

ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY: DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: Though democracy is the most practiced state principle in the current world, nowadays, the improper practice of democracy has become a very conventional phenomenon in the case of the majority of states. In spite of calling the last half of the twentieth century the Age of Democracy, the fragility of democracy has already been revealed all over the world in the first half of the twenty-first century (Ketcham, 2004). However, Bangladesh is a South Asian developing country that has stipulated democracy as one of the state principles through its constitutional provisions. Since its freedom, Bangladesh has passed about five decades with the aspiration of institutionalizing democratic values in the state mechanism. But within the five decades of independence, proper valuation of the principles of democracy has not been done yet (Khadga, 2016). In the meantime, the static economic growth of Bangladesh has become a matter of surprise to the international community. To sustain the overall socio-economic development, democratic practice needs to be strengthened. In these circumstances, this paper intends to analyse Bangladesh's performance in democratic practices since its independence. In addition, this study explores the gap between democratic aspirations and reality through rigorous research. Key Informant Interview (KII) has been conducted with relevant stakeholders such as politicians, ruling party political leaders, academicians, researchers, journalists, etc., for primary data collection. Findings from the primary sources have been cross-checked with an extensive review of relevant literature. This study shows that democracy has not been properly practiced in recent years. However, political institutions are not yet dismantled, and constitutional processes are ongoing through arranging elections in a timely fashion.

Keywords: Democracy, Economic Growth, Democratic Practice, Political Institutions, Bangladesh

Introduction

Apparently, democracy is the most discussed word in the political vocabulary in the contemporary world. Ensuring democracy has become a good choice for the international community as one of the preconditions of good governance and development as well. Since 1989, democracy has been perceived as the most suitable system of state governance by the international community (Kendall, 2003). Bangladesh, a South Asian developing country, is struggling since before its independence to protect democratic governance in the state mechanism. Even Bangladesh became independent in 1971 through nine months long bloody liberation war with the objective of forming a just society by eradicating social discrimination and establishing democracy as one of the state principles. Constitution of Bangladesh provides that, “The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed”. From 1971 to 2020, during the four decades of freedom, Bangladesh has seen many political ups and downs to make democracy alive. In fact, democracy in Bangladesh is deprived within/by the practice of democracy itself. Consequently, democracy becomes fragile and cannot run smoothly with its own spirit (Khadga, 2016). However, in spite of having widespread backlash against undemocratic regimes, Bangladesh has become the development surprise to the development partners as gross domestic product (GDP) growth is over 6.0 percent despite its confrontational politics and global economic slowdown over the last few years (Bangladesh Bank, 2013).

According to Cheibub, research findings show the positive correlation between democracy and economic development (Cheibub and Vreeland, 2012). Economist Amartya Sen defined development as the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy (Sen, 1999). And democracy is the way to institutionalize that freedom. So we cannot avoid the inherent correlation between democratization and development. Stiglitz identified inclusion of social dimensions such as literacy, distribution of income, life expectancy etc. to define development from comprehensive perspective which would be the ‘transformation of society’ (Stiglitz, 2003). Comprehensive institutionalization of democracy can accelerate overall socio-economic development through ensuring citizens’ voice and representation in the development affairs. In

case of Bangladesh it has become urgent to establish fair democratic practice to sustain the upward trend of economic development as well as to support overall social uplift.

In this backdrop, this study explores the democratic transition in Bangladesh over the past four decades of its independence. The current status of aspirations and reality of democratic practice in the state has been analyzed subtly.

Broader objectives of this study are to know the democratic development in Bangladesh since its freedom to date and to study the gap between expectancy and the current status of democracy. Findings of this study find that democracy not properly practiced in recent years, though political institutions are not dismantled yet, and constitutional processes are ongoing through arranging elections in a timely fashion.

Firstly, I explain the method of this study. Then, the relevant literature has been analysed. Bangladesh's transition to democracy over the last five decades is explained in the next section. In the following section, I explicate the findings from the interviews on the aspiration and the reality of democracy in Bangladesh. In the conclusion, I suggest the way forward to uphold democracy in Bangladesh.

Approaches and Methodology

For conducting the research, I have used both primary and secondary sources of data. As the secondary sources of data, relevant literature like books, journals, newspapers, and research reports have been reviewed, and empirical knowledge of the researcher has been exerted to obtain the insights of the current status of democracy and to get knowledge about the history of democratic transition in Bangladesh.

To know about the aspirations and reality of the democratic practice in Bangladesh, interview has been taken of political leaders, academicians, and journalists. Key Informant Interview (KII) at the national and local level with the politicians, academicians, and journalists has been conducted to gain knowledge about the present status of democracy. Simultaneously, interviews at the national level with the ruling party-political leaders, researchers, and relevant experts have been conducted to know their expectations and views about the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

Table 1: Proposed Qualitative Sample

<i>Tools</i>	<i>Stakeholders</i>	<i>Level</i>
Desk Review of all the relevant documents		
KII	Politicians, Political leaders of different national parties, Academicians, Journalists	Local and National level

Source: The author

After finalizing the checklists, a comprehensive guideline was developed for the Supervisor for conducting KII, which specifically described important definitions, terminology, question objectives, data input instructions, skipping, etc. This guideline was easy to use and helpful in the data collection process. As process of field mobilization, the researcher was familiarized with the stakeholders. A detailed schedule with date, time, and venue was prepared. It was shared with the relevant stakeholders prior to the interview.

Review of Relevant Literatures

Since the separation from India in 1947, Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) struggled for an egalitarian society where people would enjoy equality, justice, and the right to vote through democratic practice. After independence in 1971, democracy has been stipulated as one of the state principles in the Constitution of Bangladesh. People's participation, authenticity, representational, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and solidarity, etc. have been determined as the values of democracy in a state by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (Barman, et.al. 2002).

Though Bangladesh strove to be a democratic political state since its independence, early episodes of military coup and dysfunctional democracy for long years hindered the establishment of democratic practice as well as good governance in the existing institutional structures (Alam & Teicher, 2012). In his article, Blair narrated that continuous military coups, assassinations of national leaders, and martial rule took place in Bangladesh from 1975 to 1990, which was a threat to democracy (Blair, 2020). Hasan (2011) revealed that after the mass uprising in 1990 erstwhile army regime fell and the parliamentary democratic government was revived. But democracy is yet to work properly in Bangladesh

(Hasan, 2011). The nature of politics to sustain power in any way has become the trend of Bangladeshi politics, which is largely jeopardizing the democratic promotion (K.C., 2016).

According to Chowdhury, the inherent “zero-sum political culture” in the political system of Bangladesh leads to the failure of democracy, where opposition parties make alliances with extremist forces to fight against the ruling party (Chowdhury, 2000). In Bangladesh, democracy follows a zigzag direction of development, which has both impediments and chances. In spite of having positive factors, many strong negative elements have become a threat to sustainable democracy (Amin, 1992) (Bhuiya & Jahan, 2023) (Jahan, 2021).

Blair (2020) mentioned the deteriorated status of democratic practice in Bangladesh, which has a previous background of colonial rule. He identified the current declining democracy as the “competitively authoritarian” regime in Bangladesh (Blair, 2020). Political participation, a large number of political parties, a growing middle class, active civil society, timely elections, etc., are the patronizing elements of democracy in Bangladesh, but weak institutional structures and unfair practices have made the democracy fragile (Riaz, 2014a).

Democratic practice in Bangladesh faces serious challenges despite having many strong elements. The incapability of the ruling party and the opposition to deal effectively with each other heads the list (Howard & Schaffer, 2002)). Though elections are arranged regularly, there are many democratic deficiencies, such as corruption, lack of press freedom, a politicized judiciary, poorly working checks and balances, lack of accountability, and frequent opposition boycotts of parliamentary sessions (Riaz, 2014b) (Jahan, 2023b). Review of literature suggests that since its independence, Bangladesh has several promising catalysts to ensure democracy, but military coups, undemocratic practices, weak institutional culture, etc., have made Bangladesh backward in fostering democracy.

Chronological Transition of Democracy In Bangladesh In Five Decades

Bengalis struggled since 1947 after the separation of India and Pakistan for a just society where people would get social and economic justice. The political dream of the liberation war of Bangladesh was to get rid of tyranny and to uphold democracy. After independence, democracy has been set as one of the state principles through which Westminster style parliamentary democracy has become one of the significant features of the state machinery of Bangladesh. Currently, Bangladesh is

celebrating its fifty years of independence and already has already ascended as one of the lower middle-income countries in South Asia.

For discussing the chronological transition of democracy in Bangladesh, we can divide the political regime into two parts: the political regime from 1971 to 1990 and the political regime after 1990. Bangladesh started its journey as an independent war-ravaged country with the motto of nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism in its constitution. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the herald of independence, the unanimous leader of Awami League (AL), took the responsibility of governance as the Prime Minister. He wanted to make the nation a democratic one where fundamental human rights, freedom, and the dignity of human beings will be guaranteed by the state, and people will be part of the nation through electing representatives. Simultaneously, the constitution declared Bangladesh as a secular state where Bangalee nationalism will be derived from the identity of culture and language. After independence, though democracy was coined as one of the state principles, for various reasons, democratic practice became absent in the ins and outs of the political parties. Conflict of interest between the 'freedom fighters' and the 'repatriates' from West Pakistan became the most serious issue then (Siegfried & Heidelberg, 2013). Many political leaders thought socialism was more suitable than democracy to make an egalitarian society. A large number of excluded political parties and groups emerged to serve their own interests rather than the national welfare. A conspiracy began to germinate among the ruling party leaders collaborating with military officers against Sheikh Mujib, the erstwhile President. Finally, the founder of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated with his family members in August 1975 by the insidious group comprising political leaders of Awami League and army officers.

All the military rulers and political parties who were in power later did not feel the necessity to trial of the criminals who did the assassination in 1975 (Riaz, 2016). Furthermore, those criminals were posted in higher positions at home and abroad later. From 1975 to 1990, army Generals ruled the country, where several military coups as well as assassinations took place. Army rulers arranged a nominal vote to legalise their rule and amended the constitution to sustain their power. Until 1990, military officers tamed the state power of the country, initially through martial law and later through the civilian commands (K.C., 2016). Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was founded in 1978 by President General Ziaur Rahman, and President General Hussain Muhammad Ershad established Jatiya Party (JAPA) in 1986 after

the assassination of Zia. Both Generals took power through a coup and sustained their power anyway for a long time. Even though they abuse the religious sentiment of Bengali voters through supporting communal politics, the main parliamentary political institution was made inactive by both military rulers. As a result, there were no checks and balances among the three branches of the state. However, in 1990, erstwhile President General Hussain Muhammad Ershad faced a large mass uprising by the masses and the opposition parties against the military regime and was compelled to step down from the position.

Parliamentary democracy was restored through amending the constitution and conducting free, fair and credible elections in 1991. Democracy became more vivid after 1990s as there was strong opposition, active parliament, regular voting trend and the presence of a non-caretaker government. After 1991, every opposition parties continued and intensified the use of the hartals (strikes) (Blair, 2020). But gradually, irregularities, revengeful political culture, intolerance, prevalence of corruption etc. made the democratic practice questionable. Continuous uncontrolled electoral violence created image crisis of Bangladesh to the international community. In 2007 lack of political consensus marked the end of the 15-year democratic phase of Bangladeshi politics and the military-backed Caretaker Government took power to conduct the national election which is known as 1/11 in Bangladeshi political lexicon (Riaz, 2016). Then “Minus two Formula” was introduced by the Caretaker Government to uproot the two leaders of the two main political parties, which was a great threat to democracy. However, in the face of political movement and mass protest, a national election was arranged in December 2008, which was a milestone in the history of democracy in Bangladesh. In spite of the opposition of the main opposition party, the provision of the Caretaker Government was abolished from the constitution with the support of parliamentarians to protect democracy. But too much suppression by the ruling party and boycotting the next election in 2014 by BNP, the main opposition party, has led to the government’s failure to ensure liberal democracy. In 2014, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the national election, thinking that the Awami League (AL) led Government would rearrange the election like before in 1996 (Blair, 2020). AL won 151 uncontested seats in the election of 2014. However, BNP was out of Parliament, and Jatiya Party became the opposition party, getting the majority votes after AL. To many political scientists, it was the “Domestic Opposition Party” that made an alliance with the ruling party and acted as the opposition in the parliament. The democracy of Bangladesh

became known as “Hybrid” to the international community. In the latest national parliamentary election of 2018, AL won victory, leaving the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jatiya Party with little political clout, though irregularities were marked by the opposition parties, journalists, and the international media (Haque, 2021). Lack of a strong opposition party, a dynastic political party structure, and weak political institutions have made the democracy passive in Bangladesh.

Table 2: Nature of different political regimes in Bangladesh

Regime Duration	Ruling Principle	Status
1971-1974	Parliamentary Democracy	Good
1975-1977	Presidential Form of Government	Chaotic
1977-1981	Military Regime	Military ruling
1982-1983	Presidential Form of Government	Chaotic
1983-1990	Military Regime	Military ruling
1991-1996	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
1996-2001	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
2001-2006	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
2007-2008	Military Backed Caretaker Government	Chaotic
2009-2014	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
2014-2018	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
2018-2023	Parliamentary Democracy	Moderate
2024-2026	Interim Government	Chaotic
2026-till date	Parliamentary Democracy	Good

Source: The author

Aspirations And Reality Of Democracy In Bangladesh

Despite having progress in many socio-economic indicators such as GDP, education rate, life expectancy, health of mothers and infants, Bangladesh has not fulfilled the aspiration of upholding democracy. Democracy is a multidimensional evolving system that is not measurable with one or two indicators. Though democracy is a desirable goal of majority of developing countries, including Bangladesh, the actual practices of it have not been achieved yet (Murshid, 1995). Without ensuring the rule of law, checks and balances among legislative, executive, and judiciary branches, participatory fair election, and overall good governance, liberal practice of democracy is not possible.

The majority of the respondents of this study have found democracy not properly practiced in recent years, though political institutions are not dismantled yet and constitutional processes are ongoing through arranging elections in a timely fashion.

All the respondents of this study aspire to see Bangladesh as a democratic state where all of the state principles would be followed properly and all the features of democracy would be followed. According to a senior politician, now Bangladesh is in right path to uphold democracy by conducting timely elections and activating the political institutions. But religion based communal politics, increase of the discrimination, absence of self –sufficiency of the local government bodies etc. are threatening the continuation of democracy. A senior journalist of a national daily has opined that ruling party is suppressing the opposition parties and accepted “Domestic Opposition Party” as the main opposition in the parliament. He also added that elections are not free, fair and credible since 2014 and ruling party has coined “Development” as the election manifesto which is not possible without proper democratic practice. According to him, politics of Bangladesh is largely affected by geo-political interests of the big neighboring states. Another journalist from mass media mentioned that now in Bangladesh freedom of opinion is not ensured which has made the democracy failure. In addition, Bangladesh is a democratic country in pen and paper but democracy is not practiced properly.

An academician from Dhaka University opined that without political development, economic development will be hijacked. He added that lack of political consensus, rule of law, imbalance among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, too much politicization have made Bangladeshi democracy more questionable.

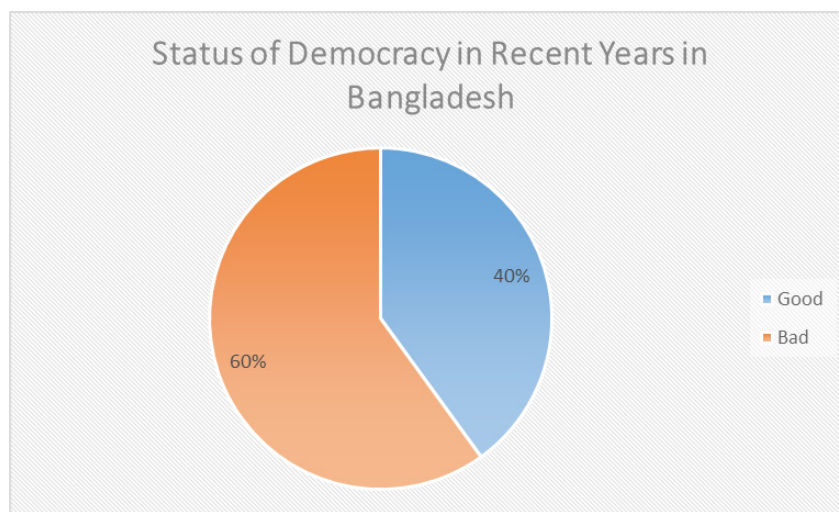


Figure 1: Respondents' Opinion about the Status of Democracy in Recent Years in Bangladesh

Source: Interviews

Though Bangladesh has an admirable history of movement and struggle to uphold democracy, due to a lack of political willingness, democracy is not practiced in the proper way yet. In a true sense, the reality of democratic practice is far from the aspiration of general citizens.

Discussion and Conclusion

The birth of Bangladesh was to fulfil citizens' rights, to make a socialist society, to uphold democracy, and to eliminate communal politics. After fifty years of independence till now these goals have not been achieved. By exploring both secondary and primary sources of data, this study intends to mention several way forwards to uphold democracy in a proper way:

Election is the main feature of democracy to ensure peoples representativeness, participation and inclusiveness. Mass people can elect their representative of their choice through participating in a fair election. Fairly elected politicians would be less corrupted and more pro-people. There is no alternative way without arranging fair election to uphold democracy properly. In this case independent and suitable Election Commission should play a very important role. Political willingness, tolerance and national consensus will pave the way to conduct a participatory fair election.

Nature of the political institutions define the nature of politic in a state. Strong political institutions ensure checks and balance of the government, lessen the corruption and accelerate the development. Without strengthening political institutions peoples' participation, freedom of opinion and inclusiveness will not be ensured. Too much politicization of the institutions and partisanship makes the system undemocratic.

Constitutional bodies are entitled with many important roles and responsibilities of state affairs. Members of these bodies should be selected neutrally so that they can perform their duties independently without biasness. Specific council can be formed to appoint the members of constitutional bodies to avoid politicization.

Nowadays democracy is the most popular state principle in the world. Indicators of democracy vary from country to country. Significant indicators of democracy such as fair elections, peoples' participation in decision making, accountability, transparency, rule of law and overall good governance have to be ensured to make democracy effective in Bangladesh.

Considering the importance of local government, the Constitution of Bangladesh has provided articles 59 and 60 to define the formation of independent

local government. Root-level people can let the local representatives know about their problems and necessities to locally elected representatives. Local government has a very important role to ensure holistic development through ensuring need-based quality service delivery. So, local government bodies should take decisions independently and should be self-reliant.

Separation of powers has been guaranteed in the Constitution of Bangladesh through Article 22, which separates the judiciary from the executive organs of the state. Checks and balances among the three branches of government is ensured through the separation of powers. Separation of powers sustains accountability and transparency of the state machinery, which reduces corruption. Rule of law can be confirmed through the separation of powers, which is one of the preconditions of democracy.

After 1975, gradually businessmen, professionals, retired government service holders, and retired military persons intruded into politics, who were later known as hybrid politicians. As political party leaders are responsible for upholding democracy, the nature of political parties is very important to continue democratic practice in the country. Currently, in Bangladesh, political parties are intolerant and aggressive toward other parties, which is a bad signal for democracy. To ensure liberal democracy, all parties' participation in elections is necessary; otherwise, the general citizens' participation is not reflected. So, political parties should be reformed, and genuine politicians should be nominated as party members.

Independence of Bangladesh has been achieved at the cost of millions of lives. After the independence, people desired that the state would take the responsibility to fulfil their basic needs and politics would be for the welfare of the masses. The erstwhile government started to govern the country with the dream of upholding nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. But opposition forces of our independence did not allow the state to be democratic socialist or secular. Now it has been fifty years of independence, though the political dreams of the liberation war have not been fulfilled yet. It is high time to ensure democratic practice and to uphold all the state principles. All the political parties have to be committed to sustaining democracy in Bangladesh as well as to accelerating the comprehensive development.

Statement of Interest

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