Introduction

The level of national or political community in a particular state is evaluated mainly in terms of harmonious relationship between the social forces and political institutions. A nation comprises a number of social forces such as ethnic, religious, regional, economic or status groups. Each of these forces holds certain values which it wants to preserve and enhance. Naturally a kind of group cleavage pervades the social terrain, which tends to threaten the fabric of social harmony and impede the growth and development of political community.

The political institutions, on the other hand, are the behavioural manifestation of the moral consensus and mutual interest of the social forces. In fact these constitute "an arrangement for maintaining order, resolving disputes, selecting authoritative leaders, and thus promoting community among two or more social forces" by mitigating group cleavages and co-ordinating group values. The extent of political community in a particular society depends therefore on the effectiveness and scope of its political institutions. Political institutions have emerged basically out of prevailing disagree-

ment among the various social forces, and it is the network of political institutions which, by evolving organizational devices for resolving or at least, mitigating the disagreement, keeps the society going and help developing a stable moral consensus. As the social forces become more complex and variegated, political institutions have to be more and more autonomous and authoritative.  

In the new states, however, there is no balance between the development of complex social forces and authoritative political institutions. As a result, national integration and development of national community always lag behind. In some states divergent religious interests have been threatening the very foundations of the states; in others conflicting ethnic interests have been tearing the polity apart; in yet others, class interests and the resultant conflicts have acquired alarming dimensions.

Bangladesh is a little fortunate in that ethnic diversity or regional and linguistic conflicts do not afflict the polity that much. Even the religious differences in Bangladesh are of manageable proportion. Still, it is far away from forging a well-knit national community. The rural populace and the urban rich are in fact living in two separate worlds; the world view of the microscopic educated minority is different from that of the disproportionately larger segment of the society, the illiterate ones constituting about four-fifths of the total population; the numerically insignificant power-wielding elites are far distanced from the masses and none of their ideas create the slightest tremor in the hearts of the general populace. In short, the varied and complex social forces in Bangladesh are yet to be orchestrated into a national community.

A part of the explanation lies not only in the absence of strong and authoritative institutions but also in the attenuation of the existing political institutions. A simple political community may have "a purely ethnic, religious or occupational base" and may attain a

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“mechanical solidarity”; but the creation and maintenance of national community in a complex society like ours is in absolute need of a network of political institutions for involving and reflecting moral consensus and mutual interest of the various social forces. Political institutions in such societies can only weave a common goal and create new linkages among the particular interests of individuals and groups.

Naturally one can ask: Why have we not been able to create and sustain effective political institutions? Why the existing ones have failed to perform their role? How can we account for the stunted growth of these institutions? This paper is not intended to provide answers to all these questions; it rather serves as a framework for in-depth analysis and inquiry. Its purpose is mainly to provoke further discussion and probing into this crucial area of academic inquiry. This paper will focus on such institutions as political parties and local bodies in Bangladesh and draw explanatory exposition as to why these have not developed into authoritative institutions capable of mediating conflicting interests of various social groups and integrating them into a national community.

Political Party

Political parties, for their distinctive role in community building, must have structural as well as moral dimensions: structurally, political parties must have formulated policies and aggregated programmes, on the one hand and wider scope, on the other, in the sense that a large segment of the population across different social forces becomes politically organized as its support base; morally, the political parties should represent the “institutionalization of trust” of the people and enhancement of that trust among the social forces. On both counts, however, the political parties in Bangladesh stand far below the desired height.

Bangladesh society is unfortunate in that though there are scores of political parties only a handful of them are well-knit and organized
upto the grass root levels, having definite policies and programmes of action. Moreover, political parties have had a very limited scope of support. This is due partly to political history and tradition of the country and partly to its socio-economic structure. In Bangladesh, political parties have never been the decisive instrument for framing public policy or for projecting its alternatives. Except for short interludes, moreover, the political parties have had fewer opportunities for functioning openly since competitive politics has often been restricted. Some of the parties now functioning in Bangladesh originated during the British period and most of them had their origins during the Pakistan period. The main thrust of party activities was thus directed against the common foe—the colonial powers—rather than for a positive national identity.

During the colonial period party structures were merely “embryonic” and their operations were either illegal or extra-legal. Consequently, political parties had fewer opportunities to ensure large scale popular participation and had the least opportunities for balanced and autonomous development. Even after independence in 1971 the ruling elites in Bangladesh continued to maintain many of the restrictions which had been imposed on the free functioning of political parties during the colonial period. Naturally the political parties remained structurally distorted and functionally conspiratorial.

Bangladesh has, moreover, inherited a political tradition where mass movements and elections were entwined. During the last four decades there were a number of political movements in this part of the world, which crystallized certain political issues and brought forth certain political forces. Elections were then held not to choose between the alternative policies or programmes but mainly to pick up the winning political force. Most of these movements were again directed against the colonial powers, engineered not by one party but most often by a combination of them. Though the vast majority of voters participated in these elections they took sides not merely as party supporters but also
as supporters of crucial political movements. Some of these elections became, strictly speaking, plebiscites. The elections of 1946 on the Pakistan issue, the 1954 elections on the autonomy question, those of 1970 on the basis of the six-point programme were more than elections; they took the forms of legitimizing plebiscites. Each of these elections was unique and each had a distinctly separate appeal to voters. These elections, therefore, did not help the parties in bringing about structural transformations and functional niceties, rather victories in those elections posed new challenges to the leading parties which subsequently became weaker still because of the pressures generated afterwards.

Not only is the political history and tradition of the country uncongenial to the growth and development of autonomous political parties but so also is the political culture of our society. The culture of society and political institutions are related in a dialectical way. A national community represents the "institutionalization of trust" and the main functions of such political institutions as political parties are to "increase the mutual trust prevailing at the heart of the social whole". One of the elements of political culture in Bangladesh, treating others more with suspicion and jealousy than with broadbased liberal trust and emphasizing personal virtue rather than collective wisdom, is fraught with serious consequences for political parties. This has led not only to intense factionalism but also to personalization of loyalties, both of which have been great impediments to the development of political parties as autonomous, adaptive and authoritative political institutions. The series of fragmentation of the existing political parties and formation of new ones under the patronizing influence of the persons reflect the "parochial political culture" in Bangladesh.

The process of fragmentation accelerated when the political power was captured by the bureaucratic elite by means other than political

and exercised through channels other than parties. The number of political parties existing in this part of the world before and after 1958 and that before and after 1975 is indicative of the trend. The generals, having not much faith in the party system and never caring to use parties as the main channel of government and administration, expedited the steady decline of such important political institutions in the country. Military intervention tends to bring in wholesale distortion in the normal political process in the society particularly for two reasons: first, the military capture political power not through any constitutional process, and the political parties become the first casualty in the process; second, they never tend to exercise political power through any party. Even when political parties are formed by the generals in power, these parties always remain far off from the centre of power. These parties continue as a kind of B Team in the game of politics.

If the military disengages, as in the case of General Zia, the military elites continue to play an important role even after disengagement. Where the soldiers have once captured political power, the most common subsequent pattern is an alternation between civilian and military regimes, with the soldiers almost always remaining close to the seat of power. Indeed the aftermath of military intervention is military intervention. The political process through the intermediation of political parties thus tends to stagnate and is never likely to blossom forth into its full-blooded natural form. The political parties in Bangladesh have been subjected to this strain.

The structural deformity and moral atrophy of the political parties in our society are also due to the prevailing socio-economic conditions. The endemic poverty of the people, intense factionalism among the various social groups and classes, and a network of patron-client ties, reaching from the grass-roots to the central politico-bureaucratic elites at the national level, have resulted not only in organizational weakness and a very low level of institutionalization in
the polity, but also institutional fragmentation. In the semi-traditional agricultural society like ours, patron-client ties have always been present in some form or other, but the penetration of this economy by the external forces, and the resultant easy availability of external assistance in plenty mainly with a view to linking it with the world capitalist system, have not only strengthened these ties but also have helped them growing and extending up to the national level. The crucial intervening links in the network connecting the political figures at the national level with rural periphery are provided by rural oligarchs acting both as patrons distributing there own resources and as brokers providing access to formal governmental offices through their personal contacts. It is unfortunate that in Bangladesh recently patron-client networks have also extended into public and private institutions at all levels of society, in which office holders have access to resources to attract their following and provide valuable support for the most powerful patrons at the top.

The situation has been worse confounded when the heads of state themselves along with their aides have of late started distributing goodies to the local patrons bypassing the formal government offices or their own parties while shuttling around the countryside, laying the foundation stone of this school or visiting that college or beautifying that mosque in the outlying areas. The process, which was started by late President Zia, still continues, and in the process not only is the vitality of political parties sapped but also the credibility of public offices and their planned efforts suffer and suffer very seriously. Under such circumstances no political party, whether in position or opposition, can serve as the effective allocator of values or platform for conflict resolution or meaningful foci of civic loyalty.

5. The basic characteristics of patron-client ties are that there are asymmetrical linkages between individuals of unequal wealth, status and power based upon personalized face to face contacts and dependent upon regular and reciprocal exchanges of benefits. See Rene Semarch and Keith Legg, "Political Clientelism and Development", Comparative Politics, V (January, 1971), vo. 2, pp. 151-52.
Political loyalty is to persons, and more so, to the perpetuation of patronage itself. Since political loyalty is directed more toward the perpetuation of patronage, the persons who can seize the principal patron roles and sustain the flow of material benefits to the clients are likely to receive the conditional allegiance and support of the clients network. A political party thus cannot retain the continued support of a substantial portion of its followers for a long time. This explains why some of the renowned opposition leaders, sometimes crying hoarse against the "misdeeds of government" and offering to undo all those even by "staging a revolution, if necessary", are found to take oath as ministers in the same government after a while.

Even the "ideological" parties, both traditional and radical, are not immune, because their actions and orientations are also imbedded in the same social ethos, same political culture and some socio-economic conditions except that these parties, in addition, are subjected to the ebb and flow of ideological conflicts beyond the border of the country.

Local Bodies

While the political parties have been deliberately kept outside the centre of power, the local self-governing institutions, which are supposed to mediate the conflicting interests of the various social forces and bring about a consensus at the local level, have always been the subject of manipulation by the power wielders. The history of local bodies in this part of the world has always been a history of misuse and abuse of a set of political institutions purely in power relation. Imperial interest played its dominant part when these institutions such as the Union Board, Local Board, District Board and so on were brought into being in British India during the last quarter of the last century, although these institutions were announced to have been ostensibly for the training of the natives for self-government.

After half a century of liberal education introduced by the British in Indian schools and colleges when a sizable English educated middle
class began demanding a share in administration and a voice in policy-making, British Indian Government introduced these institutions to satisfy the demands of the emerging rural elite and to involve them in administration through a tenuous bond of allegiance.

These institutions, comprising both the elected and nominated members, designed to provide some participation to the rural oligarchs in the management of local affairs, were so organized that the control of government officials would come out supreme. Subsequently by the Council Act of 1892 and the Government of Indian Acts 1919 and 1935, the scope and functions of these institutions were greatly increased but the full control of the government through its functionaries remained in tact. In fact, till the end of the British raj in India, these institutions functioned under the grinding tutelage of the bureaucrats and never got the least opportunity to develop as autonomous institutions.

The same tradition of bureaucratic control continued after 1947 and in several ways it become stricter. In addition, a new dimension of control by the national government was added to the already existing power-equation in such institutions when General Ayub, being scared and distrustful of the urban politics and urban politicians, attempted to shift the centre of political activities from urban areas to the country side through his ill-fated Basic Democracies system. Under the Basic Democracies the local bodies were tied to national institutions as their appendices in the form of electoral colleges, and in the process the local bodies lost whatever they had in terms of autonomy, adaptability and coherence and began to be controlled by the bureaucrats like any other government departments until 1969 when the entire system was swept away by the unprecedented mass movement which rocked the polity to its bottom.

After independence, the local level institutions have never regained their previous status. All the regimes in Bangladesh have treated these institutions with scant regard. One noticeable aspect in this regard

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refers to the reconnaissance spirit of the subsequent governments after Sheikh Mujib. Mujib Government itself kept these institutions in abeyance for a while and later on approached them half-heartedly in terms of their structure and functions. While attempting to civilianize his regime, President Zia ordered for general elections in the Union Parishads in 1977; his ultimate objective was, however, to assess whether the Baksalite forces were still predominant in the country side. When he found out that those forces were not yet extinct he lost interest in the local bodies and switched over to other measures, Gram Sarkar being one of them. The present regime's approach to local bodies seems to be as casual as ever, though it is credited with a novel experiment of decentralization of administrative power and planning exercise through the newly created Upazilla system by upgrading 460 Thana administration and 44 Sub-divisions. The chairmen of the Upazilla councils have already been elected and as decentralized units the Upazillas have been functioning in the country. It is too early to make any objective evaluation of the status and role of the Upazilla, but the Centre's tight control over Upazilla finance and personnel and Centre's direction to planning at that level appear as so many question marks to the autonomous role of the Upzila.

Conclusion

In fine, it can be stated that such political institutions as political parties and local bodies, which have played so vital roles in knitting the various social forces into national communities in the developed world, have had their stunted growth in Bangladesh and to that extent future of our society seems to be uncertain. There is indeed no ideal solution for this. Looking at the stunted growth of political parties in most of the new states, and consequently the stagnation of political process in these states some scholars feel that quite a long time has to pass through a series of crises before adaptive and authoritative political parties would emerge with their historic missions of building national communities. Some scholars
have sounded ominously that "most of the political entities created in the past fifty years are not going to complete the process of nation building", and there would be "an endless round of coups, conquests, revolutions and wars".6

This is, however, a note of a pessimist. Community building is not an impossibility, though it is one of the most arduous and most painful processes demanding absolute dedication and care. What is suggested here is that for the purpose, participatory institutions in the society have to be strengthened and re-oriented both structurally and functionally so much so that these institutions, and not person or persons however strong or public minded he or they may be, can serve as allocator of values, and foci of civic loyalties. In this respect, national leaders, whether military or political, must play a key role in a spirit of historic mission in Bangladesh.