The Future of Liberal Democracy in Bangladesh after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Shantanu Majumder

BANGLADESH

FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG

The Future of Liberal Democracy in Bangladesh after the COVID-19 Pandemic

April 2021

Contents

Executive Summary

Support for democracy as a form of ruling in Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populated country and a religiously Muslim-dominated post-colonial State, seems astounding. Perhaps it is only as an idea. The practise of democratic values comes up short in past and present Bangladesh. This paper asserts that despite the extraordinary urge, the country is far from attaining a liberal democracy due to the glaring presence of several long-lasting hindrances. Among them, a long-running dominant party culture, the continuation of malpractices that emerged during the military era and the undemocratic origins and anti-democratic principles of several mainstream political parties can be mentioned. Compromises with the basics of democracy regarding who conducts an election and how they conduct it and the noticeable reluctance of political forces towards democratic institution building are also analysed.

Government activities during the COVID-19 pandemic have once again exposed some of the weakest aspects of Bangladesh democracy. These include self-censorship by civil society, human rights defenders and the media, an ineffective opposition entirely unable to hold the government accountable and the sidelining of politicians. This paper considers these trends as a big part of the enduring problems of democracy in the country.

Lack of enthusiasm for democratic values in the society is another area this paper illustrates to scrutinize the chance for liberal democracy in Bangladesh. Confusing democracy with brute majority and, in many instances, acceptance of anti-democratic narratives on the grounds of religious belief and own culture and social expectations, along with the limitations of some civil society groups weaken the potential for democracy. This paper argues that democratic deficits in matured democracies and the decay of the democratic political culture in the region also are negatively impacting Bangladesh's journey towards liberal democracy.

Anticipating a challenging time in the post-pandemic phase, this paper offers recommendations for the attention of civil society and the international community. The recommendations incorporate continuous dialogue with the regime for fair elections, for strengthening democratic institutions and for sending a strong message to the main opposition regarding befriending anti-democratic forces in the name of political tactics. It also sheds importance for non-partisan engagement with traditional civil society. Strongly recommended is a more active role of the West European and Scandinavian countries that have better track records of democracy. Obtaining a liberal democracy should be the ultimate target instead of an electoral democracy, which often falls into the trap of electing undemocratic people democratically.

The paper recommends creating scope for formal and informal interaction between a ruling party and the opposition to minimize the distance between the arch rivals. Helping the media to become self-reliant and economically viable is also emphasized.

Introduction

Demand for democracy was part and parcel of the 24-year-long movement for independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. In continuation of that spirit, democracy was declared as one of the four basic principles in the first Constitution of the country, in 1972. However, that journey of the newborn country towards democracy was short-lived. The Head of State was assassinated, the elected government was toppled, and military dictatorship took over in mid-1975. It took 15 years for democratic forces to end the military rule.

The collapse of military rule in 1990 created extraordinary expectations regarding a fresh start for democracy in the country. Democracy, as a fulfilment of the desire of the populace, was reintroduced through a parliamentary election in 1991, the same year S. P. Huntington published his much-discussed book, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, which illustrated the reasons behind the increase in the number of countries moving towards democracy between the mid-1970s and the end of 1980s and the prospects of durability of democratic transition worldwide.[1]

It did not take long for the euphoria of the nation for liberal democracy to evaporate, mainly due to the undemocratic tussles of the democratically elected political parties. After almost three decades since the reintroduction of democracy, it can be said that despite having elections somewhat regularly, that the elected governments usually complete terms and that political institutions are theoretically active, the list of the areas to improve is massive. Shortcomings like an all-pervasive ruling party, a rhetorical and dysfunctional Parliament, the absence of democracy in political parties, street-centric oppositions and inter-party disagreement on basic principles of the State have been acute over the past decades.

Human rights and freedom of expression of the religious and ethnic minorities, freethinkers and opposition parties

are not safeguarded. The past two national elections, in 2014 and 2018, failed to obtain appreciation at home and abroad. Bangladesh's political landscape dejectedly resonates with Thomas Carothers' characteristics of a "gray zone" country—and experts struggle to decide whether the country is democratic or not.[2]

The meaning of democracy in Western countries began to expand at the end of the Second World War through the acceptance of "liberalism" as an integral element. This trend continued throughout the past seven decades. In the course of time, it was established that merely holding an election to select the rulers cannot be termed "democracy". Although elections are rudimentary for establishing a liberal democracy, they are by no means the only precondition of democracy. Equally necessary are constitutional safeguards that include protection of individual freedoms, like freedom of speech and expression against state violence and repression in the name of social expectations or religious sentiments.

Protection of minorities from the risk of the "tyranny of the majority" is also an important aspect of a liberal democracy.[3] Although there remains a swell of support for democracy, plenty of experts and observers have discovered a decline in the practise of liberal democracy around the world since the middle of the past decade, which Larry Diamond branded a "democratic recession".[4] All current realities indicate that Bangladesh is in no sense an exception to this trend.

Research organizations like Freedom House argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is "exacerbating the 14 years of consecutive decline in freedom" worldwide.[5] This paper discusses the future of liberal democracy in Bangladesh after the pandemic against the backdrop of the country's current realities.

---

[1] S.P. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

[2] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm. Journal of Democracy, vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 5–21.

[3] Fareed Zakaria, The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. Foreign Affairs, vol. 76, No.6 (1997), pp. 22–43.

[4] Larry Diamond, Facing Up to the Democratic Recession. Journal of Democracy, vol. 26, No. 1 (2015), pp. 141–155.

[5] Sarah Repucci, and Amy Slipowitz, Democracy Under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom. Freedom House (October 2020). Available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19_Special_Report_Final_.pdf.

The first section of this paper sheds light on a few ongoing problems of democracy that are nothing new but have reached a new height and, to some extent, took a new shape during the pandemic. The second section examines the long-lasting obstacles in the political sphere to attain a liberal democratic system in Bangladesh—a South Asian religiously Muslim majority post-colonial State. Although the malfunctioning of democracy has markedly been visible in several ways during the pandemic, the situation is largely a renewed manifestation of the downsides of democracy that the country has experienced for a long time.

Lack of enthusiasm for liberal democratic values that inescapably diminishes the possibility of democracy is discussed in the third section. This scrutiny is important because there is ample evidence that the chance of democracy in the political sphere depends immensely on the acceptance of liberal values (for example, tolerance and respect for different lifestyles and expressions and equal treatment of minorities), which is what is at stake now. The fourth section relates the lack of liberal democratic values in Bangladesh to regional and international trends. The final section provides recommendations for the international community and civil society with a hope to bring change, although the ongoing realities, long-lasting hurdles and recession of liberal democracy worldwide hints of a bleak future for Bangladesh.

Ongoing Realities

The discussion on self-censorship, sidelining of politicians and almost non-existent opposition increased during the days of pandemic, which hit Bangladesh hard, as it did with many other countries. Although nothing new, these issues captured front-page headlines several times as a result of unprecedented realities that emerged after the first lockdown began in March 2020.

Self-censorship as a new normal

It is widely believed that self-censorship in Bangladesh has become a new normal among human rights defenders, civil society members and journalists, to a great extent as a result of the real and/or perceived fear of being a victim of arbitrary use of the draconian Digital Security Act of 2018. The law intends to combat cyber fraud and crimes and to safeguard core values of the State. However, plenty of undefined words and terms (for example, offensive, false or threatening data or information or the intentional publication or transmission of anything that creates enmity, hatred, hostility, unrest or disorder or destroys communal harmony and deteriorates or advances to deteriorate the law-and-order situation) that are subject to interpretation of the authorities have created severe unease since passage of the law.

It seems that the fear has been rising throughout the past year of the pandemic due to the extraordinary increase in the use of the law in the form of harassment, charges, lawsuits, arrests and detention. Local media outlets think tanks and the international community report a disproportionate increase in the use of the Act since the beginning of the pandemic. ARTICLE 19, a freedom of expression- and freedom of information-promoting organization, found that a total of 89 cases were filed

against 173 people under the Digital Security Act between March (when the first COVID-19 cases were detected) and the third week of June 2020. And 22 cases were filed against 41 journalists from across the country in the same period. According to ARTICLE 19 research, only 63 cases were filed in 2019,[6] while Amnesty International reports that more than 800 cases were filed under the Digital Security Act in the first nine months of 2020.[7]

The situation fits with the observation that authorities in many countries are using "the pandemic as a pretext to crack down on free expression and access to information".[8] A large number of experts are worried that many governments will standardize the pandemic-curtailment of freedom of expression and the free flow of information in the post-pandemic period, with the intention to strengthen the grip on civil society and opposition and dissident voices. This worry leads to a big question: Will Bangladesh avoid further deterioration in the post-pandemic phase? The global and local trends do not give observers cause for optimism.

Opposition is feeble and ineffective

During this pandemic, the governing regime seems to be enjoying a kind of "free ride" against allegations of performance failure and corruption in the absence of any effective resistance in and outside Parliament from the opposition. Transparency International Bangladesh found corruption in "purchases of medical supplies and lack of transparency in procurement processes". It also reported "excessive control" of a syndicate in all kinds of procurement by the Ministry of Health.[9] Again, the increase in the number of arrests, charges, lawsuits and detention of journalists and social media activists

---

[6]   Arifur Rahman Rabbi, Upsurge in Digital Security Act cases during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bangla Tribune, 28 June. Available at https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/06/28/upsurge-in-digital-security-act-cases-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.

[7]   Digital Security Act: Rise in the use of the law alarming", Daily Star, 9 Oct. 2020. Available at https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/digital-security-act-rise-use-the-law-alarming-1974741 [Visit 02/11/2020].

[8]   Adrian Shahbaz, and Allie Funk, Information isolation: Censoring the COVID-10 outbreak. Freedom House (2000). Available at https://freedomhouse.org/report/report-sub-page/2020/information-isolation-censoring-covid-19-outbreak.

[9]   TIB finds gross corruption in COVID-19 management. New Age, 16 June 2020. Available at https://www.newagebd.net/article/108515/tib-finds-gross-corruption-in-covid-19-purchases.

for raising attention to allegations of corruption in the pandemic's management is an issue of serious concern.

These allegations of corruption and the squeezing of freedom of expression have attracted the attention of the international community and media. However, the reaction of the opposition parties regarding these issues has been minimal and informal in comparison with the response of local civil society and the international community. Instead of taking any organized initiative, the opposition leaders mostly restrict themselves to mild criticism of the government in non-political meetings or television talk shows. As a result, the opposition parties, predictably, have failed to create any effective pressure on the government that involves ordinary citizens in favour of the cause.

The weakening of the opposition began with the parliamentary election of 2014. The confrontational politics between the governing regime and the opposition parties took to a new height at that time, revolving around the debate on how to hold a free and fair election. The opposition parties had a non-negotiable demand for the reintroduction of the unelected non-partisan election-time caretaker government that was part of the Constitution from 1996 to 2011. Opposing the demand, the ruling party highlighted the argument that the system could not be restored because the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional and the system was abolished in Parliament through an amendment to the Constitution. Both sides became embroiled in a street-centric power struggle. Finally, the opposition boycotted the election, and the ruling party won by a landslide (234 of 300 seats), with 151 members elected uncontested. The Jatiya Party, the "loyal" opposition in the Parliament, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the shattered main opposition party outside the Parliament, have unsurprisingly failed to make the government accountable. In 2018, the opposition parties outside the Parliament (BNP, Gano Forum, Bikalpa Dhara and others) changed their previous stand and contested in the Parliament election.

Although the opposition was jubilant during the campaign and election-time violence was minimal, the allegation of extraordinary vote rigging and the extremely low level of vote casting eroded hope for a fresh start.

Subtle depoliticization

In some cases, the sidelining of politicians has been apparent in the pandemic period to date, reminiscent of the depoliticization efforts during the military era. Despite the criticisms, shortcomings and failures, there is no alternative for politicians and political parties in a representative democracy. Attempts to sideline, demean and corner the mainstream politicians to overcome the problem of a legitimacy crisis were evident in Bangladesh during the military era. The re-introduction of democracy saw a visible end to that trend from the State side.

Nevertheless, a strange mixture of valid reasons (undemocratic power struggle, corruption, violence, etc.), perceived wrongdoings (for example, politicians are behind all corruption) and the sometimes-failure to understand the significance of the role of politicians in a democracy provokes civil society and media to undermine the importance of politics and politicians in the country. Their relentless campaign has created an apolitical and, in many cases, anti-political mindset, particularly among a large portion of the young generation, which already questions the future of democratic politics and leadership in the country.

Along with this reality, the depoliticization trend from the regime's side in the form of sidelining politicians in major national (political and non-political) issues or events began subtly unfolding in recent years. However, it is not clear whether it is an informed decision of the regime. For example, the regime showed an appetite to rely on law-and-order forces instead of its own party activists to tackle the opposition movement prior to the national election in 2014, which visibly contrasted long-lasting Bangladeshi political culture. In the beginning of 2015, the opposition launched a prolonged violent movement to topple the government. At that time, the law-and-order forces were in charge of handling the movement instead of the ruling party activists.

The government initiatives for pandemic management brought the issue to the forefront again. Usually, the (ruling party) elected representatives lead natural disaster-management activities, which include deciding the line of action, awareness-building, relief distribution and many other initiatives. However, the government has

been pursuing a different track since the beginning of the pandemic. The bureaucracy is in charge of all pandemic management activities. For example, the upazilla nirbahi, or the chief executive, officer of a subdistrict, has been the key person behind pandemic management at the upazilla level through a pandemic management committee. The local member of Parliament and the upazilla chairperson are advisers to the committee, without any power in practice.

The sidelining has created frustration among politicians of the ruling party in the periphery, who find the practice a "distance maker" between them and the electorate as well as humiliating. The frustration is so acute that the health minister publicly decried that he was not aware of the decisions of the national committee to reopen the garment factories which were closed since the beginning of the pandemic under the instruction of the government, despite being the head of the committee. The exclusion of politicians from the process has been criticized by the opposition as well. If the trend continues, it will have a negative impact on the already-fragile political culture of the country, in terms of democracy.

Long-lasting obstacles

To overcome obstacles in attaining a liberal democracy in Bangladesh, attention needs to be invested in understanding them rather than opting for a quick fix. The hindrances place rival political forces into a point of no return. As a result, opposing political forces resist one another and block attempts to change for the positive. These long-lasting issues include a preference for a dominant party culture, the undemocratic origin and anti-democratic principles of mainstream parties, compromise with the basics of democracy regarding on how to conduct elections and minimum attention to democratic institution-building.

Preference for dominant party culture

Bangladesh began its journey with a dominant party culture after Independence in December 1971, when the Constituent Assembly of the just-born country started forming change. Of the 403 members in the Constituent Assembly, 400 were from the Awami League. The members were directly elected in the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies in the first and last general election in the history of a united Pakistan, in 1970. The provisional government of Bangladesh had, during the war, converted the National Assembly and provincial assembly members into the Constituent Assembly. Whatever the reason, the parliamentary journey began with a negligible number of opposition voices in the legislative branch.

In 1973, in the first Bangladesh Parliament election, the Awami League obtained 293 of the possible 300 seats. Understandably, little space was left for opposition parties due to the all-encompassing presence of the party in the Parliament and outside. The ruling party's decision to abolish itself, its ability to convince the main opposition parties to be defunct and then the introduction of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (a one-party system introduced in January 1975 and abandoned after the military coup in August 1975) further highlight the all-encompassing existence of the dominant party culture in the political landscape during the country's formative years.

The dominant party culture took a new turn during the military era. The military dictators attempted wholeheartedly to make their newly formed parties unparalleled. Disproportionate violence against the opposition, totally rigged elections and use of state resources to reward the party men were some of the common practices in this venture. Although a new start was anticipated during the anti-military movement, no change was evident after the reintroduction of democracy in 1991. Since then, the parties in power hardly demonstrate any aspiration to renounce the malpractice. The big political parties oppose the dominant party culture when they are in opposition. The small parties are critical about that culture but have no ability to influence the system. And no pressure from civil society has emerged that can effect change.

Illegal power capture and overthrowing of state principles

Military rule (1975–1990) damaged the democratic foundations of the country so profoundly that the impact is still felt today. The military junta amended the Constitution and used the state apparatus and the forces involved in war crimes during the liberation war to overcome the problems of legitimacy and sustainability of the regime and to create a support base.

The first Constitution included nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as the basic principles of the country. The first military junta abandoned secularism and inserted Islamic verse in the Constitution. State initiatives were unleashed to replace the tolerant, pluralistic, ethnic identity-based Bengali nationalism with a religious majority highlighting Bangladeshi nationalism. The regime, to a large extent, replicated the Pakistan culture of religion in politics. The intention was to confront the liberal and left-leaning political parties who led the liberation war and were the mainstream in politics until the unconstitutional takeover. The second military ruler followed the same track of his predecessor. He declared Islam as the state religion, officially highlighting it as the religion of the majority, and formed a new party using the state machinery. He continued the culture of vote rigging and enmity against parties with democratic and progressive origins.

The efforts of the military rulers were not in vain. In the course of time, Bangladeshi politics needlessly polarized between secularism and Islam. The anti-secular forces have been successful in branding secularism as anti-Islamic. The unresolved question of national identity and the sensitive controversy regarding the place of Islam at the state level are integral to the non-negotiable deadlock between the two main parties, Awami League and BNP. Pro-independence and anti-independence forces, the interpretation of the military rules, prosecution of war criminals and other related issues reinforce the disagreement.

Undemocratic origin and anti-democratic principles of parties

Two of the country's bigger political parties, BNP and Jatiya Party, lack the regular practice of a democratic political party. The military rulers formed these parties with the ambition to prolong their regime. In the absence of mastering any requisite for establishing a party, the first-generation leaders of these parties were picked from sharp but opposing political camps—right, left, centrist and religious parties as well. Anti-independence, anti-secular, anti-Indian and anti-Awami League personalities were accommodated in the new platforms. War criminals and religious fundamentalists were also offered important positions. Pursuing a "carrot-and-stick policy", both parties attracted some Awami League leaders from the centre and the periphery. A culture of giving up one's own political belief to join the ruling party for reward and material benefits was launched during the military era. In addition, an anti-secular stand and Muslim-sentiment characterized the politics of these parties and was a major compromise with the ideal of liberal democracy. The current party constitution, election manifesto and other documents of these parties reflect the official continuation of this position.

The two other big parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Andolan Bangladesh, are religion-centric—they discard the religious "others" and, as a result, are anti-democratic in essence. Both parties aim to establish an Islamic order. Jamaat-e-Islami is a party of convicted war criminals, while Islami Andolan Bangladesh staunchly demands a blasphemy law for the country.

In discussing the future of democracy in Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populous country, the existence of the parties with undemocratic origin and/or anti-democratic principles cannot be ignored.

Compromise with the basics of democracy

The inclusion of the election-time caretaker government provision in the Constitution in 1996, under severe pressure by the opposition, was a worrying compromise with the basics of democracy because it allowed a group of unelected people to rule the country for three

months with the prime task of conducting a fair national election. BNP, the current main opposition party outside of Parliament, was in power, and Awami League, the current ruling party, was the main opposition at that time. The provision to engage unelected people with power had no match in the democratic world. Along with the extraordinary pressure from the opposition, the dominant section of civil society established an argument without sufficient evidence that the elected party in government cannot hold a fair election. The current Awami League regime abolished the system in 2011 through a constitutional amendment, despite heavy resistance from the BNP-led opposition and civil society.

Over time it has become apparent that the caretaker government provision did not help overcome the problems (such as democratic institution-building and changes in the political culture). Notably, two of the main parties (Awami League and BNP) support the caretaker government only when they are in opposition. Dependence on a group of unelected people deemed "neutral" ultimately has resulted in inattention to the important task of a tedious time-consuming institution-building process, which is imperative for any country aspiring for democracy.

The experience of the last caretaker government (2007–2008), which stayed in place for two years instead of the mandated three-month election-time power exercise, was a wake-up call. The prolonged hold on power through constitutional manoeuvring was possible due to the wholehearted support of the military. The caretaker government at that time promulgated a state of emergency and delayed the Parliament election for an extended period. The backers of the caretaker government attempted to apply the infamous "minus-two formula" to oust the head of the two main parties from politics. Harassment, detention, torture and arrest of political activists, curtailment of freedom of speech and direct and indirect media control were regularly practised.

It is thought-provoking to see that the dominant section of urban civil society never questioned the long list of democracy-squeezing practices of the caretaker government. This section of civil society, along with the opposition parties, considered the abolition of the system as the dishonest intention of the ruling party to stay in power indefinitely. Whatever the intention of the government to abolish the system, it is important to take a deep look at the problems of holding fair elections at regular intervals and discuss whether it is democratic to rely on a group of unelected people or if it is wise to follow the time-tested path of strengthening democratic institutions.

Minimum effort for institution-building

All matured democracies have had the advantage of having a state authority, public service ethos and a common nationhood prior to the beginning of their democratization process.[10] In contrast, post-colonial countries and/or new democracies have had to start working on these vital elements one at a time. These countries also needed to provide extra endeavour to eradicate the evils of the previous eras.

Bangladesh polity has been experiencing plenty of problems of democracy that are regime-neutral. These are problems seen continuously, no matter which party is in power. Unbridled unparliamentarily politics, partisan administration and law-and-order forces, weak local government and occasional question-marked performance of the judiciary all contribute towards stalling the progress of democracy. History shows and the experts agree that without strong democratic institutions, there will be no escape from these vices. Yet, serious discussion on building independent democratic institutions, free from the pressure of government and the ruling party, remains minimal after near three decades (since the start of a second journey towards democracy in 1991).

---

[10]   Paul Becker, and Jean Aime Revelson, What is Democracy? KMF-CNOE, FES and NOVA STELLA, 2008.

Lack of enthusiasm for democratic values at the societal level

While Bangladeshi society demonstrates extraordinary urge for democracy, it is also noticeably comfortable with an anti-democratic culture and forces. This paradox needs to be taken into account when looking at the prospect for democracy in the country. Urge for a fair election, disapproval of political violence, a brief but wide-ranging safe-street movement and an anti-rape campaign in recent times convey the existence of a pro-democracy populace. At the same time, it is perplexing to find that a vast majority of people confuse democracy with brute majority. Vocal and tacit support to undemocratic narratives and practices in the name of safeguarding and upholding one's own religion, culture, community sentiment and social expectation is also evident, which negatively impacts the political sphere. Due to this reality, politicians involved in war crimes can win elections. Extraordinary emotional and violent outbursts against the prosecution of the war criminals indicate that many people are ready to negotiate with democratic values.

Intolerance and hatred towards the imagined or perceived "others" or "out group", particularly on the basis of a singular religious identity, is on the rise at a staggering pace. Many religious and ethnic minorities find themselves isolated. These conditions have given birth to"reverse isolation" among certain ethnic minority people. Although the religious extremist parties, organizations and groups openly oppose or contradict democratic ideals and liberal values, their social acceptance is noticeable. They persistently generalize the idea that Western democracy undermines Islam and Muslims. There is hardly any party or organization that meaningfully confronts their campaigns, and this is likely for two reasons—(i) fear of being branded as anti-Islam or anti-Muslim or (ii) acceptance of this campaign among the masses. Whatever the reason, the relentless campaign over the decades has confused many people regarding the ideals of liberal democracy. Unconcealed "moral policing" and the strong influence of religious conservatives in society additionally squeeze the scope for freedom of expression, freedom of religion with its true meaning and freedom to live life on one's own

terms. Self-censorship has become a reality due to these conditions.

High-level direct and indirect support for vigilante justice, growing interest in social media trials and extraordinary pressure to match with a so-called "social expectation" contradict the liberal democratic values.

Civil society sometimes fails to meet the expectations of liberal democracy, although it had a glorious role in the past. This failure began with the weakening of traditional civil society—the pro-democracy intellectuals, free thinkers, enlightened social reformers, cultural organizations and the liberal, loosely organized self-help community groups. They inherited the legacy of the early nineteenth century Bengali renaissance, when the Bengalis first exercised a modern interaction between State and society and explored constitutional paths to put forward demands to the State. They had a noteworthy role in opposing the undemocratic State machinery in the pre-independence years (1947–1971) and military rule (1975–1990) after independence through involvement in pro-democratic political movements and protest activities, providing relentless intellectual inputs and arranging nationwide anti-autocracy progressive cultural programmes. It was hoped during the re-introduction of democracy in 1991 that traditional civil society would continue its time-tested role. However, that expectation has not been fulfilled in three decades.

The weakening of traditional civil society is attributed to groups maintaining a partisan line instead of pursuing an independent role. Weak leadership, the absence of democracy within organizations and lack of funds to continue activism result in compromises in the performance of traditional civil society.

In contrast to the weakening of traditional civil society, the rights-based non-government organizations have, to a great extent, been the face of civil society in Bangladesh for decades. It is mostly the NGO-centric civil society who are appropriately vocal about fair elections, human

rights, good governance, freedom of expression and related issues. Nevertheless, the NGO-centric civil society consciously or reluctantly avoids involvement in core debates, such as secularism versus anti-secularism, liberal Bengali nationalism versus majority-religion highlighting Bangladeshi nationalism, and the place of Islam at the State level. Any observer of Bangladesh's politics is familiar with the fact that the country's confrontational politics revolve around these issues.

The limited performance of both traditional civil society and the NGO-centric civil society ultimately are making the country's journey towards democracy more difficult.

Nothing encouraging in the regional and global political landscapes

Experts and leading organizations seem to be in consensus regarding the deterioration of democracy worldwide over the past 15 years. They characterize this period with different terms: recession, rollback, erosion, decline, retreat of democracy, beginning of the end of democracy, pushback against democracy and democracy under duress.[11] There is deep query on why democracy is performing so poorly,[12] and some experts question whether democracy is slipping away.[13] The growth of populism and identity politics and the electoral triumph of hardcore right-wing politicians in some matured democracies create severe bad examples for many infant democracies. For example, what message do the new democracies obtain from the ultranationalist Brexit in Britain, the norm-busting, hatred-filled politics of Donald Trump, the increasing popularity of the far-right Alternative fur Deutschland party in Germany or the Five Star movement in Italy?

These underdevelopments directly and indirectly provide a moral boost for both political and social anti-democratic forces in Bangladesh. These forces pick examples of democratic deficits in the old democracies as excuses for their activities that go against the basics of democracy. Economic growth in recent years gives the governing regime confidence to pay less attention to or defuse the pressure or criticism from the international community and Western countries. China's noticeable interest in a stronger tie with Bangladesh likely boosts that confidence. As a result of this new dynamic, the governing regime can afford a "don't ask don't tell" stand regarding fair elections and human rights violations.

The stand of BNP (the main opposition party outside Parliament) on Western democracy is tricky. The party is willing to see Western democracies pressure the governing regime for a fair election and to be vocal about the repression of the opposition. Yet, BNP pursues policies that contradict the core values of democracy, such as its refusal of secularism for the neutrality of the state towards all religions and its embrace of a state religion provision. A long-lasting alliance in the name of political tactics with Jamaat-e-Islami, a party aiming to establish a religious state, cannot be justified.

There is nothing exemplary in the region for Bangladesh to emulate. India, the most populous democracy in the world, is to a vast extent in the grip of Muslim-hating ultra-Hindu nationalism under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Survival of a political party in power and/or its existence as an opposition in Pakistan still depends on the military, which remains the dominant organization, and religious extremists are in a position to unsettle the country at any time. Sri Lanka is in the clutches of a political family (with the president and prime minister belonging to the same family). And with its Parliament

[11] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, The myth of democratic recession. In Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, eds, Democracy in Decline? Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, pp. 58–59.

[12] Francis Fukuyama, Why is democracy performing so poorly? Journal of Democracy, vol. 26, No. 1, 2015, pp.11–20.

[13] Charles Taylor, Is democracy slipping away? In The Democracy Papers: An Anxieties of Democracy Essay Collection. Social Science Research Council.

constituted by more than a two-thirds majority of the ruling party and unrestrained strengthening of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that visibly corners the ethnic and religious minorities, the country's democracy is steadily shifting towards majoritarianism. Nepal was impressive in the past decade, when civil war ended and the country converted from a monarchy to a republic and from a Hindu state to a secular one. But an extraordinarily delayed constitution-making process, feuds over federal structure and secularism and disagreement over the nature of relationships with mighty neighbours China and India have put Nepal's journey towards democracy at stake. There is no indication that China, a global power and the current big-business partner of Bangladesh, has any intention to promote democracy here. In a nutshell, there is little impetus in the region to inspire pro-democracy forces in Bangladesh to fight the democracy-compromising and anti-democratic political and social forces.

Recommendations

This paper asserts that democracy in Bangladesh has been experiencing difficulties mainly due to deeply rooted and long-lasting problems with principles, institutions and practices. The decade-long global crisis of liberal democracy, which is further deteriorating due to the coronavirus pandemic, hints of difficult times ahead for Bangladesh. Preserving democratic principles, strengthening democratic institutions and making democracy non-negotiable in the political and societal spheres is not going to get any easier. The following recommendations target civil society and the international community for increased support towards helping liberal democracy find its home in Bangladesh.

For civil society

■ Traditional civil society organizations need a wake-up call. They need to understand the importance of being non-partisan and taking on a non-negotiable role regarding liberal democracy and the core values of the country.

■ The dominant groups of civil society should be equally vocal about fair elections and safeguarding liberal values. For this reason, civil society needs to be proportionately vigilant about the activities of the regime and the opposition, along with the anti-democratic social and political organizations.

■ Civil society should continuously pressure the regime regarding fair elections and the unremitting weakening of the democratic institutions.

■ Creating scope for formal (third-party arranged meetings, seminars, etc.) and informal (local festivals, cultural events, etc.) interaction among the ruling party and the opposition parties at the central and grass-roots levels would help minimize the hate-filled, non-negotiable distance between the two mighty forces.

For the international community

■ The West European and Scandinavian countries with comparatively better record of liberal democracy (freedom of choice, freedom of expression, less inequality, human rights, strong inter-party interaction, etc.) should consider coming into the forefront in supporting Bangladesh in its ruptured journey to democracy. Ensuring a fair election next time and freedom of expression for all corners (the opposition, freethinkers, religious, ethnic and sexual minorities and others), eliminating the fear of closing space for civil society and self-censorship of media should be given priority.

In extending support, the international community should consider that harsh criticisms might help to expose the wrongdoings of the regime but will also

create a risk of total disengagement from the regime's side. To avoid this risk, positive engagement by the international community is an option.

- A fair election as the first precondition of democracy is a top priority. At the same time, attaining liberal democracy should be the ultimate goal instead of ending up in an electoral democracy in which anti-democratic forces can be elected. In this connection, the international community should send a clear message to the opposition that direct and indirect involvement with the anti-democratic forces (war criminals, religious extremists, ultra-conservatives, etc.) are not welcome.

- The international organizations and development partners can consider involving traditional civil society in democracy-related initiatives instead of working all the time with the NGO-centric civil society. Traditional civil society, despite being weak in recent times, has a long history of struggling for democracy and is still in a position to reach people without funds and projects. Traditional civil society can be useful in combating misinformation, disinformation and malinformation from the governing regime, the opposition parties and all types of anti-democratic forces.

- Along with developing the ability to identify and oppose the performance failures of the governing regime and political parties and being aware of constitutional safeguards and rights, it is imperative to be cognizant that to attain democracy, a balance is required between citizens' rights and responsibilities. Citizenship trainings and programmes with a balance in content between rights and responsibilities might be helpful.

- Pressure from the governing regime is not the only reason for self-censorship in media. Lack of transparency by many owners of the media houses of their finances creates scope for the governing regime to intervene. Additionally, most media houses are not economically viable and are dependent on government advertisement and low-cost newsprint supply, which can drive self-censorship. Providing effective support to develop a self-reliant business model for media houses would help in bringing a change.

About the author:

Shantanu Majumder is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Dhaka. He did a BSS (Hons) and MSS from the same department prior to obtaining an MSc (SOAS) and PhD (ICwS) from the University of London. Shantanu Majumder's research interests include democracy-deficit, state and civil society relationship, Identity politics, digital disinformation, political secularism, election, governance and related issues. He publishes articles in local and international journals and regularly attends conferences, seminars and workshops at home and abroad.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is the oldest political foundation in Germany. Founded in 1925, it is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany. FES is committed to the advancement of both socio-political and economic development in the spirit of social democracy, through civic education, research, and international cooperation.

In Bangladesh, FES aims to facilitate inclusive dialogues on social justice with a focus on labor rights as well as sustainable and socioeconomic development. We discuss these issues with regard to the developments in Bangladesh, in the region and globally. We do this in order to link debates around the world, and to create opportunities for stimulating exchanges on multiple levels to help foster regional and global alliances.

www.fes-bangladesh.org

EFQM
Committed to excellence