

Good governance and political culture: A case study of Bangladesh

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Abstract: In a democratic system it is essential to have a competitive, and a tolerant party system, but Bangladesh has experienced an intolerant and a confrontational party system that has created a deadlock and brought uncertainty to the whole country. Since 1990, except 2014, Bangladesh has witnessed four systematic peaceful free elections, one each--in 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008. On January 5, 2014, however, a controversial election took place in which major opposition political parties did not participate except the ruling alliance parties. The two dominant parties—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL)—each won two previous free and fair elections, with the BNP winning in 1991, and a BNP-led 4-party coalition in 2001, and the AL in 1996, and an AL-led 14 party alliance in 2008. However, from 2014 Bangladesh is heading towards an authoritarian system. All these are happening due to the lack of good governance. This article intends to emphasize that the political culture emanating from the party politics is retarding good governance in Bangladesh. This article argues that the cultural traits developed in the last four decades in various dimensions,, particularly in more recent years, have worked as an “earth-worm” in the fabrics of democracy in Bangladesh preventing ‘good governance’.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Democracy; Good governance; Political culture; Totemism.

Abstrak: Dalam sesuatu sistem demokrasi adalah penting baginya untuk mempunyai satu sistem yang bersemangat juang dengan mempunyai sistem parti yang bertoleransi. Tetapi, Bangladesh pernah mengalami satu parti

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sistem yang tidak bertoleransi dan yang suka berkonfrantasi. Hal ini telah membuat negara tersebut menghadapi kebuntuan dan ia telah membawa seluruh negara tersebut kepada ketidakpastian. Sejak 1990 lagi, kecuali tahun 2014, Bangladesh telah menyaksikan empat pilihan raya yang sistematik serta aman, iaitu pada tahun 1991, 1996, 2001, dan 2008. Namun begitu, pada 5 Januari 2014, satu pilihan raya yang kontroversi telah berlaku yang mana pembangkang utama parti-parti politik tidak mengambil bahagian kecuali parti-parti pakatan pemerintah. Dua parti yang mendominasi negara tersebut adalah *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) dan *Awami League* (AL), masing-masing telah memenangi dua pilihan raya yang bebas dan adil. Sebelum ini, BNP pernah memenangi pilihan raya pada tahun 1991, dan pada tahun 2001 yang mana BNP telah memimpin gabungan 4 parti. Seterusnya, pada tahun 1996 pula, parti AL telah memenangi pilihan raya tersebut dengan membawa gabungan 14 parti. Sejak 2014, Bangladesh terus menuju ke arah sistem authoritarian. Semua ini berlaku disebabkan oleh kurangnya tadbir urus yang baik. Artikel ini ingin menekankan bahawa budaya politik yang berpunca daripada parti politik itu sendiri yang memperlambatkan tadbir urus yang baik di negara Bangladesh. Artikel ini juga turut menghujahkan bahawa terutamanya pada tahun-tahun kebelakangan ini terdapat mereka yang bekerja sebagai “gunting dalam lipatan” dalam fabrik demokrasi di Bangladesh bagi mencegah tadbir urus yang baik. Hal ini berlaku disebabkan oleh terbentuknya ciri-ciri budaya dalam pelbagai dimensi pada empat dekat yang kebelakangan ini.

Kata Kunci: Bangladesh, Demokrasi; Tadbir urus yang baik; Budaya politik; Totemisme.

Introduction

The year 1990 saw a dramatic change in the politics of Bangladesh. A mass upsurge that overthrew the military regime of Ershad paved the way for a democratic political system in the country. Since then, except in 2014, the nation has witnessed four systematic peaceful free elections, one each – in 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008. On January 5, 2014, a controversial election took place in which major opposition political parties did not participate, except for the ruling alliance parties. The two dominant parties—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL)— had each won two previous free and fair elections, with the BNP winning in 1991, and a BNP-led 4-party coalition in 2001, and the AL in 1996, and an AL-led 14 party alliance in 2008. In a democratic system, it is essential to have a competitive but tolerant party system, but Bangladesh has been experiencing an

intolerant and confrontational system that has created a deadlock and brought uncertainty to the whole country. Neither party has been willing to serve as the 'loyal opposition' to the *Jatiyo Sangsad* (parliament). Consequently, none of the sessions of parliament following each election has achieved proper legitimacy. A prolonged boycott of parliament by the political opposition following each election has been the political trend. Although the ruling party has indulged in acts of suppression, harassment, and destruction of the image of the opposition party, a continuous and chronic mass protest in the streets by the opposition party has become a regular phenomenon. Both the BNP and the AL have blamed each other for nurturing criminal elements, engaging in undemocratic behavior, and hatching plots to annihilate the other and destroy the country. Both parties have attempted to reshuffle the administration by placing party loyalist officers in key posts. All of these characteristics of politics in Bangladesh due to the lack of good governance have made the political system very weak and fragile, making the future of democracy uncertain.

Since Bangladesh has been witnessing the same patterns of political violence for decades, one might ask: Why are these happening? Is it due to the lack of 'good governance?' What are the internal dynamics of political culture in Bangladesh that have led to violence rather than peaceful co-existence? What is the future trend and hope for the country, particularly in terms of good governance? Transcending the conventional analyses of the current crises, we will discern, through our sociological and political imaginations, the trajectories of political cultures in Bangladesh developed over the last four decades. It is in the peculiar nexus of the political culture developed in Bangladesh that the answer lies to the questions raised earlier. We will argue that the political cultural traits developed in the last four decades, particularly in more recent years, have worked as an impediment to democracy in Bangladesh, preventing 'good governance.' Therefore, for effective democratization, no institutional solutions can be effective in Bangladesh unless these cultural traits are addressed properly in accordance with 'good governance.'

Politics, political culture and good governance

Plato and Aristotle viewed politics primarily in terms of the moral purposes that decision-makers ought to pursue. The *polis*, for both,

existed to seek its common good, civic virtue and moral perfection. In recent times, many political scientists hold the same position and identify political activity with moral beliefs. They consider the conflict about the nature of the good life as constituting the 'core of politics'. Though their conceptualization of the good life varies from the realization of freedom to a combination of freedom with goodness, they subscribe to politics as the art of living and working together. Robert Dahl (1970) considers Aristotle's definition of politics as too restrictive because it ties it to state organizations. He, therefore, reformulates it to read "any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule or authority" (p. 6). David Easton (1953) explains Dahl's analysis explicitly. His identification of 'political acts' as those that "authoritatively allocate values in a society" (p. 134) has provided many political scientists with what he calls a 'conventional guide' for political analysis. Like Dahl, he sees politics as a set of human interactions, but he limits it by emphasizing 'authoritative allocations' for an entire society. Furthermore, Easton focuses attention not only on the goals of policy-makers trying to alter the distribution of scarce resources or values in a society but also on the authority or power relationships involved in it. As pointed out by Isaak (1975), this is "a compromise position which is neither too restrict nor overly broad" (p. 21). The stress on the value allocation process and policy outcomes reappears in the writings of Lasswell (1958) who defines politics as being concerned with "who gets what, when and how" (p. 1). Clearly, the subject matter has undergone a transformation from an emphasis on state structures to a set of human interactions concerned with the allocation of scarce resources that are considered desirable. In spite of the differences among these definitions, several qualities are common to them all. First, they think that politics everywhere involves conflict, which is inherent in the human nature itself. Conflict may arise, in part, from scarcity. It also may arise because people differ in their values. Another person may judge what one person considers good as evil. Second, most political conflict is 'group conflict'. Conflicts generally take place among groups rather than among individuals. Finally, the study of politics involves understanding how people govern themselves and the consequences of the political process. Politics is the means by which people debate and resolve the most important values in a society.

However, the nature of politics will differ on the type of political culture of a society. A political culture is a pattern of individual beliefs and attitudes that relate to the political system and to political issues. According to Sidney Verba (1965), political culture is “a system of beliefs about patterns of political interaction and political institutions” (p. 515). The main components of political culture are: political customs, political beliefs, political expectations, political symbols, political attitudes, political values, and political traditions. Political cultures differ from one system to another depending on the degree of participation of the people in the political process. According to Almond (1965), a political system that allows its citizens to actively participate in the political process is called a ‘participant’ culture. On the other hand, when people are allowed to participate in a restricted way, it is called a ‘subject’ culture. However, when the people have neither the opportunity nor interest in the political process, that culture is called a ‘parochial’ political culture. There are three common qualities of political culture. First, politics and the political system are widely accepted, and consequently, citizens comply with the rules and regulations of the system. Second, people are aware of the rules and policies of the political system by which they are governed. Finally, people expect certain behavior to be appropriate or inappropriate from their government. The participant culture is the norm of good governance and the democratic system. Arendt Lijphart, Robert Dahl and others have persuasively argued that a democratic system in accordance with good governance depends very much upon the success of a ‘participant’ political culture.

The World Bank initially coined the term ‘good governance’ in 1989 in the context of widespread corruption in Sub Saharan Africa (Santiso, 2001). The IMF subsequently emphasized primarily on the administrative and economic reforms for good governance. Later, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) added a set of five core elements that are necessary for good governance: accountability, transparency, openness, predictability, and participation (ADB, 1998). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) further added that good governance ensures control of corruption, rule of law, equity, gender balance and consensus orientation (UNDP, 2002). The UN Commission for Economic and Social Affairs for Asia and Pacific stated that Good governance has eight major characteristics. It is “participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and

efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It ensures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society” (UN, 2016, p. 1).

Thus, good governance covers a wide range of principles and values. In a narrow sense, it may mean economic liberalization and development, but in broader sense it also includes rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of association, political accountability, a sound neutral administration and the promotion of civil society. Thomas Weis (2000) identified and analyzed the definitions of ‘good governance’ given by World Bank, UNDP, and OECD, Commission on Global Governance, Ottawa’s Institute of Governance, International Institute of Administrative Sciences and Tokyo’s Institute of Technology. He argued, “The initial decade over good governance was concerned less with improving political leadership of democracy than with reversing decades of state dominated economic and social development” (p. 805). Weis believes:

Good governance involves the structures and processes that support the creation of a participatory, responsive and accountable polity.... embedded in a competitive, nondiscriminatory, yet equitable economy. (p. 805)

The politicians, in power and in opposition, must have the values of good governance; in particular, the power of the government must be limited by constitutional laws and by tolerating the views of oppositions. There must be peaceful coexistence between the ruling and opposition parties. Otherwise, many forces may act to retard the road to democratization and good governance. The most important of them are (a) political obduracy and vendetta, (b) political totemism, (c) high politicism, (d) structured and systematic opposition, (e) prejudiced and discriminatory –‘projection’ politics, (f) the creation of binary spaces, and (g) extreme ideologization. In the following sections, an analysis is made to show the growth of a participant culture in Bangladesh and how the above forces, leading to Aristotle’s ‘mobocracy’ or ‘dummy-cracy’ in Bangladesh, affect the road to democratization and good governance.

Forces retarding good governance in Bangladesh

Political obduracy and vendetta

Over the nearly last five decades, traits such as stubbornness, tenaciousness, obduracy, and obstinacy have dictated the political climate of Bangladesh, leading to one crisis after another. Too much stubbornness and obstinacy do not just emasculate a clear political vision and subvert the possibility of peaceful political resolution, but also open the doors to violence and murder. The BNP-led coalition's victory in the election of 2001 was soon followed by violent attacks, conflict and the murder of opponents between supporters of the BNP and the AL (Jahan, 2002). Corruption charges brought by the former AL government against the BNP workers were withdrawn. The AL, on the other hand, rejected the election results, claiming massive vote rigging and fraud, though it could not substantiate its allegations because the AL had installed the very apparatus overseeing the election, i.e., the caretaker government (CG), the chief election commissioner (CEC), and the president. The AL then fell back on two of its old tried and tested strategies of protest: boycott of parliament and call for *hartals* (strikes). The Parliament remained mostly non-functional, because the AL repeatedly walked out or boycotted sessions, alleging government restrictions on their participation in parliamentary debates. The AL repeatedly called for the government's resignation, citing misrule, corruption, oppression, and human rights violations; it threatened street movements to oust the government. Devin T. Hagerty (2007) pointed out:

Bypassing the country's discredited and dysfunctional Parliament, the AL organized a series of strikes, protests, industrial actions, and transportation blockades that, by November 2006, were threatening to paralyze the economy. (p. 106)

Similarly, the 2008 election was followed by large scale violence against BNP- led coalition supporters by the ruling AL coalition supporters. At the same time, the AL-led coalition government conducted a heavy reshuffle of the civil-military bureaucracy as well as in autonomous corporate institutions, leading to either dismissal or making many officers On Special Duty (OSD) without any portfolio (Momen, 2010). Although the corruption charges against the AL supporters were

withdrawn, this allegedly was not done to the same magnitude for the BNP supporters. On the other hand, the BNP decided to boycott parliament as usual as the AL did during 2001-2006. As a result, the Parliament largely remained dysfunctional during 2008-2013.

Towards the end of the BNP-led 4-party alliance regime (2001-2006), the AL-led 14-party alliance dismissed the possibility of resolving their issues and concerns in the parliament regarding the formation of a caretaker government and forthcoming elections. Then they took their demands to the streets and the ruling alliance agreed to a dialogue with the AL on these issues outside the realm of parliament. However, the AL refused to sit with all parties of the BNP-ruling alliance, especially with the Jamat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), although the AL and other leaders of the 14-party alliance had sat with the JIB leaders on many occasions in the past. The BNP-ruling alliance responded with almost the same magnitude of obduracy that it would not enter into a dialogue with the AL without its coalition partner- the JIB. All these developments only aggravated the crises further.

Apart from making the parliament dysfunctional and assaulting the principle of democratic pluralism, this political obduracy wasted valuable time that could have been used to engage in a fruitful political dialogue. Incumbent President Iajuddin Ahmed formed a caretaker government (CG) that was strongly opposed by the AL-led 14-party alliance. Because the Bangladesh constitution gives no power to the CG to dismiss and/or employ any CEC, a further constitutional crisis was bound to emerge. The 14-party alliance was also launching its violent campaign to remove the then CEC. Although apart from voter lists and associated issues in which the Supreme Court provided clear directions, the CEC did not have any role in influencing the election results in the remote areas of Bangladesh, where elections are held with the vigilant presence of polling agents of all parties. However, the 14-party alliance continued demanding the CEC to step down. The AL-led alliance seriously doubted the fairness of electoral mechanisms. Ali Riaz (2006) wrote:

Ironically, it was the AL in 1995 that insisted on instituting a caretaker government instead of reforming the EC. Against this backdrop, the AL, along with a number of political parties, is demanding major changes in the formation and

jurisdiction of the caretaker government, the functioning of the EC, and the electoral laws. (p. 110)

One could clearly apprehend that this political obduracy would again generate more political crises in Bangladesh. Having no way to escape from this quagmire, the final resort would be military rule for Bangladesh, the culmination of all crises. And that is what exactly happened on January 11, 2007. The CG was dissolved prematurely, presumably under pressure from the military, after allegations of political bias toward the party in power, the BNP. A new CG, which was formed in January 2007 with the support from military, suspended all political activity, canceled the scheduled parliamentary elections, and proclaimed emergency rule. Though a direct military rule did not emerge, the two-year caretaker regime (2006-2008) was strongly controlled and led by the military (Momen, 2009). The regime ossified the process of democratization. Analysis shows that one crisis leads to another if it is addressed out of political obduracy and vendetta without considering probable consequences. The murder, intimidation, suppression, and harassment of political opponents worsened the atmosphere of vendetta and violence that had marked the country's politics in the past few decades. Unprecedented day-to-day human sufferings and the nipping at the bud of democratization are among the obvious legacies of the political obduracy and vendetta. The national election of 2014 further aggravated the trust of the opposition as the election was held without any understanding with the opposition (Feldman, 2015). In more than half of the 300 seats of Parliament, candidates were elected uncontested. According to many observers, less than 10% people voted, though the government claimed 40% participation in voter numbers (Feldman, 2015). The call by BNP for indefinite resistance in 2015 worsened the situation further (Feldman, 2015).

Political totemism

The continued confrontation between the two dominant political parties—the BNP and the AL—largely emerges from rallying behind the deceased founding leaders of the two parties, namely, '*Bangabandhu*' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and '*Shahid*' Ziaur Rahman, respectively. Although no one can deny the heroic role of Mujib or Zia in the independence movement of Bangladesh, there is a rift among their supporters on the question of who is the genuine declarer of Independence of Bangladesh:

Mujib or Zia? Though Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the ‘struggle for the freedom movement’ of Bangladesh on March 7, 1971, General Zia, “broadcast a Bangladeshi Declaration of Independence from Chittagong on March 27, 1971” on behalf of Mujib (Baxter, 2014, p. 250). Although no one can deny that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is, indeed, an unparalleled hero of the independence movement, he had a record as an abhorrent failure as a statesman. He was a man with extraordinary charisma and incredible oratory capacity. But he failed to rebuild the war-wrecked country and to combat corruption of his own people. As Milam (2007), a former American ambassador to Bangladesh, writes, “by 1974, the country was a mess, the veritable ‘basket case’ that Henry Kissinger is alleged to have called it” (p. 156). Mujib’s move towards authoritarian rule by creating ‘Rakkhi Bahini’ as well as the eventual emergence of one party, the ‘BAKSAL’, undermined his dream for democracy in Bangladesh. The assassination of Mujib and the eventual rise of Zia offered the latter an opportunity to provide a contrasting vision of national identity and definition of the nation by bringing a competitive party system with the formation of the BNP and a sharp rise in economic growth. According to Milam (2007):

Zia was tremendously popular throughout his tenure. He not only restored stability (while overcoming at least 23 mutinies by radicalized factions of the military); he also restored faith by practicing the politics of hope.” (p. 156)

Yet, Zia was alleged to have been brutal in dealing with his opponents in the army and promoting the non-freedom fighters.

Although both Mujib and Zia were assassinated, their supporters worship them as cult figures. Currently, Zia’s widow Khaleda Zia leads the BNP, and Mujib’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina, leads the AL. Their supporters profess profound love for Bangladesh, but they fall into the trap of narrow political railing behind the two deceased leaders: Mujib and Zia. Their self-imprisonment in the shackles of narrow political ideology results in a constriction of views. As the dogma begins to govern them, their sense of objective thinking, broad vision, and appreciative disposition gradually is bogged down. Finally, they completely lose the sense to appreciate the good deeds of their political opponents. In fact, their vision becomes blurred and all of the good deeds of their political opponents become bad and destructive to them, but their own activities, even if they are destructive to the nation, are viewed and

presented as something good for the country. For example, although the recent attempt of the present government to build Rampal power plant in 'Sundarban' is considered by the opposition and environmentalists as destructive for the nation, the government seems to be going ahead with the project.

All of these generate the three deviations of division, desolation and destruction -- all of which are now common phenomena -- and aspects of a chronic disease in Bangladesh politics. A true patriot should be above all political narrowness and guide the nation towards prosperity and cohesion, rather than hatred, division, and partisanships. However, because of political dogmatism, some view Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a 'superman' who is beyond and above criticism (Milam, 2007), whereas others do not have the intestinal fortitude, because they have lost the appreciative disposition to recognize his heroic role during the liberation war in 1971 (Baxter, 2014). Both sides are fanatic in that one generates the ideology called 'Mujibism' (Jahan, 1974) and the other brings the ideology of Zia's 'Bangladeshi Nationalism'. This leads to factionalism, hatred, extremism, and fanaticism. (Rashiduzzaman, 1993). Unfortunately, these traits have dominated the political culture of Bangladesh for more than four decades.

The situation does not stop there. The deceased political leader then captures the collective imagination of the followers. The deceased gradually becomes a sacred entity. Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology, calls it a 'totem' that turns into a cult-like religion (Randall & Makowsky, 1998). Because the totem needs enchantments through different rituals and celebrations, the followers then devote all of their efforts to glorifying their totem. They write poetry, stories, and novels to eulogize their totem; make arts and sculpture to depict the venerated image of their totem; and organize different cultural programs as well as compose different enchanting slogans to magnify their deceased totem. In fact, their actions cross the political boundary, penetrate the cultural and social arenas, and finally enter the day-to-day activities of the followers. Their hearts, minds, and imagination are imbued with a new color, namely, the color of their totem.

All of these are manifested in different celebrations including Mujib *Dibash*, *Sepoy Dibosh*, *Shok-Dibash*, Independence Day, and Victory Day. It is also manifested in different rituals, such as offering garlands to

the grave of 'Bangabandhu' or *Shahid* Ziaur Rahman; organizing *Kangali Voz*; in clothing like Mujib-Coat; in slogans and in phrases such as the *Joy Bangla*, *Joy Bangabandhu*, *Jatir-Janak*, *Bangladesh Zindabad*, and in different manifestations of arts and sculpture. After coming to power in 2001, the BNP-led coalition government changed the names of many institutions such as the name of the airport in Chittagong from *M.A. Hannan* to *Shah Amanat* Airport, and so on. Similarly, after coming to power in 2008 the AL-led coalition government started changing the names of many institutions such as *Chin-Moitry Sommelson Kendro* to *Bangabandhu Sommelson Kendro* and that of Dhaka's Zia International Airport to Hajrat Shah Jalal International Airport, and so on. The BNP even alleges that the government is planning to move Zia's grave from capital city of Dhaka to somewhere else in order to implement Louis Kahn design (*Dainik Pratidin*, December 7, 2016). The deceased Mujib or Zia, the totem, becomes the centre-point around which all activities of the followers are drawn. The deceased then gets a new permanent life in the hearts of the followers, and the dead Mujib or dead Zia becomes much stronger than when alive. Though political totemism has some positive implications such as creating strong unity within a political party, it retards good governance because it does not provide any room for political pluralism.

High "politicism"

Another conspicuous trend in Bangladesh politics is 'politicism' – the boiling down of all social affairs into politics, rather than the other way around. Politicism emerges when politics becomes the sole overarching unit, upon which all social affairs and activities become contingent, and to which everything in society is subservient and subordinated. Although politics is one of the dominant social institutions that exerts power and prestige, it is not the only institution that has infuses power (Islam, 2006). In a pluralistic democratic society, such as the United States or Canada, other institutions and agencies, such as educational institutions and its intellectuals, civil society, and special interest groups, to name but a few, can also have power that is parallel to politics (Islam, 1989). The problem arises when all of these human agencies become contingent upon, and submissive to, politics, and not vice-versa. Politics then dictates every human agency and limits human freedom and autonomy. This problematic relationship between politics and other human agencies, i.e., the subordination of human agencies and freedom

of politics is a great hindrance to a country's development, progress, and democratization.

In Bangladesh, for example, none of the governments of the last forty-seven years until today have been able to offer the nation a clear education policy, something that is considered the backbone of a nation. Every regime has appointed a commission to recommend an education policy for the country, but every ruling party and opposition party has tried to politicize its opinions rather than being objective about education policy. The BNP government devised an education policy in 2005 but failed to implement it because of vehement opposition from the AL. The current government led by AL alliance has developed its own education policy since 2009 but it is facing staunch opposition from the opposition party, and some opposition civil society and Muslim religious groups because of its alleged ignorance to religious/Islamic education (Momen, 2010). Similarly, despite the incidence of some terrorist activities in the country, the AL and BNP have not worked jointly to prevent these activities. In the last couple of years, the *Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) and a few other radical organizations have posed a serious threat to national security. However, the ruling and the opposition parties have failed to work together to prevent such activities. Despite unprecedented and well-coordinated bomb blasts by the JMB in 2005, the political arena experienced no changes at all: squabbling between the two major political parties—the BNP and the AL—continued, with both parties regularly trading insults. Ali Riaz (2005) noted:

Rising political violence and religious militancy, coupled with the government's vindictive attitude and the main opposition party's intransigence have created an unstable environment that is likely to inflict still further damage on Bangladesh's democracy. (p. 113)

The impasse that people are facing in Bangladesh is not related to politics, but politicism. The long-term effects of politicism are quite remarkable and striking. First, politicism transcends all barriers and enters the daily lives of people. All social contracts and relations including marriage, business, codes of conduct, and family relations are shaped by and organized under the banner of politics. Politics becomes an axis around which people organize their activities and behave as 'political beings' rather than meaning-laden social being. Second, politicism limits freedom and liberty because no new thought for development and

prosperity flourishes, as it should. Because politics dictates everything, people cannot think beyond their narrow political dogma. The thinking process of most people is restricted to a narrow political boundary. They cannot enjoy freedom beyond that limited political prison. Third, politicism leads to a normalization of power. Important human traits, such as honesty, intellectuality, integrity, sincerity, and so on assume less value, but political affiliation and closeness to political leaders and bureaucracy gain a huge market currency. People gradually covet this political currency, and leave behind the essential traits, that are of paramount importance to the democratization process. Political influence and power over every human being gradually becomes normalized, and people begin to accept them as the societal norm. Although in a democratic society, legal institutions are supposed to operate freely and authoritatively, politicism makes them subservient to politics and its leaders. Society then witnesses gross injustice, godfather and money politics, as well as minority oppression.

Fourth, politicism hinders the emergence of a vibrant civil society and other human agencies to exert positive social change. The concentration of more time and energy by both the ruling party and the opposition forces in confronting each other limits the time and energy necessary to spend for the growth of a vibrant civil society. Democracy never flourishes if there is no vibrant civil society. Fifth, politics becomes a lucrative career. Students put more emphasis on being a leader of a political party's student wing than on studying hard to achieve a better future. Since getting a job is increasingly dependent on having political links than on good academic records, many students subscribe to the notion that politics, more so than doing well in education, will provide a better future, and that doing well in education will have less market currency than having a good political career. Simply stated, education will have little or no value unless there are political links. Getting close to political leaders to curry their favor then becomes the ultimate aim in life for many students. Gradually, politics permeates all educational institutions. Political slogans, not study, become the main activity on campus. Teachers seeking promotion, position, or better facilities also do not get justice based on merit. Politics becomes an overarching frame under which everything gets boiled down. Since campuses are in the hands of few political students, all other students and faculties

are at the mercy of those few selected political students (*Prothom Alo*, January 8, 2010).

Finally, because the culture of politicism dominates society, people become more interested in developing the traits of politics, rather than using such human traits as honesty, knowledge, patriotism, civic sense, and so forth for social and economic development. What Bangladesh has been witnessing over the last two decades is that everything in the country has been reduced to politics. Politicism has become so pervasive that the ruling party leaves a very narrow gap for the opposition to exert their political will. Because the opposition is normally denied participation in any development activities in Bangladesh, this—along with other factors—leads to destructive political agendas such as strikes, violence, arms struggles and so on. Any kind of political reform will be in vain unless this very nexus of politicism is subverted and people are allowed to express their will freely and meaningfully. People will then dictate rather than be dictated by politics, and that is one of the key requirements for democratization.

Structural opposition

Politicism is followed by another long-established political culture developed in Bangladesh, that is, 'structural opposition' culture. British anthropologist Evans Pritchard found this culture in Africa. There were hostilities between Nuer and Dinka tribes, but their hostilities turned into unity when they faced a concerted challenge from the Egyptian government (Othman, 1988). What is important in 'structural opposition' is that the unity of a group or groups is contingent upon, or maintained by, an opposition to others (Islam, 2000); the more opposition the group faces, the more unified they become from within. There are internal tensions and feuds within most political parties in Bangladesh; however, those feuds turn into unity when they face or manage to create opposition to other political parties. Historically, the unity and solidarity of a particular political party in Bangladesh has been maintained through its opposition to others. A leader in the AL or the BNP, for example, becomes prominent only if they can oppose and attack rival political parties. The more bitterly they can manage to oppose or attack their political rivals, the better political careers they can make. Though opposition remains an apparent picture in most

democratic societies, the kind of opposition and bitter rivalry developed in Bangladesh politics is unhealthy.

There are some obvious consequences of this 'structural opposition culture' in Bangladesh. First, it subverts the peaceful coexistence of cooperation among political parties because 'opposition' remains the main political agenda. Secondly, because opposition to rival political parties gets the highest market currency, the political leaders remain obsessed with finding new issues and novel methods to attack their political rivals. It brings to politics the practices of falsehood, concoction, weirdness, active denial, and fabrication, as well as the construction of new realities. During speeches at political gathering, political leaders spend more time attacking political rivals rather than offering pragmatic agendas for the nation's development. The practices of lying and concoction become normalized and new sophisticated methods of concocting or fabricating facts and realities to attack political rivals are always welcomed and applauded in the realm of politics. Political rivalry and bitterness sometimes reach to such an extreme level that some political leaders lose their last iota of patriotism and then discursively portray the nation as 'fundamentalist' or a 'breeding ground of Talibanism' and so forth in an effort to invite foreign intervention. Third, it generates fanaticism within politics. Because leaders are consumed with attacking political rivals as the paramount route to becoming more popular, they not only suffer from dramatic decline in appreciating good deeds and contributions of political rivals but also lose the far-sighted vision needed for the country's development and democratization. Consequently, no culture develops based on any future vision as leaders are obsessed with attacking others instead. The country's development and progress become secondary and the political realm does not allow for visionary and honest leaders. It then creates a 'demo-crisis' in which the country is deprived of not only pragmatic and visionary leaders but also conscientious citizens and a vibrant civil society. Finally, 'the structural opposition' culture generates hatred, division, mistrust, unrest and continuous political tension. Sometimes, political tension turns into violence and murder, and 'corpse politics' (*Lash Rajniti*) emerges. If any political activist is killed or insulted as the result of any political violence, it is not generally regarded as a political loss; rather the 'corpse' becomes political capital to generate a new issue in the complex atmosphere of political rivalry. For example,

Dr. Milan's killing by the brutal law and order enforcing agencies brought about the mass upsurge against General Ershad and subsequent downfall of the regime in 1990 (Baxter, 1991).

Due to the 'structural opposition' culture that has continued for decades, a healthy political atmosphere with viable democratic practices has not developed; so the country remains retrogressive. It has also paved the way for foreign diplomats to intrude into the internal affairs of the country such as what happened in 2006. Dealing with some corrupt political leaders may shake, but will not root out, the long-established foundation of structural opposition culture.

Projection politics

'Projection' is a conspicuous political trait overwhelmingly practiced in Bangladesh. As expected, it has retarded social and economic development, and it also has driven the whole nation backward. In social science, 'projection' denotes a source of prejudice and discrimination in a multi-racial society. Many people have personal traits that they consider undesirable. They wish to rid themselves of those traits, but they cannot always do so directly either because they find the effort too difficult or because they are unable to admit that they possess those traits. They may relieve their tension by attributing the unwanted traits to others, often members of another group. This makes it possible for them to reject and condemn the traits without rejecting and condemning themselves. Since the emotional pressures underlying projection can be very intense, it is difficult to counter them with rational arguments (Komblum & Smith, 2009).

An example of projection often cited by many social scientists is White attitudes toward Black sexuality in the United States. Historically, many Whites viewed Blacks as extremely promiscuous and uninhibited in their sexual relations, and there was much concern about protecting White women from sexual attacks by Black men. In reality White men enjoyed virtually unlimited sexual access to Black women, particularly slaves. White society, however, regarded overt sexuality as unacceptable, and it is likely that White men felt some guilt about their sexual desires and adventures. To alleviate their guilt, they projected their own lust and sexuality onto Black men which was a much easier than admitting the discrepancy between their own values and behaviors (Heiner, 2010).

We often find a similar pattern in Bangladesh politics. The mainstream political parties spend much of their time and energy projecting various negative connotations and labels on to their political opponents when they themselves are the best examples of those labels. When the leaders of a political alliance, for example, label their political opponents with various negative images such as corrupt, looters, gangsters, violent cadres, vote-thieves, and so on, all of these labels initially apply to the projectors and they are unable in reality to escape from those negative images themselves.

The purpose of the projection politics is clear. First, the political opponents want to erase their guilt by portraying others in the similar fashion. Second, they want to divert people's attention from their own negative traits to the traits of their political opponents. Finally, when the leaders lack in their achievements and future vision of progress, they indulge in projection politics. Though some political leaders, that is the – 'most corrupt of them'—attack their opponents with the same traits that they already have and thereby feel relieved of their guilt, they cannot hide themselves from conscious people. They only make themselves laughable and ridiculous. The practice of projection gradually becomes an uncontested norm and political opponents gradually turn into political enemies. The normalization of these deviant practices turns the nation towards hatred, division, the concoction of lies, a silly mentality, and the deterioration of self-esteem. The political leaders can then be used as trump-cards by internal or external non-constitutional forces, such as in events which happened in Bangladesh between 2006 and 2008. Surprisingly, some political traits are so normalized and embedded in mainstream political parties and its supporters--that problematizing those traits is sometimes regarded as abnormal.

Creation of binary spaces

It has largely become an integral part of the national psyche of Bangladesh to associate its identity and existence with the war of liberation in 1971. This is not wrong because the nation's independence came through a long struggle and paramount sacrifice; however, as people begin to understand the national history of Bangladesh, they come to realize that many contentious issues remain unresolved. What is apparent is that a significant part of the country's population politically opposed the idea of separation, which is common to every liberation war and

civil justice movement all over the world. What is puzzling is that the generation born in Bangladesh after liberation had no clear answer from history as to why a quarter of East Pakistan's population opposed a separate and independent Bangladesh (Baxter, 1984). Since it was a question of the nation's identity and existence, there was a need to have a clear understanding of not only 'how' but also 'why' a portion of its population did not subscribe to an independent Bangladesh separated from a united Pakistan (Jahan, 1973).

Rather than have a clear historical account of the liberation, the whole realm has become so diluted and vague that most often, one has trouble in separating facts from fiction. As mentioned earlier, the nation still suffers from a lack of consensus on some fundamental issues such as who declared independence, how many people were killed or raped during the war, who opposed the war, why and in what way. One of the conspicuous reasons for this diluted atmosphere is, as already observed, the usage of the narrative of the 'liberation war' for political purposes (Bose, 2011). The political culture of the last four decades has been largely fraught with lies, fabrications, concoctions and emotional dispositions; in addition, because the liberation war has been one of the key issues in the realm of politics, the national identity has become diluted and weakened. The people—mostly political leaders—who are engrossed in such politics gradually become emotional and fanatical in attacking their political opponents and begin to lose their objectives in terms of disposition and fairness. Exaggerations, concoctions, obduracy and verbal attacks against political opponents are some of the traits that the political leaders and their hard-core supporters from all camps have been maintaining and nurturing for more than three decades.

The above situation has divided the whole nation into two groups, that is, those who are either for 'Bengali' nationalism or for 'Bangladeshi' nationalism or for 'Bengali Muslim' identity (Chatterjee, 1996, and Rashiduzzaman, 1993). One group uses this construction in most of their speeches, falsely accusing their political opponents, and branding them with some negative terms. As the issue of 1971 turns into their main political agenda, they use the emotions and dispositions of the people for their own interest. Individuals, whether they are true freedom fighters or not, depend on their belongingness to the party. In this way, being, or not being, in the political party becomes a 'yardstick' to identify the individuals who are freedom fighters. This constantly

perpetuates division, not cohesion. As a consequence, there has been no accurate list of freedom fighters in Bangladesh till now. The BNP, while in power in 1992, prepared a list of freedom fighters that was revised by the AL while it was in power in 1996. Again, the BNP revised that list in 2001 (Rashiduzzaman, 2002) which was further revised by the AL in 2010 (D'Costa, 2011). How could the list of freedom fighters be changed repeatedly considering that the liberation war was over in 1971?

Some conspicuous negative consequences of this construction have been witnessed during the last four decades. First, it makes people 'retrogressive'; as 1971 becomes the focal point and subsequently occupies all of their imaginations, it creates a great hindrance to moving further. Identifying who is pro-liberation and who is not becomes the main political and individual agenda (Baxter, 1997). Consequently, national development, social cohesion and progress always take a secondary priority. It not only leads to stagnation, but also constantly drives the nation backwards. Consequently, the nation lags behind economically, socially, culturally, and democratically.

Second, it leads to a clear and sometimes ambivalent division of the nation as expounded upon earlier. Many nations of the world have faced almost similar junctures, and unlike some politicians in Bangladesh, the great politicians of those nations had the far-sighted vision to build their nations and lead them forward. They all focused on cohesion, rather than on differences or divisions. Abraham Lincoln, for example, became famous because he devoted his utmost efforts to erase the dichotomy of White masters and Black slaves. Noble peace prize laureate Nelson Mandela of South Africa did the same. Even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman offered a 'general amnesty' to all who opposed the liberation movement with a view to moving forward with harmony and cohesion among the people. Nearly 33,000 detained collaborators were released (Jahan, 1974). Finally, this construction creates a culture of hatred, division, and emotion. As the proponents of this construction regard the whole nation as their own property, it eventually makes them arrogant and lustful of power through any means and the well being of the country then becomes a secondary agenda.

The people, who collaborated with the Pakistani army during 1971 known as 'Razakars,' were accused of serving their personal interests.

Apparently, they were opportunists and paid agents – which included both Bengalis and non-Bengalis (especially Biharis). In a similar vein, one may witness now a small but strong cohort of people who are seemingly collaborating with India, Israel and the United States to serve the interest of these countries at the expense of national unity and progress. Though they identify themselves as ‘the real patriots’ and harbingers of independence to the nation to occlude their real faces, they seem to be actively engaged in activities that run counter to the true interests of Bangladesh.

Liberation is not only an event that happened in 1971, but also a continuous process. Bangladesh was liberated from Pakistani oppression in 1971 with the hope that the nation would escape from poverty, corruption, tyranny, foreign dependence and intervention and all forms of injustices. Rather than being liberated itself from all these problems, the nation unfortunately has sunk deeper into the quagmire of all these. After liberation from Pakistan, those who often use 1971 as an ideological guise and a ‘political property’ not only hide their gross failures and massive corruptions during their regimes but also stigmatize their political opponents, branding them as anti-liberation, alongside other derogatory labels (Milam, 2007).

Extreme ideologization

The two dominant political parties—the AL and the BNP, as well as their allies— are also sharply divided along ideological lines. The popular view from outside Bangladesh is that the two female leaders of the two major parties: Sheikh Hasina of the AL and Khaleda Zia of the BNP hate each other on a personal level. In fact, this struggle is deeper than a personal quarrel; rather it is more at the ideological level. “The bitter division between the parties,” as Milam (2007) writes, “goes to the very heart of the state itself, the national vision and the definition of the country.” While the AL is based on ‘*Mujibism*’ and emphasizes the country’s first constitution’s principles of secularism, socialism, democracy and (Bengali) nationalism, the BNP supports a free economy, ‘Bangladeshi’ nationalism and the formulation of the state based on ‘absolute faith and trust in Almighty Allah’. Zia created a vision of national identity that contrasted sharply with the secular, socialist, statist, Pan-Bengali nationalist vision of the AL. His vision defined the nation by territory and religion, as opposed to the primordial definition of Mujib, which

is based on language and culture. This eventually has served to split the nation. In current politics, these contrasting visions have led to the political epithets ‘anti-liberation’, ‘fundamentalists’ and so on used by the AL and its allies against their opponents, and ‘pro-Indian’, ‘foreign agent’, and so on used by the BNP and its allies against their opponents. These accusations have only served to energize party adherents.

In particular, the ideology of secularism has become very controversial in the context of politics in Bangladesh. Secularism is a political ideology characterized by ‘this worldly orientation’ and the separation of religion and the state. Although secularism demands not to have religious dictations in the state affairs, it does not necessarily want the elimination of religion altogether from social life. This sort of political ideology emerged in Europe in the backdrop of church-state conflict during the middle Ages, which posed a great hindrance to development and progress. Most secularists in the West are in favor of such a separation because of the religious obscurantism of the Church, but they want to confine religion to a private affair rather than ban or eliminate it entirely. They cherish a great love for Christianity and its millions of followers, but they think that religion does not have enough political and social resources and philosophies to run a state in the era of democracy and pluralism. Nevertheless, almost every country in the West has religion-based political parties which have incorporated democratic principles. Notable amongst them is the Christian Democratic Party of Germany (*The Daily Star*, January 5, 2010).

Unfortunately, the development of secularism in Bangladesh has entirely taken the wrong route. Those who claim to be secularists in Bangladesh, are often seen as maintaining an extreme rebuff of and a total antagonism towards Islam, the religion practiced by the majority-nearly 87% of the people- in Bangladesh. On the other hand, some regimes like Ershad used religion for its own political purposes by declaring Islam as the state religion of the country. The secularists devote all of their efforts to oppose Islam and its active followers. In their writings, speeches and other political activities, they spend more time and energy attacking Islam rather than presenting their own secular philosophies. In this post-9/11 world, many AL supporters have attacked Islamic political parties with such negative and derogative labels as ‘*razakars*’ ‘war-criminals’, and so on (Hashmi, 2011). As mentioned earlier, on the other hand, the BNP supporters have called the AL and its left

allies ‘pro-Indian’, ‘foreign agents’, etc. As Jahan (2004) comments, “BNP leaders repeatedly charged that the AL was creating anarchy and ruining the image of the country abroad” (p. 60). It generates a culture of extreme hatred, division, tension and retrogressive politics that are continuously driving the nation towards backwardness, and hindering development and progress.

Conclusion

What has emerged from the foregoing analysis is that despite some accounts of success, a ‘democratic deficit’ or ‘good governance deficit’ still remains conspicuous in Bangladesh. Moving away from the traditional analysis of regimes change and democratic institutionalization, the paper delved into the political cultural traits that have largely shaped politics in Bangladesh since 1971. The political realities in recent years have generated two distinct political camps in Bangladesh—the AL-led alliance with left wing secular parties, and the BNP-led coalition with right wing nationalists and Islamic political parties. Although this bifurcation is analogous to most advanced democratic societies of the world, the political relations between these two camps are unfortunately driven by—among other things—political obduracy, structural opposition, political ‘totemism’, and a unique culture of politicism. The hostility between the ruling party and the opposition, the ruling party’s utter disregard for the rule of law, the diminishing importance of parliamentary procedures, extra-judicial killings, and a spiraling trend of violence have all delivered a serious blow to democracy in Bangladesh. Despite having enormous possibilities for democratization, these cultural traits have worked as an impediment to democracy in Bangladesh. The current political culture is to win elections by any means necessary and to remain in power by attacking opponents. In Bangladesh, According to Milam (2007):

No amount of money is too much to spend on political victory; no course of action is too immoral or illegal to achieve it; no amount of violence is too brutal to sustain it. For many years, Bangladeshi politics has resembled a bare knuckle fight—bloody, vicious, without rules, and sometimes fatal. (p. 155)

Therefore, no institutional solutions can be effective in Bangladesh unless these political cultural traits are addressed properly.

For the past twenty years, this has remained the way of political life in Bangladesh, whether it was the BNP in power (1991-1996 and 2001-2006) or the AL in power (1996-2001 and 2008 to the present). Following each election, there are calls for intermittent boycotts of the parliament, resignation of the government and for new elections. All of these activities have disrupted the economic life of the nation. Indeed, the fundamental cause of abysmally bad governance is this toxic political culture. Every ruling party has been so wrapped up in opposing the opposition by any and all means that each has failed to deliver even the bare minimum of social services. For democracy to flourish and function effectively there is an urgent need to overhaul the destructive political cultures discussed in this article. If attempts are not made to change the long established grimy culture and institutions, establishing a true democracy in Bangladesh will remain a mere dream and the nation will suffer from an impending fatal catastrophe. Bangladesh needs to liberate itself from these chronic political diseases so that it can move forward in the 21st century. If democracy with ‘good governance’ is not allowed to progress and thrive, the nation will be submerged in the quagmire of ‘dummy-crazy’.

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