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The past is not a foreign country for us

M Shamsul Haque

As people do not see the benefits of change in the future, going back to the past may not be unacceptable

The op-ed piece “The past is a foreign country” (November 17, Dhaka Tribune) by William B Milam was a very well-thought-out article on the changing nature of governments all over the world. Citing changes in the political culture emerging in the UK, the USA, and Russia, Mr Milam wrote: “Democracy, where it is truly practiced, appears to be failing. The democracies are surely not meeting the needs of their citizens, neither their material and/or their psychic needs. In both of these failings, onrushing globalisation plays a larger role.”

Further, he wrote: “The number of practicing democracies is falling as more and more countries turn toward authoritarian governance.” He traced the history of governments in South Asia, particularly those of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. “The present Awami League government in Bangladesh is allegedly reverting back to its first two and a half years in charge of the new state of Bangladesh,” he wrote.

This time, the AL has taken charge of the country in the absence of any strong opposition party. “Perhaps the Awami League is encouraged by the worldwide retreat from democracy and regression towards authoritarianism, and consolidates its one-party government into a one-party state by closing the political space for any kind of opposition,” he continued.

Mr Milam could not see civil society and political opposition being able to resist it. During the rule of Pakistan, civil society played a strong role in the emancipation of the people. One professor of political science at Jahangirnagar University recently said, in the earlier days, universities would prescribe how the government should work.

These days, the government is dictating how universities should run, as almost all senior administrative positions are filled by party affiliates.

In the last paragraph of the article, Mr Milam stated that the title of the article was taken from the classic 1953 novel “The Go-Between.” The character in the novel was frustrated with his life, and called the past a foreign country because they did things differently then.

One feels tempted to argue that, despite progress made over the last century, the tendency to halt transition towards a democratic culture is embedded in many societies such as Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In Bangladesh, we have experienced authoritarian rules since the British period including the 25 years of Pakistani rule. In fact, it has spanned more than half of the period of our existence. So our past actually is not foreign to us. It is quite familiar.

Bangladesh is cited as an example of a country that has attained 5-6% growth in GDP and some major achievements in human development indices. As we all know, GDP growth is a totally misleading indicator of social wellbeing, as the poverty level is still very high (above 25%), some 300 million people live in slums in inhumane conditions.

Underaged marriage is still at 66% in rural areas. Modern-day slavery is also present here, and considerable damage is being dealt to the environment from pollution of water, air, and land. This is going to affect the lives of the next generation.

More importantly, the failure of governments to meet the growing needs of the people is perhaps the most important cause of the hopes of people getting dashed. Take the USA as an example, the recent capture of the US Senate in mid-term elections by the Republican Party is a reflection of the dashed hopes of the common people after they elected Obama for the second term as president.

They spent \$4bn to win the elections. It is not his personal failure, nor of the Democratic Party. The Republicans blocked all major efforts of the president since he was elected in 2008. It is widely recognised that the infrastructure in the USA has been crumbling.

A bill to invest billions of dollars was not passed by the congress. The healthcare insurance for all (known as Obamacare) also made limited progress due to their resistance.

Overhauling the immigration system was agreed upon by both parties during the Bush presidency, but they kept it pending. At the heart of these denials, to change things in the USA and elsewhere, are the attitudes of the rich people who control 80%-90% of national wealth. This issue of rising income inequality has been amply demonstrated in a recent book by French economist Thomas Piketty, called *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*.

He showed how inequality has been growing in the developed world due to capital-owners earning higher than the growth in national income during the last 50 years. His main recommendation is to tax the wealth of individuals at higher rates and spend the money on education and infrastructure. This is also posing a threat to democracy.

In Bangladesh, the capacity of the government is limited to executing development projects, such that about \$20bn of foreign aid money has been lying idle in the pipeline for a long time, and the government policy-makers could not allocate sufficient funds for education and health sectors, as the tax-GDP ratio is just over 10%, the lowest in South Asia.

Hence, failure in governance is easily observable in economic spheres as major infrastructure projects are awaiting approval and funding. As for the change of political culture, we have a long way to go, since a change in government has made little difference in the lives of the people.

As people do not see the benefits of change in the future, going back to the past may not be unacceptable, provided the government can deliver on the promises made.

The writer is the vice chancellor of Northern University Bangladesh.