

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BANGLADESH: THE USE OF VILE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Politicians often use emotional appeals to the people as a weapon to gain political objectives, either personal, or for the party they represent, or both. This paper takes a look at the quality of, and civility in, political communication in Bangladesh between 1991 and 2014, a period during which the country has experienced parliamentary democracy as its system of government. Using specific examples of such communication by elected legislators, as well as by prime ministers, both inside the parliament during legislative proceedings, and outside of it, this paper examines whether the use of such language indeed has any impact, positive or negative, on the electorate. Evidence suggests a stark deterioration in the quality of, and civility in, political communication in the country since 1991. Such decline is at least a reflection of the manifestation of the deteriorating political culture, which, unless checked, and rolled back, could adversely affect the development of Bangladesh towards political maturity.

Introduction

Sean Richey poses a pertinent question regarding a possible correlation between politicians' use of a particular strategy and public response to it: "Can politicians use emotional appeals to stimulate and activate latent personality traits in the public?"¹ He cites several authors who have concluded that emotional appeals are used as political weapons.² The essence of politics is human interaction. Politics and communication go hand in hand because they are essential parts of human nature. Brian McNair provides a simple, but telling, correlation between politics and communication: political communication is "purposeful communication

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1. S. Richey, "Campaign Advertising and the Stimulation and Activation of the Authoritarian Personality", *Political Communication*, Vol. 29, 2012, pp. 24-43.
2. The pundits, politicians and commentators and their works he cites are Brader, T., *Campaigning for hearts and minds: How emotional appeals in political ads work* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and Marcus, G.E., Neuman, W.R., & MacKuen, M., *Collective Intelligence and political judgment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

about politics.”³ The operative word is “purposeful,” since the ultimate objective of politicians and political parties is to gain the seat of government, through periodic elections in liberal pluralist democracies.

This paper uses a variation of Richey’s query, and applies it to Bangladesh, a developing country with a checkered political history. It explores the deterioration in the quality of, and civility in, political communication in the country between 1991 and 2014, a period of parliamentary democracy with varying level of effectiveness. The author uses specific examples of such communication employed by elected parliamentarians, as well as by prime ministers, both inside parliament during legislative proceedings, and outside of it. A central question is whether the use of such language indeed has any positive or negative impact on the electorate. However, as will be explained later, this aspect will be secondary to, and in support of, a phenomenon that has been hampering the proper functioning of liberal pluralist democracy in Bangladesh: a steadily deteriorating political culture. The paper relies primarily on speeches and statements made by parliamentarians and government ministers, prime minister and leader of the opposition in the parliament to make a particular point, while restricting ourselves to secondary statistical information to supplement the study.

A Brief Discussion on Political Communication

The importance of political communication, whether in democracies or in authoritarian regimes, whether volubly expressed or ventilated in measured terms, cannot be overstressed for the functioning of a government. This observation does not automatically endorse any view that this functioning would be smooth, of a high quality, and positively productive for the general welfare of the country and its people. In reality, political communication can also be a gimmick for politicians to gain their personal objectives, or those of the political party they represent, and such objectives may not necessarily enhance the well-being of the citizens. Instead, such communication may have adverse consequences in fuelling personal hatred and partisan politics.

Political or policy speeches, inside the legislature, or in other forums, provide the people, usually via media, a government’s, or a political party’s or an individual politician’s, plans, objectives, or agenda. In the current information age, where the new media (specifically, the Internet) is utilized at least as much as the traditional media by politicians to convey their messages, and the people to

³ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 24.

receive them, political communication has come to rely heavily on the media in all its forms. That does not automatically provide for clear and meaningful political communication. As Jurgen Habermas observes, “Contemporary Western societies display an impressive increase in the volume of political communication, but the political public sphere is at the same time dominated by the kind of mediated communication that lacks the defining objectives of deliberation.”⁴

Exploring Richey’s query regarding the use of emotional appeal by politicians to stimulate the public, scholars are divided in their opinions on this issue. Delli Carpini is categorical about his viewpoint: “In spite of an inclusion of ever more citizens in the flows of mass communication, a comparison of recent studies arrives at an ambivalent, if not outright pessimistic, conclusion about the kind of impact mass communication has on the involvement of citizens in politics.”⁵ Habermas is more circumspect and pragmatic, believing that, depending on the circumstances, appeal to public emotions can have positive, negative, or indifferent response. He writes, “The influence of public opinions spreads in opposite directions, turning both toward a government busy carefully watching it and backward toward the reflecting audiences from where it first originated.”⁶ Clearly, Habermas emphasizes the public being in an essentially reactionary situation: “That both elected governments and voters can take an affirmative, a negative, or an indifferent attitude toward public opinion highlights the most important trait of the public sphere, namely, its reflexive character.”⁷ This paper argues that the effect of political communication varies from country to country, and the fact that it may evoke some reaction (including indifference) from the public can hardly be disputed.

Objectives and Limitations

In addition to applying Richey’s query in the context of Bangladesh, this paper takes stock of the deteriorating political culture in the country and its reflection in

4 Jurgen Habermas, “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory of Empirical Research”, *Communication Theory*, Vol. 16 (2006), pp. 411-426, p. 414, cmt_280 411_426-1-Habermas, accessed on google, 2 October 2014.

5 M.X. Delli Carpini, “Mediating democratic engagement: The impact of communications on citizens’ involvement in political and civic life”, K. Lee Kaid (ed), *Handbook of political communication research* (London: LEA, 2004), pp. 395-434, p. 422.

6 Habermas, *Op. cit*, p. 417.

7 *Ibid*, pp. 417-418.

the quality of political communication. The degradation of political culture undermines the growth of political institutions and hinders the functioning of a robust liberal pluralist democracy. Manifestation of intolerance of each other's viewpoints by the major political parties (Awami League and BNP), a tendency not to find a middle ground over contentious national issues, and the use of vile language against each other, among other matters, are symptoms, causes and/or results of a dysfunctional political culture. In essence, this paper investigates the causes and effects of the growing use of vile language in Bangladesh.

While Bangladesh is the main focus of the study, the political communication practiced in the United States, an advanced nation with centuries of experience in the practice of liberal pluralist democracy, is also brought into focus to compare and contrast the two. As Barbara Pletsch and Frank Esser argue, "In view of the significance of communication processes for the development of democracy many mainstream researchers dwelled on the United States as the country in which the modernization of political communication seemed farthest advanced and most apparent."⁸ However, the same authors, citing and endorsing Gurevitch and Blumber (1990), Swanson (1992), and Swanson and Mancini (1996), also enter this caveat to their statement: "Since the 1990s, European and American scholars have been asking themselves whether the American model of media democracy is indeed appropriate for describing generalizable patterns of developments of modern political communication in today's Western democracies."⁹ It stands to reason that different countries will likely have different modes of political communication, but there has to be a bottom line in the standard of the communication being offered. This point brings us to a limitation of this study. It would require an in-depth study on the educational and family backgrounds of the politicians (particularly of the elected Members of Parliament and office-bearers of the major political parties) since the resumption of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1991. Such a detailed study could determine if any correlation exists between the educational and family background of politicians and their use of vile language inside and outside the parliament. Due to time and resource constraints, the absence of such a detailed study has certainly reduced the evidentiary base of the arguments in this paper.

8 Barbara Pletsch and Frank Esser, "Comparing Political Communication: Reorientations in a Changing World", Frank Esser and Barbara Pletsch (eds.), *Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5.

9 *Ibid.*

The Dubious Usage of Political Communication

Deborah Stone defines politics as “the sphere of emotion and passion, irrationality, self-interest, shortsightedness, and raw power.”¹⁰ They would in themselves, or in combination, explain political rationale. Politics, indeed, is heady stuff for those who actively pursue it, with their goal primarily being claiming the seat of power, through periodic elections in liberal pluralist democracies, and usually through force of arms in autocracies. As Stone points out, politics is a sphere of emotion and passion, irrationality, and self-interest, all of which attributes are understandable in the pursuit of that vocation. They manifest themselves even in the smoothly running democracies. The very same attributes will, at times, induce politicians to engage in heated debates and conversations in almost any forum, including the legislature.

Name calling, for example, is not uncommon in the political arena of a country. That includes the United States of America, which has been practicing liberal pluralist democracy ever since its Constitution was adopted in 1787 and ratified in 1788. In fact, the use of vulgar language by its politicians to describe or discredit opponents goes back to its early days as an independent country. The following examples will illustrate the colorful language used by its high profile politicians.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the second and third presidents of the United States and signatories of the country’s Declaration of Independence, were lifelong friends. However, although Adams was the president and Jefferson the vice president of the country, they ran against each other in the 1800 race for the White House. During the run-up to the election, despite the two men’s lifelong friendship, the two camps ran various campaigns against each other, some of which involved personal attacks that would cause eyebrows even after more than two hundred years. Jefferson’s team charged Adams of possessing a “hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.”¹¹ Adams’ people labeled Jefferson “a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.”¹² Furthermore, while Adams was called a fool, a hypocrite, a criminal, and a tyrant, Jefferson was branded a

10 Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 373.

11 Kerwin Swint, “Mental Floss”, *Founding Fathers’ dirty campaign*, CNN.com/living, 2008, accessed on google, 14 September 2013.

12 *Ibid.*

weakling, an atheist, a libertine and a coward!¹³ Name calling by political candidates, or their aides and campaigners, who were at the highest level of political office of the country, might even test the credulity of many people today. And both Adams and Jefferson were well educated, successful professionals from well-to-do backgrounds. Their relationship remained acrimonious until 1812, when they resumed their friendship.

John Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, lost the presidency to Andrew Jackson, the seventh president, in 1828. During the campaign, John Quincy Adams was called a pimp, while Jackson's wife was branded a slut by the opposite camps.¹⁴ The press also had a field day with its own colorful characterizations. One newspaper had it that, "General Jackson's mother was a common prostitute, brought to this country by the British soldiers! She afterward married a mulatto man, with whom she had several children, of which number General Jackson is one!"¹⁵ If partisan journalistic foray into dirty presidential campaign manifested itself in 1828, it reached new heights during the 1880s. In Swint's words, "During 1880s, American politics witnessed the birth of its newest and most powerful player - journalistic sensationalism. And with it presidential elections entered a whole new era of toxicity."¹⁶ A nexus grew between partisan journalism and dirty political mudslinging. It was graphically exemplified by media mogul Joseph Pulitzer during the presidential campaign between Grover Cleveland and James Blaine. Cleveland defeated his rival to become the 22nd president during the period 1885 to 1889.

Blaine, who was Speaker of the House of Representatives, during the course of his campaign, played upon an indiscretion that Cleveland had committed in his past. He was thought to have an illegitimate child from an affair. One of the more catchy of Blaine's slogans directed at Cleveland was, "Ma, Ma, Where's My Pa?", an allusion to the product of that affair. It was carried by Pulitzer's newspaper *New York World*.¹⁷ Since the public was buying the paper without bothering to ponder if that juicy scandal was true or not, Pulitzer saw no reason not to run that, and similar partisan slogans, and emphasized on publishing human

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.* The first six US presidents came from affluent backgrounds. Andrew Jackson came from a humbler background, and was the first president to have really connected with the common man.

16 Kerwin Swint, "Grover Cleveland vs. James Blaine: Yellow Journalism in a White House", *Op. cit.*

17 *Ibid.*

interest and scandalous stories. A trend of journalism gained popularity, and continues to this day. Cleveland's people, however, had the last laugh with the perfect riposte, "Gone to the White House, Ha, Ha, Ha!"¹⁸

The preceding discussion suggests that a culture of incivility prevailed at the highest level of political office in the United States—a country which not only designed the first comprehensive written constitution in the world but also introduced judicious amendments to it to include the landmark document commonly called the Bill of Rights. One may question the standard of a media that resorts to sensationalism of the basest kind, especially when considered from the standpoint that the American press, or a section of it. This question comes due to the fact that the American media is seen as the yardstick for quality and responsible journalism, and is considered as among the freest in the world. However, that consideration must be tempered by the reality that the term yellow journalism was coined in terms of a practice that grew out of specific activities of the American press. The question that could legitimately be raised is why would foul language be used by politicians vying for the highest office of the land, or for the press to carry their crass statements or characterizations, or even editorialize along similar lines? Granted that the press is free to report on statements made by others, but to give them a partisan twist would indicate an attempt at titillating readers and listeners or viewers with the objective of swaying them towards its candidate of choice, besides selling its particular brand (such as newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, new media).

On the specific cases given, one of the opposing candidates in the John Adams vs. Thomas Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams vs. Andrew Jackson contests won, in spite of both camps having resorted to the use of crude language to characterize each other. There is, however, no reliable way of knowing if the use of such language had any effect at all on the voters in making their choices. In the Cleveland vs. Blaine case, though, the attack on Cleveland's character did not prevent him from winning. If the negative campaign line, or it being featured prominently in Pulitzer's newspaper, had any pronounced effect on the voters, the election result showed that either they did not care, or the negative campaign might have moved at least some of them to cast a sympathy vote for Cleveland. That conclusion cannot be definitively arrived at, but the election result is a fact. To take recourse to Stone, politics is an arena of emotion and passion, among other attributes. So, going along with this reasoning, one can expect passionate

18 *Ibid.*

speeches from candidates for political offices, although the use of vulgar and low-blow language would appear to be taking emotion and passion to an extreme. Such digging into the background of candidates to unearth unsavory doings and sayings by the opponents, and then making them an issue in political advertisements in both the print and audio-visual media during presidential races continue to this day, as exemplified most recently during the 2012 US election campaigns.

However, once elections are over, while the rhetoric does not go away, down-and-dirty malingering does go down significantly. The president takes the occasional swipe at the opposition party, while the opposition politicians reciprocate, but the language used is usually civil, if sharp. Occasionally, calling the president a liar by a member of Congress, as happened to President Barack Obama during his first term, the language will go over the edge, but the exception will be the rule.¹⁹ Furthermore, the debates in Congress will often be sharp, sometimes acrimonious, given the strong partisanship in Congress that has become more prevalent in the twenty first century, but almost never will language be used that can be construed as vulgar. The media, though, continues to dish out the dirt on politicians, but that falls more under sensationalism, “in-the-public-interest” excuse, in the process aiming for larger circulation or viewer time, rather than use of vulgar words and phrases to make one point or the other.

In summary, the American political culture shows that the practice of civility is often discarded by political passion and emotional behavior during the heat of political battle. However, once the heat of presidential campaigns is over, civility takes over the politicians’ psyche.

The Bangladesh Experience

Politics in Bangladesh is also driven by emotion and passion, irrationality, self-interest, shortsightedness and raw power, though the priority of these attributes would differ from that of the Americans. Furthermore, a average Bangladeshi citizen is prone to be more emotional and passionate about issues than the average American. One might possibly argue that the average Bangladeshi will think more with the heart than with the head, is quite garrulous, passionate, at times even irrational about politics, political parties, and political personalities, and is excitable. Unlike the American political scene, during the electoral

¹⁹ On 9 September 2009, while Obama was delivering his State of the Union address, Rep. Joe Wilson of South Carolina yelled at him, “You lie.”

campaigns, violence leading to injury and death is not at all uncommon in the Bangladesh scenario. However, as in the United States, the use of derogatory, even vulgar, language to denigrate opponents is quite prevalent during national elections. This trend, interestingly, has grown during the unbroken stretch of parliamentary democracy, interrupted by a two-year rule by an unelected caretaker government, which has been the system of government since 1991. The use of vile language has not only become quite pronounced in public forums, but also within the national parliament (Jatiyo Sangsad) in session.

Let us consider a few examples of the use of inappropriate language both inside and outside the parliament by top-level politicians of the two major political parties—the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). We can start with the outrage expressed in 2011 by Speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad, and subsequently President of the country, Abdul Hamid, MP on the use of vulgarity in the parliament. While he was the Speaker, Hamid admonished the senior parliamentarians who should have felt embarrassed about colleagues who resorted to indecent words in their speeches. He accused parliamentarians from both the AL and the BNP of encouraging the users of vile language. “It is very unfortunate,” he said, “that both sides encourage (offending) lawmakers by thumping desks.”²⁰ Two days after this stricture, the exchange of vile language became even more intense on 23 March 2011, prompting Treasury bench (AL) MP and former law minister Abdul Matin Khasru to compare that language to the kind spoken in the “red light districts”.²¹

The use of extremely vulgar and abusive language did not abate in the least in 2013. In the budget session of 2013, BNP lawmaker Rehana Akhter Renu made offensive remarks to vilify Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her son Sajeeb Wajed Joy, and her deceased husband Wajed Mia. The words used were often so vulgar and abusive that the Speaker switched off her microphone six times.²² Not to be outdone, AL MP Fazilatunnesa of the Treasury bench used similar vulgar and abusive language to characterize Ziaur Rahman, Leader of the Opposition and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, and their family members. In a snide remark clearly indicating an affair between the two,

20 “Vulgar language upsets BD Speaker”, *Thaindian News*, March 21, 2011.

21 Syed Fattahul Alim, “Using abusive words at JS”, *The Daily Star*, 28 March 2011. Red light district refers to a brothel, where the language used by its denizens is often very filthy and offensive.

22 *The Daily Star*, June 24, 2013. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the Father of the Nation of Bangladesh, and a former president and prime minister. His daughter Sheikh Hasina has thrice been the prime minister of the country.

she also wanted to know about Khaleda Zia's relationship with the man who accompanied her each time she went to perform Umrah hajj in Saudi Arabia. The Speaker switched off her microphone twice.²³ The verbal exchange between the two lawmakers caused Awami League parliamentarian Abdul Latif to walk out of the Jatiyo Sangsad. He expressed his feelings on his action: "I felt ashamed at the way abusive and unparliamentary language was used in the sacred House.... I am leaving this place to protest such bad mouthing."²⁴ When the opposition (BNP and allies) started applauding his walk-out, he lashed out at them, too: "Why are you clapping? I have not mentioned any particular party or any particular MP's name. You should be ashamed of what happened today in parliament."²⁵

Noting the sacrilege done to the Jatiyo Sangsad, an editorial of the newspaper *The News Today* commented, "Using unparliamentary language in the parliament has become a popular culture in Bangladesh.... The unparliamentary behavior of these lawmakers threatens the very existence of our democracy."²⁶ In this case we find that the situation of the use of abominable language with impunity in the Jatiyo Sangsad had become so pervasive that it warranted a first editorial in a daily newspaper. Whether it would threaten the very existence of democracy is probably debatable, but the editorial has a point. What it boils down to is a steady deterioration in the political culture of the country. And a worsening political culture is a threat at least to the proper functioning of liberal pluralist democracy.

A worsening political culture, which was both a cause, and result, of rigid partisanship of AL and BNP, one that bred mistrust of each other's intentions, and left little room for compromise, or give-and-take, which are vital to the working of democracy. It was the primary reason that the caretaker system of government was brought into being through a constitutional amendment.²⁷ The idea was a compromise arrangement based on the erroneous assumption that a so-called neutral caretaker administration would offer the perfect panacea for the country's sick political culture that prominently featured political intolerance and distrust. Interestingly, when they are in the opposition, both AL and BNP support

23 *Ibid.* Ziaur Rahman was a sector commander in Bangladesh's liberation war, and a president of Bangladesh. His widow, Khaleda Zia, was thrice elected prime minister of the country. One of their sons, Tarique Rahman, is senior vice chairman of BNP.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 Editorial-1, *The News Today*, 24 June 2013.

27 The thirteenth amendment to the Constitution that was adopted by the sixth Parliament on 25 March 1996 provided constitutional legitimacy to the non-party caretaker government.

the interim caretaker government as a credible system for holding free and fair election. However, once they go to power, they want to scrap it. In a similar vein, the AL-led government that came to power in 2009, through a constitutional amendment, discarded the caretaker government system.

That, as much as for the sake of opposition as for real concern about the fairness of national elections under the AL-led government, drove BNP to agitate for its restoration. AL would have none of it. And, so, as its term was nearing its end, and the 2014 election was looming, Sheikh Hasina declared her resolve to the press about not bringing back the caretaker system: "I believe in the Constitution. Whatever happens (regarding the next general election) will happen according to constitutional provision. Not even a hair will move from that."²⁸ Khaleda Zia's rejoinder came promptly at a BNP affiliated organization's formation anniversary: "When the winds of agitation will blow, not only will you lose all your hair; even your very survival will be at stake."²⁹ The very same day, referring to Khaleda Zia and her hairstyle, AL issued this statement: "Those who wear wig to fluff up their hair and show the people, well, their hair will get blown away."³⁰ To the discerning readers these exchanges between senior politicians might appear trite and indicative of a poor political culture prevailing in the country. But, for political activists such bitter exchanges may act as an energizer to boost up their jocular spirit.

In 2014, with Sheikh Hasina and her alliance in power, the public trading of insults and denigration of individuals by the top politicians of AL and BNP have undergone a bizarre twist.³¹ The war of words began with a declaration by BNP senior vice chairman Tarique Rahman at a party meeting in London. After quoting the declaration of Bangladesh's independence, which contained the provision that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was to remain president and Syed Nazrul Islam vice president until a constitution was adopted, he stated: "Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned to the country on January 10 [of 1972] and became prime minister on January 12. There was no constitution in the country.... So should we not say that he was the illegal prime minister?" He then focused on the current prime minister: "Sheikh Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina remains the prime

28 Author's translation from "Andoloner batashey chool to thakbei na, ostittou jabe", *Prothom Alo*, 20 August 2013.

29 *Ibid.* Khaleda Zia was alluding to Sheikh Hasina.

30 *Ibid.*

31 BNP had boycotted these elections on grounds of them not having been held under the caretaker system.

minister forcibly just like her father, who became prime minister in 1972 illegally and forcibly.”³²

No sooner had Tarique opened the war of words on history, than Sheikh Hasina retorted along the theme of illegality by telling a gathering of newly elected local government representatives: “The higher court has declared illegal the rule of Ziaur Rahman who had grabbed power illegally and formed his party BNP. So, a party formed by such an illegal grabber of power is also illegal.”³³ She then upped the ante by making a snide remark on Khaleda Zia and her family’s educational qualifications. She said that Khaleda Zia could not pass her matriculation exams, Tarique had failed in the Higher Secondary Certificate exams, and Ziaur Rahman had joined the army after only passing matriculation exams. The upshot, according to her: “With this limited knowledge they are trying to confuse people about the country’s constitution, its history, the proclamation of independence, the country’s first president and prime minister.”³⁴ Acting secretary general of BNP, Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, then took up the knowledge theme by advising AL leaders to study some history while claiming that Tarique had revealed some historical truths after studying various books.”³⁵

The cudgels of vicious words from both inside and outside the Jatiyo Sangsad by senior AL politicians followed Tarique Rahman’s claim. Here is a sampling of what they said and who said them:

“Restrain your (Khaleda Zia) madman of a son from issuing fatwas”
--- Health Minister Mohammad Nasim.

“He (Tarique Rahman) is mad, stupid and illiterate”
--- Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed.

“Ziaur Rahman is the fourth Mir Jafar in Bangladesh’s history”
--- Information Minister M. Hasanul Haque Inu.

“Khaleda is Satan’s heiress and her son Tarique is the calf of Satan. Peace will not prevail in the country until she dies”
--- Disaster Management Minister M. Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya.

32 “Mujib ‘illegal’ PM in 1972”, *The Daily Star*, April 10, 2014. Tarique’s reference to Hasina clinging on to power forcibly was made in the context of the January 2014 national elections in which BNP did not participate. His comments elicited much criticism from historians, the media and other quarters. *The Daily Star* itself in “Hilarious-torian on the block” (April 10, 2014) and “Tarique & two collaborators” (April 14, 2014) took Tarique to task on charges of distorting history.

33 “PM terms BNP ‘illegal party’ ”, *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2014.

34 *Ibid.*

35 “Do ‘study’ as Tarique did”, *The Daily Star*, April 16, 2014.

The senior leaders of the BNP responded in the following words:

“Sheikh Mujib wanted to become prime minister of united Pakistan; he did not want Bangladesh’s independence”

--- BNP vice chairman Sadeque Hossain Khoka.

“If the BNP returns to power, we will write the true history of the Bangladesh Liberation War”

--- BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.³⁶

In Retrospect

We return to Sean Richey’s query, “Can politicians use emotional appeals to stimulate and activate latent personality traits in the public?” The short answer that would instinctively come out is a “Yes”. Most politicians as Stone suggests, fall in the realm of emotion and passion. They are also influenced by irrationality, self-interest, shortsightedness, and raw power. These attributes are applicable to both liberal pluralist democracy and authoritarianism. Interestingly, emotion and passion would have greater priority for a pro-democratic politician than for an authoritarian figure, especially because the democrat would be a populist appealing as much to the emotion and passion of the voter as to his/her reason. Great orators have the ability to sway masses with their speeches, and, although they may not always win elections for their political parties, or even, on the rare occasion, not get elected, they tend to leave a mark on their audience. Just how long that impression remains will vary from person to person, as well as from the proximity of elections to the speeches made, but some leave a lasting impression beyond that of the election or the circumstances of the speeches themselves. Therefore, there will be at least a degree of positive correlation between the politicians’ use of that particular strategy of making speeches and statements, and the public’s response to it.

How would the public react if the speeches are marked by crass words, low blows and, vicious character assassination of opponents? What happens when politicians make bald distortion of facts, and unseemly turns of phrases? This is difficult to answer, since it involves a study of human psychology. If we take the early American presidential races, where both sides resorted to distasteful attacks on each other, one candidate won, but there was no way of gauging just how positively or negatively the personal attacks using foul language affected the

³⁶ “Dirty war of words”, *The Daily Star*, April 14, 2014. MirJafar popularly refers to a traitor in Bengali usage. Note how the traitor appellation given to Ziaur Rahman by Hasanul Haque Inu has been directed at Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by Sadeque Hossain Khoka.

voters. In the case of Cleveland vs Blaine, many of the voters did not seem to take into consideration the character assassination campaign launched by the Blaine camp on his opponent, since Cleveland won the White House! However, negative campaigning seems to intensify during presidential races in the US, but, after the contest ends, the rhetoric is toned down significantly other than the expected sniping at incumbent government policies to keep it on its toes as well as with the hope of unseating the party's candidate at the next general election. Furthermore, the use of obscene language during Congressional proceedings is unheard of.

In Bangladesh, we have seen multiple instances of obscene language used against opponents by senior politicians of the two major political parties. If this is undertaken in order to garner votes, then there is no hard evidence that they have succeeded in luring significant numbers of voters to their respective sides by using these tactics. Furthermore, one cannot fathom the reason for the use of obscene language during parliamentary sessions. Since those sessions are not connected with elections and vote-gathering, unless tangentially by a stretch of imagination, it may logically be surmised that those using such language have foul mouths and poor sense of decorum. Rather than a means of garnering votes, or capturing the voters' hearts and minds through the use of indecent language, the exercise in foul mouthing could be seen as a manifestation of deteriorating political culture.

If the operative word is "deteriorating," then it stands to reason that political communication was relatively more genteel before the visible onset of steadily worsening political culture since 1991. Evidence suggests that it was, and nowhere more than during parliamentary proceedings. We can go back to the days of Pakistan, when Bangladesh was its eastern province, to corroborate this point. For most of the years from 1947 to 1971, the country was under martial law and military rule with a democratic façade. However, for many of those years, there were Constituent Assembly, National Assembly, and Provincial Assembly proceedings. While sharp words were exchanged between government members and the opposition leaders, they did not degenerate to the level of vulgarity. There were occasions when wit was used in debates to make a point. The Constituent Assembly and the national and provincial parliaments were not denigrated by uncouth words and speeches, although, in one instance, a Deputy Speaker of the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan was killed during an altercation within the legislature premises.³⁷ Outside the parliament, too, while

³⁷ Shahed Ali Patwary, Deputy Speaker of the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, injured during a melee in the assembly on 23 September 1958, died two days later.

there were invectives hurled at the opposition by demagogues, they rarely contained obscene language, although many of the speeches were fiery and full of passion and emotion, aimed at rousing the public to lean towards the speakers' or their parties' way of thinking. But, then, passion and emotion are integral to politics.

The political exchanges were often intense primarily because the Bengali's demands for fair allocation of resources and better representation in the military, and civilian administrations was gaining momentum soon after the Language Movement had restored the status of Bengali language. But they almost never entered the realm of obscene language and indecorous behavior. Yet, they were vying for public support for their actions, or agenda, or engaging in intense parliamentary debates, as vigorously as any politician of any era. There is good reason to believe that the Bengali masses were influenced by their speeches because they had set ideals and objectives in mind. In those days, too, large public meetings held in open spaces were the norm, and the audience listened to speeches that had little indecorous words or phrases.

One possible explanation for the discreet speech pattern inside and outside the legislature is that the politicians of those days were largely drawn from an educated class, and from at least fairly respectable families, including those who could be labeled as elite. This statement is not a sweeping generalization but an assumption. Such an assumption can only be substantiated (or negated) by a thorough research on the family and educational backgrounds of the politicians of the pre-liberation and pre-1990 period, going back to the partition of India. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this paper, and, so, we will go along with the assumption made with regard to the politicians. Regardless of their family background or educational attainment, the politicians in East Pakistan and post-liberation Bangladesh, while pursuing politics with passion, did not resort to the use of vulgarity in speech and crass characterization of opponents to win votes or maintain public support for themselves and their parties. They usually were vanguards of, or adherents to, the cultural traits of their nation, or of their social background, which usually meant the more refined version of their national culture. The political culture also followed the politicians' behavior. It was intense, at times acrimonious, but hardly ever vulgar.

Many of those Bengali politicians of the Pakistan days now find themselves playing their familiar role in Bangladesh. While, in Pakistan, they would uphold the ideals of honor of the Bengali language, and struggle to end various forms of discrimination against the Bengalis, since the independence of the country in

1971, they have confronted the formidable challenge of nation-building. In the absence of a common enemy they had faced in Pakistan, those ideals gradually eroded. The first hint of an unhealthy political culture was seen during the flawed 1973 national election, which was won by AL in an almost total sweep. In Karim's estimation, "What was qualitatively different (from elections held during the British Raj) was the direct involvement of the government machinery in the manipulation of votes in favor of the ruling party...."³⁸ However, the parliamentary language did not degenerate to vulgar levels, which is understandable because most of the old guards of the Pakistan days were MPs, and they did not abandon their pattern and tenor of making speeches. Then, in quick succession, the one-party government was introduced, followed by the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the imposition of protracted military rules and quasi-military governments. Healthy politics had taken a back seat during all those years, before the 1990 mass movement brought down a dictator, and brought back parliamentary democracy in 1991.

In the passage of time a whole new generation of politicians has come to politics. The daughter of a former president and prime minister, and the widow of a former president were now heading the two major political parties of the country. And the politicians themselves have come from diverse backgrounds. As the years have gone by, the businessperson-turned-politician has become fairly common, without necessarily having improved upon the quality of parliamentarians. Professions from different fields with varying level of family and educational backgrounds are now represented in the parliament. A new breed of politicians has come to the forefront of the political system. Largely gone are the days of massive public gatherings in public spaces all over the country, where the audience listened to passionate speeches made by ideologically-driven politicians. Those massive public meetings have not totally disappeared, although they have become few and far between. However, even in these infrequent gatherings, a trend in crass character assassination of opponents, as well as the use of crude language may be discerned. Such tendencies have worsened as the years have progressed.

If such vile language and unseemly character assassination are meant to sway voters, then one cannot be certain if they do so. Given the fact that both the major parties continue to use vile language, one may possibly conclude that the masses have also tuned in to their way of thinking. It is also possible that several

³⁸ S.A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005), p. 308.

politicians have emerged from a societal background of crude behavior, foul mouths, and intolerance of opposing viewpoints. Combining these two possibilities, one may suggest, not without reason, that a distasteful cultural background has given rise to, and is nurturing, a parochial political culture. This may not be a far-out suggestion. After all, the masses, by and large, do not seem to mind the use of vile language, or is apathetic to it, or, some may even relish it. The poor state of political culture has led to mutual distrust, intolerance of opposing viewpoints, and abuse of the sanctity of parliament.³⁹

In conclusion, it is assumed that the filthy language used by politicians in Bangladesh is as much a manifestation of poor cultural and social background as it is a deliberate ploy to influence the public. It does not show the country in great light. The use of vile language has contributed to the deteriorating political culture and the weakening of political institutions. If such trend is not checked and rolled back, it could have far-reaching negative consequences for the growth of a democratic polity in Bangladesh.

³⁹ In the 2014 local government elections, another manifestation of this culture was seen. *The Daily Star*, which is not particularly inclined towards BNP, headlined the self-explanatory “AL excels in unfair polls” on April 1, 2014, and “AL loses grip on upazilas: Despite rigging in this year’s polls, AL performs worse than in 2009” on April 2, 2014.