

# **Democracy in Bangladesh: Looking Ahead With Despair and Hope**

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Looking in the streets of Dhaka an outsider might be struck or even wonder at the rationale behind the number of banners and posters that appear all over the city, all round the year. One would be further alarmed if one takes the trouble of reading through the posters. Most of them incite violence, call for revenge, or place series of demands, ranging from resignation of the 'fascist autocratic' government to that of guarantee for a natural death. While the former are understandable within the arithmetic of Bangladesh or for that matter South Asian politics, the later asking for the guarantee of a natural death sobers one down. Bangladesh after all is an independent country practising democracy, it is not under colonial or military rule; but so are the maladies and travails of democracy in this land that can boast of movements for democracy and self rule since the colonial period that such a poster is in fact quite natural. However contradictorily enough the movements were not democratic. This holds true for the colonial as well the post colonial periods. A major fallout of this is the malady that democracy, today finds itself in. The objective of this paper, however is not to diagnose into the maladies of democracy in Bangladesh; it is rather an attempt to move beyond the present and look into the probable trajectories for democracy in Bangladesh. The paper is divided into three sections, the first examines the factors, both internal and external that are likely to intervene or impinge upon the functioning of democracy in Bangladesh; based on these variables the second section will analyse the kind of debates and demands that have emerged within the 'popular' psyche and political milieu; finally an attempt would be made to project the probable implications of the above for the functioning of democracy both in terms of the institutions and also the lived reality of the people.

***Intervening Variables:*** Human history, politics, society move in cycles defying order or any generalised rule; yet there is no end on the part of academics and practitioners to universalise concepts and ideals and transplanting them into societies, which often have not gone through the necessary gestation periods. But then the question is what does one do. Do we discard the ideal or go through the pains of it. The history of Bangladesh points to the later. Despite the ordeals and anarchy of 'democracy' prevalent today in Bangladesh time and again popular will has opted, stood out and fought for democracy. But then looking at the lived experience of democracy one may interrogate and re examine the very wisdom of the system. It is the re examination with despair and anxiety, I would argue that instills the hope in us. It suggests that questioning minds have not been silenced and they carry the hope for the present and future. This section focusing on the variables, both internal and external, that are likely to impact on the functioning of democracy in Bangladesh is an account of the present but contains the likely agenda(s) for the future. The internal and external also cannot be clinically segregated, they flow and mesh into each other.

**Politics of Polarization:** Proverbs, poetries are important reflections of the state of a society. Bengali culture and politics are in fact quite enmeshed, the state of politics in Bangladesh is well reflected by a proverb in Bengali popular culture which says, *jar nai kono niti shaei kore rajniti* (one who does not have any principles does politics). One cannot blame the general people for such a perception or judgement. Since its birth the political history of Bangladesh has been marred by violence, a nation born out of violence with an estimated death of 30 million and rape of 20 million; yet the dream of a golden Bengal has remained unrealised. Political parties in Bangladesh have had a distorted birth and growth. The Awami League, the major political party that had carried on the nationalist movement of Bangladesh in the name of democracy and self determination of the people itself turned into an autocratic institution when in 1975 it declared BAKSAL. All political parties were banned and the country adopted a one party system. Zia ur Rahman, the military General turned politician returned the country to a multi party system in the late 1970s. But by then Bangladesh politics had got polarised. The dividing line is often characterised as secularism versus communalism, the former being pro liberation and the later anti liberation forces. It needs to be mentioned here that secularism in Bangladesh never implied absence of religion rather equal respect and opportunities for all religions. In view of the excesses of the Pakistani regime and the use of religion by them to dominate the East Bengalis constitutional provisions were inserted banning the use of religion for political purposes and also banning communal political parties. However given the numerical majority of the Muslim Bengalis and the equation of electoral politics religion was never absent from the political space of the country.

Mujib was also shifting towards the use of religious symbols towards the end of his reign. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Zia ur Rahman carried it forward and institutionalised it through bringing about constitutional amendments, to consolidate its own political position. Secularism as a state principle was dropped from the constitution, in its place absolute faith in the Almighty Allah was inserted. The ban on the activities of the communal political parties was also lifted from the constitution. These changes had far reaching implications. It changed the basic character of the state, now the state clearly identified

itself with a particular religious community and also from the model of Bengali nationalism the state moved towards the model of Bangladeshi nationalism. Most significantly it polarised and divided the people. The Bengali Muslim civil society got polarised and divided over the issue of Bengali versus Bangladeshi nationalism, the former being protagonists of secularism and the later communal politics. It also created the 'minority' question, not only the Bengali Hindus, but the Ahmediyas, Qadiyanis are under attack today largely due to these constitutional changes. One however needs to keep in context that the Awami League despite remaining in power for five years could not revert back to a secular constitution mainly due to electoral politics. Apart from this apparent divide, there is hardly any ideological divide between the two mainstream parties, the Awami League and the BNP. On the economic front, both profess liberal economies and the development of private sector.

The rise of Jamaat in the political arena is often regarded as a contributory factor towards the politics of polarisation. One would recall here that the Awami League had formed an alliance with the Jamaat in 1994-96 to oust the then BNP regime. True it had not made them ruling alliance partner, like the present BNP regime, but the significance of an alliance to oust a regime cannot be understated. One therefore seriously needs to ponder at the dividing lines, is secularism versus fundamentalism the issue, or is it merely who is in power.

In the wake of the August 21 grenade attacks, the country is witnessing a surge of bomb threats and bombs being found all over, including the academic institutions, public places. How much of it is real and hoax is immaterial. Important point to be noted here is the intrusion of terror and terrorist activities into the popular psyche and space. The acts evidently aimed at the disruption of the democratic process in the country, on the face of it appear to be the act of fundamentalist forces, since the letters and emails containing the threats bear the message of it being done in the name of Islam. The failure of the BNP alliance government to either nab the elements or even take a firm critical stand against these forces only provide fodder to the polarisation process. The country now again is set for another oust government movement. The main opposition party Awami league has forged an alliance with the left leaning parties on a one point demand, resignation of the government. The Left parties have joined in their agenda anti fundamentalism as well. This means more hartals, more violence and increase of miseries for the general people. All this however is done in the name of democracy and people's welfare. Bangladesh politics seems to have bidden farewell to the norms and peaceful methods of protests. Such movements indeed augur ill for the smooth functioning of democracy, where tolerance and accommodation are a must. Instead we are breeding a culture of intolerance, hatred and violence. Bikolpo Dhara (alternative stream), another addition in the polarised political spectrum has failed to provide any alternatives. It too has joined the above oust government movement. Political parties in Bangladesh indeed are trapped within the politics of hatred; one can call it the death of imagination.

**Militarisation and Criminalisation of polity:** On August 21 the entire country went into a state of shock and horror. Grenades hurled at the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina killed 20 people, injured about 300. The main opposition party, Awami League had called the meeting to protest the bomb explosions in Sylhet. Since then grenades have been found inside Dhaka Central jail, Dhaka Medical College Hospital. There have been bomb scares in the educational institutions; airports have been under red alert due to bomb threats. Since 1996 there have been about 19 major incidents of bomb attacks, starting from places of religious sacrosanct to occasions of cultural festivals and gatherings. Where does human security stand in this land then?

For two consecutive years Bangladesh has been rated as the most corrupt country by Transparency International. Without going into a debate about the validity of the observation, there is no denying that there is something seriously ill with the entire system. The demand for a guarantee of a natural death speaks of the deep maladies. The proliferation of small arms, protection of known criminals by political parties, the former occupying important political positions within the party and also the political system are well known. Most of the ward commissioners are known criminals. Toll collection by political parties is the order of the day. Murders of shopkeepers for refusal to pay tolls are also quite frequent. It is important and somewhat disturbing to note that while small arms is widely and quite rightly blamed for the militarisation of Bangladesh polity and it is also being termed as a high terrorist risk country by the West; yet little focus is on the source of these arms. 70 per cent of these arms are manufactured in the developed world. The West has also not evolved any international legal regime for the control of these arms. The defeat of the Awami League regime in the 2001 elections is largely attributable to the widespread corruption and terrorism let loose by members and party cadres of the then ruling party.

At this point one may ponder as to what went wrong, why we failed to evolve a stable and meaningful democratic system and a healthy political party process. While one can blame colonialism as well the internal colonialism of Pakistan for this; but one cannot deny that political growth was stunted and distorted by the intervention of military in politics.

**Politicization of Military:** The liberation war of Bangladesh had politicised the Bangladesh army. The Mukti Bahini (liberation forces) which formed the nucleus of the Bangladesh army in the immediate aftermath of the liberation war was divided along the regular Bengali forces of the then Pakistan army and those recruited by the Awami League. After the liberation of Bangladesh Mujib paid little attention for rebuilding the armed forces, this was a cause of major discontent among the army. The repatriation of the Bengali military officials from Pakistan added further divisions within the military' between the repatriates and the freedom fighters. Besides as suggested earlier the liberation war had thoroughly politicised the military. A group within them wanted to follow the conventional British army model; while another was for a people's army modeled after the Peoples army of China. Within this backdrop Mujib's disregard of the military and instead the creation of a Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini (National defence forces) was looked upon with much dismay by the military. It was seen as a parallel institution and a threat to the vested interests of the military. The later was also unhappy at the state of affairs, the nepotism and corruption rampant within the political administration dismayed the military. The Bangladesh army also carried the legacy of Pakistan army, which has a history of deep involvement in politics. On August 15 1975 Mujib was assassinated by a group of military officers. With this began the direct involvement of military in Bangladesh politics. From 1975 till 1991 the country remained under military and quasi military rule, when finally Ershad was ousted from power by a popular upsurge, for the first time in the political history of Bangladesh all the major political parties had joined forces to oust Ershad.

During the period however Bangladesh politics had got distorted. The introduction of religion into politics, as suggested earlier had polarised the polity along secular versus non secular forces. This began the process of the politicisation of religion for the vested interests of the politicians. Bengali nationalism had created the ethnic minority, while the later added to it the religious minority issue. The BNP of late Ziaur Rahman and the Jatiyo Party of H.M. Ershad were created during the period at the direct behest of the military intelligence. The two parties during their rule militarised the administration through the heavy induction of military officials into the civil administrative system. The anti Ershad movement had seen the unity between the political forces, but at the same time long years of agitation had militarised Bangladesh politics. During the period the student wings of the political parties were encouraged to use arms, continuous hartals was the order of the day. Bangladesh politics thus became weaponised and street centric.

The end of the Ershad regime did not bring about stability in the political arena. The politics of polarisation and confrontation continued. The weakness of the political forces to institutionalise themselves has made the military a factor in Bangladesh politics. The two major political parties have continued to beef up the military and the civilian regime maintains its direct control over the military through the armed forces division. The appointments to the higher and strategic positions are also politically guided. Though the military has maintained a distance from politics, but they are well aware of their power position and also that their vested interests would remain secure. Autocratic structures like Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and extraordinary powers vested in the military in the name of maintaining law and order like Operation Clean Heart only adds to the power of the military. The military got impunity for all its activities during Operation Clean Heart. They were tried under military courts but the civilian courts can not try them. Consequently the military remains unaccountable to the public. This only enhances the power of the military.

**Globalisation:** Globalisation has impacted upon the developing countries in more fundamental and crucial ways than is apparently discernible. At a very critical level it has put the state under tremendous stress. On the one hand through the opening up of markets, information, ideas and technology it has appropriated much sovereignty from the state; on the other hand being a pro rich and pro technology force it has raised fundamental questions like, if the developing world can meet the challenges and flow with the flows of globalisation; what it entails for the common people, if it is opening up or shrinking spaces for them; and then how does it impact upon the capabilities of the state. In the context of Bangladesh, one can suggest that it has impacted upon the poor, the women and the indigenous people negatively. The structural adjustment policies have shrunk the spaces for them, induced forced migration and taken them away from their traditional means of livelihood. It has also increased violence against women mainly for two reasons, first loss of livelihood impacts upon women more severely since they have to take care of the

family, and it has been observed that in such situations men become more violent and take out their vent on women; secondly when women go out in search of work under such circumstances often they get physically and sexually assaulted and they also become the victims of fatwa (religious decrees). Women working in the garments sector provide a good instance of the later.

On the other hand there is constant pressure on the part of donors and various rights groups organisations, both national and international, for reforms, transparency, righting of the human rights, women rights situations and move for greater democratization. The move though indeed laudable and deserving kudos; but again one comes back to the fundamental question, i.e., whether the demands put up by the developed world in terms of trade and economics are fair, the terms and pace setter of globalisation is the West. There is clearly a double standard on the part of the latter. By dictating the terms it is making it quite impossible for the developing countries to bring about the welfare of its masses, which is the true spirit of democracy. One might suggest that through globalisation the West is pushing its own agenda of homogenising the world to serve its own purpose, in the name of promoting and establishing democracy they are harping on the outer fittings while the soul and spirit is lost. In the context of Bangladesh as well it is benefiting the rich and creating a new middle class which bases its power largely on corruption and muscle power. Small arms and drugs have also proliferated largely due to globalisation and it is this new middle class that not only is involved in this business but also uses it to attain political power.

The state uses these non state elements to keep its power base, yet due to the pressures for reforms from within and outside it formulates one legal measure after another, like the Public Safety Act, Prevention of Terrorism against Women and Children Act and so on. Speedy Tribunal Courts have been set up to dispense quick justice. However in most of the instances the real criminals go free for they control the niches of power and they also bribe the lawyers, magistrates; it is the poor and marginalised who continue to suffer.

**Migration and political settlements:** Migration is supposedly a natural phenomenon of human history. People have been moving from one niche to another in search of better living conditions and opportunities. With globalisation, un planned development or mal development, and the move towards mechanization, spaces have shrunk for the poor and the marginalised in the rural sectors. Consequently they move to the urban areas in search of jobs. Women constitute a significant portion of these migrants. These include women from indigenous communities as well. It is an issue of critical concern among the minorities since their entire structures are collapsing. For instance, the Garos who are a matrilineal society are consistently raising the point that land and forest alienation of their community due to Bengali settlements as well the Asian Development Bank (ADB) sponsored forestry policies of the government have forced their women to migrate to the cities and they work either as house maids or in the beauty parlours of Dhaka city. This is a matter of great humiliation for a community where women constitute the head of the household. The Bengali women it has been observed get absorbed in the garments sector. Though much has been made about the empowerment of women through employment in the garments sector, but empirical studies have revealed the physical and psychological insecurities of these women and also the fact that it is the lack of option rather than availability of options and choices that make them join and continue to work in this sector. They end up living in slums, where the living conditions are not only inhuman but many a times they become victims of physical assaults. Their predicament does not end here; a more daunting future haunts them. They are not looked upon as 'good and proper' women once they go back to their own villages. There have been instances where their husbands have abandoned them either because of societal pressures or the women became physically so sick that they could not meet the demands of their husbands. It has also been observed that many women end up in brothels. In most instances they had been brought to the cities by known men of their own localities with the promise of job. This is not limited within borders, they fell prey to human traffickers and have ended up in brothels in India, Pakistan and Nepal.

In the cities slums have become the den of criminal activities, starting from arms manufacture to drugs business. They are important vote banks and are more often than not nurtured by political godfathers. They carry on terrorist acts, murders at the behest of their mentors. They seldom have party allegiance and are bought with money. At one point they become ring masters and acquire an autonomy of their own. The cases of Picchi Hannan, Kala Jahangir and others bear testimony to this.

The state has also brought deliberate demographic shift in the areas habited by minorities to dilute the ethnic composition. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) it was used as a counter insurgency move. Consequently today Bengalis constitute more than 50 per cent of the population of the CHT. In the plains as well Bengalis are being settled alongside the indigenous population. These demographic shifts have far

reaching implications for the human security and democratisation of the society at large. From the CHT Bengali candidates are getting elected. Due to the changed demographic composition land alienation is taking place very rapidly. It needs to be mentioned that the government settles the Bengalis in the community land of the indigenous people, which it terms as Khas or government owned land. The non recognition of the traditional practices of the indigenous people's rights over land is a violation of their human rights and goes against the principle and spirit of democracy. The Bengali settlements result in shrinking of spaces and means of livelihood for the indigenous communities. They borrow money from Bengali moneylenders and also sell off their lands to them out of sheer poverty. Such settlements, I would argue are politically motivated and only accelerates the process of marginalisation of the marginalised indigenous people.

**Non Governmental Sector:** The non governmental sector, NGOs, business organisations, private sector, civil society organisations are emerging as a strong pressure forum. Despite the chaos and unruliness of democracy in Bangladesh, spaces of dissent, protest as well demands have been curved out by these institutions and forums. Human rights, Women rights, workers rights, environmental rights, demands for electoral reforms are being fought out in these forums. Through wall papers, street theaters, posters, bill boards, legal aids, media coverage and so on, they are trying to reach out to the people, conscientise them about their rights and form networks within and between them for community protection. Many of these organisations have forged regional and international networks as well; and together they are emerging as a strong international civil society forum. True these organisations are deeply polarised and many of them have clear cut political orientations, yet the power of this sector as a force in shaping the politics of the country can hardly be overemphasised.

**Terrorism and Bangladesh's Location:** 9\11 changed international politics in very fundamental ways. American war on terrorism singled out the Islamic and Muslim majority states as the terrorist risk countries. Bangladesh has also been categorised as a high risk terrorist state. Bangladesh on its part has been trying hard to project itself as a moderate Muslim majority state. But the activities of various fundamentalist groups, their attacks on the Hindus, Ahmediyas, shrines, bomb and grenade attacks all over the country has put the state in a very critical position. There is no denying that subversive non state elements are gaining power. The state is also perceived by many to be patronising the terrorist elements since the Jamaat is within the ruling alliance circle. The validity of the argument is a matter of debate, but the failure of the state to check the growth of these elements give rise to such positions and allegations. There is no denying that such activities and the total failure of the state to curb these is a threat to the spirit, process and institution of democracy.

Bangladesh's location as a bridge between the South and Southeast Asia makes it strategically important for the terrorists and also for the regional powers. On the southeastern front being in the vicinity of Myanmar and Thailand, Bangladesh has become a transit point for the smuggling of small arms and drugs. The continued instability in the CHT and its physical closeness with Myanmar and the Indian northeast, both of which are infested with insurgent's activities makes the security situation more complicated. It not only impacts upon human security but also state security. Being surrounded by India on three sides also makes Bangladesh's position quite important as well as vulnerable. The nature of relations with India is critical for Bangladesh. Bangladesh shares not only common and porous borders with India but also resources, most important of which is water. How these resources are shared and the use of borders as spaces of cooperation or confrontation, affects the human security and consequently democracy in both the countries. India has consistently accused Bangladesh of supporting its northeast insurgents. Bangladesh on its part denies the allegations and asserts India is giving refuge to its terrorists and criminals and also supporting anti Bangladesh movements, like the Bangabhumi Andolon. Such allegations and counter allegations do not help the democratic process in the region. In the aftermath of 9\11 the list has been added and India now accuses Bangladesh of supporting the Kashmiri insurgents with the help from Pakistani ISI. In its war against terrorism the US seeks the support of the Muslim majority countries and in this respect Bangladesh being a moderate Islamic state is of critical importance to the US. The involvement of the FBI in the investigation of the grenade attacks in the meeting of Awami League on August 21 bears testimony to this. Not only the US but the entire donor club representatives in Bangladesh got involved into the affair. Civil society reactions to the incident were very strong and critical of the regime. The message was clear to the regime, the Bangladesh society wanted the government to act and to act quickly in putting a stop to the ongoing terrorist activities. The international community also conveyed the same message. The big question however is given the extreme polarisation of Bangladesh politics and the failure of the political parties to unite or even have minimum consensus over issues of crucial importance, if the state is in a position or has the capacity to act.

***Emerging Debates:*** The above indeed is a somber scenario. Yet the polarisations, the mass upsurge against the Ershad regime, which had usurped power through a military coup in 1982, the electoral results of 2001 despite the violence, speaks of the robustness and vibrancy of the society. The 2001 elections were marred by violence against the Hindu community, this is indeed a scar on democracy and reflects the tyranny of majoritarian democracy. The results were however widely regarded as fair by the national and international election observers. The victory of the BNP, despite the alliance, was also largely attributed to the failure of the Awami League to check terrorism and corruption. These are indicative of the will and power of the people to move forward, to resist, to debate, argue and the refusal to give in. The power of this process despite the hazards associated with it must not be undermined. Through these processes, polarisations and movements one can discern the evolving demands and aspirations of the people for a polity that they had fought for through their blood, tears and untold agonies. The following is an account of this.

**Secularism versus Communalism:** It has been argued earlier that Bengali nationalism as it had evolved within Pakistan was secular in its orientation. This was the logical outcome of the movement of the East Bengalis against the West Pakistani regime, which was using religion as the tool of oppression and exploitation against the Bengalis. After liberation Bengali nationalism was adopted as the basis Bangladesh's nationalism. It took its roots from Bengali language and culture. Secularism was also adopted as one of the state principles and political parties with religious orientations were banned from politics. This however changed after 1975. Zia ur Rahman introduced the Bangladeshi model of nationhood; secularism was dropped from the constitution and substituted by absolute faith in the Almighty. The ban on communal political parties was also lifted. Ershad carried it further. Islam was adopted as the state religion and he even ventured to turn Bangladesh into a mosque centric society.

It would however be too simplistic if clear lines are drawn on the issue along secular and non secular forces. The actual situation is much more complex than this. One can observe several strands on this among the political parties. On a closer reading even the position of the two major political parties, BNP and Awami League, does not appear to be much different, though one is the main proponent of Bengali nationalism and the other Bangladeshi. The compulsions of electoral politics and majoritarian democracy may be responsible for this. The Awami League though blaming the BNP for communalisation of politics makes liberal use of religion in all its political activities. It has not come out clearly on the issue of reinserting secularism by replacing the Islamic insertions in the constitution though from time to time its leadership has talked of a return to the constitution of 1972; neither did it take any measure in this regard during its term in office. It has been pointed out earlier that it had made Jamaat an alliance partner in 1993-94 during the oust BNP movement led by it. The BNP too openly condemns communalism and fundamentalism, however one may argue that by making Jamaat a partner in the ruling alliance it is patronising the fundamentalist forces. It is the Left and Left leaning parties who have demanded a return to the constitution of 1972 and also the reinsertion of secularism in it. The civil society too is divided on the issue and reflects the general political debate. The growth of communal forces, attack on minorities, specially the Hindus, emergence of stunt figures like Bangla bhai, clandestine organisations like Hikmatul Jihad, the attack on Ahmediyas are viewed with much concern. The civil society, media has taken a very positive and effective stand on these issues. The general consensus appears to be that one has to draw a clear line between being communal and religious. Majority of the people belong to the later group. Bengalis have through their cultural and political festivals, like Poila Boishakh, Ekushey February have time and again demonstrated their secular and syncretic spirit. The debates and the resistance suggest that Bangladesh will not give in to communal forces, despite the rise in their activities at the moment, which one may see as a reaction to the forces of globalisation as well, which is often equated with westernisation.

It has been pointed out earlier that the August 21 grenade attacks have further polarised the political scenario. The non state actors appear to have appropriated the state apparatus. But the civil society and the opposition political parties have refused to give in. The ongoing resistance speaks of people's power and the issue being the most critical in the political spectrum of the country.

**Democratisation of politics:** Several issues are involved here, beginning with internal democracy and reforms within political parties to weeding out corruption criminalisation, women and minority representations to democratisation at the local governmental levels. The lack of internal democracy within parties is gradually coming up as an issue. The unceremonial dismissal of former President Badruddoza Chowdhury for his failure to visit the graveyard of the founder and former BNP chief,

late President Ziaur Rahman has been viewed with much displeasure by the people in general. The treatment meted out to Major (retd) Mannan on his decision to quit the BNP was also severely criticised. The same holds true for the Awami League. The old guards within the party tolerate no dissenting voices. Despite clear provisions for elections within parties, top positions are occupied by the same coterie. Within the Parliament the system of open votes for reaching a decision makes it impossible for any party member to hold a dissenting opinion or abstain from voting. The demand for democratisation of political parties however is not a widespread one and is limited within academic circles. However the demand for the reform of political parties weeding them of corrupt members has gained popular appeal. The print media has played a very effective role in this respect. Photographs showing top political leaders waiving pistols caught the eyes and minds of millions. The reporting of criminal and terrorist activities by political leaders as well as their cronies, family members and party cadres has created a general awareness on these issues. There is also a general demand for the political and financial accountability of the politicians. Citizen's forums have also demanded that fund raising by the political parties must be regulated by law framed by parliament.

The provision for thirty reserved seats for women in the national parliament expired in 2001. The present parliament does not have any reservations for women. The demand for meaningful representation of women in national politics has come up in a big way. It is somewhat of an irony that despite having two women at the helm of national politics, one as the leader of position and the other leader of opposition, and despite their wielding almost absolute power within their respective parties, national politics remain excessively masculinised. Women organisations have been demanding increase in political participation of women in order for them to have the critical mass and voice to bring about change in politics. Their demands have varied between a minimum of 68 to 100 seats reserved for women with the provision for direct elections in those constituencies. The reservation of women constituencies may be phased out with time. Women have been particularly insistent on the issue of direct elections in order to have parity with men. Nominations were often ridiculed and the women nominated in those thirty reserved seats were often referred to as thirty sets of ornaments. There is also demand that political parties should nominate at least a certain per centage of women during elections. The present regime has introduced a Bill for 45 reserved seats for women. This has been severely criticised by women organisations, since it is far below their demands and also there is no provision for direct elections. The lack of this curbs upon the powers and position of women MPs and also suggest that women are not equal members of the political system. There is indeed a need for engendering politics and democracy. Values and concerns of women are vital for the survival of the society.

The issue of minority rights and minority representation is gradually but steadily gaining grounds. Human rights organisations brought this issue to the fore in the late 1980s in the wake of the Chittagong hill Tracts (CHT) conflict and reports of human rights violations by the security personnel in the region, the issue was nationalised and internationalised by the Hill people's forums like the Pahari Chatra Parishad (PCP), Hill Women's Federation (HWF). Beginning in the 1990s the issue gained momentum, with the ethnic minorities themselves giving forceful voices to the demand. With the signing of the CHT peace accord and the formation of the Jatiyo Adibashi Forum, the demand has gained wider space.

The issue of democratisation and meaningful representation of women at the local government levels is also emerging as a major issue. These political institutions constitute the foundations of power for politics at the national level. The government has reserved three seats in these bodies through direct elections. But the elected representatives allege that they have not been devolved substantive powers and are treated discriminately in comparison with their male colleagues. The airing of these views and the demand for reforms in the situation is a positive move towards democratisation of the society.

**Accountability of military:** For a long period the defence forces were above criticism and in general they remained above any accountability. The scenario however is changing slowly. The excesses of the military in the CHT have come under the scrutiny of a certain section of academicians and also the human rights organisations. The custodial deaths during Operation Clean Heart, and the ongoing activities and custodial deaths under the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) have also been the subject of much criticism by the civil society, human rights organisations, legal aid bodies, the intelligentsia and the print media. The defence purchases and budgets have also come under scrutiny. The military on its part is aware of the public pulse. It is keen on improving its public image; it has refrained from involving itself into politics. Its image has also been enhanced by its reputation in the International Peace Keeping. Bangladesh sends the highest number of troops for this purpose. The National Defence College and the Military Staff College also maintains a close link with the civil. Their academic curriculum prepared in close coordination with the university teachers offer courses ranging from military security to human security. University teachers and

civil bureaucrats are among their guest faculty members. With the objective of forging closer links with the civil the NDC team has recently introduced the program of visiting the public and private universities.

The accountability of the military however is largely constrained by certain provisions of the constitution that impedes the freedom of speech. For the interest of national security and public safety certain issues are to be discussed under reasonable secrecy. These are ambiguous terms and give wideranging powers to the state and also the security and coercive apparatuses of the state.

**Electoral Reforms:** Through the thirteenth amendment to the constitution Bangladesh introduced the system of caretaker government for a period of 90 days for the sole purpose of holding elections, in 1996. Acute polarisation, politicisation of administration and above all lack of trust upon the ruling regime to hold fair elections is responsible for this. Under the system upon the completion of its term the party in power would resign and hand over power to a group of advisers selected on the basis of consensus between the parties. The immediate past Chief Justice would serve as the Chief Adviser. The caretaker government remains in charge of the day to day affairs and is not supposed to take any important policy decision. The President however does not resign and remains in charge of defence.

The Election Commission is an autonomous body and frames its own rules. In order to have fair elections citizen's bodies, NGOs have formed election observation teams who monitor the elections. Besides a large number of regional and international bodies also monitor the elections in Bangladesh.

Citizen's bodies have been demanding reforms in various sectors in the election process, these include preparation of updated voters list, provision for postal votes so that the expatriate population can exercise their franchise rights, a more rigorous but realistic code of conduct for the candidates, and more importantly the provision for an independent Election Commission, with its own staff to conduct elections. This includes security personnel as well administrative staff. This is extremely important in view of the politicisation of administration, the members of which is usually called upon to conduct the elections. The provision of registration for political parties contesting elections should be made mandatory. In order to create a "level playing field" for the political parties as well for the candidates the state owned media, TV and radio must brought, during the election period, under the control of the Election Commission. The Law permitting a candidate to contest the election from five constituencies should be amended limiting the number to only two. Poll observers should be provided legal coverage to enter and observe the proceedings.

**Parliament Reforms:** It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Bangladesh has a dysfunctional parliament. Politics are street centric rather than parliament. Boycott of the parliament by the Opposition is the norm rather than exception irrespective of the party. Though the opposition continues to enjoy the privileges of parliament members at the cost of the general public. The opposition and the position could reach perfect consensus only on two issues: raising of salaries for the MPs and the import of duty free pajeros for them. This indeed speaks of the lack of sensitivity and political bankruptcy of the politicians. Time and again, even before parliament sessions begin the opposition makes its participation conditional upon the 'rational' behavior of the position. What constitutes 'rational' that only they can define. The major cause of their boycott, as pointed out by them is the partisan behaviour of the Speaker and the refusal of the Speaker to allow them to speak and switching off of mikes during their deliberations.

In the wake of the ineffectiveness of the parliament, and the threat to human security caused due to street centric politics, citizens have been demanding to take back politics to its rightful place, i.e., the parliament. Besides there have been demands for reforming the parliament in order to make it effective. These demands include, the post of Deputy Speaker to be held by the opposition. The Speaker ought to resign from his political party upon being elected the Speaker. The sessions of the Parliamentary Committees should be open and civil society organisations and individuals with expertise should be invited to give their views on matters of national importance. The Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee should invariably be a member from the Opposition. Article 70 of the constitution should be reasonably amended to allow the members to express their views according to their judgments, instead of toeing the party lines.

**Administrative and Judicial reforms:** Depoliticisation of the administration has been a long standing demand of the citizens. The entire administration it appears is polarised along the two mainstream political party lines. Transfers, promotions in key positions are made according to political

preferences and priorities. Corruption is rampant within the administrative service. Separation of the judiciary from the executive has been a major demand of the citizens and has been the electoral promise of all the major parties. This is of critical importance. The judiciary is directly involved in the electoral process since the immediate past retired chief justice becomes the chief adviser of the caretaker government. The government has been accused of manipulating the appointment of judges on political considerations. This has polarised the judiciary along political party lines. There is also the demand for the setting up of ombudsmen and an independent anti corruption commission. The government keeps on promising these, the political parties put these up in their manifestoes; but largely because of their vested political interests they have not fulfilled these promises.

**Rights and Protection Agendas:** Human rights, women's rights, minority rights, migrant workers rights are emerging as important demands and civil society movements. Legal aids and human and women rights organisations have come up with specific demands and protection rights of various vulnerable groups starting from garments workers, slum dwellers to sex workers. These organisations maintain networks with regional and international agencies on the above issues. They provide services as well as rights awareness among the vulnerable groups. They lobby with the state, the donors and regional and international forums for creating a legal regime to provide social justice and dignity to the vulnerable groups. Despite polarisations within and among these movements, it cannot be denied that such movements are aimed at humanising and democratising the society and polity.

The above one may suggest provides a map of the dreams and aspirations of the people. How far they are translated into a reality however is another question. One can observe three clear trends. On the one hand there is the utter irrationality and political bankruptcy of the politicians; then there is the growing danger of the rise of dark forces in the form of communalism and terrorism; on the positive side one can also observe a very proactive and vibrant civil society (though polarised) voicing the voice of reason, sanity and harmony for a just society. A major weakness, of the latter, however is its failure to reach the sinews of the society, to transform these into a mass movement. Most of the think tanks and organisations are Dhaka i.e., capital centric and is limited to an elite, which has little contacts with the masses. The intelligentsia too speaks in a language hardly communicable and understandable to the general people. However the NGOs are playing a major role in conscientising the people and taking the issues at the community level. But the former has its limitations; being donor dependent they are constrained by funds consequently they have to follow the agendas of the donors. There also are major silences on issues of critical importance for human and societal security. These include issues of economic reforms, land reforms, trade unionism, education and health reforms, environmental issues. This is not to suggest that they have not surfaced at all, but to make the point that these have remained rather muted and concerns only of a few agencies, not issues of major public debates and deliberations. Several reasons can be identified for this. To begin with one may argue that the volatile and polarised nature of politics with its demons like public insecurity, frequent hartals, terrorist acts, toll collection, corruption makes life a daily survival struggle for the general people, that leaves them with little scope and energy to think of alternatives; secondly and more importantly, being an aid dependent and donor driven country the governmental as well non governmental sectors pick up issues important to the donors. The political economy of aid comes into play.

What hopes and futures do we then have for democracy in Bangladesh. Is it going to institutionalise itself into a system contributing to and acting in synergy with the people as a tool of human security and development; or is it going to be a rule of a minority majority; or are we heading for a collision of different forces. These are the questions that the paper now seeks to answer.

**Trajectories for democracy:** Politics, it is evident, be it national or international does not operate in a vacuum. The variables impacting upon it, as well the debates and issues emerging from it makes the connection between the local, regional and global abundantly clear. Based on the analyses made above one can suggest different scenarios for Bangladesh.

The first is almost like the doomsday prediction and seems most evident given the extreme violent, criminalised and polarised nature of Bangladesh politics. Increase in violence criminalisation and collapse of human security. It would be unfair to pin it to national politics alone. Globalisation it has been argued earlier has put states under stress. Growing unemployment caused due to SAP, the unrestrained production of small arms by the developed world, the association of terrorism with Islam by the West, though they deny such a position, their policies however do not reflect the denials. The configuration of these forces gives a vent to the forces of communalism and also violence. Small arms and drugs not only militarises and weaponises the society, but also is big business, a major source of muscle, money and power for the

otherwise unemployed. The bombing of the places of religious sacrosanct to the Muslims in Iraq is watched with much dismay and anger by the people in Bangladesh. The age of satellite television, in other words the globalisation of information and technology has made it possible even for someone sitting in a remote village to watch such scenes. Such destruction is not accepted and is taken as a direct attack on Islam. Rise of fundamentalism and militarism with the easy availability of small arms is only a little step from here. It does not take much persuasion to take this leap. The western 'rationality' somehow has failed to take cognizance of eastern sensitivities and rationality.

Extreme polarisation among the political parties and the blame game that has become so predictable in the political arena further complicates the situation. The state takes recourse to autocratic mechanisms enforces draconian laws curtailing on the fundamental rights of citizens. More authoritarian structures like RAB are instituted; more power is vested in the intelligence agencies. This results in shrinking of spaces for dissent as well debate for the general people. The lack of political accommodation on the part of political parties only exacerbates the situation. Recourse to hartals is the most common and sought after recourse by the major opposition, despite the increasing fatigue and frustration of the general people as well the professional groups with this as a tool of protest. It is understandable that under such a scenario human security is the first casualty as violence is rampant during the hartals. Apart from the economic loss suffered by the entire nation, the academic loss is also colossal. At the university level year after year the academic calendar goes hay wild. A normal four to five years masters course now takes seven to eight years to complete, not to mention the the mental suffering, which is indeed immeasurable. Students coming from upper middle class families either go abroad to pursue their graduate and post graduate degrees or take admissions in the private universities and medical colleges, which are beyond the means of an average citizen. At each instance the poor people suffer. The country also is loosing out on its young talents. If one takes into account the consequences of hartals one indeed would call it a moral and social sin and evil. It is also undemocratic for it curtails the fundamental rights of citizens. A simple survey of the political leadership would reveal that their children are either studying abroad or in private institutions. Besides the development process of the general people is severely hampered as funds from the human security sectors, like health, education, economic reforms are diverted to fund the special security institutions formed to tackle not only violence and damage related to hartal but also the general violence and criminalisation of politics.

It has also been observed that preoccupation with issues of party politics takes up the space for debates on issues vital for human security, like education, economics, and health. More importantly it creates a psyche of siege, fear and a culture of intolerance of differences and dissent; consequently the later gives rise to a culture with a very high level of tolerance of violence. In terms of services, rights and human security, then democracy or the formal get up of democracy entails little meaning. This augurs ill both for the institutions and the lived reality of people. The strengthening of the forces of coercion and violence concurrently the devolution of power into the structures of autocracy and the enactment of coercive laws, though in the name of public safety and security only empowers the coercive institutions of state. A TIB report (DS 13.9.04). The casualty is not only the security of common people, but also the institutions of democracy. The formation of RAB, institution of Operation Clean Heart is suggestive of the failure or inability of the civil institutions to administer and control. This crisis of democracy is as much a consequence of internal maladies as it is of global and regional factors connected with terrorism, economic reforms, labor movements, small arms and drugs smuggling, and cross border insurgencies.

The second emerging scenario is what one is witnessing in Bangladesh politics today. There is a confluence of number of forces, both violent and accommodative. Though the two major actors are not talking to each other but they are talking through other channels. Several important developments have taken place in the arena of politics, following the August 21 grenade attack. On the one hand clear polarisation has taken place at the same time there are signs of accommodation. The major opposition party Awami League and the Left leaning parties have formed an alliance on the issues of ousting the government and anti fundamentalism. The government is blamed not only for its failure to provide security to the opposition and the general people but also harbouring fundamentalist forces by making the ruling alliance with the Jamaat. The fundamentalist forces are widely speculated to be responsible for the sudden eruption of grenade and bomb attacks and the threat to use them. This hard line is again marked by a degree of understanding, which was absent before.

The opposition has chalked out different strategies to protest, largely due to the pressure by the Left leaning parties and also sensing the general pulse of the people recourse to hartal has not been adopted as the main tool of protest. Instead mass level contacts and mobilization at the district levels along with protest marches, human chains are being organised. The opposition has also joined the parliament to

protest the grenade attacks and have a general discussion on the grenade attacks. In other words a multi pronged strategy has been adopted. The parliament as well as the street options are being used; whereas formerly the parliament option was ruled out in preference for the streets and hartals. The institutionalisation of politics requires taking back politics to the parliament. On the government side also despite hard talks there have been signs of accommodating the opposition positions. It has accepted international investigation of the grenade attacks. International assistance is being sought to tackle the problem. In the parliament also the position appeared to be making room for the demands of the opposition. Despite the above moves the country again seems to be plunged into the quagmire. The position and the opposition are under pressure from the people to act rationally and allow the functioning of the society. The government is under pressure to improve the security situation and the opposition too is urged upon to help the process.

The sustainability of the opposition alliance, or any political alliance is under question, given the divergence in their programs and agendas. Besides the major political parties have their eye on electoral politics. It is difficult to see them pursuing any agenda that might affect their votes. Consequently one might observe shifting alliance patterns and partners but alliance politics, it appears is there to stay. The present political crisis and the resulting configuration of issues and the compromises point towards a third probable and more likely scenario. The pressures from the citizen's forums would compel the political parties to compromise on their politics of confrontation. Widespread rights based activities by the non governmental sector at the community levels are conscientising the people about their rights. These activities are perceived as a threat to the traditional structures of power by the traditional leadership. Consequently one observes the rise in conservatism as well. In the name of religion and societal values they oppose these movements and activities. From the situation prevailing an increase in the confrontation between these forces is quite evident. But the syncretism and resistance inherent in the popular culture makes it most unlikely that the people would give in to communal forces. The pressures from the international community, the donors, the international civil society, it is argued is also a major force to reckon with. Civil society in Bangladesh too despite its' polarisations act as a strong pressure group. Increasing confrontations and polarisations at the different layers, it is suggested would compel the political leadership to move towards issue based politics and people's welfare. The polarisations and confrontations, arguably are indicative of the failure of the state to deliver. Political parties are coming to realise and feel the pressure of people's power and the pressure is increasingly on them to give up their politics of confrontation and deliver. This is however not going to happen tomorrow but the process is on.

In the past the military had intervened under such circumstances even under much lesser pretexts, but the non interference of military despite the continued deterioration of the general law and order is indicative of the growing maturity of the military and also the power of the civil. The 1991 oust Ershad movement and the consistent refusal of the civil society to accept Ershad's legitimacy, has made the military realise that the civil society will not accept military rule. Under such a scenario the continued bickering between the two major political parties is indeed ironic and sad. There is a general fatigue with the nature of politics. It has not been uncommon for the people to remark that Bangladesh should be run by non party elements as it happens during the term of caretaker government. These are strong signals to the political parties. People are searching for alternative politics, the politics of human security, accommodation and tolerance. It is expected that the political leadership would listen to and take cognizance of people's voices, which so far they have failed to do. The trajectories for the futures of democracy in Bangladesh are mixed and complex. Intense political confrontation marked by pressures from below and above, i.e., within and outside would continue. Unless the political parties come to a minimum consensus the non state actors would appropriate the state.