

REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

Nurul Islam
Research Fellow Emeritus, IFPRI

Development can be promoted either by a democratic government or a dictatorial regime. The primary conditions that promote development are high rates of savings and investment (both in physical and human capital), technical progress through R&D, and efficiency in resource use that are nurtured through competition both in home and foreign markets. A democratic system is not a necessary condition for development; an authoritarian system may also initiate and propel economic development. However, as economic growth gains momentum, living standards improve and economic opportunities and rights widen; the general population also wants greater political rights and freedom, greater participation in political life, greater freedom of expression, press, and association, and greater influence on the decision-making process. It is also argued that while development may be initiated or promoted and nurtured under an authoritarian regime for a period, there comes a stage when continued progress in the long run requires a degree of freedom of thought and expression—i.e., the freedom to innovate techniques and institutions, and to venture into unfamiliar and uncertain directions that are at odds with the suppression of free political thought and action.

With the pressure for political opening, if resisted, and if the authoritarian regime persists, the system becomes unstable; chaos and political upheavals with resulting disruption of economic life ensue. The gains from economic progress obtained during the duration of the “stable” authoritarianism are lost. These gains, obtained over a long period, are often lost during a brief period of cataclysmic dislocation. Thus, the cost of chaos and of the collapse of the political and economic structure may more than offset the gains during the preceding regime. Examples are that of Pakistan during Ayub regime, of Iran under the Shah of Iran, and ongoing turmoil and

instability in Indonesia. Also, there are several examples in Latin America. In a few cases, an authoritarian regime may respond constructively to the pressure for political opening up and make a relatively but not completely peaceful transition to a more democratic system. Examples of South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand come to mind. Chile has made the transition, with occasional bumps and hiccups surfacing from time to time. The transition from an autocratic to a democratic system is likened to a process in which one who is accustomed to riding a wild horse decides to dismount. The risks of being thrown and being grievously injured are real. An authoritarian system does not have a built-in mechanism for a peaceful change of power, i.e. a peaceful succession system. Frequently, therefore, a succession struggle leads to instability, i.e. socio-political breakdown and chaos.

Democracy provides a stable, peaceful method of change in government. Thus, development that is promoted by a democratic regime is more likely to be sustained in the long run than a process of development promoted under the auspices of an authoritarian regime that sometimes vigorously pursues it in the short run. It is true that democratic regimes have a decision-making process that is clumsy and time consuming; it involves negotiations and compromises between competing interest groups often across a wide range in order to find a consensus. This process by its nature cannot be neat, quick, and decisive. For example, the need to deal with or accommodate the populist pressure to keep taxes low or to increase expenditure on public services imposes difficult negotiations that may not always succeed in reaching the desired outcome of high rate of savings and investment. But as against this, dictatorial regimes, in general, tend to have a high ratio of public expenditures relating to

defense and security purposes, since the army has a significant, direct/indirect role, in preserving and protecting an authoritarian regime.

In the ultimate analysis, however, yearning for democracy is not a mere input to economic development but is an objective in itself. Both democracy (i.e., political rights and freedom) and economic development (higher living standards) are desired by most people. They are not considered as alternatives, even though in the short run they may sometimes present possibilities of trade off. The history of political experience of Bangladesh indicates that Bangladeshis want democracy, political freedom and rights, as well as development (Ahmed 1979). Their search for political democracy has, however, suffered from interruptions. As is customary with many authoritarian regimes, the latter were never totally free from all pressures for limited political opening. The successive military regimes in Bangladesh since 1975 sought some sort of political legitimacy, at best, under highly artificial and restrictive conditions; they sought acquiescence and acceptance by the masses. In 1991, the movement for restoration of democracy gained sufficient momentum to put an end to the military regime.

How to establish a well functioning democratic political system in Bangladesh is a critical challenge. Having spent a major part of Bangladesh's history under the military authoritarian regimes, the political institutions and parties are only slowly willing or able to play by the rules of democratic politics, through a process of "learning by doing." They have no sustained prior experience of engaging in democratic politics. The limited participation in political life under the rules set by the military regime required them to play a subservient role in imparting legitimacy to the regime and in mobilizing support for or voicing muted criticism of its specific policies.

Democratic politics requires the art of compromise, a policy of "give and take," and rejects a policy of "winner takes it all." The majority needs to involve the minority in the decision-making process, knowing that today's

majority may be tomorrow's minority. Similarly, today's minority behaves as a "responsible or loyal opposition" and does not obstruct "governance" by the majority, fearing that when it takes over the task of governing in the next round, it may face "obstructionist" politics (Sobhan 1993a; 1993b). Frequent, peaceful, fair, and free elections are the only way to encourage such a behavior pattern on the part of the political parties. This tends to ensure that the losing party in an election will accept the electoral verdict gracefully; the winning party will not be obsessed by arrogance of power, realizing that its power is temporary. While the minority, in the name of consensus as a basis of effective governance, cannot veto the majority decision, the majority must be seen to have gone a reasonable way to accept the demands or wishes of the minority. There is no shortcut in the way of developing the required norms of democratic behavior; only a process of trial and error over time accomplishes this. At the same time, it would not be proper to argue that since the western societies took hundred years or more to become full-fledged democracies, Bangladesh would also require such a long time. Firstly, in various fields of human endeavor, modern societies accomplished in a shorter span of time what historically took much longer in the past. Learning from history and past experience considerably expedites the process of change and adaptation. Advances in technology as well as in methods of organization and management have provided opportunities for the latecomers to "leapfrog" many steps in social evolution. Secondly, there are examples of contemporary developing countries where norms of democratic behavior developed in the post World War II period in a relatively short period.

The intervention of the army in the political process in Bangladesh hindered the growth of democracy. The senior officers of the Bangladesh army, which has grown in size and strength since 1975 and is nurtured in the traditions of the Pakistan Army, had scant regard for the politicians and for the democratic process. They, in turn, transmitted their own inherited attitudes and prejudices against political democracy to the new and young

recruits in the post-independence period. After, more than a decade and a half of military rule, even after the restoration of democracy in 1991, politicians have an ambivalent attitude towards the role of the army. In public, all political parties pay tribute in or out of season to the military by recalling their heroic role in the war of independence, even though many party adherents did not participate or were too young to participate in it. They also extol the role of the military as the guardians of sovereignty and independence of Bangladesh. These parties are provided generous financial and other material inducements in an apparent attempt to preempt any tendency on their part to intervene in the political process. There is also some tendency among factions in the different political parties to cultivate their favor so that, in case the army intervenes, they could enjoy the formal authority of running the civil administration under the patronage of the army in a pattern similar to that prevailing in Pakistan.

To cajole and “bribe” the military establishment by building up a strong army without any economic or strategic justification does not, in the long run, help establish unambiguous civilian control over it or discourage political adventurism on its part. It is frequently suggested that risks of political intervention by the army in Bangladesh have declined due to several factors: 1) there has been a significant change in the international climate, in the aftermath of the Cold War, against the political role of the army and in favor of political freedom and democracy; 2) for a heavily aid-dependent country like Bangladesh, the likelihood of an adverse external reaction to any military takeover serves as a restraining factor; 3) years of experience have convinced the army that to solve the development problems of Bangladesh is a very heavy responsibility that is difficult to fulfill; 4) it is far better to enjoy all the comfort and financial privileges far above the civilian level without any responsibility of running the country; and 5) the participation in the recent U.N. peace keeping missions has given it an additional resource and a measure of prestige and status at home and abroad.

What is needed, above all, is a highly organized public opinion that is strongly in favor of civilian control of the army, ruling out its political role or intervention, no matter how disorganized and chaotic the politicians are or how much they continue to squabble and maneuver.

The appropriate size and composition of military expenditures should be a matter of open debate and discussion in the public and political forums. As a percentage of the central government's expenditure, the defense expenditure has increased from 9.4 percent in 1980 to 17.6 percent in 1993, whereas in India, it has declined from 14.1 percent to 12.8 percent. There has been a 12.4 percent increase in armed forces personnel in Bangladesh between 1987-94 and military assets (equipment) increased by 56.3 percent during this period. To argue that defense expenditures as a proportion of GNP/GDP are rather low in Bangladesh compared to many developing countries is beside the point. Firstly, what is relevant in the context of other countries' security needs may not be relevant or appropriate for Bangladesh. Secondly, if other nations are wasting their resources, there is no reason why Bangladesh should do so. Being so heavily dependent on external assistance for its economic survival and growth, the opportunity costs of defense expenditures in Bangladesh are very high in view of its extreme poverty and scarcity of resources. Thirdly, one should recall that the saving investment rate and the tax/GNP ratios in Bangladesh are abysmally low--much lower than comparable countries in the developing world. This is all the more reason why a public debate, including that in the parliament, is needed as to (a) the nature and magnitude of Bangladesh's security needs (threat of external aggression), and (b) the nature and extent of military response in order to meet such needs. No less important is the need to subject the cost effectiveness of the defense expenditures, i.e. its pattern and composition, to the same rigorous scrutiny of cost-benefit analysis as other competing public expenditures. For example, it is a widely held view that given the deteriorating state of law and order in the country, public

expenditures on internal security forces, i.e. the police and associated services, is awfully inadequate. Their modernization and expansion should be given as much, if not higher, priority than the military expenditures. The accountability and scrutiny of military expenditures in Bangladesh are extremely superficial. All over the world, military expenditures are a major source of a high degree of corruption. The shroud of secrecy around the defense expenditures facilitates and encourages corruption. The published figures of defense expenditures do not often clearly show all the items of expenditure incurred by the defense establishments; there are defense-related expenditures that are shown in the budgets of the civilian ministries. The first step in the search for transparency is to allocate to the defense budgets all the expenditures relating to the army and military establishment under their appropriate headings.

It is worth serious examination whether Bangladesh should not encourage the use of military for development activities, especially in the infrastructure projects. They are used occasionally at times of emergency such as floods and cyclones for relief operations. The argument that such use will jeopardize the combat readiness of the armed forces is of doubtful validity and can be tested by experimenting with a number of pilot projects that will involve only a fraction of the army.

An important challenge that Bangladesh faces in developing a multi-party democratic system is the formulation of a national consensus for a policy towards India. This also has implications for defense expenditure in Bangladesh. India looms too large in the internal political debate, the relationship with India appears as an electoral issue at times of political campaigns, and political parties are characterized or defined in terms of their attitude towards India. This has roots in the politics of the Pakistan days and goes even further back to the Hindu-Muslim conflicts and tensions in the Indian subcontinent in the pre-independence days. The civil society, including newspapers, think-tanks, professional associations, trade unions, and chambers of commerce, etc. have a vital role to play in

encouraging public discussion on this subject and in generating public consensus. While the relationship with a dominant neighboring power would not be entirely free of tension, it should not vitiate an objective and unemotional examination of how and in what ways a viable strategic, diplomatic, and economic relationship with India can be established. A national consensus on the relationship with India would enable a concentration on national political and economic issues and put the political parties to test in terms of their performance in achieving domestic economic and political objectives.

Because of the unique historical circumstances of their origin, the evolution and development of the political parties in Bangladesh ended up with very strong leaders with almost absolute control over their party's organizational and decision-making process. The internal governing structure of the political parties is far from fully democratic; there is no free play of diversity of opinions that reach a consensus on policy issues through a process of dialogue and debate within the individual party forums. The decisions are made by the party leaders and are carried out by the rest. This creates dissatisfaction within the party; lack of effective participation by senior party members breeds a lack of commitment to party policies. When there is no habit of open debate and consensus-building within an individual party platform, it is no wonder that the possibility of debate and consensus building across or among different parties remains a far cry. At present, the habit of autocratic control of the party apparatus is transferred to the national government when the particular political leader takes over the functions of the government. Over time, as the leaders who exercise absolute control over the party apparatus retire, competition and pluralism within each party may develop, leading to the growth of bottom-up rather than top-down leadership.

While the political system has not grown to meet the challenges of an open democratic society, the civil society in a broad sense has developed much faster (Blair 1993). The various components of civil society, i.e. organizations of various professional groups, research institutions, and a wide variety of non-

governmental organizations, are engaged not only in consciousness raising efforts, but also in mobilizing, training, and providing a wide range of services frequently focused on disadvantaged groups, including women and children. The NGOs, therefore, perform a vital function in organizing various classes and types of groups based either on occupation, region, economic class, age, or sex.

The participants of NGOs, in general, develop greater confidence and an awareness of their civil and economic rights and opportunities; they are trained to think and articulate their social and economic needs, and to demand services to be provided by the government. This is a desirable development in Bangladesh; in the course of time, people's increased awareness of socioeconomic issues affecting their lives, and their active participation in expanding socioeconomic opportunities would enhance their political awareness and affect the way and the extent to which they will participate in the political process. Two types of policies would expedite this process. One is a big push for universal literacy, as well as primary and secondary education. This would greatly improve awareness of both political and economic rights and opportunities on the part of the masses. Second is the growth of local governments with adequate resources and responsibilities to perform both developmental and administrative functions. This would bring the government to the people and make politicians directly responsible to their local electorate for their actions. This will greatly widen the democratic process, i.e. the participation of the people in decisions and actions affecting their lives. (Haggard and Webb 1994; Kohli 1993).

As democratic political institutions take root, simultaneously Bangladesh faces a challenge to develop a commitment on the part of the political leaders for economic development. Under what circumstances will a government in Bangladesh make a strong commitment to development? In general, the commitment to development can be traced to a visionary leader with a vision of the country's economic future, and with a commitment to achieve the vision.

Visionary leaders emerge only once in a generation. They stand out alone and high. While participating in the rough and tumble of electoral processes buffeted by competing vested interests, they rise above short-term interests and inspire and mobilize a nation to follow their vision. As Winston Churchill once said, "a politician is interested in the next election, whereas a statesman is interested in the next generation." Bangladesh does not have this good fortune. In many countries, the leadership has responded to the challenge of development, because of the perception of a political or an economic crisis that may threaten its continuance in power. It is not the existence of a crisis as much as the perception on the part of the leadership that such a crisis exists--or may develop--that stimulates and guides the leadership to overcome it through sustained efforts for development. A short-term crisis like flood or drought threatening food shortage or famine often elicited vigorous response from the governments irrespective of the nature of the leadership. However, long-term endemic poverty or underdevelopment does not necessarily create a perception of crisis that requires short-term emergency action; long-term stagnation is not perceived by them as a possible contributing factor to the loss of political power in the short run. Action to relieve long-term underdevelopment has to be sustained over a period of time and brings results only in the long run--which may accrue at the time of successor governments, thus giving credit to the latter. In the ultimate analysis, it is only an educated and intelligent, politically conscious, and organized electorate that can and does put pressure on the politicians to respond to its long-term concerns and needs. Through the expansion of education and of a conscious civil society, activated by a wide variety of groups or associations embracing different segments of society, a democratic polity with a major focus on socioeconomic development may gradually emerge. The signs of such a trend are visible and strong; one can only hope that the current political institutions will not slow down or interfere with this process but facilitate it.

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