Democratic Consolidation and Credibility of Governance Institutions in Bangladesh

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Abstract
In recent years efforts have been made to improve governance by ensuring institutional performance and policing for greater transparency to sustain liberal democracy in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Since gaining independence in 1971, The People’s Republic of Bangladesh has been driven by internal power struggles and economic chaos, while attempting to develop a democratic society. A predominately Islamic country, Bangladesh’s representative government is battling poverty and rampant corruption. Although this study appreciates what Bangladesh has achieved so far, it seeks to deviate from the general trend that romanticizes Bangladesh’s democracy and its recent connection with new governance parameters. This study attempts to identify some of the major paradoxes that Bangladesh’s democracy is faced with. All these factors will be analyzed in the context of a contemporary notion of governance and democracy in Bangladesh.

Keywords
civil society, democracy, good governance, political culture, political institutions

Introduction
Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971 through a fierce armed struggle from Pakistan. But democratic consolidation in the country is in dilemma due to the fact that military and quasi-military governments have ruled for about 15 years within the 41 years of its independence. In 1991 democracy was restored in Bangladesh when a mass movement toppled a prolonged military regime. Restoration of democracy coincided with the initiative of governance reforms which have been introduced in a phased manner since the early 1990s. But there has been relatively little critical debate about the nature of liberal democratic reform and its likely impact on Bangladeshi society. Given the far-reaching nature of these new measures we need to examine carefully not only the
reforms but also the assumptions which lie behind the connections between economic reforms and democratic governance, bearing in mind historical and indigenous factors.

The dominant view nowadays among supporters of globalization is that markets and democracy are the universal prescriptions for the multiple ills of underdevelopment and weak governance. Liberal democracy and market capitalism are considered as the most efficient economic system the world has ever known. Liberal democracy is said to gradually transform the world into a community of prosperous, war-shunning nations, and turn individuals into liberal, civic-minded citizens and consumers. In these processes, backward aspects of underdevelopment, weak governance, corruption and poverty will be swept away in the non-Western world. In terms of the prevailing mindset, economic reforms and good governance as well as democracy form three interrelated and mutually supportive aspects of the development process in the contemporary world.

A package of governance measures has been taken by the Bangladesh government since 1991, backed up by international agencies and donor governments, as a necessity for an efficient and honest administration. Efficient administration and liberal democracy are perceived as the prerequisites for the success of economic reforms and also for political stability in the country (Joseph, 2001). Considerable publicity has been given to their efforts and, as a result of widespread cynicism and even the despair which exists about the prospects of reforming the political system, the promise of reform has aroused some enthusiasm (Sebudubudu and Osei-Hwedie, 2006). But the current governance agenda and fragile democracy have contributed to shaping the cosmetic democracy in Bangladesh. This work argues that a lot remains to be done to improve the quality of the Bangladeshi governance system to consolidate a genuine democracy. Thus democracy in Bangladesh needs to be reassessed in the light of a genuine governance system, going beyond the current rhetoric of democracy. This is because democracy has more meaning when there are checks and balances in place; but this kind of a balanced approach is yet to take shape in the contemporary politics of Bangladesh.

Significance of the Study

With reference to Bangladesh, despite the recent research work focused on new political and democratic arenas along with economic reforms, the issues surrounding the changes in governance and their impact on the political economy and democracy of Bangladesh have hardly been subjected to any comprehensive analysis. A book authored by Kamal Siddiqui (1996) entitled *Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh: Fifty Unpleasant Essays* touched upon the internal dynamics of Bangladeshi government and politics, as well as underlying problems in civil bureaucracy which need to be overcome to challenge the existing system and ensure good governance. One of the notable publications in particular displaying the characteristics of Bangladeshi democracy is entitled *Patron–Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh* written by Stanley A. Kochanek (1993). Another book edited by Zillur K. Khan (2011), entitled *Bangladesh in the Twenty First Century: Democracy, Development and Terrorism*, studied the organization of political groups, focusing on the patron–client relationships in democratic practices. Both the authors displayed a discernible appreciation of the ‘evolutionary’ interpretation of democratic development in Bangladesh. However, these publications focus on the subject of governance and democracy in Bangladesh by referring to their connections too generally without illustrating the deeply imbedded nature of the local governance system.

A book written by Sreeradha Dutta (2004), entitled *Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy*, provided valuable insights into conditions which have enabled and encouraged political patronage to become dominant in the country. Mehnaz Manan (2010) in her article entitled ‘Bangladesh in
2009: The Peril Within’ published in *Asian Survey* said that returning to democracy in 2009 was soon marred by an unprecedented event during which military officials were massacred by the Bangladesh Rifles in a mutiny which surprised the whole nation. She also mentioned that Bangladesh’s economic growth was also challenged by the global recession, which began in the United States in 2008. All these publications have focused on the highly personalized nature of Bangladeshi politics as they continue to argue that the personal animosity between Begum Khaleda and Sheikh Hasina have weakened the democratic processes in Bangladesh. Moreover, the authors are also concerned with the rise of Islamic militants in Bangladesh which can pose a challenge to the consolidation of democracy. These publications have generally analyzed the perils of the democratic practices in Bangladesh, but they hardly deal with the governance agenda to address the cosmetic liberal democracy in the country. Here lies the essence of the current work, which will explore the paradox of the governance system including the issues of political practices and liberal democracy currently at play in Bangladesh.

**Liberal Democratic Governance**

In many cases, democratic governance that emphasizes ‘democratic polities’ (Leftwich, 1996: 16) forms the theoretical framework of liberal democracy. The focus is on the political interpretation of democratic governance by Leftwich (1996) and amplified by Hout (2002) that highlights political and legal aspects of the political system, specific procedures and institutions that subject decision-makers to effective popular control (Arat, 1991). These include a legal system that protects rights and freedoms of citizens, competitive democratic politics based on multi-party, democratic rules and procedures, free public and private press and active civil society. Such a definition of liberal democracy paves the way for examination of the role of parliament, political parties, bureaucracy, civil society, media and judiciary in the political process. These institutions are the basis of democratic politics with political parties not only forming the government and checking each other, but aggregating the interests of society, a role shared with civil society organizations.

Parliament is expected to be the voice and protector of general interests of constituents, and an overseer of the executive. Wallis (1989: 28) states that in ‘parliamentary democracy, parliament’s functions include representation of voters, mechanism through which governments can be formed and controller of government performance’. But he concedes that:

> the practice … has deviated substantially from theory in many cases … these deviations have meant that parliament is not a very effective means of controlling government performance.

Bangladesh is no exception as it is practicing parliamentary democracy to govern the country. One of the functions of parliament is to represent the electorate, and it can do so if it interacts with and is accountable to them. The main mechanism of representation in a representative democracy is popular election, and that of accountability is consultation. Beyond elections, however, popular consultation, which is also an important element of traditional culture, is another way through which leaders can represent the masses. One of the hallmarks of democracy is a strong and credible opposition that is able to provide an alternative to the ruling party, and hold the government in power accountable. As Osei-Hwedie (2001: 58) puts it: ‘the opposition’s role is to check and balance the operations of the ruling party, prevent abuses of power and ensure, inter alia, that the government does not neglect the public interest’. The opposite is largely true for much of South Asian countries including Bangladesh, as the opposition parties largely fail to play the role to check and balance the activities of the ruling party. This has contributed to a de facto one party dominant
system within a multi-party framework in Bangladesh. Democratic governance also requires a neutral and independent judiciary to protect and reinforce the rights and freedoms of citizens, and contribute to the proper functioning of the system, especially to fight arbitrariness and corruption.

In the 1960s democracy was believed to be an outcome of socioeconomic development, but not a condition of it (Cutright, 1963). It required a high level of literacy, communication and education, an established middle class, vibrant ‘civil society’ and relatively limited forms of material and social inequality (Dahl, 1971: 103) and a secular public policy. The foundations of most modern advanced industrial economies were laid under non-democratic or highly limited democratic conditions as in Britain (1750–1850) and much of Western Europe (Tilly, 1975). This supports the view that democracy is a consequence of development and hence sustains the earlier arguments in modernization theory.

A more prominent argument is that a premature democracy may falter in its early stages when there is ‘a cruel choice between rapid self-sustained expansion and democratic processes’ (Bhagwati, 1996: 204) and when there is a need for effective state action (Adelman and Morris, 1967; Hewlett, 1967). This is due to the fact that early stages of development require capital accumulation for infrastructure and investment before an advanced welfare system or high wages can be afforded. These propositions have not gone unchallenged (Goodin, 1979; Kohli, 1986; McCord, 1965; Sklar, 1991) and stimulated debates have ensued (Diamond, 1992; Sirowy and Inkeles, 1990). But, practically, no examples of sustained growth in the developing world have occurred under conditions of uncompromising economic liberalism, whether democratic or not.

**The Architecture of a Democratic System in Bangladesh**

The political and administrative systems that were established during the 200 years of British rule in the Indian sub-continent symbolized a basic inheritance from the colonial master which characterized the newly independent states in South Asia (Mitra, 1999), including Bangladesh. Unfortunately, disregarding South Asian indigenous political culture, the contemporary governance system and political institutions in Bangladesh were set up according to foreign or Western blueprints. The decision to introduce even a limited version of democracy into the Indian sub-continent, while welcomed by English-educated moderate intellectuals, was criticized by radical nationalists who, under influence of the revivalist movement, demanded observance of the indigenous traditions of political conduct in the Indian sub-continent and, thus, amendments of British democracy (Mitra, 1995). Sri Aurobindo Ghos should be noted here as one of the leading figures of the radical wing of the Indian National Congress (Jalal, 1995). He formulated a critique of European democracy in 1903 explaining the major difference between Asian and European models of democracy and pointed to the weakness of European democracy in Asian society. He says that European democracy took as its motive the rights of men and not the *dharma* (laws of society) of humanity (Jalal, 1995: 23–25).

An individual with his rights and aspirations stands in the center of the European concept of democracy, while the community and *dharma*, the duty to serve the community, is the basis of society (Malkani, 1993: 41–53). In his critique of democracy, Aurobindo did not reject it, but insisted on amending the European version according to the Asian context (Mallick, 1993: 12–24). The structure of the contemporary Bangladeshi state and its parliamentary democracy is mainly an inheritance of the colonial past. Elements of parliamentary democracy introduced into British India under the predominance of a highly centralized bureaucratic state came to form a special type of colonial democracy, which influenced the Bangladeshi democratic system very significantly since its independence (Mizanur, 2000).
However, the Western ideals of democracy have been thought to be absolute; that is, there is only one democratic process and it has neglected the informal grassroots democracy that has existed for several centuries in the countries of South Asia (Mitra, 1990). The dynamics of ongoing and diverse public opinion, which once had the potential to shape Bangladeshi politics through grassroots democracy, has been effectively undermined by a Western necessity to bureaucratize democracy (Dilara, 2000). First of all, the traditional village assembly or *Panchayat* system, as an informal grassroots democracy in the Indian sub-continent, which calls for unity in thought and action, was an understandably scary proposition to the West, particularly the British colonial power in South Asia, which had colonized and exploited this region for centuries (Mitra, 1995).

The history of the village-level *Panchayat* institutions on the Indian sub-continent goes back hundreds of years. In the post-independence period, the *Panchayat* system was largely neglected. India has realized that these *Panchayat* institutions practiced in the villages needed to be vibrant and responsive to the needs of the people to bring about lasting progress benefiting people of all classes. This will lead to the empowerment of the poor and weaker sections. The new theme on ‘democratizing *Panchayats*’ has been taken up on a pilot basis in India with the following objectives: (i) promoting and strengthening of village-level institutions as functional groups in the *Panchayat* to ensure people’s participation; (ii) sustaining the *Panchayat* institutions’ access to resources and reduce its dependence on the state; and (iii) integrating the existing traditional systems with the *Panchayat* to enhance the participation of the people and achieve synergy. In a fragile democracy like Bangladesh, this kind of village *Panchayat* or village assembly is largely ignored. To overcome the pitfalls of a fragile democracy, the only existing tiers of local government in Bangladesh, namely the *Union Council* and *Upazila or Zilla Parishad* (sub-district or district council), could learn lessons from the Indian *Panchayat Raj* system, which has already been institutionalized in India.

Therefore it has been in the interests of the Western powers to ridicule and belittle indigenous informal grassroots democracy as an informal mode of social relations lacking the sophistication of bureaucratized democracy. By imposing the Western liberal democratic system on Bangladesh, the West was literally able to de-legitimize the pre-existing and homegrown democratic spirit of the country. This is one of the reasons why weak governance and fragile democracy still persists in Bangladesh.

The history of democracy, in theory and practice, is primarily a Western concept created out of specific needs and shaped by shifting relevance over a long period of time and in a specific part of the world, namely the one commonly labeled the West. It can be argued that liberal democracy, in its fully-fledged form, is primarily a characteristic of the economically advanced Western societies and is more a product of socioeconomic development than its cause (Gordon, 1994: 79). The struggle and compromise among different interest groups in a political system, which is controlled by checks and balances, are based on a negative perception of power and on the mutual distrust called realism. It is thought to provide the best possible political system in all places. The universal and general approach of the Western political culture, which focuses on individual freedom and rights and also protects individuals from coercion of state, is sometimes too simple and narrow to apply in a third world country like Bangladesh (Rehman, 2000).

The concept of liberal politics only relates to state institutions, whereas economic and cultural factors are regarded as separate. This liberal model considers individual freedom to be more important than equality; that is, material scarcity is not seen as an obstacle for individuals to enjoy freedom. The flaw is that liberal democracy ignores the fact that, in order to feel free, individuals must enjoy a certain degree of political and economic equality (Kabir, 2000). Western liberal democracy is not always compatible with the local culture and traditions of the South Asian countries,
especially in Bangladesh where poverty is rampant. By and large, democracy in Bangladesh has been characterized by huge corruption, the authoritarian nature of a democratic regime, patron-client politics, weak governance and so on (Parnini, 2009). Politics in the West may currently be said to have lost some of their cultural touch, whereas South Asian countries still keep upholding that kind of cultural flavor in almost every respect of politics.

The colonial version of democracy in Bangladesh is intertwined with the current form of governance system largely replicating the Western model of democracy by ignoring the local notion of governance process. This has literally led to the formation of a premature democracy and weak governance in Bangladesh mostly shaped by confrontational politics and politics of violence. This is a situation exacerbated by the lack of intra-party democracy, excessive state patronage and family dynastic politics all across the country.

**The Nexus of Traditional and Modern Democratic Processes**

The newly restored liberal democracy in Bangladesh largely ignores the local governance processes in many respects. This work examines the challenges that democratic consolidation has encountered in Bangladesh, undertaking simultaneous economic and political reforms. Recently the international donors have focused on one type of organization, namely non-governmental organization (NGOs), which fall under the rubric of organizations of community power and grassroots democracy. This study argues that the most suitable process of grassroots democracy can flourish in a social space that is provided by a competent state free of corruption. In liberal democracy the contemporary concept of civil societies are frequently equated with NGOs. But there has been an indigenous and traditional mechanism in Bangladesh that handles local governance. This is called a village assembly or *Panchayat* in rural areas. They focus on the particular matters at the local level with wider responsibility for community affairs. Traditional village leaders called *Matbar* are still playing an important role in settling small-scale village disputes through the village *Salish* (meeting). But complicated issues are dealt with by *Upazila/union Parishad* (council) members and political leaders. This kind of village assembly is loosely structured, leaderless and largely spontaneous, but has been ignored so far, though it is able to solve local problems and disputes successfully in many respects. These assemblies are the mechanisms to solve crises at the community level in Bangladesh.

In India the *Panchayat* has been institutionalized, but in Bangladesh it has almost lost its spirit. Instead of the *Panchayat* there has been a four-tier local government in Bangladesh. The union council in Bangladesh has the potential to take the shape of *Panchayat* by allowing a necessary social space for the entire community. This union council can also learn lessons from the *Panchayat* system practiced in India. By community, we mean a geographic community, which in the case of Bangladesh would be a rural village or an urban neighborhood. These were also based on common interests because they are places where people lived and, in some cases, where people work as well. The village assemblies were not based on political affiliation – although partisan politics might play a role in their operation in some cases – nor exclusively based in the workplace, nor relating exclusively to a particular subgroup within the community, such as women, youth and workers, or an ethnic, religious, or color grouping. Taken together, they were potentially unitary bodies able to express and articulate the felt needs of the people in relation to everything from the provision of housing, food, water and roads, to the distribution of land, the creation of meaningful employment, matters of security, and particular problems experienced by women. They were, in fact, informal mass bodies open to anyone in a given community.
It is clear that strengthening local governance requires strong political will. The clarity of mind and the ironclad commitment of the political leaders towards endogenous democracy and their initiatives to this effect make the Panchayat system a reality in West Bengal. They have a clear vision for the Panchayati Raj and are also relentless in making that vision come true. Another aspect of the Panchayati Raj that attracted attention is its ability to strengthen grassroots leadership, especially of women and the marginalized. The Panchayat system appears to provide a systematic training ground for the people who will take top leadership positions in country. Almost all the work that is performed by the Civil Society Organization (CSOs) and NGOs in Bangladesh is the responsibility of the Panchayati Raj institutions in India (Raju, 1998). NGOs appear to work as contractors for the Panchayats. Bangladesh should take this lesson from India on how to promote endogenous democracy through local and indigenous agencies like the existing Union Council by incorporating NGOs or civil society under the guidance of a competent state as NGOs are increasingly coming under scrutiny and criticism due to the lack of their accountably and legitimacy.

Traditionally, popular Sabhas and Samitis, the latter being the assembly of the whole people and the former a smaller body, settle different kinds of disputes on the basis of consensus in villages of Bangladesh. These two bodies act as Sabhas and Samitis, as legislative and deliberative bodies and our claim is that they should be made functional in Bangladesh. The local government – that is, the Union Council or Upazila Parishad – should be both responsible and responsive to the village Sabhas and Samitis. But, for that purpose, it is imperative that an institute for the training of villagers in the task of socioeconomic development in its various dimensions should be set up to cater to the needs of a cluster of villages. In this way, the system of planning from above can be assisted or replaced by one from below. Contrary to scholarly misconceptions about local democracy in Bangladesh, this kind of local and direct democracy based on the endogenous principle of modernity and democracy at the national and state levels has developmental and progressive potentialities.

The other feature is that the traditional village assembly or village mass bodies represented an attempt, explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, to capture more power for the population at the grassroots level during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 or during similar kinds of big mass movements. Some were quite advanced and self-conscious in this orientation. This is a good example of ensuring accountability from below. There were neither NGOs nor groups of bureaucratized ‘community development’ schemes involved in this indigenous process: hardly anyone has had a chance to abuse power. Thus we need to look at the indigenous experience in Bangladesh to overcome the pitfalls of donor-driven Western models of social change through so-called ‘civil society’ to understand the precursors of ‘good governance.’ Of course, this work is not positing yet another new dogma – that is, that the village assembly is the only locus of change. Rather, the experience of Bangladesh suggests that the village assembly is one of several critical loci of social spaces and change. This kind of social space should be the normative core and the heart of any conception of democracy from below in Bangladesh. A sustainable civil space provided by a competent state must ultimately depend on the spontaneous mobilization of citizens to demand transparency and accountability from the government of Bangladesh and to even seek more effective election and representation in the parliament. Donors can do little to create such civic mobilizations or indeed to promote the accumulation of social capital as it remains an inherently indigenous process.

**Crisis of Governance and Democracy**

Bangladesh is an interesting case, which represents the contemporary postmodern condition where nothing is clear-cut. Bangladesh is a country that is economically backward and not very successful
politically, in spite of having been a democratic state since 1991. The donor agencies have equated ‘good governance’ with democracy, and development and the capitalist market economy with political freedom. However, this notion fades away when we look at the situation of Bangladesh, a country in which the indigenous process of governance has been largely ignored. This country is still at the crossroads in its march towards a genuine democratic order. Though it started its political journey with a parliamentary system after independence in 1971, it failed to sustain it; slowly but steadily the parliamentary government degenerated into an authoritarian system (Dilara, 2000: 50–54). Although there was a restoration of democracy in 1991, a genuine form of democracy is yet to take shape, confronted by a fragile scenario and frequent disruptions.

Since gaining independence in 1971, The People’s Republic of Bangladesh has been driven by internal power struggles and economic chaos while attempting to develop a democratic society. A predominately Islamic country, Bangladesh’s representative government is fighting poverty, rampant corruption and organized crime. Bangladesh has enjoyed more than four decades of independence and it has also witnessed 13 years of military rule or governments dominated by the military (Rahman, 2008). The institutional framework for parliamentary democracy was restored in Bangladesh in 1991. The Jatiya Sangsad (parliament), comprising directly elected representatives of the people, has been the centerpiece of national politics. But democracy in Bangladesh has so far gone hand in hand with corruption, human rights violations and criminalization threatening the state’s economy and survival (Subhan, 2000). Professor Ataur Rahman, a noted political analyst of Bangladesh, was among those critical of the two female leaders and their governance by patronage. The only visible outcome of the Bangladeshi people can watch rising corruption coupled with violence and fear. Bangladesh was a changed and renegotiated democracy in a new governance framework (Bangladesh News, 2007).

We cannot deny the fact that both of the dominant political party’s leaders are elected leaders. They have led Bangladesh for years against autocracy, and fought extremely hard to establish democracy. Under their leadership, in the last few years the economy has blossomed with a growth rate of around 5%. A strong private sector has developed and established itself as the driver of economic development. Various development indicators have shown significant improvement. However, per capita income remains very low which was estimated at only USD700 in 2011. The United Nations (UN)-declared Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target poverty reduction as the thrust of its programs, which are being implemented in Bangladesh as well. Before the global financial crunch set in, the world’s richest nations sounded very optimistic about ridding the world of the curse of poverty once and for all through making huge investments in the poverty-prone countries of Asia, including Bangladesh. But that trumpet blowing against global poverty, however, ended in a whimper with the onslaught of global recession, which affected the Bangladeshi economy to a great extent. Amid every discourse on economic growth and development, the nagging issue of poverty pops up stubbornly in Bangladesh. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) survey shows that 64% of Bangladeshi children, who comprise 45% of the population, have no access to sanitation, while 41% of them have no home to live in. Worse still, 35% of the country’s children go half-fed every day. But that figure reflects the condition of the children who belong to poor households. And that is, of course, not the real picture of those who are not just poor, but are less than that (Syeda, 2010).

Although Bangladesh’s economy has greatly suffered in the global recession, it has achieved some targets of MDGs in terms of social and economic developmental goals (D’Costa, 2011). Rapid modernization in every sector widens the gap between rich and poor, creating a divergent Bangladeshi society. According to a report published in The New Age on 27 March 2012, income inequality has remained almost at the same level since independence, undermining all the
successes the country has made in alleviating poverty, reducing child mortality, increasing primary school enrollment and improving sanitation. The Gini coefficient, a measure of the inequality of wealth or income distribution, stood at 0.458 in 2010 while it was 0.36 in 1974 (The New Age, 2012b). The independence of the country was celebrated with a strong promise of economic freedom and removal of economic disparities, with ‘socialism’ installed as one of the pillars of the original constitutions of the country in 1972. Ironically, 93% of the entire population of the country still earns less than USD300 a month while 47 million people still live below the poverty line. The governments since 1971 have actually widely deviated from the promise of a more equitable distribution of wealth and instead pursued crude neo-liberal free market economic policies following the donor’s prescriptions, which have only helped to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Even though the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country has grown steadily to 6.5% over the years, the wealth created has remained in the hands of a few, while the governments, deliberately or because of poor economic management, pursued policies which directed wealth into the hands of vested quarters.

A positive sign for Bangladesh is its recent victory in settling maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar, which was resolved by international arbitration on 14 March 2012. This victory literally paved the way for Bangladesh to explore and extract gas and oil in the resource rich Bay of Bengal (The New Age, 2012a). Since Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, it has been in negotiation with Myanmar over their maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. However, political stability remains volatile due to a lack of significant progress on war crimes trials, human rights concerns on the India–Bangladesh border and environmental challenges stemming from water-sharing or transit arrangements with neighboring countries.

The political leaders have also failed to protect all the public institutions against corruption and rent seeking. The political parties have become hostage to black money and muscle power. Authoritarian behavior and activities of the political parties in power of government sometimes demolish democracy within their parties as well as in the country. Corruption and nepotism are thus bred into society. The personal animosity and rivalry of the two major parties has caused a deep rift division in the country, and the interest of the country has always been sacrificed for narrow partisanship. People nowadays demand that all these misdeeds have to be properly investigated.

Local Political Struggle and Democracy in Bangladesh

It is often argued that there has been a weak governance system in Bangladesh because of nascent politics and an ill-developed political party system. The ‘governance’ agenda of the donors failed to address the problems of local politics by perpetuating the status quo, which also contributes to shaping the country’s governance problems and economic backwardness. Thus we need to take a look at the local politics of Bangladesh critically. A political party, as defined by the country’s election code, is an organized group of people pursuing the same ideology, political ideas or platform of government. The two major parties in Bangladesh are the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (AL). BNP finds its allies among Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh while the Awami League aligns itself traditionally with leftist and secularist parties. Another important player is the Jatiya Party, headed by former military ruler Ershad. These political parties are mostly built around ‘family connection,’ or ‘family dynasty’ or ‘personalities’; the ideologies or platforms are just adornments for them. Political complications that have been arising out of matters like ‘family connection,’ ‘family dynasty,’ and so on would have hardly any significant bearing on candidacy requirements, per se.
The Awami League-BNP rivalry and their confrontational politics have been bitter and punctuated by protests, violence and murder. Student politics is particularly strong in Bangladesh which is a legacy from the liberation movement era. Almost all parties have highly active student wings, and students have been elected to parliament. After 1975 democratic norms disappeared from Bangladesh following the many military coups and counter coups, in which military-cum-civilian politicians grabbed power in the country. Military-led rule ended when people power toppled H.M. Ershad from government in 1990. In 1991 the nation once again embraced liberal democracy with the adoption of a Westminster-style parliamentary form of governance. With the exception of a caretaker government (since 2001), the nation has witnessed, since 1991, two democratically elected governments led by the two major parties, namely the BNP and the AL (Hossain, 2003). In the 2001 general elections, the BNP formed the government with an alliance with three minor parties. Restoration of parliamentary democracy was coincided with the initiative of governance reforms which was introduced in a phased manner since the early 1990s. However, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh has recently been driven by internal power struggles between the BNP and the AL as two major political parties and the consequent economic volatility, while attempting to develop a democratic society. A predominately Islamic country, Bangladesh’s representative government is fighting poverty and official corruption. Although one can appreciate what Bangladesh has achieved so far, it should not deviate from the general trend that romanticizes Bangladesh’s democracy and its recent connection with good governance.

The military-backed interim government came to power in January 2007, which immediately suspended democracy and provided an uncertainty of what was to come. Democracy failed to survive at that point and was replaced by an extended non-party caretaker government in 2008–2009. It is known to all that the army-backed emergency rule had ended with a landslide victory for the AL alliance led by current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the parliamentary elections held on 29 December 2008. Through this election, a democratic government was restored after a long two years of emergency rule by a non-party caretaker government (CTG). Nevertheless, domestic politics is now heading towards a bitter political confrontation over holding the next general election under a neutral interim administration scheduled to take place in 2013. Particularly, the political uncertainty began with the ruling-party-dominated parliament unilaterally abolishing the caretaker system once and for all in July 2011 through the 15th amendment of the Bangladeshi constitution in favor of holding the next general election under a neutral interim administration instead of the CTG. It created fiery contentions among the opposition parties led by the BNP, instigating them to protest on the street to demand restoration of the CTG to conduct the next general election. Apparently it is the duty of the politicians to devise a new administrative mechanism for peacefully holding the next general election averting the collision course in the country.

The emerging notion is that bipolar confrontational politics and mutual abhorrence of two major party leaders, Khaleda Zia of the BNP and Sheikh Hasina of the AL, have become too personal, and seemingly have turned into a great burden for the country to cherish the essence of democracy and representative governance. The BNP led a mass rally held on 12 March 2012, demanding that the CTG was brought back to hold the next general election, but it had unsettled many quarters at home and abroad because of the surreal way the ruling grand alliance (RGA) handled the overall law and order situation. In order to dismiss and disrupt the grand assembly of four party alliances (FPA) of the opposition parties, the current regime took drastic measures for virtual isolation of the capital Dhaka by restricting travel through roads and waterways. The ruling party also used its party activists to aid the law-enforcing authorities. The AL initiated law enforcement by party activists that included unlawful search and seizure of common citizens at various points of the capital Dhaka,
symbolizing a controversial approach to democratic practice in Bangladesh. Against this backdrop, political volatility can lead towards a path of decaying democracy in the country.

The subject of local politics needs to be discussed in the light of political parties’ attitudes and party systems towards political development and democratic consolidation. First, in the new typology of political parties drawn up by Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond (2001), there are two types of elite-based party: the traditional local notable party and the clientelistic party. Under this typology, the political parties in Bangladesh would be classified as clientelistic parties; that is, instruments of oligarchic elite for the predation of the state and its resources through various means. The use of traditional patron-client ties, critical forms of patronage, rent-seeking, outright corruption, fraud, coercion and violence are also visible. Second, the institutionalization of political parties and party systems is often regarded as being very important or even crucial for a country’s political modernization and democratic consolidation.

Scholars like Samuel Huntington (1968: 196) have developed criteria to rank parties and party systems from weak to strong, from un-institutionalized to institutionalized. Under the traditional characterization of political parties and party systems, the main parties in Bangladesh and its overall party system would be regarded as weak and un-institutionalized. Here we argue, however, that, while seeming to be feeble, sapless creatures, the political parties are quite rapacious and formidable. Political clientelism symbolize that the building of strong and truly democratic political parties and a concomitant party system in Bangladesh is turning out to be a much more difficult and complicated process. The ideas of liberal democracy and governance agenda largely lost their actual meaning in the confrontational politics of Bangladesh and the major political parties have deliberately or otherwise humiliated and mutilated the rules of liberal democracy in the last several years (Siddiqui, 1996: 11–23).

**Democratic Governance: An Illusion or a Reality?**

The donor agencies that advocate liberal democracy and ‘good governance’ appear oblivious to how few of the conditions for democratic endurance exist in Bangladesh and what their implications for democracy might be. Legitimacy of the state, sustaining democratic politics (Linz, 1978), the existence of a rich and pluralistic social space (Diamond and Linz, 1989) and relative social or economic equalities are all essential conditions for enduring democratic politics, as evident from previous breakdowns in the 20th century (Linz, 1978: n55). In most of the developing countries, many of these conditions are distorted and flawed by low levels of legitimacy, consensus and elite commitment (Ekeh, 1971; Jackson and Rosberg, 1986). A robust and substantial middle class rarely exists, nor does a powerful working class, both of which might push for and protect democratization. There are also limitations of the donor-driven ‘civil society’ as a component of the governance agenda to ensure grassroots democracy in Bangladesh and elsewhere because it ignores the indigenous political culture and the type of governance from below shaped by the village assembly. Bangladeshi societies and politics are fractured by lack of political consensus and also by political violence. Throughout the country, economic problems and the subsequent liberalization prescribed by the international donors have imposed a heavy price on the poor (Jackson and Rosberg, 1986: 267–271). None of the economic solutions have so far enabled stable or sustainable democratic practices or coherent development strategies in Bangladesh.

While democracy is acknowledged to be the best available option for empowerment of the people, the current democratic government in Bangladesh can hardly be said to have done enough for either consolidation of the democratic political process or its protection from
extra-constitutional intervention. A prolonged non-party caretaker government in 2007–2008 and abortive military intervention through an attempt at coup in the political process in January 2012 are some notable examples of the fragile democracy in Bangladesh. It seems to be by and large political rhetoric rather than articulation of the government’s willingness in Bangladesh to consolidate the democratic political process to strengthen the governance institutions and also to introduce effective safeguard against extra-constitutional takeover of state power. Bangladeshi people lost the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with most of his family members in 1975 through a military coup d’etat. Furthermore, there happened to be several other coups and counter-coups which decimated a large number of army officers and soldiers including Liberation War Heroes and sector commanders like General Ziaur Rahman, Khaled Musharraf and Abul Manzur. Those events were instrumental in the destruction of democratic institutions and inflicting irreparable damage to the country, civil society and the military establishment. The political elite need to realize that protection and consolidation of the democratic political process cannot be ensured unless they think this more than routine rhetoric. If political elite in Bangladesh really are sincere, they need to take effective steps and to strengthen the democratic institutions on the one hand, as well as create constitutional and legal deterrence for extra-constitutional interventions. Institution-building or improved training alone cannot simply produce an independent, impartial and competent administration or governance institutions in Bangladesh.

Local politics in Bangladesh should be intertwined with political will and homegrown initiatives on the basis of a local political culture to give rise to the kind of state that can introduce, sustain and protect an effective and independent capacity with good governance. Otherwise, a positive developmental outcome would be very difficult to achieve in a sustainable way. In contemporary Bangladesh, neither electoral democracy nor a governance agenda is likely to bring about a sweeping change that can generate an improved governance system. Hence it has not just only been a managerial or governance question but also a political one. For all forms and processes of development, the state and non-state actors should take into consideration the central core of politics in terms of conflict, negotiation and cooperation over the use, production and distribution of resources in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

A balanced approach will help liberate the people in Bangladesh from poverty and also can help society resist the status quo. Without innovative governance under an autonomous state, genuine development, on the basis of local needs, becomes difficult and cannot flourish. Furthermore, democratic and market-friendly strategies will break up on the rocks of economic inequalities and intensified poverty, escalating political strife sooner or later, especially in a premature democracy such as the polity of Bangladesh. Because of this reason, Western insistence on good governance and free markets along with a more prominent role for the NGOs is crucial to the development of Bangladesh, but democratic consolidation demands home-grown initiatives of the top elites, who can undertake drastic governance reforms in the country. The current rhetoric of cosmetic democracy and paralyzed governance reforms is likely to produce political instability and subsequent economic crisis. To harness the power of public opinion is as important as to broaden institutional and political participation in a fruitful and synergistic connection between the state and society. The challenge of achieving MDGs thus lies in finding a roadmap to help improve the governance system in Bangladesh. More fruitful state–society interactions, efficient public institutions and autonomous national actors can help promote the national interests. It is a guideline for the clarification of the role of a state and the state–society relations so that the right approach can help
contribute more effectively to ensure innovative governance with indigenous norms of accountability in Bangladesh as in other developing countries.

Apart from the above factors, political parties in Bangladesh need sweeping reforms suitable for the promotion of endogenous democracy. Ironically, democracy does not seem to exist inside the political parties of Bangladesh. Most of them are self-centered and more interested in promoting party interests at the cost of broader national interests. Political leaders are hardly elected on the basis of merit and any constructive procedure, particularly through free voting. Rather, the leaders superimpose themselves on the parties because of extraordinary privilege they enjoy as being unequal among the equals for reasons of their relationships with famous persons who once were supreme in running the affairs of these parties.

Politics in a democracy is essentially the politics of accommodation and compromise, which appears to be largely missing among the dominant political parties in Bangladesh. Given the diversity of interests in political parties, democratic failure seemed inevitable during the extended non-party caretaker government in 2008 and the political parties should learn lessons from the past bleak scenario to be more careful in their future politics. Democracy has been distorted in highly polarized societies like Bangladesh, divided as it is by income, class and political stance.

Political parties in Bangladesh seem to continue to be significantly dominated by cult and family. The services of competent and enlightened members of civil society at the highest positions of these parties are practically barred. The extended caretaker government from 2007 to 2008 and abortive military intervention through a coup attempt in January 2012 are some notable examples of the fragile democracy in Bangladesh. Unless democratization of the political parties takes place, the leaders of such parties will not likely behave democratically in parliament. Surprisingly, the political parties do promote their coterie interests at the cost of genuine interests of the people. The political will of the political leaders and elites can drive Bangladesh towards attaining home-grown initiatives for credible institutional reforms to strengthen governance and consolidate democracy based on the indigenous governance process to address local needs and demands. To this end, democracy in Bangladesh needs to be reassessed in light of the historical notion of governance system, political culture and colonial legacy, going beyond the current rhetoric of liberal democracy. This is because democracy has more meaning when the checks and balances are in place; but this kind of a balanced approach is largely absent in the contemporary democratic practices of Bangladesh.

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References


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