

## The Curious Crusade Against Family Politics

Contributed by Abdul Momen  
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"Making blanket slogans against 'family politics' can be politically convenient. But it is hypocrisy ... The government's crusade should not be against 'family politics' per se, but against incompetent and corrupt people. This will show respect for citizens' political rights, which is something that advisors of this government have neglected so far. It will also be far less hypocritical. After all, they too have skeletons in their closets."

The current emergency government of Bangladesh wants to eliminate 'family politics' from Bangladesh. In particular, Law Advisor Mainul Hosein wants to prohibit any close relative of political leaders to run for or even hold any public office. So far, much of the intelligentsia seems in agreement.

The reason is clear. Both of the main political parties have benefited from their families, and their families have benefited even more. The excesses of the sons and brother of Khaleda Zia, the leader of BNP, are known widely. In Awami League, the oldest and the largest party, close relatives of Sheikh Hasina have run for elections and controlled access to her. The two populations

Dynastic control has stifled the chances of democracy to take strong roots. In 1977, during a trip to Iran, General Zia, the dictator at that time, asked me about the population size in Bangladesh. I gave him two figures: 81 million, and ten thousand. Surprised, his Finance Advisor, Dr. M. N. Huda, asked me the reason. I told him, the country has 81 million to get foreign aid, and 10,000 for whom most rules and resources provide benefit.

With the advent of democracy in 1991, I would guess that number to have risen to about 100,000. These are the elite who enjoy access to power in a country of 147 million. So one should not oppose any sincere effort to distribute power further toward the masses. Hypocrisy ... or not?

But is the current government really in any position to assail the political parties in a blanket way? Assuming that a civilian government is in control, the country is run by ten advisors appointed by the Chief Advisor, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. Whom did he pick? His wife's brother Dr. Ifitkher Ahmed Chowdhury is the Foreign Advisor, another brother-in-law's wife, Geeti Ara Safia Chowdhury, is his Industry Advisor, and his batch-mate and old friend, Dr. Mirza Azizul Islam, is his Finance Advisor.

But since they are known to be competent, 'family politics' in this case is not considered bad. The Chief Advisor probably decided that he could trust them. Dr. ATM Shamsul Huda, the Chief Election Commissioner, is the brother-in-law of Education Advisor Ayub Quaderi. Does it mean that neither should be allowed to hold office? No. If they are competent, they can serve the community successfully without necessarily getting into a conflict of interest.

Similarly, Major (retd.) Iskander is the brother of Khaleda Zia. He is married to the sister-in-law of Major General Masududdin Chowdhury, commander of the powerful 9th Division, the current chief of the national commission against crime, and according to the Economist, the main architect of the anti-corruption drive. Does this mean that General Masududdin cannot hold office because his relatives (namely, Iskander, Tarique Rahman, and Arafat Rahman) are being investigated for corruption?

There's nothing wrong with having confidence in people you know. In stable societies, if the possibility of direct involvement and partisanship arises, the official involved would generally withdraw himself or herself from that particular case. But this would not disqualify him from holding public office in general.

Making blanket slogans against 'family politics,' as the Law Advisor Mainul Hosein is fond of doing, can be politically convenient. But it is really hypocrisy. Moreover, it may not serve the nation's long-term interest. Take a broader look

Family politics is common not only in Bangladesh and Pakistan, but also in more mature democracies. Think about India: Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi. In Indonesia, President Sukarno's daughter Meghawati Sukarnoputri became President.

In Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga was President between 1994 and 2005. Her father, Solomon Bandaranaike, was a prime minister, and after his assassination, her mother, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became the world's first female prime minister.

In the United States, father and son John and Quincy Adams were the second and the sixth presidents of the country. The Bush presidency has gone awry, but everyone is familiar with the strong leadership provided by the three Kennedy brothers: the late John F., the late Robert, and current Senator Edward Kennedy, who was a vocal supporter of Bangladesh back in 1971.

In Massachusetts, a state that has pioneered many progressive movements in America, William Bulger was the President of the State Senate, even though his older brother, James Whitey Bulger, has been a notorious mobster and a fugitive from law for many decades. His brother's criminal record did not prohibit William Bulger to hold public office successfully.

The frontrunner for Democrats in the United States now Hillary Rodham Clinton—and she is benefiting from having Bill Clinton as her strong supporter. Bill Clinton, the most popular US president in history, appointed most of his college friends as his secretaries. Choose the right battle

Under Mainul Hossain's formula, both would be committing offenses. Hillary Clinton would have been disqualified to run for office. Don't mind the fact that as a Senator, she is highly popular among her constituents.

Serving in public office is part of one's basic civil and political rights, irrespective of family ties. It is not a government's position to restrict this right. It is something that voters should choose. Even the first Islamic Caliphate was run successfully and liberally on the basis of family ties and kinship.

The government's crusade should not be against 'family politics' per se, but against incompetent and corrupt people. This will show respect for citizens' political rights, which is something that advisors of this government have neglected so far. It will also be far less hypocritical. After all, they too have skeletons in their closets.

About the author