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Can we achieve change without chaos?

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The annals of history are rich with narratives of revolutions and uprisings, where the overthrow of old regimes promises the dawn of justice and liberty. The French Revolution, with its dramatic overthrow of monarchy and its rallying cry for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, stands as a symbol of radical and violent societal upheaval. However, its practical implications for a country like Bangladesh warrant a critical reassessment at this juncture.

Though initially driven by noble ideals, the French Revolution quickly descended into chaos, bloodshed and authoritarian rule under Napoleon Bonaparte. The Reign of Terror turned revolutionary energy into a self-destructive cycle of suspicion and executions that ultimately undermined the very ideals it sought to establish. Violent upheavals like these often fail to achieve their lofty goals and instead plunge societies into prolonged instability.

Unlike France in 1789, Bangladesh is not governed by an absolute monarchy or a feudal aristocracy. Though far from perfect and fragile, democratic structures exist and provide a foundation for meaningful reform. Instead of dismantling the system through abrupt and chaotic change, the focus should be on strengthening governance and addressing institutional weaknesses through peaceful, deliberate efforts. A violent upheaval, on the other hand, would destroy what little stability exists and leave a vacuum that opportunistic

forces might exploit, ultimately replacing one form of dysfunction with another.

For more measured and deliberate changes, Bangladesh might look towards the American and Glorious Revolutions. These revolutions, while not devoid of conflict, were marked by a clearer vision for the post-revolutionary order and a stronger emphasis on establishing lasting institutions rather than merely dismantling the old ones. They focused on legal and constitutional reforms that laid the groundwork for stable governance, rather than precipitating widespread disorder.

Last year, Bangladesh experienced an abrupt regime change through a student-led public uprising in July-August, demonstrating the potential for rapid shifts in power. While this event reflects a strong desire for change, it also serves as a reminder of what must follow to avoid prolonged instability. Modern examples like Libya and Egypt after the Arab Spring show that abrupt regime change, without strong institutions and a clear vision for governance, often leads to political fragmentation, economic decline, and authoritarianism. We must avoid such a chaotic aftermath.

Some may argue that abrupt and radical change could be necessary for Bangladesh to break free from entrenched dysfunction. While this perspective may seem appealing, the history of the American and Glorious

Revolutions demonstrates that a shared vision for the future and a collective effort to reshape institutions are far more effective than divisive and violent upheavals. In Bangladesh, cultivating a civic culture that encourages participation, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution is a far more reliable path to lasting progress.

As LT Hobhouse notes in his book

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Liberalism, great social changes do not arise solely from innovative ideas—they require the activation of collective emotions and passions to break away from entrenched routines and challenge oppressive authorities. Yet passion, if unguided, can easily become chaotic and counterproductive. What Bangladesh needs is not a revolution of streets and chaos but one of minds and policies—a revolution rooted in a shared vision and practical understanding of

how to achieve meaningful change.

First, activists and thinkers must demonstrate the feasibility of their aims by grounding their revolutionary ideas in the realm of the possible. They must show how these aims can either harmonise with existing institutions or lead to the creation of new, viable frameworks that better serve the populace. In Bangladesh's context, where democratic structures exist but remain weak and often falter, the goal should be to improve, rather than reject, the system entirely. The focus should be on building upon what works and rectifying what does not.

Second, a compelling social theory must be developed and clearly communicated in a way that resonates with the real demands and aspirations of people. This theory should offer a clear explanation of how society should function and why. It must provide a constructive blueprint for addressing pressing issues such as governance, corruption, and social inequality, while remaining anchored in the nation's cultural and historical ethos.

Finally, the principles of this social theory must evolve into a comprehensive social philosophy that guides the nation towards a long-term vision of justice, prosperity, and democratic integrity. This philosophy should unify and direct activists, lending coherence and purpose to their efforts, and ultimately become a force in shaping national policies and public opinion.

As Bangladesh looks to the future, it is crucial to pursue well-structured and purposeful change. This approach will direct the passionate energies of the populace towards strategic and constructive goals. Such a path will ensure that the changes we seek are not only profound but also enduring. It will build a stable and prosperous society that reflects the true spirit of our democratic aspirations.