

Bangladesh in Transition

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Introduction

On February 3, 2001, half a million Bangladeshi citizens gathered in Dhaka to participate in a social movement that demonstrated against human rights abuses, economic injustice, and political corruption. At “The Peoples’ Grand Rally,” the United Citizen’s Movement (UCM) presented a 10-point declaration that demanded “strengthening democracy, ensuring good governance and free election, fighting communalism and corruption, empowering women, ...and resisting the enemies of independence.”ⁱ

The rally also spoke out against corrupt state-business relations. “True [economic] development is not possible without fair politics,” said Dr. Qazi Faruque Ahmed, the Secretary General of UCM.ⁱⁱ He derided those opposed to liberal democracy, especially those in favor of military rule, and stressed that they “must be resisted in every ward, village, and town of the country.”ⁱⁱⁱ Changes in local political culture, he noted, would be imperative in developing citizens’ political expectations for reforming national politics.

The rally embodied free speech and the right to assemble. Speakers recognized the importance of protecting human rights, and practicing free and fair elections and economics. In 2001, Bangladesh seemed to be moving toward democratic consolidation, as a democratic political culture spread along with economic reforms and increased bureaucratic transparency. Organizations like the United Citizen’s Movement were gaining influence and membership; foreign direct investment increased; and women became more involved with grassroots organizations, and continued to gain financial independence through Bangladesh’s micro-loan programs.

By 2002, however, Freedom House declared Bangladesh “Not Free” for the first time since 1975-1976.^{iv} Largely due to press harassment, increased human rights violations, and loss of transparency, this downgrade proves that Bangladesh is not able to maintain its democratic structure and ideas in order to move toward consolidation.^v Once again, the government is failing to satisfy the needs and wants of its people. Additionally, since the bureaucracy, political parties, and electoral systems are noticeably corrupt at all levels, Bangladesh citizens are growing dissatisfied with their government. They realize that it does not practice the democratic principles that it claims to uphold. They want free and fair elections, civil rights, economic opportunity, and transparency.

This paper will investigate the concepts of democratization and consolidation, and it will explore some specific cases that have prevented democratic consolidation during Bangladesh’s history as an independent state. Why, despite the population’s strong support for democratic principles, does the government continually backslide after gaining any democratic footing? This paper will examine current indications of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh, and it will look at the discrepancies between formal and informal actions of the state.

Defining Democracy

Between gaining independence from East Pakistan on December 16, 1971, and pressuring General H. M. Ershad from the presidency in 1990, citizens of Bangladesh participated in five parliamentary elections, three presidential elections, and three referendums.^{vi} However, in “Democracy in Bangladesh: Illusion or Reality,” Murshid argues that these ballots “were not aimed to foster the democratic process,” but were rather exercises aimed “to seek credibility, confirm constitutional changes or provide mechanisms by which to legitimize the

civil-military bureaucracy” that continually claimed control from any civil bureaucracy that attempted development.^{vii}

Ershad, for example, embodied a militant legacy left by the Pakistan army. He distrusted civilian rule, believed the army deserved a constitutional role in government, and held little civilian support. Ershad gained his presidential power through both the 1986 and 1988 elections, which were rife with vote rigging, media manipulation, blackmailing, and coercive threats toward voters. Meanwhile, Ershad and his Jatiya Party (JD, the National Party) claimed to support democratic principles and liberal economics. In practice, however, the Nationalist Party only led a pseudodemocracy, a military regime masked with a theoretically liberal constitution and the guise of routine elections.^{viii} In *The Third Wave*, Huntington describes such actions by similar military or authoritarian rulers who would “justify their own regimes by democratic rhetoric and claim that their regimes were truly democratic” in order to maintain legitimacy and hold off civil and economic pressures.^{ix}

In *Developing Democracy*, Diamond names and defines types of governments like pseudodemocracies in relation to the concept of democracy. Democracy itself, he says, is difficult to address since political scientists define democracy in many different ways. Schumpeter, for example, emphasizes competitive elections “as the essence of democracy,” while others—like Murshid in his Bangladesh analyses and Dahl in his polyarchy conception—also consider non-electoral aspects of a state, including civil liberties.^x Classifying particular regimes presents an added challenge as “subtypes of democracy” also “vary greatly in terminology and conceptual emphasis.”^{xi}

At the most minimal definition, an electoral democracy is “a regime in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested elections”^{xii} Bangladesh is often classified as such a democracy, meaning that the country is susceptible to Karl’s “fallacy of electoralism.”^{xiii} Diamond explains this concept, saying that an electoral democracy often

“privileges elections over other dimensions of democracy and ignores the degree to which multiparty elections (even if they are competitive and uncertain in outcome) may exclude significant portions of the population from contesting for power or advancing their interests, or may leave significant arenas of decision making beyond the control of elected officials.”^{xiv}

Contrary to a liberal democracy, Bangladeshi policies and practices often protect bureaucratic corruption, media harassment, electoral manipulation, and civil society abuse. A liberal democracy successfully works past such actions to secure freedom and pluralism “through a ‘rule of law,’ in which legal rules are applied fairly, consistently, and predictably...and the state and its agents are themselves subject to law.”^{xv}

From 1991-1993, after Ershad and his military rule stepped down, Bangladesh seemed on its way to becoming a liberal democracy by virtue of its transparent election system and continuing public, elite, and organizational affinity toward liberal principles. The 1991 elections that officially ousted Ershad were, in fact, dubbed the “first free and fair elections in 20 years.”^{xvi} The position of prime minister earned primary executive power, and under prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia, the Bengal Nationalist Party (BJD) took control of the state. Meanwhile, Ershad served a five-year sentence for corruption and illegal possession of weapons.^{xvii}

Under the BJD, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was at its best an electoral democracy, since it held periodic, multi-party elections as stipulated by its constitution. The autonomous Bangladesh Election Commission hosted presidential elections every five years,

oversaw parliamentary elections, prepared the registry of eligible voters, and defined the constituencies for parliamentary elections.^{xviii}

By 1994, though, Bangladesh's democratization was slipping as street violence mounted in response to the 1991 election results, which consistently proved unfavorable to minority groups. The parliament, led in membership by the BJD, lacked ability to deal with such insurgencies, and this raised "concerns about a growing crisis of governability...as well as the strength, effectiveness and commitment of the state to be responsive to the needs of the people and hence, to democracy itself."^{xix} In December 1994, the problem escalated when 145 members of parliament from opposition parties walked out of parliament and began an assertive campaign against the BJD government.^{xx}

Aspects of Consolidation: Democratic Deepening, Regime Performance and Political Institutionalization

These rebellions revealed serious legitimacy problems in BJD rule. Diamond explains the "reciprocal relationship between legitimacy and performance," and emphasizes that a regime's legitimacy will be stronger if the regime successfully provides the needs and wants of the people.^{xxi} Increased legitimacy, likewise, facilitates "greater public patience with and support for governments facing formidable problems."^{xxii}

Without such legitimacy, consolidation is impossible. Consolidation, as defined by Diamond, is "the process of achieving broad and deep legitimation, such that all significant political actors, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is the most right and appropriate for their society, better than any other realistic alternative they can imagine."

Diamond emphasizes three tasks of democracies that are likely to result in consolidation: regime performance, political institutionalization, and democratic deepening. He emphasizes the connection between consolidation and the deepening of democracy. "Deepening," he writes, "makes the formal structures of democracy more liberal, accountable, representative, and accessible—in essence, more democratic."^{xxiii}

When Ershad stepped down after mass protests in 1990, democracy looked like it had a chance to develop in Bangladesh. In this case, public pressure was strong enough to remove a powerful military figure, and as Diamond explains, establishing civilian supremacy is especially difficult "when the military as an institution has a long tradition of political intervention and retains extensive political and economic prerogatives."^{xxiv} Ershad's removal and loss in the 1991 election further showed that Bangladeshis desired rule of law, rather than a military pseudodemocracy.

Still, Bangladesh's state history is overwhelmed with problematic and self-destructive institutional practices and regime performances. The combined ineffectiveness of these two factors have repeatedly stunted democratic deepening—and therefore stunted consolidation—in Bangladesh.

For example, during Khaleda Zia's first rule as prime minister from 1991-1996, the government could not build legitimacy or produce effective policy because of the internal rift in parliament. Opposition parties, especially the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the BJD or its leaders, including Zia. Led by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the BAL and other opposition parties organized the longest strikes in the country's history and threatened to boycott the April 1996 elections if they were not carried out on their terms, which included electoral supervision by an interim caretaker government.^{xxv} In 1995, *the*

Economist warned that “a clash of egos is threatening Bangladesh’s fragile democracy and its equally fragile economy.”^{xxvi}

Party disputes like these often distracted parliament from achieving policy solutions and outputs that Bangladeshi’s drastically needed. Opposition-led strikes, for example, “cost export industries hundreds of millions of dollars in lost orders” and scared off foreign investors, just as Bangladesh began moving toward a market economy.^{xxvii} Before the protests, Bill Clinton had praised Bangladesh’s “giant strides towards democracy and economic reform,” and Christopher Warren predicted that Bangladesh and other South Asian states would offer “the next major area for economic growth and development” because of an “increasing commitment to democratic reform to the rule of law, and to the belief that economic development is important....”^{xxviii} Zia’s government opened itself economically to foreign investors and tried to liberalize state-business relations.

Because of such attempts to liberalize, international organizations became more financially involved in Bangladeshi issues. In 1995, for example, the World Bank, the U.S., and UNICEF financed a \$59.8 million program to reduce malnutrition, which at the time affected about 90 percent of Bangladeshi children.^{xxix} The Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Program (BINP) was extremely successful. In only two years, severe malnutrition among children under two years old decreased from above 20 percent to around three percent.^{xxx} BINP continues to work with NGOs and communities to eradicate malnutrition, and to educate women about nutrition, family planning, sanitation, and childcare.^{xxxi}

Despite some effective economic and humanitarian outputs, Zia’s 119,189,000 constituents were savvy to the internal divide among the government. As the ’96 elections neared, and as party competition increased, reform strategies became political tools for the warring parties.

Zia’s BDJ often accused opposition of sabotaging any economic or humanitarian advancements that the party promoted. With her personal, party, and state survival at stake, Zia focused more attention on campaigning, negotiating with the BAL, and developing new election strategies instead of continuing to produce effective solutions to problems facing her citizens. Even though the BDJ prime minister and parliamentary majority held constitutional power, other parties would not acknowledge this power, and the opposition perpetuated this disrespect for constitutional leadership throughout the country.

Because of political institutionalization problems during Zia’s rule, regime performance was hindered and legitimacy therefore decreased. And since the regime lacked legitimacy, institutional reforms could not be implemented to create more transparent, less corrupt systems.

Diamond writes, “the better the performance of a democratic regime in producing and broadly distributing improvements in living standards, the more likely it is to endure.”^{xxxii} But as the Bangladeshi government faces intense economic and vital problems in the most densely populated country in the world, institutional corruption and ineffective regime performance continue to threaten democratic development.

Diamond lists Bangladesh among countries whose “progress toward democratic consolidation has been partial and slow,” where “crises have been repeated, and the quality of democracy has deteriorated in some respects.”^{xxxiii} Still, Bangladesh citizens “have shown no appetite for a return to authoritarian rule of any kind; culturally,” despite institutional and regime performance problems, “democracy remains a valued goal.”^{xxxiv}

Indicators of Consolidation: Formal and Informal Methods

In 2001, Zia was reinstated as prime minister after defeating Hasina in the national elections. In the earlier parliamentary elections, Zia's BJD gained a majority, as well, and also earned additional influence as part of a four party coalition developed by Zia in a campaign strategy against Hasina's BAL. Around 500 foreign and local observers monitored the elections, and UN observers "said the vote was 'sufficiently free, fair and peaceful, particularly after a violent campaign.'"^{xxxv} During the parliamentary elections, Hasina immediately contested the votes, but she did acknowledge Zia's legitimacy after her inauguration.^{xxxvi} This acknowledgment alone shows a move toward more civil acceptance of the norms of political conduct.

As charted in Diamond, certain democratic norms and beliefs must be exemplified in the behavior of elites, organizations, and the mass public.^{xxxvii} Elites, he says, must "develop a self-interest in adhering to the rules of the game, which then makes those constitutional rules self-enforcing."^{xxxviii} In a democracy, the rule of law reigns. The mass public and other organizations give the most legitimacy to elites who uphold the constitution.

Bangladeshis consistently show the most support for candidates who support democratic ideas. Even organizations and elites that formally proclaim democratic ideas, however, often pursue ends by a non-democratic route. Informal actions are often coerced and corrupt, especially in political links to economic policy.

The Heritage Foundation's "Index of Economic Freedom" describes Bangladesh's formally liberalized economy, noting that a privatization act from March 2000 and other liberal investment policies "have yet to be enforced properly by local authorities."^{xxxix} The state, for example, still owns 40 percent of industrial capital, and the banking system is dominated by state-owned banks. "Since the government is the owner, regulator and customer," of banks, "there has been ample opportunity for mismanagement and political interference" of financial assets.^{xl} The Heritage Foundation notes Bangladesh's most problematic economic issues, which are the very problems that keep Bangladesh from liberalizing its economy: "corruption, bureaucracy characterized by vested interests, lack of transparency, and outdated business laws that do not protect private contracts."^{xli}

In the "2001 Country Reports on Economic Policy and Trade Practices," the U.S. Department of State also outlined many problems facing Bangladesh's move toward free markets and trade: "Poor infrastructure, bureaucratic inertia, corruption, labor militancy, and a generally weak financial system discourage investment. Political unrest and a deteriorating law and order situation also discourage domestic and foreign investors."^{xlii}

The factors that attest to Bangladesh's poor economic situation—with a GDP of \$359 in 2001—help explain why Bangladesh has yet to liberalize its government, to consolidate democracy.^{xliii} The same problems that affect economics also affect the court system and the bureaucracy. For example, according to the U.S. Department of State, "under a longstanding 'temporary' provision of the Constitution, some subordinate courts remain part of the executive [rather than judiciary] and are subject to its [executive] influence;" the legal process is corrupt, especially at lower levels.^{xliv} Bangladesh still has a long way to go before its norms and beliefs match its behavior, before it fits the bill marked by Diamond in his "Indicators of Democratic Consolidation" chart.

The 2001 elections exemplify the usual application of "democratic" politics in Bangladesh. Although Zia peaceably assumed her role as prime minister, violence during the campaign itself killed 155 people and injured over 2,500.^{xlv} In this case, the mass public,

political organizations, and elites were all guilty of employing violence and other illegal methods. Diamond's chart emphasizes the use of political violence as a sure sign of non-consolidation. If elites use "rhetoric that would incite their followers to violence, intolerance, or illegal methods," if organizations "employ violence, fraud, or other unconstitutional or antidemocratic methods as a deliberate tactic in pursuit of power or other political goals," and if the mass public "uses violence, fraud, or other illegal or unconstitutional methods to express their political preferences or pursue their political interests," democratic ideology is not successfully implemented in the state.^{xlvi}

In 1995, Murshid explained the nature of democracy in Bangladesh, and because little democratic development has taken place since then, the description applies today:

"While democracy remains a desirable objective, the political actors are yet to learn the rules of the game. Threats to democracy may come from the legacy of personality cult and authoritarian rule in Bangladesh. Decision making within party political structures continues to be authoritarian. The military, which has tasted power and privilege, is likely to be tempted to assert its authority should it find its interests being neglected by a civilian regime. Political participation may be curtailed by vote rigging and violence at polling centers."^{xlvii}

Bangladesh does face such threats, and the survival of its democratic political culture might depend on its ability to overcome problems through constitutionally compliant, non-violent means. Increased human rights abuses and civil liberty infringements might, after all, lead to widespread distaste for democracy, since political culture and public opinion are subject to frequent change.

Amnesty International's 2001 report also describes the situation that Bangladeshis face. "Rampant corruption at all levels of society and government...thwart efforts to tackle widespread poverty and political instability. Torture, including rape in custody, continued...and impunity for past human rights violations persisted."^{xlviii} Amnesty also revealed police brutality, especially aimed at demonstrators and journalists who covered protests, and local political bargains often included bribes and/or torture. These and other abuses against political rights and civil liberties knocked Bangladesh into the "Not Free" zone of Freedom House ranking.

The longer corruption continues, the more easily corrupt practices will be accepted. Murshid, for example, notes that "the abuse of the electoral system by governments...has become an aspect of the political culture of the country."^{xlix} Freedom House worries that violence against the press might be the next non-democratic practice accepted in Bangladeshi political culture.¹

Today, Bangladesh seems to be backsliding to a pseudodemocracy, specifically a semidemocracy, in which the principles of an electoral democracy are implemented with a degree of pluralism and competitiveness, but in which "a relatively institutionalized ruling party makes extensive use of coercion, patronage, media control, and other features" to stunt authentic competition or threats to its own legitimacy.^{li} Like the days of Ershad's elections in the 1980s, Bangladeshi political practices—especially local politics—are continually reverting to less transparent systems and more corrupt policies. Formally, the constitution influences and oversees policy-making. Informally, bribery and coercion manipulate bureaucratic and economic decisions.

Despite all this, the people of Bangladesh are finding ways to voice opinions through grassroots organizations and public rallies like the UCM social movement in 2001. Citizens are also slowly gaining vital strength because of foreign aid, micro-loan financing, and increased

foreign investment. Such improvements must continue if Bangladesh wants to improve health care and eliminate hunger. Under the watch of agencies like Amnesty and UNICEF, Zia's current government is working to alleviate poverty, liberalize business, and, supposedly, weed out corruption throughout all levels of government. According to the U.S. State Department, for example, "poverty alleviation programs were the largest recipients of the fiscal year 2002 [Bangladeshi] budget allocations, receiving \$1.9 billion, or roughly 25 percent of total projected spending."^{lii}

Conclusion

Bangladesh has never been a consolidated democracy according to Diamond's definition and indicators. Yet, the political culture continues to support democratic principles, despite ineffective performances of past and present regimes that, since 1971, have all claimed to uphold the ideas and principles of democracy. Intense corruption at all levels of government and violence against the media currently pose great threats to the institutionalization of democratic ideas. Even with the government's lack of transparency, though, citizens can often see through corrupt politics, and they seem to understand the difference between what a liberal democracy should be and what Bangladesh's version of democracy is. Until efforts succeed in decreasing poverty and hunger, however, the majority of Bangladesh's 131 million citizens will likely devote their time to personal survival rather than development of civil society.

ⁱ "Execute HC verdict against *fatwa*, try war criminals in special tribunal" 1

ⁱⁱ "Civic grand rally in city: Call to eliminate fatwa-mongers" 1

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.* 1

^{iv} "FH Country Ratings"

^v Karlekar 5

^{vi} Murshid 3

^{vii} *ibid.* 3

^{viii} *ibid.* 5-7; Diamond 15

^{ix} Huntington 47

^x Diamond 8

^{xi} *ibid.* 7

^{xii} Przeworski in Diamond 9

^{xiii} Diamond 9

^{xiv} *ibid.* 9

^{xv} Diamond 11

^{xvi} Murshid 8

^{xvii} "Timeline: Bangladesh"

^{xviii} "Bangladesh International Election Observer Network"

^{xix} Murshid 9

^{xx} "On the Brink"

^{xxi} Diamond 77

^{xxii} *ibid.* 77

^{xxiii} Diamond 74

^{xxiv} *ibid.* 113

^{xxv} "On the Brink" 36

^{xxvi} "On the Brink" 36

^{xxvii} *ibid.* 37

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- xxviii Christopher 656
xxix “BINP: Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project”
xxx *ibid.*
xxxi “BINP: Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project”
xxxii Diamond 78
xxxiii Diamond 62
xxxiv *ibid.* 62
xxxv “Polls Close in Bangladesh”
xxxvi *ibid.*
xxxvii Diamond 69
xxxviii Diamond 70
xxxix “Index of Economic Freedom”
xl *ibid.*
xli *ibid.*
xlii “2001 Country Reports on Economic Policy and Trade Practices,”
xliii *ibid.*
xliv “Index of Economic Freedom”
xlv “Polls Close in Bangladesh”
xlvi Diamond 69
xlvii Murshid 13
xlviii “Bangladesh”
xlix Murshid 3
l Karlekar 5
li Diamond 15
lii “2001 Country Reports on Economic Policy and Trade Practices”