

Democratic Deficit in Bangladesh: A Cause for Concern

By

Ms. Amrita Chowdhury

A theoretical representation of an idea or a concept remains unconsummated till it is married to the practical implementation of the same, more so for a concept such as democracy. Democracy in pen and paper can at best be a quasi-democracy if the basic democratic principles continue to be violated. Certain specifics have been laid down the attainment of which would enable a nation or a country to be qualified as a democratic state. Bangladesh is one such country which having imbibed the democratic principles constitutionally, fails to bring forth the same beyond pen and paper.

Democratic principles have witnessed a steady decline over the years. Bangladesh's claim to fame was its image as a secular Muslim country with a commitment towards secular democracy and its ostensibly inclusive practice of Islam. In a report by Christine C. Fair, a South Asian expert, the progress Bangladesh has made in the sphere of human and economic development is remarkable. According to her, between 1997 and 2000 it witnessed an average 5% annual increase in GDP. Bangladesh has also exhibited exemplary democratic tendencies particularly in issues of gender discrimination. Women have led both the country and the two main political parties for more than 15 years.¹ This unfortunately is only one part of the story. Democracy in Bangladesh has been

gravely compromised, and since 1999, the gradual escalation of a phenomenon called the Islamic Militancy, has marred the country's secular system.ⁱⁱ What escalates the already troubled political condition is the abysmal economic condition of the country. Added to this, one can witness poor governance and widespread corruption. A constitutionally construed democracy it is, but the transition into democracy is unstable and lacks consolidation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tracing the Democratic Expedition in Bangladesh

Democracy in Bangladesh is as old as Bangladesh itself and in these three decades democracy should have been rooted strongly in the Bangladeshi soils. History on the other hand narrates a different story which unfortunately fails to confer on the Bangladeshi democracy a fairy- tale ending or even a fairy- tale beginning. East Pakistan seceded from its union with West Pakistan in 1971 and was renamed Bangladesh. The new born baby chose to grow up as a parliamentary democracy under a 1972 constitution. The 1972 constitution adopted as state policy the Awami League's (AL) four basic principles of nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy.^{iv} Democracy soon treaded the rocky roads when Mujibur Rehman, the very first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh faced criticism for the faulty government policies, declaration of emergency which failed to implement political reforms. His death was followed by several coups which resulted in a military rule being established under Ziaur Rahman, instituting martial law in the country. Ziaur did recourse to democratic ways and under him was formed the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). He too was assassinated, and Bangladesh yet again plunged into the dark days of military rule under Hussain Mohammad Ershad. He tried and failed to consolidate democracy and had to surrender to the rising opposition amongst

masses. Hopes were pinned on the BNP leader Khaleda Zia who assumed power after a decade or so of military rule. The welcome change however did not bear many fruits and could not keep at bay the political turmoil which in its finale toppled her and ushered in a neutral caretaker government. Coupled with it, rampant corruption made matters worse. Democracy it was, but a seriously compromised one.^v Thus BNP leader Khaleda Zia's rule from 1991-1996, and AL leader Sheikh Hasina's term from 1996- 2001 could not revive the dwindling democracy in Bangladesh and made matters worse by brewing a personal animosity. Public's contempt was growing towards the politicians who subverted the political institutions, and this peaked towards the end of BNPs 2001-2006 tenure, one which was marred by Islamist links, corruption, extortion, terrorist attacks and even rigging of votes. Military therefore naturally intervened ushering in a military rule yet again in the country. The caretaker government ended on January 6, 2009 when Awami League President Sheikh Hasina became the Prime Minister.

Hindrances to a Stable Democracy

Political System

Bangladesh's political system is indispensable to the two major parties, The BNP and The Awami League and the bitter enmity between their leaders Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. 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 reaming up with Islamist forces.

National strikes, violent street politics etc are some of the common means to destabilise the government. Many have termed this as the 'zero-sum politics' which has encouraged dangerous alliances with Islamist Parties.^{vi} Further they have failed to provide good governance and restore law and order. The existing situation does not anticipate a major change in the near future.^{vii}

Islamic Fundamentalism

Bangladesh at its inception was a secular democracy, often exemplified in the international arena as a Muslim country practicing religious tolerance. The upsurge in political Islamist tendencies and Islamist violence in Bangladesh is a recent phenomenon, and a pressing one at that. The two vital reasons for its 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'.^{viii} 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.^{ix}

Corruption as a Hindrance to Transparency and Accountability

Not many sectors and quarters exist in Bangladesh which remains detached from corruption. According to the Transparency International Report, the police, judiciary, land registration offices, schools etc remain indispensable to corrupt ways and measures. This paralyses the economic and social development of the country which in turn complicates the puzzle of poor governance.

Democratic Restoration in Bangladesh: Remedial Measures

If democracy has to be restored in Bangladesh certain measures should be adopted by the government which would propel a smooth transition. Some of these may be stated as under-

- The zero- sum political culture which is now inherent to the Bangladeshi political system should be addressed and arrested without much ado. The parties should realize that Bangladesh has the potential to come up in the international arena and therefore they should rise above petty politics.
- A more challenging task but one which can in no way be ignored, is the rise of political Islam and Islamist violence. What makes the scenario worse is the fact that the political parties rely heavily on these parties such as the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI). The solution to this problem too is intertwined in the remedial measure which preceded this, a cordial and amicable relationship between the two mainstream parties which would diminish the drive towards zero- sum politics.
- In order to successfully institutionalise democracy in Bangladesh, the parliament should not only be stable, but should be established as the supreme legislative authority.
- Corruption in Bangladesh has spread like plague and this has been responsible for the weakening of democracy. This coupled with lack of accountability of the government, and absence of transparency, has deepened the problem. Anti- corruption measures should thereby be adopted.
- Media and information plays an important role in any democracy encouraging transparency and good governance. Bangladesh should

thereby encourage free flow of right to information of the people and the frequent attacks on the media and press should be curtailed.

Conclusion

This article attempted at recounting the journey of democracy in Bangladesh since its inception touching upon its successes and failures and the challenges that it has faced so far. Despite the many obstacles and hindrances, it would be unfair to write off Bangladesh as undemocratic because there is scope to improve and develop the state of democracy through political will and other remedial measures suggested so far in the paper.^x Soon after Sheikh Hasina assumed power as the Prime Minister of the country, the BNP boycotted parliament over the chamber's seating chart and launched the demonstrations over Awami League efforts to force Khaleda Zia out of her cantonment home. The Awami League also failed to make good on promises to enact into legislation democratic-reform ordinances approved by the caretaker government.^{xi} The much needed stability has not yet crept in. What remains to be seen is whether the Sheikh Hasina government during her tenure rises above petty politics and strengthens democracy in the country keeping the national interest in mind. The answer to these vital questions however floats in the future.

End Notes

ⁱ Fair Christine, "Recent Developments in Bangladesh: A Human Rights Update", United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C. electronically accessed at http://www.usip.org/congress/testimony/2005/0524_fair.html on 11th June, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Karim Tariq A and Fair Christine C, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads", *Special Report 181*, January 2007, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C. electronically accessed at <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr181.html> on 11th June, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Datta Sreeradha, "Bangladesh's Political Evolution: Growing Uncertainties," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April 2003. electronically accessed at

<http://www.idsa.in/publications/strategicanalysis/2003/april/Sreeradha%20Datta.pdf> on 12th June, 2009.

^{iv} *Background Note: Bangladesh*, Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs, U.S. Department of State, electronically accessed at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm> on 12th June, 2009

^v *Ibid*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>

^{vi} Fair Christine, *op.cit*, http://www.usip.org/congress/testimony/2005/0524_fair.html

^{vii} Karim Tariq A, and Fair Christine C, *op.cit*,
<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr181.html>

^{viii} Karim Tariq A, and Fair Christine C, *ibid*,
<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr181.html>

^{ix} Fair Christine, *op.cit*, http://www.usip.org/congress/testimony/2005/0524_fair.html

^x Barman Ch. Dalem, Rahman Golam M, and Siddiqui Tasneem, "Democracy Report for Bangladesh," accessed electronically at
<http://www.idea.int/publications/sod/upload/Bangladesh.pdf>

^{xi} *Op.cit*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452.htm>