

Academia and the Regimes: On being Perplexed about ‘Political’ Structure

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INTRODUCTION

This essay attempts to question the academics’ systematic responses to and, denial of, the contemporary nexus of nation-state, corporation and military agencies, with special reference to the sub-continental nations. The initial provocation is formed as I have been experiencing a series of prolonged expressions by academics, mostly in public domains but in ‘informal’ discussions. Surrounding a gut sense of discomfort about the governing policies and actions, yet with insufficient energy for dismantling them, some of the expressions may be reformulated as: “Why is this happening in a democratic nation like ours? Aren’t we an electoral system then?”, or, with evidently more helplessness, “(I/we) can’t even imagine that this government is doing such things.” The sub-continental nations, however, cannot weigh similarly when it comes to the respective electoral systems or in reference to what is believed to be the ‘democratic structure.’ While India has long been considered a democratic nation, Pakistan, with its overt military history, has not. On the other hand, Bangladeshi authority has lost its credibility to the global audience, or to some part of it, by not being able to bring the opposition to poll. It, then, would be safe to consider the academics’ discussions about and around India, Bangladesh, and West Bengal. But Mr. Donald Trump, while presiding the United States, could not but barge into this, unknowingly though it seems. I need to note again that I am here concerned about the ‘public discussions’ by the academics. Writing in ‘academic’ journals has always been a different practice and needs to be analysed distinctively.

Polling and Popularity

‘Free and fair’ election is a phrase that has long been championed by academics and political analysts, across the globe – simultaneously as an organisational process and political thought. This often is manifested as the sole feasible and legible point of reference in journalistic and public discussions. ‘Nation-state,’ often is seen as a static entity beyond any circumstance and conditionality. I am not simplifying the complex relationship between perceptions about ‘nation-state’ and ‘nationalism’. But I would like to underline the orchestrated manifestation of ‘nationhood’ during and before an electoral poll by the governing structures in Bangladesh and India. Not surprisingly, if happened so, even in the United States, at least during the latest poll.¹

¹ Some random news features during the US presidential poll should be enough to look into how the ‘American’ spirit was repeatedly constructed through speeches and essays, by both candidates and their respective political parties and allied experts. Even now, when I am writing this, President Biden is quoted as saying “American democracy is not a reality show”, at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner on 30 April 2022. However, some of his other remarks could really be confusing if one is not much familiar with the subtle changes that are taking place in political vocabularies. He said: “The free press is not the enemy of the people, far from it.” For long, it could have been formulated otherwise by a head of the state, like ‘free press is not the enemy of the state’. It should then be understood that the President uses ‘people’ synonymously to ‘state’. This is a difficult time for political analyses.

The academics, however, are entitled to, and equipped with, to go beyond these obsolete parameters, but hardly are seen to do so while in everyday conversations. There are significant instances, from Anderson (1991) to Chatterjee (1993), from Homy (1990) to Nandy (1994), where critical understandings of nationalism and nation-states can guide us not only to write academic papers but also to organise our everyday thoughts. Commentators start and elaborate by assuming the nation-states as indispensable; and ‘electoral’ practices as determinants in the mentioned peer-group gatherings. Success in the poll, regardless of what flaws have been discussed over a period, even perhaps by similar professionals, remains a testimony of popularity and public mandate. It remains so, precisely because of the apprehension of the academics, about the polls – they tend to see polling results as popularity, and popularity as a public mandate. I opine that this conventional framework is formulaic and cliché and asks for a serious revision, not only in strictly defined academic papers but also in regular conversation.

In the case of Bangladesh, the typical academic quest for ‘credibility,’ mostly rotates around the fact that the parliamentary election was boycotted by BNP, the major opposition party. Though many scholars do not at all criticise the current government, a few others do. But the limit of political desire remains largely aligned with ‘credibility.’ This is inadequate by any means. Had BNP participated in the election, would the current ‘authoritative’ system have vanished? Then what about the Indian case, where the opposition, led by the Congress Party, took part in the election, and still be considered ‘undemocratic’ by a large portion of academics, both within and beyond India. Things are totally different in a two-party system, like in the United States, where boycotting does not take place as a political action.

‘Regime’ and new Modalities of ‘Nationalism’

One aspect of this systematic denial should be seen as a conviction about a ‘regime’ to have emerged from ‘non-electoral’ system, hence autocracy. In this line ‘electoral democracy’ appears as a solution to, and termination of, a ‘regime’. The other main aspect, I propose, is a persistent faith in some illusory virtue of ‘true nationalism.’ Regardless of the efforts put by the political thinkers of the 90s, ‘nationalism’ largely remained as some noble emotional outlet, often in the name of ‘good citizenship,’ in the modern days. Nationalism is a discursive and ever-changing concept; a known proposition needs to be reminded again and again. In the hindsight, scholars are in a stern necessity to conceptualise the new forms of nationalism with all its manifestations – as a clear set of instrumentalities not only to guide state-citizens, but also as a punishment layout.² I opine that nation-states should be re-conceptualized in light of their ever-innovative customising of rites and forming of alliances where ‘electoral system’ has been reconfigured as a rite, as in rites de passage (Gennep, 1909, coined by Turner, 1969). I would further like the academics to remain cautious about possible connection between this customisation and (the process) globalisation. Overdoing of the concept of ‘neoliberal’ might have resulted in under-conceptualisation of it.

Academics have warned us not to confuse cultural and economic globalisation, and that the later had started long back, precisely in time of colonial ‘modernity’ (Dirlik, 2000), and remained uncontested as compared to the former. My proposition emerges from the understanding that a covert economic system has long been firmly established where individual ‘nation-states’ play as a stake with its ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ trickery. Regardless

² Modes of operation in punishing citizens can vary significantly from nation to nation. For example, if ‘charges of sedition’ appeared as the most dangerous tool in India in the recent years, Bangladeshi regime opted for ‘defamation of the father of the nation’ or DSA (Digital Security Act) to target and punish citizens with dissents. ‘Security measure’ should be the modus operandi in some other nations including the US.

of its internal electoral system, or absence of it in some other cases, it acts as a state-culture in a given situation. A complex web of transnational actors that comprises multinational corporations, 'national' military agencies with 'international' missions, big pharmaceuticals, and perhaps cosmopolitan dual citizens is at heart of this political system, hence 'regime' in localised context. Government of a specific 'nation-state' is thus designed for, and destined to, act as a stockbroker for the stakes, and more importantly, punish people with other interests. There is no mystery in modern days' regimes; we all just need to unlearn some premises. National polls have nothing to do with what has long been perceived and desired for as 'democracy'.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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