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**Crisis in consensus: Is election a way forward for Bangladesh?**

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**Manzoor Hasan and Ashikur Rahman**

AREND Lijphart, an eminent political scientist of our era, wrote while dedicating his work *Patterns of Democracy* to his six grandchildren that he hoped that their century would be more democratic, peaceful, kinder, and gentler than what he mostly studied and experienced during his lifetime. This idea of inheriting or leaving behind a kinder and peaceful democratic society is appealing to all human beings with conscience, and yet so many societies that we see or know have lived through centuries of chronic conflict and anarchy. Why are peace and democratic governance so hard for us to achieve and sustain? Are most of the world's civilisations still suffering from scarcity of wisdom and resources that they cannot create conditions for a gentler and kinder democratic order?

The answers to the posed questions are difficult, but some insights on the mentioned issues are of fundamental importance for Bangladesh, which at present stands at a difficult crossroads. First, any basic polity generally experiences conflict amongst its citizens concerning the distribution of state resources. These conflicts have ignited political economists, such as, Karl Marx and Friedrich Hayek, to point out contrasting methods of conceptualising and organising the State. Second, there is a deep division among the political actors concerning who gets what. That is, should 'winners' of the majority opinion have an unchallenged domination over the 'losers'? This is an essential issue and the idea of attaining 'balance of power' through the separation of judiciary, legislative and executive is an outcome of deliberation on such concerns.

Third, any given society struggles to find an optimal level of rent seeking that it allow its political elites to undertake. It is evident from popular media that the affidavits of the aspirant Members of Parliament of the 10th Parliamentary election have created a deep discomfort within citizens, which

in some sense reflects that people are concerned with the level of rent political actors generate in the name of serving them.

Lastly, political landscapes of all nature and heritage will constitute groups that nurture values and ideological convictions that are difficult to reconcile, and that such polarised entities often engage with each other with extreme ferocity. What happens as a result is that the lives of those who belong to neither political camp are ultimately challenged in the process. In the case of Bangladesh, the role of 'Political Islam' advocated by Jamaat-e-Islam is one such issue where the divisions in the society run deep and no amicable solution to the current political impasse is in sight. In essence, the question that almost all political actors are asking today is: should we provide any political space to a party that not only challenged the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, but had also ruthlessly aided genocide against its own people in 1971? Furthermore, does 'Political Islam' as opposed to 'Private Islam' have any meaningful role in our statecraft?

Thus, the turmoil that Bangladeshi political arena currently faces is ultimately a manifestation of these conflicts, which has been further magnified by the current electoral debates that have caught our attention and imagination. But, can a free, fair and participatory election provide an amicable solution to the deep divisions that have pushed us to this brink of madness? Can simply a change of political power be the magic bullet that moves us forward as a nation? Historical developments within societies carry imperative information on political order with grave mistrust and frictions. Bangladesh has not proved to be an exception.

To mention one example, had F.W. de Klerk -- the last president of the apartheid-era South Africa -- opted for participatory elections without resolving the issue of reconciliation and peace with the leadership of African National Congress (especially Nelson Mandela), could one imagine an inclusive and peaceful political space in South Africa? The objective of evaluating this bit of history is to remind ourselves that elections on their own do not amount to creating consensus in a society. Therefore, what is needed in Bangladesh is constructive dialogue among political actors which will, once and for all, solve the principal source of violence and anarchy in our society.

In that context, the political leadership of Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party have two critical issues on their plate, which need an enduring settlement. First, they need to pinpoint a basic institutional arrangement that will permanently solve the issue of elections and how they will be conducted by all future political governments. Second, the two political forces must determine the level of political space that they are willing to provide Jamaat-e-Islam, and whether or not such radical elements should ever be considered for political alliance which can fundamentally threaten the secular character of our nation. Without finding lasting consensus on these two issues simultaneously, no election -- participatory or non-participatory -- can deliver us the peace and democratic governance that the ordinary citizens of our country rightfully demand.

**The writers are Barrister and Senior Economist of Policy Research Institute, respectively.**

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