

## BANGLADESH

# **POLITICAL PROCESS & CHALLENGES: RELEVANCE FROM EUROPEAN MODELS OF DEMOCRACY**

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Bangladesh has been quite vulnerable to all kinds of crises that include political as well as natural. It has faced many challenges in its march towards democratic order. Although it started its political journey with a parliamentary system after independence, it failed to sustain it; slowly but steadily, the parliamentary government degenerated into an authoritarian system. As Bangladesh completed its 20 years of independence it also completed 13 years of military rule or governments dominated by the military. In late 1990, however, the political situation altered dramatically. Autocratic rule was ultimately defeated by a popular uprising, and General Ershad had to resign. Under the close supervision of a caretaker government headed by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, installed after the resignation of General Ershad, a free, fair and impartial general election was held on 27 February 1991. A representative *JatiyaSangsad* (House of the Nation) came into being. In a bid to democratize the polity in Bangladesh, the *Sangsad* has substantially amended the Constitution. In sum, institutional framework for parliamentary democracy was set up in Bangladesh. The

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JatiyaSangsad, comprising directly-elected representatives of the people, has been the centrepiece of national politics; a cabinet, consisting of the leaders of the majority party, is accountable to the *Sangsad*. The Prime Minister, the *primus inter pares*, is head of the government. The constitutional head of state is the President, who is elected by the *Sangsad*. An independent judiciary is still a controversial issue in Bangladesh.

As far as political and social development is concerned, the economic crisis in Bangladesh has been compounded by political problems. Class conflicts, which had for so long been subjugated by the demand for regional autonomy, emerged as the crucial problem. The real threat to political and social stability during the first Awami League regime came from the radical forces. They attempted to bring about a 'second revolution' through armed struggle. They argued that the Bangladesh Revolution of 1971 was an 'unfinished one.' As Maniruzzam writes, "When the War of Independence was being transformed into a truly people's liberation war and the radical forces were coming to the forefront, the 'land-based bourgeois government of India' in league with the 'Soviet Social Imperialist Power' interfered, and the Awami League leadership, which represented the exploiting classes in Bangladesh, came to power. Its strategy was to replace the puppet regime by force."<sup>(1)</sup>

Until the 1990s, Bangladesh was considered a liberal society. But that changed rapidly. Bangladesh has seen a rapid growth of political Islam. The main religious political party is Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB). It has maintained close affiliation with Pakistan-based religio-political organizations especially the Jamaat-e-Islami. In the 2001 general elections, the JIB won 18 seats in the parliament, with the help of Bangladesh National Party (BNP).<sup>(2)</sup>

Bangladesh's political scene has been tumultuous since independence. Periods of democratic rule have been interrupted by coups, martial law, and states of emergency. One of the main reasons why the free and fair general elections held by the caretaker governments over the years have failed to institutionalize democracy in the country is lack of democratic institutionalization within the parties. Bangladesh shares its history of political development with the British and Pakistani eras. Westminster-style parliamentary democracy has been the driving force of the political parties. There are five major political forces in the country besides numerous smaller ones. The BNP and its allies form the right-of-centre to conservative grouping in Bangladesh. The Awami League (AL), which initially saw its birth as a socialistic organization, has now transformed into a centre/centre-left political stream. The

extreme right or left, while not supported by a large proportion of the population, is typified by having very dedicated followers. To the left are the Bangladesh Communist Party, factions of the JatiyoSamajtantrik Dal, and other socialist groups advocating revolutionary change. To the right is a group of parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami and IslamiOikyoJote, which call for an increased role for Islam in public life. The fifth major party is the one founded by ex-military ruler General Ershad, the Jatiyo Party (JP) which operates independently.

### **Social democracy and secular Constitution**

Bangladesh is a secular state where its citizens are guaranteed the freedom of religion. Here Bangladesh's secularism does not mean absence of religion but means freedom of practising religion of own choice by all communities living in Bangladesh without interference or dictation of the state.

Despite the country ceasing to be a secular state constitutionally after a presidential ordinance in the 70s, secularism remained the prominent feature of Bangladeshi society. Given the fact that secularism in the region as a whole is in many ways different from its Western versions that assert complete separation of the church and the state, the ethos of secularism in South Asia is fundamentally the freedom of the individual to practise the faith of their choice without being subject to any form of state or communal discrimination.

Barry Kosmin, of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, breaks modern secularism into two types: hard and soft secularism. According to Kosmin, "the hard secularists consider religious propositions to be epistemologically illegitimate, warranted by neither reason nor experience. However, in the view of soft secularist, "the attainment of absolute truth was impossible and therefore skepticism and tolerance should be the principal and overriding values in the discussion of science and religion."<sup>(3)</sup>

The idea of soft secularism is relevant for the struggle against religious radicalism in the present day. For example, Peter Nasuti states that France has reacted to the rise of Muslim immigration by asserting its secular heritage even more strongly. Through measures such as the outlawing of conspicuous religious attire in schools, directed at Muslim women's headscarves, it hopes to prevent the spread of extremist attitudes. However, such actions may have the paradoxical effect of causing a rise in Muslim fundamentalism.

Due to the gap between the “secular” and the “sacred,” anti-secular forces in Bangladesh have managed to infiltrate the different state organizations and to deliberately misinterpret the ideas of secularism. Second, in order to reconstruct the idea of secularism without oversimplification of the complexity of religion, it is essential to know the distinction between the religious orthodoxy that civil society needs to fight and the finer moral values of religion that need to be assimilated.

Secularism is a hugely controversial issue in Bangladesh, with the country’s politics effectively divided between secularist and leftist forces and conservative forces. Rightist conservative parties often term the propagators of secularism as being “anti-Islam” and accuse them of promoting blasphemy by calling Bangladesh a secular nation.

For example, various speeches made by leaders of the front ranking religio-political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, have often declared in their speeches that, if the Awami League were to be allowed to put back secularism in the Constitution, Islamic culture would be badly affected. In 2008, when the military-backed caretaker government passed a landmark National Women Policy, the government came under criticism from Muslim fundamentalists for drafting what they termed an “anti-Islamic” policy.

Subsequently, following street protests by religious extremists and pressure from sections of the military, the government was forced to review the policy.<sup>(4)</sup>

The Constitution, as originally framed in 1972, explicitly described the government of Bangladesh as "secular." But in 1977, an executive proclamation made three changes in the wording that did away with this legacy. The proclamation deleted "secular" and inserted a phrase stating that a fundamental State principle is "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah." However, with the constitutional order by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2010, the original characteristic of the Constitution was restored banning the religious parties from contesting elections. Following the SC Appellate Division’s decision upholding the High Court's landmark verdict of 29 August 2005 that declared the Constitution’s Fifth Amendment (1979) illegal, the ban on forming political organizations based on religion was restored.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **Bangladeshi nationalism and local politics**

Sheikh Mujib ur Rehman (1972-1975) introduced “Bangalee nationalism” as the spirit of the nation. After his assassination Gen Ziaur Rahman (1976-81) introduced “Bangladeshi nationalism” with a tilt to

Islam. Gen Ershad forcibly changed the Constitution and introduced “Islam” as State religion and took the nation towards “Islamic nationalism.” So-called politicking of nationalism and politics for the elite class failed to provide sense of security and dignity, and welfare for the stakeholder groups bracketed as minorities in Bangladesh. The political parties despite promises made in their election manifestos, failed to stand by the minorities. According to the 2005 High Court verdict, the faith amendment undermined the very sovereign character of the republic. Article 1 of the Constitution says Bangladesh is a unitary, independent, sovereign republic to be known as the People's Republic of Bangladesh.<sup>(6)</sup>

Interpreting the article, a former chief justice Mustafa Kamal says in his book *Bangladesh Constitution: Trends and Issues*: “Article 1 distinguishes Bangladesh from a dependency or a colony or a federating unit. Bangladesh has opted for a republican form of government. So, any kind of monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy or dictatorship is an anathema to its republican character.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Bangladesh is one of those relatively new democracies where democratic culture is yet to strike deep roots into the social soil. An institutional framework has been created, but these institutions have not been vibrant. Scores of political parties exist in the country, but all are organized on feudal lines rather than democratically, thus creating ample opportunities for personalized power for the party bosses. A problem facing democracy in Bangladesh is, that the "concept of loyal opposition that accepts constitutional processes and is prepared to wait its turn to form a government is virtually unknown in Bangladesh."<sup>(8)</sup>

### **Local politics and democratic culture**

It is perhaps common knowledge that most Bangladeshi political parties have the provision for democratic culture within the parties in their constitutions, though they do not follow it faithfully and regularly. Making them obey their constitutions is a necessary condition for practicing democracy within parties, but certainly not a sufficient one. The critical point to be noted here is that ordinary members of any democratic association are, and ought to be, directly involved with appointing the individuals who will represent them and protect and promote their interests. For democracy to flourish, fair elections, universal education and strong social institutions are the basic requirements. For the vast majority of Bangladeshis, politics revolves around the institutions of the village or the union of neighbouring villages. Traditionally, the main base for political influence in rural areas

has been landownership. During the British colonial period, landlords controlled huge estates as if they were their personal kingdoms. With the abolition of landowning tenure in 1950, a new local elite of rich Muslim peasants developed. The members of the new elite owned far less land than the landlords had once possessed, but they were able to feed their families well and formed new links with the bureaucracy of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh.

The situation changed since the mid-1990s. Bangladesh's middle class has grown and become increasingly vocal about its own economic interests. Bangladesh's civil society has also grown stronger and is more capable of challenging the government. A vibrant business class has emerged that is increasingly interested in securing Bangladesh's business environment. Finally, while Bangladesh's media has been deeply polarized historically, more independent and neutral media outlets and journalists have emerged who are willing to challenge the government. These factors suggest that Bangladeshis have started asserting their preference of democracy over dictatorship.

According to the Bangladeshi Constitution, the political system depends on parliamentary form of government. Parliament dissolves after a period of five years, unless dissolved by the president earlier. This period of five years may be extended by an act of parliament but by no more than one year at a time. The actual terms of the nine parliaments are shown in the table below.

**Table**

**Terms of Parliaments<sup>(9)</sup>**

| <b>Parliament</b> | <b>Date of First Sitting</b> | <b>Date of Dissolution</b> | <b>Actual Term</b> |
|-------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| First Parliament  | 7 April 1973                 | 6 November 1975            | 2 years 6 months   |
| Second Parliament | 2 April 1979                 | 24 March 1982              | 2 years 11 months  |
| Third Parliament  | 10 July 1986                 | 6 December 1987            | 1 year 5 months    |
| Fourth            | 15 April 1988                | 6 December 1990            | 2 years 7          |

|                    |                 |                  |                                     |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Parliament         |                 |                  | months                              |
| Fifth Parliament   | 5 April 1991    | 24 November 1995 | 4 years 8 months                    |
| Sixth Parliament   | 19 March 1996   | 30 March 1996    | 12 days                             |
| Seventh Parliament | 14 July 1996    | 13 July 2001     | 5 years                             |
| Eight Parliament   | 28 October 2001 | 27 October 2006  | 5 years                             |
| Ninth Parliament   | December 2008   | December 2013    | Emergency imposed<br><br>Continuing |

**Source:** [http:// www parliamentofbangladesh.org](http://www.parliamentofbangladesh.org)

The current government came into existence as a result of a general election held on 29 December 2008. The election was significant to the people of Bangladesh from different viewpoints. Through this election the people of Bangladesh restored a democratic government after two years of emergency rule by a non-party caretaker government headed by Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. The election saw the highest number of people casting their votes for democracy.

### **Power tussle between the two main parties and future challenges**

The two dominant political parties have been in politics long enough to contribute in sustaining liberal democracy in Bangladesh by improving institutional performance and promoting greater transparency. Yet this has not been the case; the internal struggle has threatened and destabilized the country's democratic system. Confrontational politics has been challenging the political atmosphere, and created mistrust between Khaleda Zia and Hasina Wajid. The BNP-led mass rally on 12 March 2012, which demanded a return to the caretaker system, raised

new questions because of the way the ruling grand alliance handled law and order on the day.<sup>(10)</sup> In order to dismiss and disrupt the protestors, the Hasina government took drastic measures to isolate Dhaka, restricting travel along key roads and waterways. As these events show, political volatility has the potential to further harm democracy.

Bangladeshi politics is still marred by personality clashes and dynastic clashes. Democracy requires a politics of accommodation and compromise, but this appears to be missing among the dominant political parties in the country. Given the diversity of interests represented by these political parties, the ability to compromise is essential, and democratic failure often seems inevitable. Democracy has been distorted in Bangladesh's highly polarized society which is divided by income, class and political affiliation. Political parties in Bangladesh continue to be dominated by religion and family, and senior positions within the parties are rarely awarded on the basis of merit. Extended caretaker rule, from 2007 to 2008, and abortive military intervention through an attempted coup in January 2012 are notable examples of the fragility of democracy in Bangladesh.<sup>(11)</sup> Unless democratization of the political parties takes place first, their leaders are unlikely to behave democratically in parliament; instead, they will continue to promote their coterie's interests rather than the interests of the wider public. But with greater political will on the part of its leaders and elites, Bangladesh could implement home-grown institutional reforms, based on the country's indigenous governance process, to address local needs and demands.

### **Legacy of South Asian politics**

South Asian democracies are plagued with dynastic political system. That system is cherished and supported by majority of political leaders. Publicly they do talk about democratic culture in parties. Bangladesh has been struggling with a poor record of leadership through democratic practices in the parties. Instead, the chiefs have been elevated to their positions under the aegis of what is an institutionalized dynastic culture — effectively extending these un-democratic structures of power to the party level and subsequently as the incumbent ruler at state level. The concentration of power at the top of both main parties has edified their leaders into unquestionable leaders to fellow party leaders and party workers hence elevating them above all criticism.

The ills of nepotism, corruption and absence of transparency have caused a deep crisis of democracy in the region. A complete lack of respect for the rule of law and reluctance to delegate power to the people



at the grassroots level exists in most of the countries. Bangladesh is no different. No internal democracy exists in the big political parties. Despite their continuous struggle for democracy, inside their parties they have remained autocrats. The top tier of their parties is accountable to no one but the party chiefs who handpick them. The party-chiefs' wishes remain a command for the central leaders, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is a case in point. According to the party constitution the chairperson can hire and fire anyone, even the party secretary general; she can nominate anyone she deems fit; she is accountable to no one. Sheikh Hasina, too, has never tolerated dissent: honest, competent leaders like Dr. Kamal Hossain had to leave the Awami League for challenging Hasina's leadership.<sup>(12)</sup>

BNP leaders observe that during the 1991-96 regime of their party, party leaders had more unity and shared the party achievements as their own, and that the party decisions reflected their opinions. During the 2001-06 regime, the party somehow lost the credibility; the senior party leaders were sidelined on many occasions; their opinions were not given due attention. Party and family in the context of Bangladesh politics have been synonymous to most of the common people, even to the party activists.

Governments in South Asia have pursued national security through destructive military apparatuses, rather than seeking security for citizens by actualizing their creative potential. The rule of law in South Asia is widely disregarded and undermined in terms of economic rights and equality for all, despite the fact that SAARC member states are signatories to international instruments. Lawlessness plays a dominant role in promoting bad governance in most South Asian countries. As a result, ordinary people have been deprived of civil liberties, security and socio-economic rights.<sup>(13)</sup>

Despite its cultural diversity, strong feudal and traditional values and patriarchal cultural practices, which are common characteristics across the region, have hindered capacity-building and the improvement and take-up of opportunities for women, tribal, ethnic and minority communities in South Asia. This has prevented marginalized communities, including women, from participating in political decision-making processes.

Troubled political relations have resulted not only in mutual mistrust, tension and hostility but also the continuation of feudal social practices in South Asian countries. Although the basic right of the people to a life of dignity and social justice is theoretically accepted by all

governments in the region, the current situation has led to indiscriminate violations of human rights. The people are gradually becoming desensitized, development is losing its humane face and democratic institutions are being weakened.<sup>(14)</sup>

### **European models of democracy: Any relevance?**

In Europe, even though there are a number of political parties with Christian names as prefix, these names do not compromise the secular character of laws and systems of government having no intention to change the basic structure of the state's existing system and laws on the basis of Biblical doctrines. In this context, the core issue appears to be whether a political party wants to change the structure of the constitution and laws of a state on the basis of particular religious doctrines. When political parties want to change the structure, system of government, judiciary and laws of a state in accordance with the principles and beliefs of a particular religion among many religions, people of other faiths in such a state perceive discrimination on the basis of religion. It is interesting to note that many linguists do not believe that secularism is not a good English substitute for the Bengali word *dharmanirapekhata*, which means that a state remains neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine and practice.<sup>(15)</sup>

Apart from secular characteristic of European model of democracy, there are a few salient features that European states have managed to establish in their democracies and until and unless these features are ensured in South Asian countries in their respective forms with their own system of democracies, they will remain weak and unstable.

- Good governance and accountability to citizens
- Education key to social awareness about political rights
- Empowerment of women to ensure them safe and secure participation in decisionmaking as equal members of the society
- Decentralization and local government system for more autonomy
- Enhanced political and democratic space for marginalized sections of society
- Capacity-building of civil society

The European democratic model ensured that modern political governance is founded on the notion of a social contract between the state and its citizens. The equality of citizenship has created a basis for equal participation by all citizens in political governance, where the state is expected to command sovereignty and to provide a good standard of living by preserving positive values that enhance liberty, order and justice in society. In a multi-cultural society like South Asia, the active engagement of citizens in the entire web of social and economic associations that cover the democratic landscape is crucial for national and regional integration. Thus, citizens need to have control over their national economic, social and political life. Failure can bring a crisis of authority for the government and of loyalty to the state, political parties, parliament and the institutions of governance.

The societal conditions that help to foster a successful democracy include a responsible media, a universal public education system, and a populace literate enough and with enough political awareness to take advantage of the media and the education system to educate themselves politically. An environment must be created that enables the electorate to correctly judge the politicians they elect. The cornerstone of any successful democracy lies in a constant educational ethos: literacy, universal free education, and educational opportunities including job retraining for changing economic circumstances. There should be a focus on "institutionalizing reform." One option would be to focus on the political parties and push for internal reforms and political party laws. This reform can happen only with the involvement of the parties. Any efforts towards reform that exclude the parties will be reversed as soon as the political parties regain their power. While recognizing the need for parties, panellists were cognizant that the parties themselves were the real barriers to reform. Parties themselves are not democratic. Party leaders are not elected by party members and both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party operate as *de facto* dynasties under their strong and entrenched leadership structures with little will or ability to aggregate interest.<sup>(16)</sup>

## Conclusion

For the vast majority of Bangladeshis, politics revolves around the institutions of the village or the union of neighbouring villages. Traditionally, the main base for political influence in rural areas has been landownership. During the British colonial period, landowners controlled huge estates as if they were their personal kingdoms. With the abolition of landowners' tenure in 1950, new local elite of rich Muslim peasants

developed. The members of the new elite owned far less land than the landowners had once possessed, but they were able to feed their families well and formed new links with the bureaucracy of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh.<sup>(17)</sup> One of the outstanding characteristics of the urban political leadership is its relatively short history. By the late 1980s, it was clear that many of its members had emerged from middle-class or rich peasant backgrounds since 1947 or, in many cases, since 1971. Most retained close links with their rural relatives, either locally or elsewhere. Urban elites included professional politicians of national parties, and the entire social group that made up the urban leadership — military, professional, administrative, religious, and business personnel interacted in a hotbed of national politics.<sup>(18)</sup>

After more than four decades of independence, the dreams of prosperity, stable democracy and political stability are still not completely fulfilled. Both major political parties are still split on the basis of being considered 'pro-Indian' or 'pro-Pakistan'. The Awami League is considered pro-Indian, liberal and secular, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is considered pro-Pakistan, reactionary and right wing. Despite these political differences among the parties, Islam has remained an important component of Bangladeshi ideology. The Constitution, as originally framed in 1972, explicitly described the government of Bangladesh as "secular." But in 1977, an executive proclamation made three changes in the wording that did away with this legacy. The proclamation deleted "secular" and inserted a phrase stating that a fundamental State principle is "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah." The phrase *Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim* (in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful) was inserted before the preamble of the Constitution. Another clause states that the government should "preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity." These changes in terminology reflected an overt state policy aimed at strengthening Islamic culture and religious institutions as central symbols of nationalism and at reinforcing international ties with other Muslim nations. With the constitutional order in 2008, the original characteristic of the constitution was restored banning the religio-political parties from contesting elections. Domestically, State support for Islam, including recognition of Islam as the state religion in the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution in June of 1988, has not led to official persecution of other religions.<sup>(19)</sup>

Although a two- or three-party system has been progressively evolving in most of the countries of South Asia, party politics is still a far cry from democratic ethos. Despite the introduction of one or other

variant of local self-government, substantive devolution has yet to take place in any of the seven nations. Democracy is weak though in place for many years now but the culture of democracy has yet to take roots. Most importantly, the nations of South Asia are still in search of a social contract that can satisfy their people, regardless of gender, faith, ethnicity or religion.<sup>(20)</sup>

Bangladeshi society has proved that while being a Muslim-majority country and deeply religious, the state could practice secularism guaranteeing rights to minorities. The question, however, is whether the Bangladeshi civil society and government will be able to continue with “strict” secularism like in Europe, or they will have to mould it according to the changes today. In Europe, even though there are a number of political parties with Christian names as prefix, these names do not compromise the secular character of laws and systems of government having no intention to change the basic structure of the state’s existing system and laws on the basis of Biblical doctrines. In this context, the core issue appears to be whether a political party wants to change the structure of the constitution and laws of a state on the basis of particular religious doctrines. When political parties want to change the structure, system of government, judiciary and laws of a state in accordance with the principles and beliefs of a particular religion among many religions, people of other faiths in such a state perceive discrimination on the basis of religion. Despite serious problems related to a dysfunctional political system, weak governance and pervasive corruption, Bangladesh remains one of the few democracies in the Muslim world.

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