

Democracy in Bangladesh: An ethical perspective

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Abstract: Bangladesh is a democracy but is facing several problems in sustaining it. Democracy is easy to proclaim but it is difficult to realize its features. Democracy must be accompanied by several essentials. Analyzing democracy in Bangladesh, it is found that the country is beset with unemployment, corruption, child labour, illiteracy, rape and violence. These problems are considered a hindrance to sustaining democracy in the country. Sustaining democracy would require making Bangladesh's politics free, fair, and unbiased. Fulfilling these requirements would also make the government of Bangladesh legitimate which would help bring peace, progress and development in the country. Introducing moral and ethical practices in politics may not remove all the problems of the country but will go a long way to solve a myriad of problems facing Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Democracy, Ethics, Corruption, Illiteracy.

Introduction

The term democracy evokes different ideas such as freedom of expression, social security and especially voting rights whereby people can elect their preferred candidates as representatives who will work for the community, for society, and for the country. This democracy is good for the nation; but for several reasons – like unemployment, poverty, illiteracy corruption and immoral practices – democracy in Bangladesh is not merely flawed but its sustainability is seriously in doubt. There is a need, it has been argued by many observers of the government and politics of Bangladesh, for the leaders to take serious note of this deteriorating situation and to steer the country towards peace and prosperity by ensuring justice and rule of law, and by respecting the basic rights of the people. This article, therefore, analyses the nature and features of democracy, and identifies the threats to democracy. This is followed by examining the nature of democracy in Bangladesh and the threats it encounters which threatens its sustainability.

Definition of democracy

Abraham Lincoln defines democracy as “a government of the people, for the people and by the people” (Quotes, 2007). The term is coined from *demos*

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(people) and *kratos* (rule) in the middle of the 5th century BC which means the rule of the people. The term was coined to denote the political systems that existed in some Greek city-states, mainly in Athens. To Joseph Schumpeter (1976: 269), “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.” According to others, “democracy, republic, commonwealth is a political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them” (WordReference.com, 2007).

Thus defined, democracy turns out to be a method characterized by the competition of leaders for vote. Leaders, according to many scholars, are controlled by the people. As such, democracy is defined to mean a government by the majority with the consent of the minority. Such a government champions the development and wellbeing of the individual. Thus defined, a democratic government is characterized by several features including: freedom of speech, freedom of the media and the freedom to cast their vote as they deem fit. Freedom of speech ensures that citizens can speak out without fear and ventilate their grievances without any let or hindrance. Freedom of the media – electronic or print – is the liberty of the people to publish or broadcast real and constructive critiques of the government and society. Freedom to vote means that people are able to cast their vote for their chosen candidates without intimidation, bribery or underhand dealings. These freedoms confer legitimacy upon the government which is demonstrated by a high degree of popular support it enjoys in frequently held elections.

Secondly, justice meaning an environment in which all citizens are treated equally and accorded dignity and respect. Justice requires a strong judiciary which is separated from the legislative and executive branches of government. An independent judiciary with real power to review acts passed by legislators or decrees issued by the executive is a potential safeguard against abuse of power by those in power. The judges must be impartial. There should not be threats of violence against judges in order to force them to give judgments according to the will of the dictator, elected or otherwise.

Finally, a limited government which means that there exists a constitution which defines and limits power of the government. The constitution must express the will of the people and should be respected by all. The constitution must be written and rigid so that it cannot be tampered easily by those in power.

Democracy thus defined has to face several threats. The greatest threat to democracy does not always come from the barrel of a gun but from poverty,

illiteracy, apathy, and economic insecurity. Another obstacle to democracy is the desire of those in power to stay in power by whatever means possible. They use state institutions and resort to oppression, corruption, division, segregation, terror and murder. These features are foreign to democracy. A genuinely democratic nation thrive on diversity and difference.

Democracy subordinates the state and its institutions to people who enjoy freedom of speech, association and assembly. It ensures an environment where individuals express who they are and what they believe in. This is what Abraham Lincoln meant in his definition of government “of, by and for the people”. Democracy also requires a citizenry which is knowledgeable and informed. For this it is obvious that the problem of illiteracy is a serious threat to democracy. Literacy does not mean simply reading the word but to read and understand and to make informed civic choices. Illiteracy must, therefore, be wiped out if the democracy is to sustain.

Democracy in Bangladesh

The Constitution of Bangladesh declares democracy to be one of the fundamental principles of state policy. The country has to be governed through representatives of the people. The constitution guarantees the rights of the people to elect their representatives, who then take charge of statecraft in running and deciding their affairs. The legislative power of the republic is vested in the parliament consisting of members elected through direct voting using first past the post method. The voting age is 18. Adult citizens, male or female, may vote and be voted for unless otherwise disqualified on several grounds. Candidates are permitted to contest up to five constituencies, but may represent only one if they win more. By-elections must be held for seats vacated in these circumstances.

The Constitution, through an amendment in 1996, provided for a care-taker government system to manage the elections and transitions. This non-party Caretaker Government had a limited life and limited function. It would govern the country in the period after the dissolution of each Parliament and before the formation of the new government following the general election. “The Caretaker Government concept developed out of mismanagement and rigging of the votes by political parties, especially party in power” (Barman, 2002). This caretaker government has performed its function admirably in 1996, 2001 and 2008. However, the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, despite vehement opposition, decided to scrap the constitutional provision to stage general elections under a caretaker government. The Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Act 2011 was passed by the Parliament on 30th June 2011, which ended the caretaker

system. According to many scholars, this amendment has made it possible for the party in power to rig the election and stay in power as it was done before.

One of the important characteristics of democracy is “majority rule” which Bangladesh has followed intermittently since independence. Since 1991, whoever won the majority vote in the election formed the government. The question relates to the way the leaders and parties win majority in the parliament. Personal observations of several elections confirm that candidates use money to buy votes and political parties use bribe and intimidation to win majority in the parliament. Citizens’ vulnerability to massive corruption is explained, among others, by unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and lack of moral teachings. These are considered threats to democracy.

Corruption

Many commentators argue that people in Bangladesh enter politics to make money. Once a party is in power, it pays lip-service to its stated aim of making the country developed. Party leaders even have plans and projects which, if implemented, would result in some type of progress. The plans, however, are never followed in to-to rather the ruling elites undertake activities to make money by corrupt means such as manipulating development works. The administrative machinery of the government is manned by the members of the ruling party. The opposition waits for its turn to win the election. Both the regime and opposition make false promises in their political programmes just before the scheduled election. They distribute the election manifestos containing pious pledges, circulate them and explain them through the mass media. Immediately after the election, the manifestos are forgotten and pledges are never fulfilled. Manifestos and the media are used to win the election.

Corruption is also found within sectors essential to maintaining democracy: the police department, judiciary, educational institutions, and the media. This corruption is most apparent in the police force. The police exist for the safety and security of the nation, yet people always feel insecure with the police, because they extort bribes from the public. The police force often work during the election period taking bribes from the representative of the candidates in exchange for help in getting people cast illegal votes for them. The Transparency International provides the following scenario of corruption in Bangladesh:

Although the police department exists for the security and safety of the people, it is one of the most corrupted areas in Bangladesh. People do not feel safe and secure to police and they are highly controversial in the

society. The Bangladesh Human Rights Commission is a non-governmental organization. A roundtable between the BHRC and the (ICJ) was held on November 6 in 2002. A speaker at the roundtable said that about 93 per cent of the police officers in Bangladesh were thoroughly corrupt (Haram, 2002).

There are other examples of corruption including the following:

1. Criminals arrested by the police are immediately released without charge because of the interference of political leaders. Police often are threatened with losing their jobs or demotions if they do not release the criminals or if they do not act as dictated by political leaders.
2. A person seeking a job in the police department is required to pay a heavy sum to political leaders in exchange for the job. On getting the job, the police officer tries to get the money back through corruption. Furthermore, since police officers are recruited because of political influence, they are biased supporting the political party which favours them. Sometimes, the government leaders use the police as a political weapon to influence the opposition parties as well.

Critics have noted these sorts of corruption in the police force. They argue that the corruption in the police force is because of:

1. Low salary. The salary which a police officer gets is not enough to help maintain a family in the city. Consequently, police officers work in various locations especially in places where they can extort money from the public.
2. Lack of moral training. The police do not get moral training. The training they receive does not include ethics and values required for a healthy society.

Unemployment

In addition to corruption, unemployment poses a serious threat to democracy in Bangladesh. Most educated youths are unemployed in the country. Youths constitute one third of the total population in Bangladesh and of them 40 percent are unemployed (Syed, 2004). The unemployment rate of the population with a secondary school certificate or above is significantly higher than the rate of those individuals with a lower level of education. The unemployment rate for educated women is higher compared to that of the male population. The recently released Labor Force Survey report of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows that over

two million people (constituting 4.3 per cent of the labor force) are unemployed, and over 15.1 million people (or 34.2 per cent of the labor force) are under-employed with limited working opportunities. In addition, the number of educated unemployed is 1.2 million or 5.2 per cent of the 20.3 million “educated” people. Of the educated unemployed, 9.5 per cent hold a graduate or post-graduate degree. Because of desperation, the unemployed population engages in crime, and act in support of one leader or the other. During the election, they work and campaign for candidates in return for money and other benefits. These unemployed youth, at times, use violence and intimidation to solicit votes from the public. Political leaders support these violent youths to gain the vote. So-called democratic leaders fail to care for the democratic rights of street children and child laborers.

Illiteracy

Illiteracy is yet another threat to democracy. After more than three decades of independence, the government has not been able to tackle the problem of illiteracy. According to a UNICEF report from 2000-2004, the literacy rate for adult males was 50 percent of the population. For adult females, it was 31 percent of the population (UNICEF). In terms of literacy, the gap between urban and rural areas is astronomical. Only 36.6 percent of people in rural areas are literate as against 63.0 percent of literate who live in urban areas (Literacy Day, 2003). Bangladesh leaders as well as international experts have emphasized the role of literacy in development. The then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Khaleda Zia, said that literacy is the foundational step towards sustainable development. Likewise, former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, mentioned that literacy is a key lever of change and a practical tool of empowerment, affecting the three main pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development and environmental protection (Matsuura, Koïchiro, 2005). Despite these pronouncements, not much has been gained in terms of reducing illiteracy in the country.

It must be noted that the citizens of Bangladesh are provided with the right to education in the Constitution of Bangladesh. It states in Article 17 that “free and compulsory education” is provided to all. The State shall adopt effective measures for the purposes of: establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law (The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2004). Yet the country’s elected leaders fail to

extend this democratic right to everyone. Responsibility is not only on political leaders, but also on bureaucrats, who are driving the government and executive sectors of the country. Peace education is a very important tool that will increase people's responsibility and consciousness of self-empowerment.

People living in villages are still not aware of the importance of educating their children. Large numbers of parents are not educated and, subsequently, do not understand the importance of education, despite the many initiatives taken by the government. Although, legislation has been passed to reduce illiteracy rates in girls by providing free education through the twelfth grade, it is still not enough. Bringing awareness to the parents is equally important for future generations.

To point out the level of poverty does not mean that the country is devoid of educated people. The problem with the educated group is that they are not acting as a force for democracy. Director of the Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development, Mirian Vilela, believes that most of the problems that the world faces are created by the better educated (Vilela, 2006). She also mentions that there is a lack of values and ethics in education, an abundance of greed in education and a profusion of self-interested people that ultimately are responsible for the superseding of social interests. In the university education system in Bangladesh, teachers and students are highly educated, yet a number of them are involved in foul politics that pollute the institution, and harm the society as a whole.

The country is challenged by a lack of educated people with good moral character. People are losing trust in highly educated people. Many university students are known as killers, kidnapers, and rapists (Sayeed, 2005). Students once contributed immensely towards the language movement of 1952 and towards the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Yet, in recent years praise for students is almost nonexistent. Students have forgotten the proverb that "the pen is mightier than the sword" and instead firearms are still the preferred weapons for campus battle and violence in the campus vicinity. Presently, many students forget their main duties and responsibilities. Students and teachers are misguided in terms of their ethics and values in education. Greed for power and money is turning them toward dirty political scheming.

Given the above scenario, some scholars suggest that peace education is needed for the more educated people in the country. This will help bring consciousness, responsibility and moral values. "Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, social groups and religious groups." (Symonides

and Singh, 1996). This approach of education is known as “peace education”. Peace education is defined as education for transforming consciousness and worldviews toward a culture of peace and nonviolence. “It rests on developing a critical understanding of root causes of conflicts and violence, and empowering learners to dismantle a culture of violence and to build a peaceful self and world; it takes place across all modes formal, nonformal, and informal and levels, relying on participatory, creative, and critical pedagogies” (Groff & Smoker, 1996).

Peace education acknowledges its purpose as “...education to facilitate the achievement of peace and related sets of social values, largely through learning to recognize, confront and practice alternative, multiple form of violence” (Brenes, 2004). This education system helps students to empower themselves by learning how to critically analyze a situation. “Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation” (Levin, 2000, 156). Peace education does not follow the system in which the teacher is the only source of knowledge. “Students are producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement” (p. 157). Peace education talks about poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and street children on local, national and global levels. It discusses how to empower people through cooperation and collaboration.

Poverty

More than 135 million people live in Bangladesh, of which 55.2 million are living in poverty (Eberlee, 1997). The majority of those living in poverty reside in rural areas where the economy is heavily dependent on agriculture. Many people suffer from hunger, lack of housing, and exposure to floods, cyclone and monsoon. Thousands of children cannot go to school. Government and NGOs are working to eliminate these problems but they are having difficulties in controlling the problem. Some of these poverty ridden people migrate to the urban areas and work as rickshaw pullers, day laborers, road sweepers, or cleaners in hotels and live mainly in slums. They earn between US\$0.50 to US\$2 per day. This amount is not enough to provide for an extended or large nuclear family. Due to this strain, many families living in poverty are increasingly likely to accept bribes from political candidates to mitigate their present situation and vote accordingly. Those who accept bribe do not consider whether the candidate is fit to serve the country; they simply base their vote on their short-term monetary gain.

In a poverty-ridden society, the businessmen thrive. As Kochanek (2000: 155) points out: “Bangladeshi businessmen have been very successful in securing direct elite representation in government...have been well represented in elected

assemblies and have been served as cabinet ministers” The percentage of MPs elected from the business community has increased over the years rising from 24 percent in 1973, to 26 percent in 1979, and to 45 per cent in 1999 (Kochanek, 2000). The two major political parties in Bangladesh have been very much under the influence of the business elites.

Child labor and street children

Child labor and the phenomenon of street children contribute to the weakening of democracy in Bangladesh with illiteracy and deprivation of rights. Child labor is a common scenario in Bangladesh. So many children start working when they are only 6/7 years old. They work in houses as servants or maids; sometimes they work in cottage industries, manufacturing, factory work, brick fields, street sweeping, collecting garbage and other types of risky work (Insight News TV, n.d). Most of them are boys younger than 15 years old.

The estimated number of street children in Bangladesh is 445,226 of whom 53 percent are boys and 47 percent are girls (Sept 2001 survey). Of all the street children, 75 percent are in Dhaka city alone. All categories of street children are called *Tokai* (‘rag pickers’) by the general public, although they may be engaged in petty trading, employment, and criminal activities. Average daily income per day of a street child is approximately USD\$0.55 (Haram, 2002). According to a BBC report of 15 February 2002, “there has been an alarming rise in the number of street children in the major cities of Bangladesh. Every morning as the sun rises a host of children walk across this vast mound of rotting rubbish scavenging for used plastic bottles or similar rubbish. They spend their days with a sack over their shoulders, ceaselessly scouring through the rubbish. ‘We find all sorts of things, from old bottles and containers to cans and plastic containers,’ says eight – year-old Saber.”

These child laborers and street children all are deprived of basic human rights in Bangladesh, even though they are enshrined in the Constitution. Article 15 of the Constitution of Bangladesh reads: “It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens; the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care; and the right to work, that is the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage having regard to the quantity and quality of work” (The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2004). Every now and then child laborers, street children are involved in different crimes. Sometimes,

political leaders use them as their political weapons. These innocent, illiterate people involve in different distractive activities for food and money. Some participate in political demonstrations, throwing bombs, burning public and private vehicles and properties, with no concern for their own lives. People use those vulnerable children for their political advantage and this is not expected in a democratic country.

Absence of moral teachings

Illiteracy, poverty, corruption, and unemployment are the common phenomena not only in the Bangladesh but found in many other countries. These problems cannot be removed overnight but it is possible to reduce these to a great extent through proper democratic practices as well as honest, sincere and qualified visionary leadership. To develop a visionary leadership, it is necessary to have the moral education, social awareness, and consciousness of human rights and responsibilities that are included in peace education. When leaders are educated and honest, people will be conscious about rights and duties. Only then democracy will be successful in Bangladesh.

Education without morality does not bring any positive change in society. Many people opine that a moral teaching for all level of people in society especially in the politics in Bangladesh is absolutely essential. Jamal Badawi says that all of our social, economic and political problems come from immoral behaviours of people. Lewis Mumford in his book *Conduct of Life* laments: “The invisible breakdown of our civilization, the erosion of values, the dissipation of human purpose, the denial of distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, and reversion to subhuman levels of conduct” (cited in Badawi, 2010). Burtrand Russell at one point said that it would be unfair to beasts to say that man has descended to the level of beasts. Indeed if I may add that sometimes beasts are regarded as more humane because a beast only kills for food (See Badawi, 2010),

Conclusion

People in Bangladesh sarcastically define democracy as a “government off the people, far the people, and buys the people.” During the election period, the candidates buy people’s vote through giving money directly to the people or to the election officers who are in charge of the election, and through violence and intimidation. In the post-election period, all the promises are forgotten and the government stays from the people as far as possible. In other words, democracy in Bangladesh is not functioning as it should.

It is argued that democracy is good for society. People can get equal rights if only democracy is properly practiced. But democracy will never be successful where people are deprived of their basic rights, where corruption is rampant and where political leaders are involved directly or indirectly in corruption and violence. Political leaders need to improve their attitude and behavior to get the good results of democracy in Bangladesh. Sometimes political leaders use the unprivileged people, the less educated, the illiterate or the unethical, and the corrupt people for their political gains. These unethical practices can give short-term benefits but bring long-term sufferings to the nation. To get the good results of democracy, a country needs to introduce moral values in the formal and informal education system. The leaders must eschew corruption and then try to reduce corruption in various sectors. They must ensure that everybody has an equal access to education, must make child labor illegal, and ensure employment opportunity for all. Allah says in the *Qur'Ēn*, "O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do." (61: 2-3). Word and action must correspond to each other in order to gain better results of democracy in Bangladesh.

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