those who voice out their concerns are either ignored, or if felt that they need to be curbed, are intimidated—if lucky jailed, but often picked up without following legal procedure, leading to unaccounted for missing persons, and sometimes extrajudicial killings. This is a scenario created to instil a culture of fear and submission in the minds of the people.

The neoliberal economic paradigm that exists too, is totally unconcerned with internal politics of any state, in fact I would venture to state that it thrives in such autocratic regimes, whereby lacunas in terms of social or environmental impacts can be skimmed over, excuse given that the state concerned is the real entity to ensure such guarantees. The various arms of the United Nations may issue new Conventions, ask nation states to follow certain treaties, etc. but as can be clearly seen, are totally toothless to ensure any implementation. Bilateral, regional or even institutions which emerged through the Bretton Woods feel no obligation to ensure that the basic tenets of democratic accountability are ensured. Most important is economic growth, where on the one hand, the state provides financial or technical assistance, while on the receiving end, the state can look towards monetary gains, quite often linked to personal interests too. Thus, authoritarianism is the current trend for governance not just in Bangladesh but all over.

Authoritarianism has many facets. The blatant one is where authoritarian domination is established without having to go through the farce of democratic practice. The other is that of actually getting people to believe that electing dictators who bring in autocracy and authoritarianism is good for the nation. They can deliver. A few obvious current examples being cited are India, Philippines, the United States, etc. The most glaring example of the past being Germany during the Third Reich after the voting in of Adolf Hitler. Call it brainwashing or call it lack of political acumen. The result is the same. The consequences too, could be as chilling. This brings me to the question: does democracy, in the very faulty

and manipulative way it is practiced in most countries of the world, pave the way for authoritarian regimes? Is now the time to start thinking how democratic systems could take the average citizens' concerns as their guiding principles for change, for development, for ensuring well-being? The next question that this forum could start discussing, if it has not done so already, is what forms of governments and governance could ensure true democracy?

Let me give two recent examples from the land I know best, Bangladesh, about what happens when the average citizen tries to express their views and opinions on matters that are of their immediate concerns, how a simple expression can be perceived as threatening to one's own powerbase if actions are spontaneously taken up without the support or leadership of any obvious political organisation. The examples are of two movements from one year back, both spontaneously taking shape and form across the nation very fast, and unrelated to each other in terms of leadership and actors. Yet the way these movements were 'controlled', were crushed, follow an uncannily and strikingly similar process.

The first is what is popularly known as the 'quota reform movement'. Since Bangladesh became independent, a system of quotas to ensure that certain sections of the population are given scope and space in the highly-valued government jobs has been followed. A category of quotas was for Freedom Fighters who took part in our Liberation War. Concern about this was raised many years back when the certificates as to who was a Freedom Fighter were misused. With each successive government, a new set of Freedom Fighter certificates were given out, along with demands for increased quotas. After forty-seven years, when the Freedom Fighters themselves had already passed the age of retirement, their children too had passed the age of joining, it was their grandchildren who now wished to have quotas for themselves. Quotas also existed for women as per the CEDAW and other UN declarations, for indigenous communities—who are not called officially called 'indigenous' by the government—and for other marginalised groups. As such, over fifty percent of government jobs were reserved under quotas. Thus, a movement began to reform the quota system and make it more representative, so that merit was given major preference. Questions were raised about the rationale after 47 years, given that the quota reserved for the families of Freedom Fighters was the highest, of whether to decrease this percentage. The movement consisted mainly of final-year university students. The movement spread like wildfire across the country. Once the government felt that they had no control over the movement and this could lead to people raising issues, the movement was 'dealt' with severe brutality: through arrests and picking up protestors from their homes, many were jailed or 'missing'. For family members, knowing that a protestor was in jail was reassuring. At least they would not become another victim of extrajudicial killings. The brutality of these actions completely suppressed the movement.

Soon after, when the Dhaka University had its student body elections after 28 years, a similar situation to the national elections took place. Two leaders of the quota reform movement, including Nurul Huq were elected from among its leaders, all the other posts went to the pro-government students' party, the Chhatra League. It was only in the women's hall that the women student's put up a fight to ensure proper votes were cast and counted, hence independent candidates won in most of these halls. Nurul Huq has been

brutally beaten up a number of times with none of the perpetrators, all with affiliations with the ruling party, arrested.

The second example was even more brutal, tragic and demoralizing. It showed the government's authoritarianism at its height. For many years, road accidents have been the major cause of unnatural deaths in Bangladesh. Most of the accidents are caused by public transport. Yet, no actions are taken against the vehicle owners or drivers. In August 2018, after the running-down of two students by a bus, school students, mostly in their eleventh and twelfth year of schooling, managed to take over control of the city roads, checking licences, maintaining lanes and other traffic laws—with a set of demands for the government to make roads safe. This spread to all cities and towns of the country. Within a few days, similar to the earlier movement, the government decided to crack down. The police and then the goons of the ruling party were let loose to brutally beat up students. The level of brutality far exceeded the very peaceful nature of the movement. The message was clear. The government will not tolerate questions or attempts to ask for accountability. The government will not tolerate anyone to take to the streets to express their sentiments. The government is in control and any attempts to show that people can raise issues will be dealt with—that's the lesson. Giving the message that authoritarianism is in force ensured that no one else went out to protest this action. Arresting of a globally renowned photojournalist for speaking out during the movement only went to show how 'strong' the government was. Though the government gave out assurances that tough measures would be taken to ensure road safety, it lasted for just a week. Meanwhile the movement died down, and matters went back to business as usual.

These two examples are two of many. The ending is always the same. In the end, the government manages to buy time, then go back to its own authoritarian rule. Public and global actions, international outcry may make international headlines for a short span of time. In the end, it is business interests that show that no matter what, the Modis, the Dutertes, the Putins, the Trumps, will rule on ... until such a time when the tide changes. How long does this world need to wait for that, is the question?

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