

The declining left - Bangladesh expects more

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Suranjit Sengupta had been a stalwart of the Awami League for the last four decades or so. An articulate parliamentarian and a vociferous constitutionalist, Mr. Sengupta had been a robust voice in favour of socialist principles. Marred by a corruption scandal in 2012 which tainted an otherwise glittering political career, the former Railways Minister represented the progressive left-wing faction of the Awami League. With his demise, we are yet again reminded of the potentiality of this unique brand of politics. At the same time, we silently and sadly observe the severe ideological and partisan incoherence of those in the left end of the political spectrum.

Throughout the history of Bangladesh's political journey, left-wing principles have been a subsidiary attachment to the mainstream national story. During the 1960s, the Red Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani led East-Pakistan's struggle against Ayyub Khan's military authoritarianism. Although, some may rightly argue that Bhashani lit the fire which spurred notions of Bengali nationalism, it was the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who wielded the baton of hope for East Pakistanis. During the 1971 Liberation War, the Awami League led the political struggle for freedom, while left-leaning student leaders of the Dhaka University Students' Union (DSSU), such as ASM Abdur Rab, Shahjahan Siraj and Nur-e-Alam Siddique, organised armed resistance against the Pakistani forces. It may be notable to state that the leaders of the DSSU played a critical role in enhancing the notion of Bangladeshi independence. Bhashani was still a prominent actor, and gave his blessings to Bangabandhu to lead Bangladesh to freedom. Sheikh Mujib, whose philosophy and policies could be best described as that of a left-leaning centrist, enshrined the values of secularism and socialism in Bangladesh's post-liberation Constitution. This was in no uncertain terms, the greatest achievement for the political left in Bangladesh.

Yet it is safe to say that the left never truly governed or led Bangladesh from the frontlines. Additionally, leftist principles fail to catch the imagination of the public in a way that it has in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the left continues to have an enduring effect in our everyday politics. Firebrand leaders such as Rashed Khan Menon and Hasanul Haq Inu serve in PM Sheikh Hasina's Cabinet. Matia Chowdhury, the fiery protégé of Maulana Bhashani, is one of Sheikh Hasina's closest advisers.

The shift of leftist politicians towards mainstream political forces is not a new phenomenon. Former Prime Minister Kazi Zafar Ahmed, a proponent of Bhashani's Islamic socialism, had justified his participation in both the Ziaur Rahman and HM Ershad governments as being part of his intention to bring progressive change from within the established system. A similar reasoning has been used by the likes of Menon and Inu when asked about their philosophical u-turn. Perhaps they are right. Or perhaps their actions represent the duopoly of our two largest parties. Without relying on the Awami League or the BNP, it is simply impossible to stand at the topmost stratum of political governance. And this fact entails that left-leaning progressives of the likes of Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Nuh-ul-Alam Lenin, have joined political organisations whose philosophies might very well be different from those they share.

However, there is another side to the leftist story. The troubles of Bangladesh's two-party system have been brought forth by those left-leaning politicians who believe in bringing progress through activism. They have been dubbed unambitious, irrelevant and ineffective. The media gives them minimal attention. They rarely get electoral support. But the small group of prominent outsiders deserve respect from the public. The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) is a decaying organisation. Yet it is headed by the widely respected Mujahidul Islam Selim who continues to be a voice of reason and anti-establishment politics. The CPB and other small leftist parties played a supporting role in ousting General Ershad and restoring parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1991. They have been vocal in their intention to protect labour rights and ensure environmental protection in the last two decades. Due to their small support base, their voice has never truly been heard by the mass public. In more recent times, the young Zonayed Saki put his name forward in an unsuccessful attempt at the Dhaka mayoral race. Yet Saki gives us hope. He provides us with an unconventional alternative. The left provides us with much needed competition in the political process. Suffice it to say however, as an amalgamated entity, the political left is in a precariously difficult position in modern Bangladesh.

Power lures even the best away from their ideologies. It seems many left-leaning leaders have succumbed to this phenomenon. They may be right, however. One may question the practicality of sitting outside and doing nothing about a system which is not right. However, it is this very difference in structural opinions which is proving detrimental to the left. Factionalism, intra-party feuds and a lack of ideological consistency have created a scenario where it is impossible for them to be a united entity. Left-wing politics is different from centrist or right-wing politics.

In countries where socialist norms have succeeded, in almost all cases the left has stood up as a united face. Countries like Sweden, Norway and Denmark are classic examples. In Bangladesh, we have the exact opposite. Not only is the left divided on all sides, there is no interest amongst politicians sharing the ideology to unite. The two main political parties have capitalised on this, resulting in a growing third force from maturing. This is indeed sad for Bangladesh.

In an ideal scenario, Suranjit Sengupta would probably have been happy to depart this world seeing a strong leftist political grounding in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The evolution of the self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in the USA is a refreshing sign for even those who do not necessarily share the views of the political left. The public of Bangladesh continue to put their weight behind the two main parties, yet they would welcome the growth of a strong, powerful and united alternative brand of politics.

Bangladesh is inherently secular, but the country also prides its Muslim heritage. It is an exclusive blend which requires an exclusive approach from political actors. As such, the basic principles of left-wing politics such as social justice, national welfare and equality are ideas, which should in theory, captivate the public mindset. Only if the left can strive forward as a single force and not capitulate to the constraints of our two-party system, only then would leftist norms truly be relatable to the common man.

Bangladesh is stuck in a frenzy of the two main political parties. Although, these two parties deserve credit for playing a great political game, the failures of the left have only assisted in creating such a system. Now more than ever, the political left needs to adapt to 21st century Bangladesh, and take their rightful place in the highest echelon of the country's political system.

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