



Is an election enough?

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We need to start a new debate that focuses on a complete changeover of our political system through decisive constitutional amendments

In 1991, we were promised a democratic state. A state that operates with accountability and transparency. A state that is effective in acknowledging the basic aspirations of the people. In essence, there was a simple dream that finally, we would have a political society where everyone would be accountable for their actions, and people would have a voice in the manner in which they are governed.

Since then, Bangladesh has had four participatory elections, and yet, our democracy has failed to consolidate over the last 24 years, while politics has remained as confrontational as one could imagine.

It baffles me when we face the narrative from some of the leading political commentators that holding another routine election will solve our democratic crisis. Why should we expect the quality of our politics to improve if only there is a change in government? Is it rational to expect that the nature of the future governments will be any different than what we have experienced in the past?

I have come to realise that some of our political commentators suffer from an acute presence of historical amnesia. They have somehow fooled themselves into believing that the future will be different than the past. However, as a social scientist, I have no reason for agreeing with such a perspective.

This is because if the actors within our political arena face the same set of incentives in the future, why should they change their behaviour? Is it rational to expect that our current institutional arrangements, governed primarily by our constitution, will produce a qualitative change in politics? These questions intrinsically demand our sincere reflection.

The brutality that we witness within our politics will not cease to exist if we hold one more routine election. The mindless politicisation that has crippled our public administration will not stop if we have a change in our political master.

The complete absence of accountability with which all members of the state operate will not

come to an end if we allow the same set of institutions to govern political actions. Of course, then one might be tempted to ask: What is the way forward?

For me, any chance of a better future is rooted, first, in our realisation that in 1991, we did not introduce democracy. Rather, we merely introduced a rule-based voting system that allowed people to exercise their franchise and elect their representatives. Yet, somehow, we forgot to introduce the other key pillars of democracy: Accountability and transparency.

To stress the importance of what is being suggested here, it is essential to invoke a crucial issue highlighted by James Madison, an architect of the US Constitution, who wrote in the Federalist Papers: “The aim of every constitution, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold public trust.”

I sincerely feel that the political deadlock we experience today is inevitably a product of our weak constitution, which, in the post-1990 period, did not allow both rough “balance of power” and “checks and balances” to exist between and within key stakeholders. In that context, I strongly believe that the current opposition movement, with its emphasis on a single issue - elections - is misplaced.

The time has emerged for us to go back to the drawing board and rewrite the rules of politics with major constitutional amendments. But, are we ready for such a meaningful discourse? Or should we only debate over who has the divine right to rule our helpless masses?

In the midst of our current crisis, more than 60 people have been burned to death so far in the name of politics. But what happens tomorrow if the AL and BNP reach a consensus? Will the families get their loved ones back? Will anybody be tried for these heinous murders?

No. It is high time we realise that we live in a state with zero accountability. Our government (no matter who is in charge), our opposition, our civil administration, our law enforcement agencies, or the crony business houses, all operate with zero accountability. And thus, the entire political system that we have implanted in the name of democracy is on the verge of explosion. It is imperative that we revisit these issues in a fundamental manner.

Hence, if we care about our democracy, we need to start a new debate that focuses on a complete changeover of our political system through decisive constitutional amendments, and not only on elections. Paracetamols can't cure cancer, and an election on its own can't deliver democracy. Let us start that new debate. Let us voice our need for a new political order.