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Introduction


The collapse of Soviet communism a decade back once again has vindicated Winston Churchill's dictum that contemporary democracy as we know it is the 'least bad' of all systems of government. Since the beginning of the 1990s, renewed attempts have been taken to establish and strengthen the democratic systems of government across the former Soviet block as well as developing countries. However, not all countries are witnessing positive trends or successes in their democratization efforts. Farid Zakaria's Article on "Illiberal Democracies" echo the message. Obviously, the problems are many and varied, as different groups of countries had differing historical experiences as far as their systems of governance were concerned. On the other hand, no universally correct blueprint of democracy is there to replicate, though some indicators or elements are widely accepted as the basis of a democratic system of government.

Historically, the city-states of ancient Greece stand out as the earliest examples of democracy, where the whole citizen body formed the legislature and participated in it. This was direct democracy. As time passed, population increased and complexities of administration developed, direct democracy was no more possible. With the decline of city-states and the
Roman Republic, the early forms of democracy were replaced by a period of warrior Kings and many centuries were to pass before the re-emergence of democratic systems of government. The key to this revival was the emergence of individualism, individual rights and industrial revolution in Europe during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The system that evolved was 'representative democracy,' in which citizens exercised the right of participation in political decision-making not in person, but through elected representatives. However, linking popular preferences to political outcomes remained a persistent problem because of social and group differences. The system of 'constitutional democracy' was a finer version of representative democracy in that the powers of the majority are enshrined in constitutional provisions designed to guarantee the individual and collective rights of all citizens including the minority. Based on experience of the western world during the last three centuries, some elements of constitutional democracy can be laid out:

1. A system of periodic elections with a free choice of candidates;
2. Competing political parties;
3. Universal adult suffrage;
4. Political decisions by majority vote;
5. Protection of minority rights;
6. An independent judiciary; and
7. Constitutional safeguards for basic civil liberties.

Most of the industrial democracies are anchored on these basic elements, though the trajectory they passed through sometimes differed. Some common threads were there to the successful evolution of liberal democracy. Historically, one such thread was the relationship of political participation to ownership of property. Unlike city-states, the Roman Republic
gave franchise to all the classes in society. In reality, only the rich and property-owning class exercised political power. Even in the early representative democracies, political participation and voting rights remained the exclusive right of the propertied class. With the development of manufacturing as the dominant mode of production, a new class of industrialists and commercial entrepreneurs replaced the feudal lords. Trade unions and civic groups were formed and gradually the franchise spread to all citizens of the country. Even in Europe and America, women were granted voting rights only from the beginning of the 20th century. Still, in many of the mature democracies, vested interests and money play the decisive role in political decision-making. As a result, new forms of governance, such as deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, discursive democracy and many other varieties are advocated to ensure the connectivity between the preferences of people and political choices in the industrial world.

This historical brief points to the fact that development of capitalism and market forces antedated the evolution of political democracy in Europe. America had a somewhat different experience in that it witnessed simultaneous development of capitalism and democracy. Even President Madison once remarked that without westward expansion, meaning the vesting of individual rights over land across the western prairie, democracy in America would not have been possible. East Asian nations, the most vibrant of all developing economies, passed through a prolonged period of autocratic rule when market forces were allowed to operate relatively freely. Now they are gradually opening up to liberal democracy. These experiences show that economic opportunities, provision of basic needs and a minimum level
of literacy among the wider masses are some of the pre-
conditions of democratic practice in any country.

However, India and Sri Lanka are the exceptions in the
developing world which went straight into political pluralism
after independence in 1947-48 and continue the tradition,
despite occasional setbacks in the way. If they could do this,
other countries also should have been able to do so, given
commitment. But this was not the case. The typical example
is Pakistan, the other part of former British India. With a
brief spell of democratic experiments, Pakistan fell into
military rule by the end of the 1950s and continued till the
independence of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) in 1971.
Again, after a brief spell of democracy, military rule was re-
established both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. After the coup
of 1975, in which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib and his
extended family members were killed, successive military
regimes of Zia and Ershad were civilianized through political
machinations. This process, a very traumatic experience for
the people of Bangladesh, continued till the end of 1990.
Prolonged military rule crippled the political institutions,
maimed the politicians and made many of them objects of
buying and selling in a charade of democratic politicking.

It may be recalled that in many countries, including
Pakistan and Bangladesh, overthrow of elected governments
by military rulers was supported by western governments
because of strategic considerations. Autocratic and military
regimes were viewed then as outposts of anti-communism.
This distortion, both by endogenous and exogenous forces,
manifests itself in many forms in the Third World, such as
'consensus democracy,' 'guided democracy,' 'limited democracy,' and even
'martial democracy.'
Now that the Cold War is over, there is no external threat to the flourishing of democracy. Since 1991, democracy again had a new lease of life in Bangladesh. Since then, two national elections, widely regarded as quite free and fair, have taken place. Following the initial turn of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) during 1991-96, the Awami League was back to power after a period of 21 years. Its five-year term ended in July 2001. The BNP-led four party alliance swept back into power following the general elections held on 1 October 2001. However, experience of the last decade in Bangladesh shows what Hasnat A. Hye calls 'a hungry man's syndrome,' in which politicians, long starved of power and perks, manifest an unwillingness to share and hang on by any means. The latter include monetization and criminalization of politics, in which black money and raw muscle power reign supreme. Civilized norms of behaviour remain absent. It is believed that this disease can be cured only through accountability, transparency and equal access to power guaranteed by regularly held free and fair elections.

Though election to public office is only one step in the process of institutionalizing liberal democracy, it is the most important step. With regularly held elections for several decades, political weeds are likely to be cleaned out. Here comes the all important role of CIVIL SOCIETY in a country like Bangladesh, a low-income economy where majority of the masses remain poor, illiterate and functionally landless. It may be recalled that lack of democracy in the “economic and social” sphere of the society was not initially a part of the democratic agenda in Europe, and factors such as the prevalence of economic inequality in a liberal democratic state were indeed irrelevant in the early stages of democratic development. But in the democratic practices of the post-War de-colonized world, together with political democracy, the
question of economic democracy has come to dominate the discourse, because of the conditions prevailing in the newly-independent countries. Therefore, together with uninterrupted political process, a minimum level of economic and social development of the masses is required.

Though the growth of civil society coincided with the emergence of Bangladesh, the initial focus was on the provision of relief and basic services to the poor. Gradually, it began to provide micro-credits for self-employment. Though real empowerment and upward mobilization is a long way to go, efforts of NGOs, the major arm of the civil society in Bangladesh, is regarded as a commendable effort. Many NGOs are turning to advocacy for ensuring basic human rights and the rule of law. Other professional and civic groups are also engaged in this endeavour. However, civil society in Bangladesh remains divided, often along political lines. In such a situation, what is the real contribution of civil society to empowering the people, economically as well as politically? Do the NGOs and other civil society bodies have autonomy independent of the regime in power? How far can they contribute to cleansing the weedy environment? Can the civil society bodies play the role of *avant garde* in the process, whereby countries like Bangladesh can make a hop-step jump to what the western world took centuries to achieve?

These were the issues that had been the theme of a day-long National Seminar on "Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh," organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Dhaka on 28 May 1998. In all, six papers were presented in two working sessions by the learned political scientists, economists and NGO activists of the country. The sessions were theme-based: the first one was devoted to "Civil Society and the Political
Process," and the second one on "Civil Society and People's Empowerment." Three papers were presented in each of the sessions.

Here are the highlights of the individual papers. Most of the papers have a discussion on the nature of civil society and what the terms stand for. There are disagreements about the definition of civil society and what segments of the society it covers. A kind of consensus has been observed that civil society includes at a minimum those segments who do not exercise or seek state power and who are not involved in commercial activities for profit-making. Therefore, civil society is poised against the state and the private sector/market. Mohammad Humayun Kabir in his paper on The State and Civil Society in Bangladesh analyzes the nature of the Bangladesh state and civil society in historical perspective, and argues that the relationship between the state and civil society in Bangladesh has been both adversarial and cooperative. What is needed in Bangladesh is both a democratically strong state and a strong civil society working in cooperation with each other. An active non-partisan and tolerant civil society can significantly contribute to the process of democratization in Bangladesh.

Mahfuzul H Chowdhury in the paper on Civil Society and Party Political Process in Bangladesh describes the interaction between the political parties and civil society and argues that the parties in Bangladesh, led by authoritarian leaders, have resorted to political means that ran counter to the interests of the civil society. Even the parties appear not interested in good governance for the benefit of the masses. On the other hand, civil society does not have the capacity or power to force the political parties and the state apparatus to look for the interests of the civil society and the larger masses.
In his paper on **Civil Society and Rule of Law: The Bangladesh Context**, Shahdeen Malik devotes the first section to a critique of a centralized state with a growing body of laws, which do not necessarily lead to the rule of law. He cites the example of America where even the judges and public prosecutors are elected by voters, who are assisted by jurors from amongst the citizens. On the other hand, activities of NGOs in Bangladesh and behaviour of their leaders are yet to be grounded on the rule of law. Therefore, total independence of the judiciary is a *sine qua non* for the establishment of rule of law in Bangladesh.

Khaleda Nazneen in her paper on **Civil Society and Economic Empowerment** emphasizes that empowerment of the masses connotes primarily the access to resources and investment of those resources according to their own choice. Thus, economic empowerment will lead to political and social empowerment. Though the amount of micro-credits provided so far by the Grameen Bank are not sufficient, it is a step forward, which should be substantiated by government efforts in providing the basic services to the people. In her paper on **Civil Society and Social Empowerment** Aroma Goon explains the phases in the evolution of strategies of the NGOs in Bangladesh and shows that majority of the NGOs are being marginalized by the big brother NGOs. This is not a healthy development. Goon argues that the NGO she leads, PRIP Trust, is different from the lot in that it focuses on the demand side, i.e., on articulation of people's demands and aspirations in an integrated way for creating pressure on the government.

In their paper on **Civil Society in Bangladesh and Political Empowerment**, Abdur Rob Khan and Farah Kabir make the argument that empowerment of the civil society
should be coming from within the civil society utilizing the vast untapped and unorganized social capital available in Bangladesh. They suggest that a change in the ambience and environment of politics at the grassroots can be achieved through a two-pronged action strategy: first, to bring a fundamental change in the nature of national politics from 'politics of rejection and hostilities' to politics of healthy competition, and second, an effective local government system with empowerment, particularly of its women members.

Thus, it is evident that the volume is rich in analysis, insight and above all, straight talks about the political process in Bangladesh, where a growing civil society movement has the potential of having a norm-setting impact in the years to come.