

DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH

Shantanu Majumder
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Dhaka
e-mail: shantanu.majumder@sas.ac.uk

Introduction

It is not necessary to be a person of high intellect to say that the current version of democracy is not working well in Bangladesh. Rather, several trends, for example, post-2001 election violence against the religious minorities and political opposition, spread of terrorism, growth of religious militancy, electoral intrigues, use of police and armed forces with enormous power and immunity in the name of maintaining law and order, failure in poverty alleviation, institutionalization of corruption, confrontation among the big political parties (which is not ideological in essence), violation of human rights, state violence against individuals in the name of security and integrity of state, and so on has given birth to a vital question: what are the differences between a consent-based political system and an undemocratic regime?

There is a valid ground in favour of the aforementioned question. Yet it would be logically incoherent to say that Bangladesh obtained nothing positive in its experience with democracy. In an attempt to evaluate the 'outcomes' of democracy, this article considers the term 'outcomes' as an analysis of the previous and current situation under the civil regimes and naturally includes both the beneficial and problematic results so far evident as the process continues. It is therefore meant as an assessment of the achievements and failures of the civil regimes.

This article refrains from shedding light on the military regimes that can be treated as complete deviations from the democratic way of rule and according to the 22-point rulings of Bangladesh High Court on August 2005, were unconstitutional. As per the verdict of the court, usurpation of state power through martial law proclamation was not only unconstitutional but also a grave legal wrong (Halim 2005). From the same point of view, reintroduction of multi-party politics, party-building, holding local and national elections, experiments on local government and similar activities have all been treated as the efforts of the military dictators to make their regime legitimate, sustainable and to obtain acceptance of the rank and file and the international community as well (Jahan 2005). This article argues that military rule in Bangladesh was a negative outcome of democracy. Besides, it can be seen as a severe failure of the civil regime to protect democracy as Huntington (1968: 194) said, 'the most important causes of military intervention in politics are not military but political.' This paper has been divided into three main parts. An attempt has been made to identify the major achievements in the journey towards liberal democracy in the first section. The second section endeavours to deal with the reasons and evidences of the malfunctioning from two perspectives: party-political and socio-economic domains. The final section will attempt to identify several short-term initiatives to be undertaken in order to make liberal democracy effective in Bangladesh. In addition, as a part of the long term initiative, effort has also been given to understand if there is any relationship between the malfunctioning and the current version of democracy namely, liberal democracy.

Part One: The Saga of Success

First Civil Regime (1971-75)

In December 1971, after twenty-four years long struggles and movements and a bloody war of nine months that cost millions of lives, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state with huge expectation for a pro-people democratic polity. Though it was short lived and showed undemocratic tendencies in many cases, in comparison with the previous state order, i.e., the Pakistani system, the first civil regime was successful in initiating some of the basic norms and values of the liberal democracy. Three major achievements are discussed below.

Modern Constitution: Framing a modern-secular constitution in the shortest possible time can be described as the first and foremost success of the first civil regime. A new constitution had been drafted within nine months of its independence, while Pakistan took nine years to complete the same feat. Upto 1956, Pakistan was ruled under the Government of India Act 1935 that was a device of the colonial administration. In order to draft a constitution for the new state, a Constituent Assembly was established in March 1972 under the Constituent Assembly Order 1972. The Assembly formed a Drafting Committee in April. In early November, the new constitution was enacted. The preamble of the Constitution ensured that the state will ensure rule of law, fundamental rights, freedom, equality and justice for the citizens of the *Prajatantra* (Republic). In Article 153, it was mentioned that if any dispute arises from the differences in the *Bangla* and English version of the constitution, the former should prevail which was an indication of 'internalising modern constitutional concepts in our legal culture' (Rahman 1998: 117).

It is a fact that there were limitations in the process of framing the constitution. The Book was basically drafted by the lawyers, though adept. Very little input from intellectuals, political scientists and politicians that could have made the constitution more pro-people, was received. These groups inevitably would have had a strong and instinctive understanding of the needs, hopes and aspirations of the population and so might have led to the inclusion, within the necessary legal framework, of aspects to emphasize the whole purpose of the act. Nevertheless, the new constitution was an invaluable documentation and a big success. It was mostly successful in formulating the dreams and aspirations of the *Bangali* masses in a legal format, which include democracy, socialism, secularism, and *Bangali* nationalism as the cornerstones for what the race fought for a long time.

Embargo upon Religious Politics: Another success of the first civil regime was the constitutional embargo upon religious politics. It is worth mentioning that banning of religious politics was not only a victory of secular *Bangali* nationalism over the religion based Pakistani nationalism but it also showed the maturity of the Bengali ruling elites considering the experiences and socio-cultural reality.

It seems that experiences of the abuse of religion in the formative phase of Pakistan, during the era of united Pakistan and in the nine months of liberation war in 1971 by the religious parties and groups in the name of religion encouraged the first civil regime in Bangladesh to give a second thought regarding the De Tocquevillian (2000:216) straightforward democratic right of every individual to form associations. The regime was apparently convinced that there was a further possibility of anti-democratic uprising through the use of religion using right to form association. Probably the regime thought that those forces, instead of building civility in the society, might try to bring into reality, 'an uncivil society which will be violent and confrontational' (John & Patricia 1998: 780-81). In response to that possibility Article 38, paragraph 2 of the first Constitution states: ' provided that no person shall have the right to form or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union which in the name of or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues, a political purpose.'

Anti-secular forces misinterpreted the constitutional embargo upon religious politics as an official assault on religion. However, the civil regime (and the secular force) was apathetic to convince the populace in favour of their argument that embargo upon religious politics was a reflection of the aspirations for a modern liberal state.

Parliament Election: The parliamentary elections held in March 1973 can be described as one of the major successes of the first civil regime. Holding a general election within fifteen months of the inception of the state was an incredible achievement totally contrary to the experience in the era of united Pakistan that took twenty-three years for the first general election that ultimately resulted in the break up of the state and the birth of Bangladesh. Opposite to the military-bureaucratic way of ruling, holding a general election in the shortest possible time showed the respect of the first civil regime to the urge of the Bengalis during the era of internal colonialism for a consent based polity.

Second Civil Regime:

Through a basically city-centric, mass upheaval in December 1990, after fifteen years long Cantonment Rule by two military dictators, Bangladesh made its fresh start towards Western-

liberal democracy. At that time, expectation regarding the working of democracy reached to its maximum height. However, the expectation of that time has already been faded, if not disappeared, and frustrations regarding the fate of democracy are evident in all spheres of Bangladesh society. Yet Bangladesh has achieved several remarkable developments during this period compared to its military predecessors. Some of the successes in the post-military democratic era are discussed below.

Politics of Reconciliation: Since the effort for the restoration of democracy in 1990s, Bangladesh politics has been showing the tendencies of a politics of reconciliation (Islam 2002:66-67). November Declaration of 1990, jointly made by the opposition parties, had outlined the future political structure of Bangladesh, and also worked as a stimulus to end second military dictatorship in Bangladesh. Basically, the outline paved the way for the initiation of a parliamentary democracy, based on the voting system, which would reflect the numerical consent of the populace. At the same time, the outline vowed to restrict transfer of power through any unconstitutional means, establishment of the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, nullification of all the anti-humanitarian laws etc.

Again, in 1996, the political parties became successful in making an agreement regarding the constitutional provision of Caretaker Government, which was given the task of holding a free, fair and neutral election upon the completion of a term by a political party.

Regular Election: Bangladesh has witnessed peaceful transfer of power on the basis of electoral verdicts held on regular intervals during the last three occasions, though it has become a habit that the party defeated in the election alleges electoral rigging and frauds. Yet, it can be said that national elections in the post-military era were free and apparently fair and have an immense impact on the political culture of Bangladesh. This trend is also a discouraging message to the anti-democratic forces that used to design unconstitutional means for taking over power in the past.

Towards a bi-party system: Since the fresh start, election results hint that Bangladesh is gradually moving towards a viable two-party parliamentary system. Although obtaining support from (or making coalition with) allied political parties and groups, the two major political parties, namely Awami League (AL), and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with huge support among the voters have been mandated to rule the state through election. Whereas some of the South Asian neighbours, for example India, Pakistan, Nepal and even some of the South East Asian countries have been suffering from 'the uncertainties associated with a multiplicity of parties sharing state power or remain exposed to the authoritarianism associated with a single party dominated polity' (Sobhan 2002:3-4). This trend toward a bi-party system is, indeed, a signal of a prospect of Western liberal democracy in Bangladesh, notwithstanding the current confrontational politics making the democratic process dysfunctional to a great extent.

High Turnout in National Election: One of the major achievements in the last fifteen years is the high turn out in national elections. Since 1990, due to an environment of fairness, national elections create great enthusiasm among the voters (and the non-voters as well). This is in total contrast to the apathetic attitude in the military era, when everybody knew that the results would be rigged. In most of the Western states, out of frustration or anger regarding the exiting political system or the misdeeds of the politicians, voting turnout is decreasing day by day. Whereas, in Bangladesh, despite the people undoubtedly being annoyed with some aspects of the political system and individual politicians in the democratic era, the voter turnout has remained at an exceptional level. For example, in the parliamentary election in 2001, a voter turnout of

75.59% was recorded. This can be treated as an indication of the determination of the electorate to be part of the political system.

In spite of many shortcomings, if this trend continues, it can be hoped that in future Bangladesh might have a quality and mature electorate able to put necessary pressures on the politicians, political parties and the state machinery. Development of infrastructure and mobility (Islam 2002: 69), up-to-a-level-free media and access to information technology will also give impetus to the aforementioned process.

Rise of Dissident Culture: Since 1990s, like other parts of the world, the term 'democracy' has become very popular in Bangladesh, due to the end of the cold war, triumph of capitalism in the name of democracy over the Soviet-style state socialism and fall of the military dictators in many parts of the world through mass movements. At that phase, an urban mass upheaval in Bangladesh contributed to the fall of military rule and the resurrection of parliamentary democracy.

Even though, from that period on, interestingly, two apparently contradictory ideas have been working simultaneously in the political life of the state. On the one side, there has been a tremendous growth of discussion among academics to the toiling masses on the problems, prospects, ways of consolidation and institutionalization, establishment of the norms and values of democracy. On the other hand, serious frustrations regarding the ongoing version of democracy are also very much evident among many of the above-mentioned groups. It seems that like other parts of world, a 'dissident culture' (Chomsky 2002) is emerging gradually in Bangladesh, which is eager to give a fresh thought to the current practice and to accept the conventional approach of the political parties. Success of some the non-partisan but political movements in current years can be mentioned in this connection.

For example, student movement at Dhaka University in 2002 in response to a brutal police attack in a female hostel, which ultimately resulted in the resignation of the VC. Notably, it was not the student organizations affiliated with the political parties but the politically conscious non-partisan general students who were in the forefront of the movement. The same can be said regarding the movement that flourished in March 2004 following the ultimately fatal assault on Professor Humayun Azad of Dhaka University, who was well known for his anti-fundamentalist stand. This time again, instead of political parties, the movement was carried on by the general students, cultural organizations, and some other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Latest evidence of the growth of a non-partisan but politically involved dissident culture is the Kansat episode in early 2006, when inhabitants in a remote area of North Bengal were involved in confrontation with law and order forces in order to attain the regular supply of electricity which is essential for irrigation and domestic use.

The growth of these types of non-party-centric politics indicates an awakening of the public mind regarding the stereotype definition of politics. Through the experience of severe misdeeds by the politicians in the name of democracy, people herein increasingly learning that 'politics is more than just something politicians do' (Parenti 2002:3). This change might be treated as one of the major positive outcome of the Bangladesh democracy.

Growth of Economy: Though there is hardly any evidence of rationality in case of distribution, there is reason to believe that practice of a constitutional system has contributed to the growth of economy in Bangladesh. Table 1 (Akash 2003) shows that in the first decade of the second phase of democracy, contribution of real aid in GDP has decreased whereas one can identify steady growth in GDP in the same period. Now a days, as a resource for development, contribution of

foreign aid in GDP is 2 or 3% where as the share was around 10% in the 1980s. It is true that, there are many other reasons behind the decline in aid-dependence, such as pressure from the donors for receiving Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) instead of aid, narrowing the scope of receiving aid due to the change in the global political reality, failure in fulfilling the preconditions (expected and unexpected). However, it can be argued that there is a relationship between the practice of parliamentary democracy and in improved resource mobilization as well as in expansion of export earnings (Sobhan 2002:7) that contributes to minimizing aid dependency.

Again, Table 2 (Akash 2003) indicates gradual growth of the size of export, remittance, and foreign exchange in the post-military era. Analysing the trend of data, it may be possible to argue that as time passed after the restoration of democracy, the overall economic performance improved at a slow but steady rate. All these, lead us to a conclusion that the consent based ruling system since 1990 has been contributing in the economic growth of Bangladesh in a positive manner, though failed to provide answer to problems of distribution.

Table: 1

Trends of Foreign aid and GDP

Year	Real aid as Percentage of Real GDP	Growth Rate of GDP
1990-91	5.62	3.34
1995-96	3.54	4.62
1999-2000	3.20	5.47

Table 2

Trends of Export, Remittance, Foreign exchange and inequality.

(Crore Tk.)

Year	Export	Remittance	Total Foreign Exchange Earnings	Total Foreign Export Earnings as % of Import	Ratio of the income of top 5% to that of bottom 5% Households
1990-91	6125	2725.62	8850.62	70.6	18 (1991-92)
1994-95	13130	4814.47	17944.47	76.5	

1995-96	13857	4970.47	18827.47	66.5	27
1996-97	16564	6300.04	22864.00	74.8	
1999-2000	24923	9807.03	34730.03	82.4	46 (2000-01)

Note: The inequality data in the last column is calculated from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey data published by BBS and pertains to the specific year of the survey.

Main intention of this section is to say that Bangladesh has been experiencing a much better system of ruling under the civil regime(s) in comparison to the internal colonial era and military dictatorships. At the same time, it is also important to mention that the current version of democracy in Bangladesh is neither flawless nor working well. In the next chapter, attention has been given to analyzing the problems of the current model of democracy here.

Part Two: Malfunctioning Democracy

What is going on in Bangladesh in the name of democracy? What is the outcome of this democracy? Does democracy mean merely the practice of a universal suffrage? Isn't it important to raise the question that who gets what and why? If democracy means the rule of the people, by the people and for the people, do the people of Bangladesh govern really? Experiences of the masses under the civil regimes, especially, since the reintroduction of democracy, bring these questions into the forefront. A general agreement has already been established that Western-liberal type democracy is not functioning properly in Bangladesh. In this part, an attempt has been given to explore the reasons behind the malfunctioning of Western-liberal type democracy. With a view to discussing the flaws of the current version of democracy, two major domains, i.e., party-political and socio-economic have been taken into consideration.

Party-Political Domain:

Political parties have played the crucial role in the making of the history of the nation. Anti-colonial movements in the Pakistan era, organizational role in the liberation war and movements against post-independent military (and civil) dictatorship recall the glorious role of the political parties. However, these are the one side of the reality. What is the other side of the story?

Rounaq Jahan (2003:223-29) evaluated 2002 Bangladesh politics -- ' The year did not bring any change in the way government and politics function in Bangladesh. The destructive confrontation between the government and the political opposition has continued. Most disturbing was the fact that political leaders were unwilling to recognize how their actions are threatening the very fabric of democracy... The failure of the two political parties [Awami League and BNP] to peacefully negotiate their differences threatens the future of democracy in Bangladesh.' No doubt, nothing has changed since these remarks were made.

It seems that this statement considers malfunctioning of parliamentary democracy as a domestic issue and found no role of the external factors (and actors) in the politics of a post-colonial state like Bangladesh. Similar to this statement, majority in Bangladesh believe that the political parties are solely responsible for the current crises of democracy. This type of conclusion shows a deep frustration regarding the abuse of the system by the parties and politicians in practicing parliamentary democracy. Though it is not a sign of a mature political culture to discredit the politicians or parties all the time, it shows the level of dissatisfaction regarding the performance of the politicians and the parties that encourages people and experts to offer immunity to the other exposed or unexposed stakeholders contributing in the malfunctioning of democracy.

Moreover, the politicians and the parties in Bangladesh 'have also shown high degree of instability, the parties have undergone a continuous process of fission or quick fragmentation as well as fusion and proliferation. Their leaders and workers have frequently changed loyalties, created new symbols, new identities and new parties' (Islam 2002: 61). Taking into consideration these issues an attempt has been made in this section to understand how the politicians and parties are nurturing obstacles to a proper parliamentary system.

Money and Muscle Politics: As evidence of the existence of consent based ruling system in Bangladesh since 1990, it is possible to cite the example of three consecutive as well as successful parliamentary elections. But what is going on in the arena of real politics is in stark opposition to the theory of liberal democracy. Mainstream politics of Bangladesh can be labelled as the politics of Money and Muscles.

Money has become a crucial factor from local level to national level politics, in many cases the most important factor, in running an organization, getting nomination and in winning elections. Arbitrary use of money in politics is affecting the democratic process in two ways. First, this practice is narrowing the scope for the real politicians and widening paths for those who have funding ability and take politics as a scope to make more money through the use of political power and connection. Politics has become a shield in securing undue incomes of these 'money-movers' in politics. This trend, on the one hand, creates obligation on the parties and the political leaders to offer undue favours to the financiers. And in doing so, Bangladesh politics develops a peculiar symbiosis of politicians, businessman and bureaucrats (Sobhan 2002:5-6). Second, use of money in politics has been changing the voting culture, especially, of the vulnerable groups. Taking advantage of the situation, local touts, *vote-baparais* and *matbars* mediate the whole process of 'money for vote' practice on behalf of the chance-makers in politics.

Along with the extensive rolling of money, use of violent methods as a means of power tussle is also a regular practice among the major political parties in Bangladesh. Government usually does not hesitate to use the law and order force, party cadres and *Mastan-Sontrasis* (something like gangsters and hooligans) in order to control the opposition movements. On the other hand, in response, major opposition parties damage public and private property rampantly. With a view to eliminate or control the rival, use of *Mastans-Sontrasis* by many of the politicians and major political parties is an open secret. It can be said that 'the existing political system itself makes the mastan an acceptable actor' (Ahmed 2004: 102). The same can be said about the reason behind the existence of the *sontrasis*. Besides, use of terror against the religious and the ethnic minorities at the time of election has become endemic. In many parts of the country, the women and the poor are often the victims of election time violence. Metaphorically, it can be said that a

Honda-Gunda (motor cycle-muscleman) culture (Akash 2004) has captured the arena of politics in Bangladesh.

Moreover, similar to the colonial era, street-centric politics is dominating the discourse of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh that enhances the chance of violence. Taken into account the current use of money and muscle investment in politics for power, it is hard to differentiate between civil and *khaki* (military) regime. One difference may be identified between the power-centric politics of civil and military regimes in capturing, consolidating and maintaining power: military regimes use guns and tanks, whereas democratic parties use other measures such as *hartal*, strikes, car-smashing, and the rest (Ahmed 2003: 373-75), all in the name of democratic right and protest against the misdeeds of the ruling party or state.

Epidemic of Hartals: One of the most noticeable and damaging negative aspects since the reintroduction of democracy is the dramatic rise in the number of Hartals (nationwide strikes). A study of UNDP (UNDP 2005) shows the cost of Hartals to be equivalent to 3-4 percent of GDP.

Apart from the adverse negative impact on production and businesses, Hartals affect the rural and urban unskilled and semi-skilled labour force and daily wage-earners directly. Besides, educational institutions and service sectors also suffer from the epidemic of Hartals. The UNDP report shows 95 percent people surveyed believes that Hartals are damaging for economy and society. However, reality shows that major political parties in Bangladesh persist in considering Hartals as the main option for movements or opposing government, which is undoubtedly a reflection of disrespect to the will of the people. Major parties are also inconsistent in their position. They deplore Hartals when in power but readily practice this measure when in opposition as their Constitutional right.

This double-standard regarding Hartals is one indication of the determination of the major political parties to gain power at any cost, even if the means is damaging to the development process or goes against the will of the people.

Absence of Democracy within the Party: Practice of democracy within the major parties, who determine the course of politics, is absent in Bangladesh. There is no provision for election in the central and local level of the major political parties. In the case of the two big parties, i.e., AL and BNP, some sort of dynastic system is prevailing at the highest level. In the course of time, such a peculiar system has developed that nobody even dares to show interest for the top post, since it would obviously damage his or her career and position in the party.

Instead of a fair democratic competition, family status or influence or connection with the higher authority of the party has become crucial in holding a position within the party. At the same time, in many cases, grass-root level politicians in the party have been cornered by the new comers, for example, retired civil-military bureaucrats, business elite turned politicians and mafias. These new comers have, not surprisingly, better financial ability or connection with the party high command.

Absence of an Enlightened Political Class: Expansion of modern (basically Western) education, a strong economy, social equity, and a culture of tolerance are some of the preconditions for the success of a Western liberal type democracy in a polity. However, there is exception. For example, amongst the post-colonial states, India has become successful in operating a consent based parliamentary system. Even so, it has failed to materialize many of the above-mentioned preconditions. For many, India's democracy is a sham (Jalal 1995) since issues like caste politics, extreme poverty, socio-economic inequality, regionalism and religious fundamentalism still

influencing the politics of India to a large extent. However, the critics of Indian politics also agreed that this (i.e., Indian) democracy could help reduce inequalities, at least social if not economic (Varshney 2000: 3-25). For many, reason behind this 'political miracle' (Jones 1978: 131-43) is the flourishing of an educated, enlightened and experienced political class by 1920 to 1945 who were committed and internalized the values of the Western democracy. History also reveals that commitment of the political class played a vital role in the success of Western liberal democracy in many states like UK, USA, Italy and Germany (Almond & Verba 1963: 483).

The Bangladesh political system lacks such an enlightened political class with necessary knowledge in the art of ruling and accommodating opposing views. During the colonial and military rules democratic political parties and politicians in this region obtained excellence in the politics of opposition. Political oppositions have continued to use the same technique against the party-in-power even after independence. Again, the ruling party has failed to show due respect to the opposition, which makes the liberal democracy virtually ineffective. As a result of this failure from both sides, today the Bangladeshi version of democracy means merely a tussle for state power. And the rules of the game of liberal democracy have hardly been practiced.

Patron-clientilism: Both vertical and horizontal 'patron-client relationship' (Islam 2002: 61-65) have been practised within the major political parties of Bangladesh, which have contributed to the decay of one of the basics of any political party, i.e., offering service to the people. In exercising vertical patron-clientilism, the political parties develop a hierarchic system of leaders and cadres from centre to the grass root level. This relationship, in many cases spreads on the basis of kinship, and localized and personalized ties. Battling for leadership, winning elections at any cost, personal benefit etc., have become the top priorities instead of dedication for the people or promoting democracy or upholding party ideology.

Again, a horizontal patron-clientilist system has also been practised by the political parties, particularly by the party-in-power, through a process of creating loyalties, allegiances and collusion with the key actors of the state and other organizations in the society. These two types of practice have been infecting the possibilities of liberal democracy severely since 1990. It creates undue pressure on the state institutions. In gaining state reward, connection with the political bosses has been prioritized, instead of merit or qualification or necessity. Moreover, this process undermines the scope of electing or making of a leader in a proper way within the party since blessings of the leader has become the main criterion instead of working ability, dedication and quality that need to be considered.

Socio-Economic Domain:

The aim of the democratic movements against internal colonialism and the liberation war was two-fold: political independence and economic emancipation. In 1971, Bangladesh obtained its political freedom. But after more than thirty years of its birth the same cannot be said regarding the second part of the aim.

Democracy has become, basically, a game played by the major political parties to get on the gravy train of state power. In this game, people are supposed to play the role of spectators all the time, except on the day of national elections once in five years. This can be described as one of the glaring negative outcomes of democracy in Bangladesh. It seems that the Bangladeshi version of democracy equates democracy with the provision of a regular national election

arrangement only. It also neglects the importance of exercising democracy at the grass-root level that could make liberal democracy meaningful so that the masses develop a sense that they are also dignified stake-holders in the system. By and large, in the third world states' practice of democracy still remains confined to the middle class and organized sectors of the urban society (Amin 1996:78-99). Bangladesh is no exception. Moreover, values of liberal democracy are mostly absent in the socio-economic domain, since there has been a fabrication of the faulty idea that democracy is a system related to the state apparatus solely.

From this point of view, democracy in Bangladesh is crippled and also struggling to survive at the state level even. Some reasons can be traced behind the failure of liberal democracy in the socio-economic domain.

Weak Civil Society: A non-partisan civil society, one of the foremost pre-conditions of the success of liberal democracy, which is able to pressure create and bargain and, negotiate with the state without the influence of political parties in favour of the citizen is yet to flourish in Bangladesh. Most of the CSOs, specifically in the post-military phase, are guided by the vision of the political parties, instead of pursuing an independent policy. According to Rehman Sobhan (Sobhan 2002a: 18), 'Civil society is increasingly becoming divided along our principal fault lines'. As a result of this, now a day, almost all welfare issues of the CSOs become controversial. Since, one misinterprets the other, in real sense, misdeeds of the state remain unchallenged. Apparently non-partisan local advocacy NGOs also, if we consider them as part of civil society, are free from this shortcoming (Majumder 2002).

This failure of the CSOs is one of the major reasons behind the irresponsibility of the state and its tendency to escalate violence. There has been no change in these activities of the state, though the government has been changing. Negligence to basic rights and Constitution, violation of human rights, interference in individual freedom and expression can be seen in every regime. However, intensity of such negative activities is way lower under the civil regime than a military one.

Politico-ideological conflict among the CSOs entails two more problems. Firstly, one of the specialties of liberal democracy, i.e., the 'patterns of civility' (Foley & Edwards 1996: 39) has not grown here. Secondly, some organizations that are neither pro-people nor holding public opinion have been getting the legitimacy of working as a part of civil society. A good number of educational institutions, medical centre, bank, insurance company etc. led by the religious fundamentalists' are the example of that type of organization. Though pretending, the real motif of these factions is not to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh. Thirdly, possibility of a 'three celled democracy' (Leaching 1988: 222-224) where civil society can act as an intermediary between the state and the private sector instead of a 'binary' model i.e., government versus private sector concept has been reduced.

It is remarkable that a persuasive theory of 'state without civil society' (Chandhoke 1995: 8-13) was not imagined in the era of struggle for independence. As a result of the failure in meaningful interplay between state and society (Reuschmeyer 1985) in the post-independent phase, it has consequently not been possible to restrain the state from arbitrary practices and also to evaluate critically the state activities. However, for a liberal democracy it is indispensable, because 'no emancipation is possible in the modern world without a strong civil society that can strengthen the public sphere and can provide a haven from a centre of resistance to the Behemoth state'

(Gouldner 1980: 355 -373). There is little room to disagree with this statement for a country like Bangladesh struggling for the proper working of liberal democracy.

Disrespect to Pluralism: The Bangladesh state has failed to safeguard the different ways of life in terms of culture, belief, practice or religion for the individuals and especially, for the ethnic and religious minorities and women, even sometimes for a sect of the dominant religion. Some sort of 'majoritarian' approach in the name of values, tradition, and indigenous culture or respect for the religion of the majority is prevailing.

Military presence at Chittagonj Hill Tracts (CHT) that violates the provisions of the Peace accord of 1997, attacks on the religious minorities immediately after the election result in 2002, banning of the Ahmadiyya publications by the Government in January 2004 that directly fuelled the extremists' demand for an official declaration that the Ahmadis are non-Muslim, regular practice of *Fatwa* (which is illegal since the High Court ruling in January 2001) by the religious clerics, in most cases against women: these are some examples of the state disregarding its duty to safeguard the different ways of life in Bangladesh.

Disrespect to pluralism has also been accelerated by the governmental decision of internationalization of capital markets, investment and production and by the state-business alliances in the domestic market (Jahangir 2002: 105-110) that resulted in the collapse of social democracy. The savaging of social safety nets, welfare systems and price subsidies, and the privatization of state owned properties and services- all these can be cited as evidence in this connection. This decay of social democracy along with the omnipresence of a market based economic system reducing the scope to live one's life in a different way. For the upper echelon, in order to maintain control over the society and market, liberal democracy with all of its values, cannot be a potential solution. Hence homogenization is needed. It seems that Bangladesh is moving towards an 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria 1997) where pluralism or different ways of life is not accepted in the society. In the economic sphere, instead of liberal democratic views, neo-liberal thought has triumphed. Around the world, it is creating a political culture that privileges the consumer over the citizen (Sheth & Nandy 1996: 16).

Bangladesh, day by day, shifting towards the neo-liberal idea, is an indication of the dominance of 'the American conception of the world' (Jahangir 2002:107-109), which encourage apolitical consumerism in the social arena of the peripheral societies. This is the trend, which treats market economy as the ultimate way to attain democracy (Fukuyama 1989). This paradigm shift as in many parts of the world indicates the erosion of the post-renaissance European liberal democracy and the growth of post- war market based American neo-liberal democracy. If this continues, in future, Bangladesh may have a democracy with 'a combination of private property system, market relation and possessive individualism' (Hall 1991) and this democracy would have had no say for those issues that could make liberal democracy meaningful.

Failures of the Secular Force: Triumph of the religious fundamentalist force over the secular politics can probably be described as the most deadly blow to the liberal democracy in Bangladesh. In the course of time, use of religion in politics has become so crucial that currently even the liberal political parties hesitate to speak in favour of secularism, for the fear of offending religious sentiment and loosing votes. Significant organizational strength of the fundamentalist force gives birth to a question, is Bangladesh becoming a Taliban State? (Riaz 2004: 9-15).

Successful alliance between the religious fundamentalist force and the non-fundamentalist-non-secular parties, the flow of international funds for the anti-secular forces, abuse of religious sentiments by the military and civil regimes, uncertainty of modern life and Western generalization of fundamentalism --- all these reasons can be attributed to the growth of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Despite these factors, the failure in analyzing and understanding the idea of secularism by the democratic secularists can be considered as one of the major reasons behind the growth of the current religious fervour. *Bangali* secular democratic forces (both nationalists and leftists) following the teleological construction of modernity, failed to realize that the success of secularism depends to a large extent on the proper analysis of the socio-economic- historic reality of an area. In defining democracy, secularism and modernity, they also failed to recognize the vast contradiction in the formative phase among the European societies in 'transformation, articulation and combination of the elements of modernity' (Kaviraj 2000: 160).

Again, the secular force erroneously felt comfort in treating all religious organizations and movements as fundamentalist where as some of them are engaged in confronting religious fundamentalism. The modernist democratic *Bangali* elites, biased by the idea of objectification and bureaucratic rationality, view the state craft in fully secular, scientific, amoral, and dispassionate terms and give over emphasis on the acceptance of western secularism as equal to the acceptance of the ideology of progress and modernity (Nandy 1998). Moreover, the idea of secularism followed a wrong path from the beginning here since the pioneers of secularism failed to realize the 'exclusionary dynamic of modernity, on borrowing, blending, and cross-fertilization' (Gole 2000: 91). All these failures of the secular force, along with the state patronage for religious extremism from time to time, have been deepening the problem of liberal democracy in Bangladesh.

Absence of a Dominant Class: The idea of liberal democracy, which flourished in Europe by the bourgeois class, as a means to confront feudalism is basically oppressive. But compared to the feudal way of ruling, it can ensure more welfare for the people. This statement is more or less valid in the place of origin of liberal democracy, i.e. the West. But the experience is not the same in a transitional society like Bangladesh. An entrepreneur bourgeois class as the dominant force, which is essential for the functioning of this system, has not flourished yet. Rather, a comprador bourgeois class, without any inclination to entrepreneurship and basically interested in money-making through undue state facilities has emerged. Moreover, a feudalistic mode of production, culture and attitude is also playing a dominant role.

In the absence of a proper bourgeois class, a peculiar alignment of the feudalists and the comprador bourgeoisies has been dominating the social, economic, cultural and political realm that is strengthening the social hierarchy. Besides, due to this practice, a patron-client relationship in the form of "cash or kind" has been shaping the society in a pyramidal form. Irrational distribution of wealth, opportunity and reward has been minimizing the scope of social mobilization.

As a result of the aforesaid malpractices existing in the party-political and socio-economic domains, frustration of the 'have not' groups regarding the system is growing day by day and making the possibility of liberal democracy increasingly difficult in Bangladesh.

[Part Three: Is there any way out?](#)

A few short-term initiatives that might be helpful for the improvement of the present condition of democracy in Bangladesh have been discussed in this section. In addition, as part of the long-term initiative, an attempt has been made to question the justification for the omnipresence of liberal democracy as the one and only form of ruling.

Short Term Initiatives:

Democratization of the Political Parties: Democratization of the political parties needs to be considered as a major precondition in order to materialize the scope of Western liberal democracy in Bangladesh that was created in 1990. Some measures can be taken, with a view to minimize the malpractices and to strengthen intra-party democracy. For example, initiation of election system from top to lower bodies of the parties (Ahmed 2003: 385), enactment of law(s) regarding the source of funding, candidate selection process, election expenditure, annual audit (Kamal 1995:55) and some other measures would create pressure for the practice of democracy within the party. At the same time, these provisions would also force the parties to follow the norms and values of liberal democracy in the political and state arena.

Again, reforming the political finance system can be effective in changing the exiting political culture since there is a great relationship between the use of private funds by the parties and the minimization of the scope of a liberal democracy in Bangladesh. Major political parties receive huge amounts of black money for organizational and election purposes (Ahmed 2004a). This is why, for them, it is not possible to maintain transparency and to stand for the pro-people issues or politics as they hesitate to hamper the interest of the ‘donors’ to the party fund. Provision of allocating money in the national budget for the political parties may place an obstacle to the use of black money. Either the number of seats in the parliament or number of votes received in the last national election could be the criteria of funding for a party from the state (Sobhan 2002: 5-6).

Strengthening Local Government: Global experience shows that success of democracy heavily depends upon the smooth working of local government. Time to time, several reforms have taken place in the local government system of Bangladesh aimed at making local councils accountable and responsive to the people. However, from the beginning, as in many other arenas, a ‘culture of destruction’ hinders the sustainability of a structure of local government. Once a political party comes to power there is a tendency to stop or destroy the previous structure. For this reason, scope to participate in the local government, which admits the people to learn the techniques of self-rule and help to consider themselves as a dignified, and useful stake holder of the system is absent. In order to make liberal democracy meaningful, political parties need to reach into an agreement in developing a sustainable structure of local government that will not be hampered by the change of regime.

Refining Parliamentary Culture: Activities of the parliamentarians in the House can be described as the most visible evidence of the malfunctioning of liberal democracy in Bangladesh. In many cases, the language, gesture and level of tolerance of the members do not fit with the norms of the parliamentary democracy. Again, a “majority talks the most” culture is evident in the parliament.

In order to attain a sophisticated parliamentary culture, it is important to practise some of the rules ritualistically, such as, adjournment motion and vote of censure, cut-motion, vote of no-confidence and criticism of the Cabinet members. Moreover, strengthening the parliamentary committees and initiating the floor crossing provision could be helpful in improving the proper functioning of the parliament. Besides, up gradation of the status of the parliamentarians is also

important (Rahman 1995:74-86). Now, according to the rules of business, the Cabinet Secretary and the Chief Secretary of the state is enjoying the higher status than a member of the parliament, which is contrary to the idea of the supremacy of the people's representatives in the state affairs.

Practice of Cyber Democracy: Currently, the idea of cyber democracy has captured the mind of many in the developed liberal democratic states. For them, tremendous development in convergence of communication and technology has created a possibility to reach the notion of democracy in the grass root level, which can ensure a real citizen based democracy (Tsagarousianou 1998: 167-77). With an expectation to challenge the monopoly of existing political hierarchies over powerful communication media, experiment with remote computing, telephone conferencing technology and interactive cable television has started there. Again, availability of Internet technology has increased the scope of interaction of the social actors and activists.

However, the reality of Bangladesh is completely different. Only a small percentage of the total population is enjoying the facilities of cyber technology and out of around seventy thousand villages, more than half are deprived from the electricity facility. Even though, the rate of cyber technology use is increasing, especially in the city areas and suburbs. Pro-democratic forces can take advantage of this in monitoring and exposing the malpractice, abuse and distortion of the system. ICT can also be helpful in reviewing the policies of the Government, and developing a culture of meaningful, issue based and academic focus group discussion. Furthermore, ICT can be considered as an essential means to gather and disseminate information effectively and rapidly that can strengthen the activities of the democratic forces.

Long Term Initiatives:

Rethinking Liberal Democracy: What is democracy? Is it only a way of governance or should democracy also take the task of social transformation? The experiment of democracy worldwide has been experiencing a perplexing situation regarding the aforementioned question. Since the collapse of state socialism and the end of the cold war, the discourse on democracy has become narrower and poorer (Sheth & Nandy 1996: 17) since a specific model, i.e., liberal democracy has become dominant.

Effort for the success of this model in Bangladesh has been confronting more complexities than the contemporary successful users of liberal democracy experienced in the beginning. This is not to argue that Bangladesh has been experiencing everything negative in the experiment with liberal democracy. Rather, in comparison to the colonial or military rule, the existing liberal democracy is a far better form of governance. But the question is should we treat a particular form of democracy as the final remedy for emancipation? Raising this question is important in the sense that in many parts of the world, liberal democracy has failed to bring significant change and to fulfil the expectation of the people.

Conclusion:

In analyzing the outcomes of democracy in Bangladesh, we need to consider democracy as something multi-dimensional. Democracy should not be treated as a means of political governance only.

Whether the current practice of democracy is contributing to minimizing the problems of irrational distribution and marginalization process, is it tolerant to the different ways of life and diversity, is this system of governance ensuring the constitutional safeguards for the minorities, and finally, can this democracy materialize development? All these questions need to be taken into consideration in defining and exercising democracy in Bangladesh.

In spite of severe failures in materializing the project of democracy, if we consider several trends and positive outcomes of the civil regimes, it must be an exaggeration to comment that ‘liberal democracy has exhausted itself’ (Nandy 1996) in Bangladesh. Even though examining the negative outcomes of the second phase of democracy, it may be argued that the victory of 1990 has been undermined by the capitalist forces of privatization and practice of market economy that are reflected in every sphere of life. Consequently, ‘as a peripheral economy Bangladesh has become more marketised, more globalised, and more urbanised; and in the process it has now a large number of super-rich and an increasing number of uprooted poor people’ (Muhammad 2006: 1459). It seems that, influenced severely by the ‘Washington consensus’, this democracy insists that economic or social democracy has nothing to do with political democracy that contradicts the aims and objectives of the struggle for independence.

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