

DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Unless Bangladesh will find credible means to change the political culture within which it function, the viability of democracy will remain doubtful. Though it is about four decades of independence, the history of democracy isn't worth to value its principles in its actual practice. Bangladesh's democracy is distorted by the malpractices of political power by her politicians. The quality of democracy in the country has been jeopardized by the immature practices and attitudes by its political party, in or out of power. In fact, the democracy in Bangladesh is deprived within/by the practice of democracy itself. Consequently, democracy becomes fragile and cannot run smoothly with its own spirit. It is now widely accepted that Bangladesh is facing a crisis of governance which originates in a malfunctioning of the democratic process. The qualitative deterioration of governance leads to raise lack of concern in pursuing democratic values in practice. The people of this country cannot extract favors from democracy rather their interests become somewhat distorted. In this way the steady failure to get better governance could threaten the sustainability of practicing democracy in Bangladesh repeatedly.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a continuous political process, which can only be sustained and developed by giving due attention to certain issues which is conducive to people's concern. Though Bangladesh has passed 39 years of its independence, it has failed to institute democracy as a political tradition. The political history of Bangladesh in the last half century divulges a country wedged in a pendulum swing between democracy and dictatorship, between hopelessness and optimism, and between mass lethargy and violent collective action. In order for democracy to be sustainable, democratic practices have to have a democratic society. Politicization of crime and criminalization of politics exacerbated the crisis of democracy in the country. To make the sense of democracy as a political tradition in Bangladesh, it is needed to expedite the democratic culture within the periphery of its political apparatus with fair and accountable political leadership.

Bangladesh was born through a revolution comprising a dream of a society promised upon equality, liberty and fraternity died quickly. Unfortunately, the country is now passing through a phase of democratic

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altercation. *The “problem” of Bangladesh is not one about which party governs, but what political class most of our leaders come from, and the behavioral/attitudinal patterns they represent. We live in an environment of conspicuous consumption by the elite, a culture of arrogance, cynicism, and bullying where the ability to circumvent the law is claimed as a hallmark of status and power, and atmosphere that has led to the criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime. Our leaders impugn the patriotism of anybody who disagrees with them, use the word “conspiracy” as a weapon in their demagogic repertoire, and hound the opposition (whoever it may be) with sneering impatience and petty vengefulness (Ahmad, 2006).*

This article seeks to respond to the following question: ‘what are the apparent challenges to the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh?’ Here it is argued that the democracy situation has been jeopardized by many threats so that Bangladesh’s democracy can’t be sustainable in the long run. It needs right way to eloquent the threats distinctly for ensuring sustainable democracy in Bangladesh. There are numerous approaching threats as well as bad practices in the democracy of Bangladesh where identifying those matters are fully incorporative or commemorative as well. The methodology used is a literature review of academic work, seminar works, media reports, policy documents and evaluations produced by different academicians, policy makers, journalists and civil society organizations. It is concentrated concisely on the literary publications of the Bangladeshi writers or scholars or think tanks that are native about Bangladeshi politics, culture, socio-economic realities, history and usual customs as well.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH: AN OVERVIEW

Although Bangladesh began as a democracy in 1971, democratic values gave clearly failed to take hold in its system or institutions. The democracy the country claims to have practiced has been somewhat distorted (Chowdhury, 2007: 1). The People’s Republic of Bangladesh started its sovereign passage with a democratically elected government. But the representative government was removed in 1975 through a military rebellion. Military generals dominated the state power of the country till 1990, initially through martial law and later through the civilian commands. However, massive political movements by the people of the country successfully restored the democracy there effective from 1991. There have been multiparty parliamentary elections in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008. Regrettably, the history of multiparty parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh is epitomized by distinguished threats as intransigent political Split, lack of intra party democracy and factional

rivalry, corruption, controversial neutrality of Election Commission, ineffective Parliament, uneven women representation in political affairs, religious Extremism, lack of good governance and so on.

During the 1990 election, when democracy was apparently re-established, the country was mostly divided into two powerful camps. One was under the Awami League, which endowed with political leadership in the independence struggle under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the other was under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which was formed by Gen. Ziaur Rahman, the famous freedom fighter, after he assumed power. After Sheikh Mujib's assassination, the feuding party elders of the Awami League inducted his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, as the party's leader, as a compromise. In a similar paradigm, when Gen. Zia was assassinated, his wife, Khaleda Zia, became BNP's leader. *Bangladesh's political system is indispensable to the two major parties, The BNP and the Awami League and the bitter enmity between these two lady politicians. Unlike other democracies Bangladesh does not provide the opposition with a credible platform and in order to make themselves heard and their bid to topple the ruling government they engage in undemocratic means such as rearing up with Islamist forces* (Chowdhury, 2007). These two political parties, the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP), subjugated this centralized, 'winner takes all' system. *These two women rose to leadership positions even though they were considered politically inept. Ironically, the unscrupulous politicians facilitated these two women gradually assume dictatorial power within their respective parties. No party member ever dared to question their authority; if any did he/she faced intimidation or the sack* (Chowdhury, 2007: 1). The split of political parties have been disallowed by enforcing strong discipline. *The parties in Bangladesh enforce discipline very strictly inside parliament and outside. A member loses parliament seat in parliament if he/she resign from the party or votes against the party* (Rahman, 2008: 108).

According to Bangladesh Constitution Article 70 (1), Abstention from voting or absence from parliament ignoring whip 'direction of the party' as the constitution says – is treated as voting against the party. This is subjected to be a great impediment to flourish democracy within and outside the political parties in the country. *The idea of intra party democracy has gained increasing attention in recent years because of its apparent potential to promote a 'virtuous circle' linking ordinary citizens to Govt. benefiting the parties and more generally contribution to the stability of democracies—in which these parties compete for power* (Scarrow, 2005: 88). The intra party tensions within a party and breakup of political parties occurred in Bangladesh due to inordinate ambition of leaders of their respective parties. In this case, the relevant input grounds

are personal clash, attraction of joining the ruling party, ideological and factional divergences. The political parties cannot continue democracy within similar party periphery because parties lacked leaders with high ideas, and well-conceived political courses of action; they have internal conflicts and lack committed personnel. *Nearly one-third of the political leaders held that political parties were responsible for failure of democracy in Bangladesh. Other important causes were lack of democratic values, illiteracy, and imperialist conspiracy* (Khan, 2008: 168). Lack of popular involvement in the decision making process led to the creation of an atmosphere of atomism which encourages the formation of patron-client relationships which stressed factionalism within the party and greatly weaken its organizational strengths.

Loyalty to the party in the intangible sense has not emerged as a leading factor in Bangladesh politics. The party loyalty, quite legitimately, can be viewed merely as loyalty to the party leader or to the faction-leader. Therefore, in most cases, defection takes place in the form of a group or a faction which accentuate both the breakup of the political parties and loyalty to new parties.

The politics of clinging to power at any cost is the main cause of jeopardized democracy situation in Bangladesh or politics translating simply into grabbing power become appeared as the prior concern to our politicians which are greatly hampered the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. Factional conflicts tend to feature strongly within the major parties. One faction of the Awami League led by Dr. Kamal Hossain broke away from it and formed Gono Forum on 19 August, 1993. One report found that factional conflicts in the Awami League had become a major problem involving Ministers, MPs and local party leader (The Daily Star, 1999).

The BNP also has been marked by a sharp division between some senior leaders and juniors. *It eventually led to the formation of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) by a group of dissidents led by Oli Ahmed and Professor Bodruddozza Chowdhury, a former president of the country. Newspapers report noticed a further split when the LDP as two of its top leaders have drifted apart as a consequence of factional in fights* (Dhaka Courier, 2007). The Jatyia Party has also undergone several splits in its political history. Thus the process of fission did operate in Bangladesh in spite of centripetal pulls exerted by the two party systems which actually hinder the democratic process in Bangladesh.

CAUSES OF DEMOCRATIC INSTABILITY

The era of democracy in Bangladesh also portended the era of massive corruption. The increasing polarization of administration and even self-ruling public institutions led to rampant rent seeking and

corruption on an ever increasing range. It could be said that the persistence of corruption, authoritarianism and what at times seems almost like a blood feud between the leaders of BNP and AL underlay the complex reality that has been attempted to consolidate temporarily through nondemocratic means. But given the depth of popular disgust at the travesty of democracy by the political elite, the anti-corruption drive is understandably supported by a wide spectrum. Failure of nurturing democratic traditions within the party democratic or in other political institutions drove the political system towards atomism and gave rise to an unprecedented system of corruption. *A key feature of Bangladesh's political culture is prevalent corruption and use of musclemen among political leaders especially, when they hold public office* (Khan, 2008: 187). Condescending and harboring musclemen and using them both inside and outside the party have lost its democratic fabric of the nation in general is about to shattered. It has unfortunately become part of Bangladesh's political culture and hence, cannot be disregarded any longer. The presences of such ill motives in democratic culture (often anti-social in nature) affect the party structure and function defectively in nursing democratic tradition which definitely fuels the threats to the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. In some way these events may transform inter-party rivalries into violent confrontation and retaliations.

Exploring the magnitude of regionalism and nepotism within political parties is tended to breed corruption. Corruption directly affects the local people and disrupts national development. *The Basic Democracy Program, introduced during the 1960s to strengthen local government, provide an example of the evolution of corruption in Bangladesh from grassroots* (Iqbal and Wan, 2008: 92). The escalation of corruption was partly fuelled by skyrocketing of election expenditures and purchase of political allies. It was reported that candidates and enormous amount of money to get nomination from parties and many of them also spent astronomically high amount for their election campaign. *It was reported that one candidate of the BNP in Dhaka had spent nearly 2 crores (US\$294117) of taka and another of the Awami League about 1.67 crore (US\$ 2, 45588) for the election which was scheduled for 22 January, 2007 (Menon 2007). Both Awami League and the BNP collected huge amount of money by selling nominations for the upcoming election (Alo, 2007).* An financial editor putted a question claiming the untold deterioration of the democracy in his editorial as: *"What is the future of our democracy if this 'buying and selling' of politicians become the practice rather the exception, and what will be the level of our politics if the ruling party tries to allure, bribe or coerce other party leaders and MPs into joining its ranks in such a corrupt manner?"* (The Daily Star, 2003).

Political and administrative factors are at the apex of the causal factors of corruption, Economic and socio-cultural factors are being identified as other major causes of corruption. *Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh's leaders have incidence of corruption, but even since the return of democracy during 1990s no government had been able to take effective action to address the systematic issues, which allow corruption to flourish* (Iqbal and Wan, 2008: 93).

Good governance in Bangladesh is far from the actual consonance of the term. *The need for good governance and institutionalization of democracy has been argued although the post liberation era of the country from every corner; But least has been done in achieving it* (Bakshi, 2005: 936). There are several factors and issues that are constraining especially the process of good governance. The major factors are corruption, inefficiency of bureaucracy, politicization of administration, non-observance of the rule of law etc. The main issues and problems for ensuring good governance in Bangladesh can be prescribed as inequality of income, inefficiency of bureaucracy, political interference in administration, nepotism, improper use of resources, lack of transparency and accountability, poverty and unemployment, lack of political commitment which are appeared as prevalent threats to the promotion of democracy. In Bangladesh, administration is always to work and the influence of party in power. So, here nepotism is widespread and administration is always unfair.

The administration cannot take any free and fair decision. Sometimes, political influence breach factionalism in the administration which in turn results in demoralization, utter negligence of work and often serious tension among the bureaucrats. Ministers, especially those with greater political power and pressure and stress their overall supervisory role to dominate and direct those in administration who versed under them. In true and real sense the application of rule of law in Bangladesh follows a course of selective and discretionary submission. It is said that laws are there but there are applied only in favor of privilege people or class. As a result justices undergo and denied to the common people. Nepotism is seen to be one of major problems in institutionalizing democracy and good governance in Bangladesh.

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNANCE PERFORMANCES

The intransigency and constant controversies among the political parties in the country contour this democratic institution contentious which cannot ensure its sustainability. It is another burgeoning challenge to the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. Although the Election Commission is an autonomous body, it has appeared as a tradition that the

ruling party/parties try to appoint people who are sympathetic to it as either Election Commissioners or the Chief Election Commissioner. The obvious intent here works as to influences the outcome of the elections. Consequently, the government and the Election Commission, in particular, come under heavy fire for perpetrating the rigging when they attempt to conduct any election. The Election Commission thus becomes a major subject of controversy. In the recent past, on the eve of national parliament election 2008 the Awami League-led 14-party alliance and other opposition parties made serious objection to the role of Justice M.A. Aziz as the Chief Election Commissioner.

The Election Commission was alleged to be supporting the bid of the BNP government to return to power by putting in order the faulty and inflated election roll and through other dodges. *A survey sponsored by NDI (Bangladesh) found that 13% of the entries in the electoral roll were faulty and that there were 19020000 wrong entries in the list. The survey found that percentage of wrong voters was 34% in Rajshahi Division, 32% in Dhaka, 22% in Chittagong and Sylhet and 12% in Barishal and Khulna. One name in 16 was found to be faked and one name in 14 was listed twice* (Alo, 2006). This finding was a severe gust to the Election Commission's image as a neutral and autonomous body which indicates the deep crisis in performing democratic institution with political consensus in Bangladesh. The culture of godfathers and criminal wings of political parties have created much more complex situation where Election Commission faces much more impediments to ensure a fair and dominance free election. *The godfathers and criminal wings of political parties must go. Without this it would be impossible to create environment for a free, fair and credible election* (Hossain, 2009: 56).

The parliament in Bangladesh, to reiterate, did not function properly since 1991 when multi party democracy was restored through strong political movement demanding democratic reestablishment. *In the fifth parliament dating from 1991 many of the acts were introduced in the form of ordinances a practice which was not favorable for promoting democracy. In a sense, it led to what has been described as 'dictatorship of the Prime Minister'* (Hasanuzzaman, 1998: 230). There are frequent walk outs, boycotts and finally mass resignation of the opposition from the parliament in 1994. Committees and subcommittees did not function well because often minister headed them or sufficient representation had not been given to the opposition parties. Those committees also many circumstances were not able to arrive at consensus on issues. Deliberations of the parliament suffered from lack of skill, training and knowledge of many members were absent from the session that led to chronic chorum crisis. Its main function turned out to be passing of the

acts in hurry, clearing of the budget and hurling praise or abuse. *The emergence of a hung Parliament could become a huge liability for democracy and a clear win for the recalcitrant* (Hossain, 2009: 12). A seminar of the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) and Bangladesh Economic Association as reported by the Daily Star: “*The present state of politics has make parliament virtually non-functional, democracy meaningless and economic activity crime-based, pushing the entire society towards ruination* (The Daily Star, 2003).

Parliamentary democracy doesn't signify free and fair parliamentary elections alone, it apparently means ascertaining the rule of law, ensuring the fundamental rights of the people, peaceful contention among contending political elites, mutual trust, cooperation, compromise, allowing the free flow of nonconforming political opinion and honoring the representative political institutions as well. Upholding the grounds of democracy should be borne equally by both the party in power and the opposition. In a parliamentary system a convincingly good relation between the leader of house and leader of opposition is necessary condition for smooth execution of the government. *The boycott of parliament, countrywide strikes and lack of understanding between the ruling and opposition parties are damaging the democratic spirit and proper functioning of the democratic process in Bangladesh. Such a deadlock in the long run may create a failed state with a weak democratic set up* (Chowdhury, 2005). National strikes, violent street politics etc are some of the common means to destabilize the government. Many have phrased this as the ‘zero-sum politics’. Since Independence, Bangladesh politics is exemplified by the absence of the above conditions and awesome presence of a feeling of intolerance mostly emanating from a confrontational political culture which creates too much conflict and least consensus and subsequently jeopardizes the democracy situation in the country.

The legislature of Bangladesh is unicameral called the Jatiya Sangsad or the parliament is constituted under Article 65(1) of the constitution for a term of 5 years. It consists of 300 and 45 members of who three hundred are directly elected from single territorial constituencies on the basis of adult franchise (FEMA, 2009: 141). From local govt. to national govt. paradigm, women in Bangladesh are not enjoying their full fledged deliberation as a political being. Although Bangladesh's democratic government is being headed by two women, the two supreme leaders of the major two parties in the country since 1991, democratic practices could not make assure the effective participation of women in politics of the country. Unequal sort of representation, lack of appropriate power and resources, absence of proper guiding rules and regulations hinder women's effective participation in political decision

making process. *Though increasing number of seats for women in the parliament was a valid demand, no one should lose the perspective that the actual issue is the effective and meaningful participation of women in Bangladesh politics* (CPD, 1999: 13). The long tradition of gender hierarchy in the political domain doesn't accept women as power holders, which can hamper the standard way to ensure democracy in any democratic country and Bangladesh is surely not an exception. *Therefore, it requires changes both in structure and in the mindset of people for meaningful participation of women in politics* (Mumita, 2010). *Minorities and women were barely visible within Political leadership may explain why rent seeking and corruption are such a predominant features of political parties of the country* (Khan, Islam and Haque, 2008: 144).

Bangladesh at its beginning as an independent state was a secular democracy, often exemplified in the international arena as a Muslim country with full range of religious tolerance. *In Bangladesh, advocates of the radical path appear more determined than liberals or secularists. Secular forces hardly work with a sense of mission. There is a threat in the attempts to redefine Bangladeshi statehood in Islamic colors. Initially, there was constitutional faith in state secularism as defining credo of Bangladeshi nationhood* (Huda, 2010). Those who tried to raise their voice against the Islamist fundamentalists, extremists, godfathers, religious or otherwise, were either killed or threatened to keep their mouth shut. For case in point, SAMS Kibria of Awami League, Professor Humayun Azad of Dhaka University and Abu Hena of BNP to name a few. This is another pressing threat or challenge for the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. *The two vital reasons for Islamist resurgence have been advocated to the 'persistent failure to redress the atrocities perpetrated in Bangladesh's liberation movement' and 'the evolving efforts to redefine Islam in Bangladesh's domestic political scene. If not addressed immediately the wave of Islamic extremism can in its rage and force, drown the already dwindling democratic principles in the country. Issues of grave concerns may be attributed to the political parties' alliances with the hard-line extremists, the rise of new and less tolerant interpretations of Islam, the growing interplay between the rise of Islamism and authoritarianism, to name a few* (Chowdhury, 2005).

Furthermore, new challenges have emerged in the post-9/11 period. Democracy now will have to be struggled in the frontline which cannot but hold anti-imperial fight, fight against xenophobia and racism. The failure to distinguish religion as theology and religion as a cultural norm is still widespread in Bangladesh. To promote the democratic values and its subsequent practices, religious extremism must to end and a liberal religious statehood with utmost tolerance have to ensure, otherwise no

alternative will be a panacea to the burgeoning terrorization within the political ambiance of the country.

DISCUSSIONS

From time immemorial, quest for democracy are epitomized by the concern of achieving wider goal of public interest. It is one aspect of governance which is shaped on the available terrain in terms of operating good governance. The quality decisions along with its valued actions of public officials produce good governance enhancing the trust of people. As an important element of sustainable democracy, good governance is not pursued in an expected level in Bangladesh. What can gladden the heart of its people is that the state is run on the principles of justice, equality, accountability and transparency as well. Though democracy is supposed to ensure these principles of democracy unfortunately good governance is still a far destiny in Bangladesh. Uncertainty in politics increases because of various economic, political and cultural factors. Nothing is more significant in developing appropriate political culture in practice by those who are mostly accountable for practicing politics and governing the county. The contingent trend of the powers of the institutions and accountability to the people derive from the nature of the democratic state. Unfortunately, being a democratic state by its constitution Bangladesh is not having a smooth political mobility with democratic courses of action.

The country today is riddle with numerous problems threatening the very development of democracy. Our society with an under developed political culture and poverty ridden illiterate and incompetent masses is lacking democratic political organizations, institutions and practices. Political bankruptcy, intimidation and corruption are engulfing the nation, instead of the cultivation of an atmosphere conducive to liberal democracy. *If the war remains within words rather than lethal weapons, the nation would be heaving a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, things sometimes get too violent and get out of control* (Hossian, 2009: 39). Of all the problems the political parties in Bangladesh, the biggest one is the absence of democracy within the parties themselves. Atomism, absence of inner democracy and the presence of mastans (musclemen who abuse political power) are the negative elements in the structure and function of Bangladesh's political parties.

Obviously, the masses do not have much faith in, concern for, it's political parties. The gap between the political parties and the common masses is another continuing feature of its political culture. Money and muscle, corruption, hooliganism, regionalism and nepotism, corruption, fractional conflict within the party is continued to be a central part of politics and political parties in Bangladesh; Religious extremism, unequal

representation of women in political affairs, lack of good governance, absence of intra level democracy in practice and ineffective parliament can be noted as the most crucial features which postures challenges to the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. To establish a pluralist democratic polity, the country would have to merge its political culture with full potentials to enjoy its democracy in a sustainable manner.

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