Political Instability in Bangladesh: Security Implications

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Introduction

It was Cicero who had the right type of insight to see through politics when he stated with candour "Politics is a sly craft. It uses human souls as tools." Cicero had certainly in mind politics of his times, not of Bangladesh at a vast distance in time and space. But thinkers of Cicero's stature have time-and space-transcending relevance; and we may begin this discussion on intermesticity between political instability and insecurity of Bangladesh by referring to this seemingly jarring comment.

But politics may not be all that negative as Cicero would have us believe, since there are positive aspects to it as well. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasanl (1880-1976), a practitioner of populist politics, for example, contradicted Cicero by stating that, "Politics is such a noble endeavour the aim of which is to ensure total welfare of people of all walks of life irrespective of race and religion by uprooting injustice and oppression from society. Politics is also for ensuring justice, rule of law, freedom of speech and, in general, rights of all kinds in society". Politics may also be a mix of what Cicero and Bhasani would have us believe. In an overall Bangladesh perspective, however, Cicero's statement rings a good deal of truth; and this is in consideration of the masses who are both subjects (but not always objects) and tools of politics. The game of politics in this country has not been found to change the fate of these masses, but does have a rewarding bearing on the fate of those who are players. As one of the most politicised nations of the world, Bengalees find politics deeply rooted in their psyche. With a psyche such as this, these people, when called upon to engage in organisational politics
and/or political organisation, make politics volatile and dysfunctional. Such volatility and dysfunction of politics arise mostly out of the quality or the lack of it of the players of the game of politics. Consequently, politics in Bangladesh has been found to be mostly non-delivering. Under such circumstances, politics is reduced to either a demonstration of resilience to be in power on the part of the incumbent government or stratagems on the part of the opposition to grab power. Such politics keeps the country on tenterhooks and has multi-dimensional security implications, both in the short and long run.

This paper considers two inter-linked issues in the context of Bangladesh: political instability and its security implications. The exercise has a futuristic perspective as the nearing twenty-first century projection underlies the discussion. The paper divides into two parts: conceptual and empirical. In the conceptual part political instability and security are defined, and the inter-linkage between the two are suggested. Despite some obvious political mileage gained since the beginning of the nineties following the apparent democratisation of the polity much of Bangladesh politics, as the empirical section argues, is permeated by characteristics that create genuine concern for the present and multi-dimensional security threats in the long run. This section concentrates on the indicators of political instability in Bangladesh, and at the same time, links the same with security concerns.

Conceptual Context

Following Harry Eckstein, stability may be characterised by durability, acceptance of legitimacy, and effectiveness of government actions. The first essential prerequisite for a stable political system is that it is presided over by a capable, effective ruling group that is able to overcome aggressive, self-destructive forces and internal civil dissension and that can provide protection against threats both from within and without. The success of any government in maintaining stability is measured by the absence of violence, loyalty to and confidence in it by the people, and the persistence of the system of governance in its essential form, while adapting to
new conditions and challenges. In other words, a stable government is also a dynamic government, with continuity as well as changes. A contrary scenario is political instability when the ruling group lacks in these characteristics and fails to deliver what a stable order demands of it. In fact, this contrary scenario does not only mean political instability, it may also be equated with, as Huntington argues, political decay.³

But few regimes across the world possess all of these characteristics; some of them may possess some. Only a handful of countries - including the United States, Britain and its older dominions, Scandinavia, the Benelux nations, and Switzerland - have been found to have stable systems since the beginning of the twentieth century. Even so, instability has appeared in such stable systems in recent years following the ending of the Cold War. And, of course, the erstwhile Soviet Union and East European nations are some of the more glaring examples of instability.

The political scenario in the Third World countries stands in sharp contrast to that in the stable ones in the developed world. Both the history of colonial past and the circumstances following decolonisation conspire against the quest for a stable order in these countries. Sharing history and circumstances common to other Third World countries, Bangladesh can hardly present a different political scenario. Moreover, out of twenty-six years following independence this country was under either military or civilianised military rule for quite some time. Consequently, political process either remained suspended or got travestied. The country got back to its constitutional rails following the 1991 general elections and the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution that reinstated the parliamentary system. Under such circumstances, it would be futile to look for the suggested characteristics of a stable polity in Bangladesh. Be the political scenario of Bangladesh as it may, in reality the question her rulers cannot escape is: can this country cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century with such a political order? This is the question that has to be faced squarely along with the alarming ramifications of such an unstable polity.

The phenomenon that intertwines with the nature and
quality of polity is political culture. In the context of domestic politics political culture is defined as "the total configuration of a political group of people's subjective orientations toward government and its activities, toward other actors, and toward themselves as political actors. It includes pre-rational beliefs and attitudes, such as the presence or absence of a sense of social trust or a deeply felt identity crisis. Rationale belief systems, such as ideologies, religions creeds or moral convictions, also play a major role, as do unstated beliefs about the legitimacy of coercion and violence in political life." The discussion below on the Bangladesh political scenario shows that a political culture conducive to stability is yet to emerge. Of course, political culture cannot be created over a few years, it develops over a long period of time through a sustained growth. But it has been found that the critical facilitating factor in the development of political culture is the level and quality of political culture of leadership.

The conventional security perception, stressing only the external military threat, has now been replaced by a comprehensive one that considers both internal and external security in both non-military and military contexts. This type of security thinking is reflected when Harold Brown writes that national security "is the ability to preserve the nation's physical integrity and territory: to maintain its economic relations with the rest of the world on reasonable terms; to protect its nature, institutions, and governance from disruption from outside; and to control its borders".

In the case of the Third World developing nations security has to be conceived in a far more comprehensive context wherein the internal dimension has to have an edge over the external. The priority attached to the internal dimension of security of these states may be explained by the fact that these are what Barry Buzan rightly characterises as "weak states". He identifies two specific indicators of weak states: lack of social cohesion and state capacities. The security dilemma of such weak states is rooted more in internal than external threats. Some other recent studies on Third World security emerge with the conclusion that internal political and economic instability pose serious threat to such core values of these states as independence and sovereignty - as does the fear of an external aggression. Two workshops in 1992,
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From the conceptual context outlined above it appears that Bangladesh belongs to the category of Third World politically unstable states as well as to the category of weak states in security consideration. It also appears that security weakness arises from internal weakness, much of which is political and economic in origin and ramifications. By applying this conceptual context to Bangladesh it may also be suggested that there is an internesticity between political instability and insecurity. But, for the sake of a balanced perspective, the discussion to confirm this seemingly disquieting generalisation that follows has to be preceded by a resume of the track record of Bangladesh's political evolution that contains gains, losses, and even concerns.

The twenty-three years of relentless struggle (1947-1971) of the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) against West Pakistani ruling clique and the former's liberation war against the latter in 1971 were waged for achieving a democratic polity wherein the citizens would have their due share and weightage in governance. And, indeed, four clearly spelt-out state principles were enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh in 1972, one of which was democracy. Therefore, pre-liberation aspiration and post-independence achievement appeared to have coalesced. Economically Bangladesh had a creaky start because of the nearly-wrecked state of its economy and infrastructure. On the contrary, the political start was stunningly confident with initial stable strides. The Constitution, produced in a remarkably short time of eleven months, appeared to have reflected the hopes and aspirations of the people.

But if the beginning was so impressive the actual functioning of the polity was soon to hit snags, and in the process democracy started having a rough deal. Before the democratic renewal, following the anti-authoritarian turn-
around of 1990, the military ruled Bangladesh for about nine years; and during the rest of the time a mix of populism-pseudo-democracy-martial law-authoritarianism dominated the polity. Evidently, democracy was not allowed to function properly. Before the actual transition could be effected the path had to be paved by a Neutral Caretaker Government, which, by its nature, was a unique politico-constitutional improvisation in 1990. In 1996, this improvisation was given a constitutional legitimacy through the Thirteenth Amendment to the national Constitution. Headed by Supreme Court Chief Justices, the two Caretaker Governments oversaw two free and fair elections in 1991 and 1996 respectively, having ensured two peaceful transfers of power. The first positive upshot of the democratic renewal was the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution in 1991 that reinstated parliamentary democracy. However, the achievement of such political mileage, notwithstanding the renewed democratic polity, even today appears fragile. After reviewing the functioning of Bangladesh democracy after one year of its operation some American experts came up with the conclusion that, "... the past record of political instability and the still incomplete acceptance of democracy as the only solution for the country's problems suggest that the country's democratic institutions of 1992 are a fragile growth that will need to be nurtured if they are to survive."

Such an assessment of the post-authoritarian renewed democracy that Bangladesh had was either cautious or premature in 1992; but could we have a positive and optimistic assessment now? If we follow and support Fareed Zakaria's contention we might argue that democratic renewal in Bangladesh, in common with other parts of the world that have come under democratic sway only recently, has spawned an "illiberal democracy". Zakaria argues that "democracy does not seem to bring constitutional liberalism" and that "to date few illiberal democracies have matured into liberal democracies". He finds that these illiberal democracies may hold free elections but do not honour the rule of law and the rights of their citizens. But as weighty historical facts contradict Zakaria's generalisation, we might come up with the counter-argument that "In many of today's democratising
states, illiberal democracy may be a way station along the road to the more benign forms of governance..." Germany had to go through many tortuous phases of democratisation before getting it right. Japan, perhaps that oldest Asian country to start practising Western democracy, has only recently strengthened democratic governance and other attributes of a liberal polity.

History helps getting over the Zakaria type of pessimism vis-à-vis democratic future in the democratising nations, including Bangladesh. But history is also replete with instances of how internal political instability and resulting weakness have created multidimensional insecurity for many states, including the ones referred to. Before these nations could get their internal political scenario right they had to cope up with spells of insecurity. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the scramble for China amongst the industrialised nations of the West, rightly dubbed ‘Cutting the Chinese Melon’, can be explained by two specific factors. First, vast underdeveloped China was also a vast market for surplus products of the industrialised foreign powers. Second, lacking in socio-political cohesion under weak and effete imperial administration, China could not withstand intrusion of external powers.

It appears that there are grounds of optimism even for illiberal democracies; but it also appears that political instability during the illiberal transition phase may have security ramifications. Granting that Bangladesh is passing through the supposedly illiberal phase of democratisation, it has to be presumed that political instability that goes with this period of transition has security implications for the country.

An overview of Bangladesh political culture, in which are rooted the sources of political instability, has been given by Mahfuz Anam in his perceptive commentary: "bickering, mutual abuse, negative politics, lawlessness, misgovernment, broken promises, state-controlled electronic media, boycotting parliament, frequent hartals, impeding regular productive activities in mills and factories, patronising violence, keeping armed cadre in the student front-wings, putting personal and party interests above the country’s, and failing to understand what the people want." Perhaps keeping in mind such a
scenario, Abdur Rob Khan goes to the extent of characterising Bangladesh politics as "devilish." A number of indicators that bring politics to such a state may be suggested.

Election is universally recognised as the first step towards democratic governance. Despite the improvement that has been registered in 1991 and 1996, elections have not yet matured to be as satisfactory as is required in a democratic polity. Although universally acclaimed free and fair, at least in comparison with the previous ones, these two general elections remain open to question in terms of both input and output. The questionable input for election is money or, to be specific, black money. A distinguished member of the SAARC observer team that oversaw the 1996 election, succinctly comments: "As long as money plays an important part in elections, it is futile to claim for a country anywhere in the world that every citizen or groups of citizen has equal access to the political market, which is what a free election would mean." Money and/or black money not only militates against the democratic spirit of election, they also impact negatively on the quality of elected representatives and the quality of resulting Parliament.

In the recent past, middle class professionals with credentials and having contact with the people have been squeezed out of the political market to yield place to rich businessmen, industrialists or individuals with questionable means of income. The candidates who win election by sheer power of money regard it as another but most rewarding financial investment; and once elected they tend to use their exulted position to make money. Because of numerical preponderance of such rich legislators, the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) has been compared to a "Dhaka Club." This is a phenomenon common to all the countries of South Asia. A perceptive watcher of the regional political scenario draws attention to the security ramification of this phenomenon: "Once elected the legislators with black money amassed through smuggling of narcotics or illegal weapons could threaten to bring down a government that came down hard on them, the whole country could be put at the mercy of a few powerful drug barons, pulling the strings from behind and purchasing the loyalties of members of parliament through a process of horse trading." This is a grim scenario
that may not be relevant to Bangladesh at present, but in the context of the violent trend of politics such a possibility in the days ahead may not be ruled out.

Closely linked with the quality of legislators is the quality of legislature. Thanks to the electronic media coverage, parliamentary debates and happenings are open to public. The performance of our elected representatives, barring some exceptions, leaves so much to be desired. This is a parliament where sessions take place with most of the seats vacant. This is a parliament that is characterized by frequent walks-out, mostly sterile debates, frequent violent war of words between the Treasury Bench and the Opposition mostly on non-issues, and very rare parliament-like debate on issues of national importance. Untoward and even violent incidents on the floor of parliament are also not rare. The quality of legislators is bound to reflect in the proceedings of the legislature. Thus, the election system, vitiated by money-and-politics nexus, and a literally non-performing and non-delivering parliament are factors sufficient to make politics volatile and unstable with serious long-range ramifications.

Criminalised and vandalised politics is another indicator with alarming foreboding. Violence and politics have become almost synonymous. It may be suggested that this kind of politics be characterised by three Ms: money, mastan, manipulation. The emergence of mastans would not have been possible without patronisation by political parties. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, immediately after taking over the reins of government, directed that mastans, irrespective of their political affiliation, must be brought to book. But as the scenario across the country shows this directive has not been translated into reality. Perhaps sociologists would draw our attention to the socio-economic origins of violence and even of corruption in a severely resource-constrained country like Bangladesh. Whatever the origins both these ills have been found to have serious negative impact on the political culture of the country.

Aggregate data on the casualties of violent politics present a grim picture. The data from the media sources show that on an average more than one hundred people die and two thousand suffer wounds in violent political clashes in a year. The campus violence, an extension of violent politics at the
national level, has seriously affected academic functioning: student wings of political parties frequently turn educational campuses into battlegrounds. The twenty-four hour security patrol by the law enforcing agencies on campuses does not square with the image the educational institutions are supposed to carry. As Professor Rehman Sobhan puts it, "The campuses have become battle-fields where armed gunmen fight for control of the turf in the best Chicago tradition.... These armed students are protected both by the regime and the opposition. Most of these students have little political motivation and function as medieval warlords with loyalties to their paymasters who need them to assert their political authority..." There are some studies that suggest a causal linkage between endemic violence and demise of democracy. The increasing incidences of violence in Bangladesh politics over the years thus cloud the future of democracy. With this violence unarrested in time, this country would have to step into the next century with a dangerous legacy. Criminalised politics and its extension to campus have resulted in an alarming slide in educational standard. If the present trend continues, as is the apprehension, "the country will be literally devoid of educated people to run it" in the next century.

Elite competition in the spirit of tolerance and accommodation, as is common to a civilized society, is literally absent in Bangladesh politics. Intolerance in politics is reflective of the absence of a mature political culture, a factor that is a prerequisite for the process of sustained democratisation. Although the divide between the major parties is not so great as to provide a basis for a fundamental conflict, politics is viewed as a game in which winner takes all and played out in a zero-sum format. Political parties are found to contest elections as if they are fighting wars. Political divide and rivalry often degenerate into personal enmity, thus infusing an unhealthy element of acrimony that leads to violence. The prevalent intolerance-based political scenario has two outstanding features. First, the party in power is always intolerant, arrogant and even feudalistic in attitude. Second, the opposition forces always oppose the government for the sake of opposition (there may be some occasions of justified opposition), and are in politics as if with the
undertaking to bring down the government. A situation such as this results in what has been termed "crisis of governance". A country with such a crisis in governance may not be equipped to face the challenges of governance in the more difficult century that is just around the corner.

The worst indicator of volatile and dysfunctional politics is hartal that has been found to have crippling politico-economic consequences in the recent past. Hartal is the prerogative of the political opposition, which is, of course, an anathema to the incumbent government. Although an accepted and recognised form of protest by the opposition under certain extreme circumstances, hartal in Bangladesh has assumed a vicious character nowhere else to be found. The Finance Minister of Bangladesh, Shah A.M.S. Kibria, has put the daily economic losses from hartal at Taka four billion. Since hartal does not achieve its only goal of unseating government, but creates "problems for the common people, business and investment", he proposed an abjuration of the same by political parties through consensus. On 15 November 1998, the Prime Minister in what appeared to be a major policy decision declared "I am making this announcement to shun the politics of hartal both as the Prime Minister and the President of the Awami League for the greater interest of the country."

The BNP-led seven-party opposition, instead of reciprocating this widely hailed proposal, took some time to come up with a conditional counter-proposal, the tenor of which was that the government would have to make sure that no hartal-provoking circumstances be created. It appears that the positions of both the government and opposition are based on the logic of circumstances, but widely differing. If this difference is not bridged through some political engineering with the solemn intention of abjuring hartal or finding alternatives to it economic security of the country would be at stake. Beside colossal damage to domestic economy, a hartal-crippled Bangladesh would be uninviting to foreign donors and investors.

Use of religion for political ends and a constitutional provision for making Islam the state religion appear to be anathema for a country that had its beginning as a secular polity. Moreover, there was a constitutional embargo on
denominational politics. As citizens of a secular polity, the Muslims of this country in 1972 were no less devout than they have become (?) in 1988 under Islam as a state religion. There has been incremental induction of religion into politics over the years through the policies of either legitimacy-seeking rulers or actions of rulers seeking to buttress their position in power by appealing to the sentiment of the religious majority. As a belief system, Islam is very much integral to the psyche of the Bengalee Muslims; but a religious polity may not be what they would accept. The performance of the denominational parties in the general elections of 1991 and 1996 support such a generalisation. In 1991, for example, the Jamaat-I-Islami had 18 seats in parliament; in 1996, they had their strength reduced to 3 seats only. But a fledgling polity with poverty and political instability provides an easy base for such extremist denominational politics. Despite the numerical insignificance in the national legislature, denominational politics has its socio-political base deep and wide across the country. Perhaps Afghanistan of today is the classic example of what an onslaught of bigotry could do to a developing state; or what happens when religion and state get mixed up. One of the major challenges Bangladesh may have to face in the next century is the one that would emanate from denominational politics.

A factor linked to political instability is the low-level of development of political parties. A resume of political evolution of Bangladesh shows how much central and critical are political parties, either in or out of power, to shaping political culture and functioning of the polity. It is undeniable that all major mass-level political mobilisations, including the ones that gradually led to the successful liberation war and the fall of Ershad, have been achieved under the stewardship of one or more political parties. There may be two explanations for the low level of development of the political parties. First, Bangladesh was under strong executive and authoritarian rule for about one and a half decades, during which period there were relentless assaults on the political parties. Consequently, the factionalised and weakened parties had something like a defective growth. Of the three major parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jatiya Party (JP) have grown out of renegades from the Awami
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League (AL), the Muslim League and some leftist parties. Consequently, while the original parties were weakened in their rank and file, the new ones remained as mongrel admixtures. Second, lack of inner democracy has also contributed to the retarded growth of the parties. Professor Rehman Sobhan rightly observes, "This weakness of inner party democracy in the principal democratic parties remains one of the more serious constraints to consolidating a democratic culture and building a national political consensus. The survival of absolutism in democratic politics leads to the resurfacing of the 'Presidential' culture of a coterie of civil servants or personally loyal political associates". None of the major parties is an exception to this apt generalisation.

One of the preconditions for successful democratic governance is a consensus on major national issues, which, however, is negated if society remains riven with divisive issues. There is certainly consensus of the major parties on such issues as the nature of polity, system of governance, system of economy and foreign policy (except on India). Still there are some issues that keep the socio-political pot in Bangladesh simmering, sometimes boiling. Two such issues relate to our identity and who made the declaration of independence. For AL and its supporters our identity is Bangalee, while for BNP and its supporters Bangladeshi. To AL and its supporters Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the Father of the Nation and it is he to whom goes the credit of envisaging an independent Bangladesh and for having made the declaration of independence. But BNP and its supporters stick to a contrary position by crediting Ziaur Rahman with the declaration of independence.

It is interesting to note that the controversy on the second issue was unknown when these personalities were alive. To these two has been added recently the issue of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 2 December 1997. The Awami League Government and its supporters consider that the accord has heralded peace and stability in the region. On the other hand, BNP and its supporters argue that it is a sell-out to the insurgents and that it, in the long run, would lead to the secession of the region. Not logic, but politicised emotion, is the root of these controversies. Such differences between
the two camps of political elite are translated into a social divide, thereby negating the scope for social cohesion. Lacking in the much-needed social cohesion Bangladesh turns out to be a "weak state".

**Concluding Observations**

The above seven indicators suggest that Bangladesh is not only politically unstable but, in security perspective, a "weak state" as well. It may also be suggested that Bangladesh is a state for which internal dimension of insecurity has an edge over that of the external. Such a Cassandra-like prognosis may appear to be deeply disconcerting, but this is an inescapable reality. The pointed question that has to be asked is: can this politically unstable and a "weak state" like Bangladesh face the challenges of the twenty-first century? Perhaps the analysis presented above on the intermesticity between political instability and insecurity leads us to answer negatively to this question. But to fully comprehend the underpinnings of such a conclusion we have to clarify what the challenges of the next century actually mean, and how the country would not be able to face the same. *Prima Facie*, the next century would be like any other preceding century, albeit a new one. But in the context of the enormity of changes that have taken place in the outgoing century the forthcoming one would certainly be with distinctive features hitherto unknown. The twentieth century with its heritage of tremendous advancement in technology, both for construction and destruction, and of war and peace along with the fall-out of the Cold War, has prepared the background for a distinctive new century.

The world order that has resulted following the ending of the Cold War is a place wherein a "weak state" like Bangladesh may find it an arduous exercise to survive in the challenging circumstances. The challenge would be three-dimensional: political, economic and environmental. Politically, Bangladesh would have to face the challenge of a restructured world dominated by a unipolar and, at the same time, a multi-centred system. Economically, the challenge would be from globalisation or internationalisation of capital. Environmentally, there have been clear signals in the recent
past that the sea-level rise, because of green house effect, would bring disastrous consequences to the geography and people of Bangladesh. If Bangladesh fails to achieve at least some reasonable level of political stability and consequently to replace state weakness with some strength, it may be very difficult for the country to cope with these challenges.
Endnotes


11. "The Bangladesh Democracy Program (BDP) Assessment", *Final*


