

Politics in the gutter and stars in the sky

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A truly democratic and civilised society makes progress through the development and nurturing of right political, social and cultural institutions in the country. Politics shapes the structure and functioning of these institutions. People repose their trust in the politicians as their elected representatives to make the institutions function properly. Examples of these institutions include educational management, the judiciary and administration of criminal justice, electoral process, financial systems and other civil affairs management systems and processes.

Forty years have passed since the independence of Bangladesh. However, it is a soul-searching question if the nation has achieved much in developing and nurturing solid and effective political, social and administrative institutions. In practical terms, the question implies if successive governments have been able to provide adequate, equitable and beneficial services to the population at large in keeping with their rightful aspirations and expectations. If not, why not and who are responsible for this mismatch.

It has become evident that the State as an entity is often treated just like a private company by the government of the day to maximise profits within its tenure of office. Those governing the country appear to have lacked any social responsibility and accountability for their actions, and failures to deliver their political promises are blamed on others, especially the previous governments. This blame game has continued for a long time and is now deeply rooted in the political psyche in Bangladesh.

A major reason for the current disturbing state of affairs is the apparent lack of willingness of the government irrespective of political parties to develop governing institutions that are independent and that should function freely according to the rules, regulations and law of the land. This lack of willingness emanates from the desire of the ruling class to wield control over the institutions to serve their own self-interest, with a slice of benefit going mainly to those loyal to the party. The result is that the institutions have become dysfunctional with an adverse impact on the democratic governance of the country.

Social progress and development require participation of all members of the society that encourages the practice of human rights and fundamental freedoms underpinned by the principles of social justice. Social justice, in its broadest term, means equal opportunities for all to participate in socio-economic development. Thus the achievement of social justice can act as a yardstick to measure the extent of economic, social and cultural development of people in a country.

A country develops with its own efforts and actions given its natural endowments. While some kinds of development assistance from multilateral donor agencies and economically advanced countries are necessary, the main thrust of development must come from within. The basis of this thrust should be the desire for democracy, rule of law and social inclusion in the decision-making process by the government.

It is incumbent upon the government of the day to recognise that it is their primary responsibility to strive for human development of all the citizens in the country. Among other things, this requires credible actions to narrow and close the gap as far as possible in the standards of living between the rich and the poor. Right policies underlie right actions. Right actions can only be taken if right policies are set first and desired policy intent can be achieved if policies are allowed to be implemented without hindrance and political interference.

Resources are very limited in a developing country like Bangladesh. There is no scope for wasting these scarce resources (for example, natural, financial and capital resources) in undertaking over-ambitious and socially undesirable projects which do not generate sustainable benefit to the community as a whole. In other words, resources need to be used to generate greatest benefit for the greatest number, so to speak. With current economic knowledge and available statistical measurement tools, the impact of government policies and programs on the community can be easily assessed if there is a real political will.

There is no denying the fact that the role of the government in a modern world is to facilitate economic and social development through devising the right institutions and creating other enabling conditions. The private sector and citizens themselves can make efforts and take actions to achieve economic and social progress in their own interest. The government should not put obstacles to the society's legitimate desire to progress.

An important responsibility of the government is to ensure enforcement of law and keep order in the society so that members of the public can engage in productive and income-earning activities in a peaceful atmosphere. Citizens should not be subjected to intimidation by the criminals, thugs and extortionists for rent seeking. People should have freedom to change their lives through productive activities in different fields. Unfortunately it is a far cry as extortion has become so viral and widespread in the society, which is often attributed to political patronage. People are frustrated and do not want to see more of the same time and again.

At issue are not the failures of the past, but learning from failures and hopes for the future. Politicians can still learn from their past mistakes, correct their bad behaviour, take responsibility and be accountable for their actions. Continued self-seeking politics relying on monumental thuggery, unbridled hooliganism and incessant lies will only lead to increased social conflict and retard desired human development for sure.

Finally, following Oscar Wilde can we say, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars"?

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