Civil society, democratic development and international donors in Bangladesh

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Abstract

As international donors turn increasingly to support democratization, civil society has assumed an important role in their foreign assistance strategies. This paper analyzes civil society and donor efforts to support civil society in the context of Bangladesh, a country only recently emerging into democracy from prolonged military rule and in which civil society is only now beginning to take shape in the form of autonomous organizations operating at the macro level. The paper examines one donor-supported civil society initiative in Bangladesh — the country's fledgling environmental movement.

The basic political problems in Bangladesh have been a small and relatively closed elite managing the state in its own interest and a defective political party system incapable of representing the citizenry. Civil society cannot substitute for effective parties, but it can help widen the political arena and thus constitutes a good sector for donor support aimed at strengthening democracy in Bangladesh.

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CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL DONORS
IN BANGLADESH[1]

I. Introduction

As increasing numbers of countries turned to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the international donor community not surprisingly also began to show an interest in supporting democratization in these countries.[2] The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as a number of the bilateral development assistance agencies (e.g., Canadian International Development Agency, Swedish International Development Authority) has initiated projects specifically intended to support democratization efforts in recipient countries.

These various efforts provide assistance in several directions, such as elections, political parties, legislatures, judicial reform and civic education, but the present analysis will focus on just one dimension: civil society. Using Bangladesh as a case study, it asks two principal questions:

- can civil society organizations contribute significantly to building a democratic polity in Bangladesh?
- if so, how (if at all) should donors consider supporting civil society to this end?

The paper begins by laying out a few necessary definitions and then turns to a brief analysis of the Bangladesh context within which civil society must function, focusing in particular on its political economy over the years since the country attained independence in 1971. From there, it moves on to consider an example in the environmental activism field that will illustrate the linkages between civil society, democracy and donor support[3] in Bangladesh.[4] The paper ends by posing some larger issues.

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[1] This paper is based in large part on field work conducted in March-April 1994 as part of a multi-country study of civil society and democratic development that was sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, Program and Operations Assessment Division (PPC/CDIE/POA), located in Rosslyn, Virginia. The author served as assessment manager for the study while working at USAID in the POA office on leave from Bucknell University. The present paper is largely an extract from and updating of a longer assessment of civil society and democratic development in Bangladesh (Blair and Jutkowitz 1994), drawing on those sections of the paper written by the present author. Special acknowledgments are in order to both Joel Jutkowitz of Development Associates, Inc., and Tofail Ahmed, now of Chittagong University, who participated in the field work with the author in March-April 1994. For a synthesis of the overall findings of the five-country study, see Hansen (1995; also Blair 1996). Views and interpretations expressed in the present essay are those of the author only and should not be attributed to USAID or other participants in its civil society assessment.

[2] During the Bush administration, USAID issued a policy paper on "democracy and governance" (USAID 1991), and now in the Clinton administration has included democracy as one of its four principal development strategies (USAID 1994). The Development Advisory Council (DAC), which is composed of the bilateral donor organizations belonging to the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), has produced a policy statement supporting assistance to democratization efforts (DAC 1993). Even the World Bank, long reluctant to engage itself in ostensibly political activities, has cautiously moved toward supporting some aspects of democracy (World Bank 1994a and 1994b).

[3] Although this study was sponsored by USAID, it has sought to analyze civil society efforts sponsored by a variety of donors. In the examples examined in this paper, a number of donors were contributors.

Some definitions and concepts

In a study of this nature, dealing with such traditionally indistinct and argumentative topics as "democracy" and "civil society," it is essential to pin down definitions at the outset. Democracy has proven reasonably easy to delineate for this purpose, and a typical political science textbook definition can be pressed into service, holding that it consists of:

- Popular sovereignty — the state is accountable to its citizens and is accessible to them, both regularly (through elections) and continually (through the rights of advocacy and petition);
- Political equality — all enjoy the full range of human rights and are permitted to participate on an equal basis in attaining access; and
- Political liberty — freedom of speech and assembly are guaranteed, especially for minorities.[5]

The key concepts in this definition, so far as civil society is concerned, are the continual accountability and participation of the first two elements, as well as the freedom of speech/assembly that must be in place in order to exercise those first two components.

Civil society itself has been somewhat more difficult to define, for there is no firm consensus on the term within the political science discipline. Thus, in the end, any definition must be in some measure arbitrary. In the most general terms, civil society can be defined as the broad arena of organized human activity that exists between the family and the state (which may be defined as the whole set of governmental organizations from local to national level, including bureaucracy, the military, and political leaders). In the present paper, as in most political science analysis on the subject, we would want to narrow the definition of civil society to include only activity intended to influence the state in some way, i.e., to affect public policy at some level on behalf of a constituency. But even this restriction would still include a fairly wide spectrum from informal and even spontaneous movements (such as the people's movement opposed to the Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1998) to formal institutions (e.g., a chamber of commerce). Movements have been critically important in the politics of Bangladesh at various junctures, such as the fall of the Ershad government in 1990, but we shall be focusing here primarily on the more formal end of the spectrum just mentioned.

Another set of terms to sort out is that of the non-governmental organization (NGO) and the civil society organization (CSO). NGOs can be thought of as including any kind of formally organized activity outside the state, the family, and (in most definitions) the market or for-profit sector. Within that wide range of human activity, CSOs (as their name implies) constitute a

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[4] The larger study (Blair and Jutkowitz 1994) from which these illustrations are extracted, assesses in addition macro-level civil society in the areas of human rights, the media, "umbrella" civil society organizations, the business community, family planning, and direct advocacy for the poor. At the micro level, it examines women's empowerment, civil society and the elections of 1992.

[5] This listing of characteristics is adapted from Greenberg and Page (1997: 8-12).

subtype of NGOs intending to influence the state. This stipulation largely excludes political parties, which have as their main objective not to influence the state so much as to take over and manage the state.

An NGO may or may not be a CSO, depending on whether it is pressing the state to do (or not do) something. A useful distinction is that NGOs that are also CSOs generally concern themselves with advocating some kind of public policy, while NGOs that are not CSOs tend to focus more exclusively on service delivery of one kind or another. Depending on what it is doing at any given time, then, an NGO may or not also be a CSO. And an NGO may become a CSO for a time, then return to playing an exclusively NGO role – changes in character that are essential to understanding democratic politics in Bangladesh during the 1990s.

One last matter to consider is autonomy. If it is to be effective in advocating the interests of its constituency, a CSO must be independent the state or political parties. Thus organizations that are controlled by the state or a party – what used to be called "fronts" in an earlier era – are not part of civil society.

In sum, our focus of interest will be upon CSOs, which consist of those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are:

- concerned with influencing state policy (whether as their main focus or as one agenda among others); and are
- autonomous from the state and from political parties.

Where civil society and democracy come together is that the former supports and strengthens the latter through increasing accountability by widening participation. Ideally, to build civil society in a democratic context is to build pluralism, i.e., a polity in which many interest groups compete to influence public policy, assuring in the process that no particular group is dominant and that most groups of any significant size have some (though not necessarily an equal) voice.

It is important to note that pluralism holds dangers for democracy and the public weal just as it holds promise. Pluralism in politics is quite similar to the classical (or neo-classical) marketplace in economics: Both assume that participants are behaving selfishly (or at any rate self-centeredly) in their own interest, that the arena in which they act is highly competitive, and that these two characteristics working together will increase the public good, respectively by supplying quality goods and services at affordable prices or by producing public policies that a wide range of interests has had a hand in fashioning.

But just as there are common "market failures" in the economic realm through oligopoly, rent-seeking and the like, so too there are what might be called "pluralist failures" in the political arena. Instead of competing, the stronger interest groups can collude with each other to award themselves overlarge slices of the public pie, squeezing out the weaker groups. "Gridlock" and

"demosclerosis" are two terms that have been used to describe this process in the contemporary United States.[6]

Moreover, public policy derived through a pluralist process carries no guarantee that it will serve the wider public interest. This is most demonstrably true when minorities are excluded from the process (e.g., the segregated American South of an earlier era), but it can also be true even when there are no structural obstacles to participation (as for example with the vast mountain of subsidies to American or Western European agriculture that have built up over the years). Pluralism, then, cannot be assumed to be an unalloyed benefit to a political system, but, like markets, it does appear to do a better job at holding the system accountable to its members than alternative options.[7]

There is also the question of anti-democratic elements in civil society. Our definition of civil society, it will be recalled, comprises those NGOs that are trying to influence the state. Does this include CSOs that want to undermine the state as a democratic entity? The issue definitely arises — within the industrialized as well as the developing world — in connection with many radical fundamentalist and revolutionary groups. The Aryan Nations or Michigan Militia in the United States, as well as various Islamic groups in Bangladesh, are part of civil society, just as are human rights and women's advocacy groups. But a democratic state is not required to tolerate organizations trying to subvert it in the name of free speech, nor are international donors wishing to support civil society obliged to assist each and every CSO, including those that want to destroy the state itself. Democratic governments must be able to insist that CSOs play by the rules of the game if they are to receive recognition, and foreign donors need to be able to apply the same test if they are to offer support to such groups.

As a final preliminary note, in the Bangladesh context with its large and well-known NGOs, it is particularly important to indicate what civil society is not as well as what it is. Most of Bangladesh's higher-profile NGOs have not in fact been a part of what we are here labeling civil society; indeed they have largely eschewed a civil society role, although this may be changing somewhat in the current environment. This abstinence has been a conscious one, as these bigger NGOs have chosen to concentrate on their developmental work rather than outrightly political agendas, partly owing to what was surely a well-founded fear (particularly during the Ershad years) that political involvement would bring repression from the regime.[8]

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[6] See Rausch (1994) for an insightful analysis of "demosclerosis" (the term is his own creation). See also Olson (1993). Whereas the thrust of Rausch's thinking is that demosclerosis is a relatively recent phenomenon afflicting the American system, Olson argues that the pluralism of particular interests is inherently self-destructive, thereby implying a more somber prognosis for the prospects of civil society strengthening democracy.

[7] In the polity, elections also serve this accountability function but only at periodic intervals and only at the very broadest level of generality; pluralist accountability allows for particular citizen inputs on a continual basis (cf. the item on popular sovereignty that makes up the definition of democracy given in the text above).

[8] In the waning moments of the Ershad era in late 1990, the NGOs main umbrella organization, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) did weigh in publicly with the regime's opponents, and again in the escalating opposition to the BNP government in March 1996. Otherwise, however, the development-oriented NGO community has been conspicuous by its essential absence from the national political scene. It is significant that during both the Ershad and the BNP eras, the state engaged in various maneuvers to restrict the NGOs' activities

The political context: regime types over time

In the partition of British India in 1947, the province of Bengal was split into a larger, mostly Muslim eastern section that became East Pakistan and a smaller, mostly Hindu western section that became the Indian state of West Bengal. Despite several attempts at democracy over the ensuing 24 years, Pakistan spent most of that period under various authoritarian governors — most notably the 11-year regime (1958-1969) overseen by Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Democracy appeared to surface briefly with a national parliamentary election in 1970, but the outcome of that poll almost immediately led to a crisis in which the dominant regime in the West tried to abrogate the election results. A civil war ensued in East Pakistan, culminating in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country at the end of 1971.

The first two decades of the new nation's history were essentially more of the same, insofar as governance was concerned, with brief democratic windows opening but separated by much longer periods of authoritarian control. The principal regimes during this time were those headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-75), Ziaur Rahman (1976-1981) and Mohammad Hussein Ershad (1982-1990). As in the Pakistan period, so too in independent Bangladesh succession has never been a smooth process; Sheikh Mujib and Zia were both assassinated, while Ershad was precipitously forced to resign in December 1990 and was placed in prison.[9]

After Ershad, an interim government took over and within several months had superintended a parliamentary election widely perceived as the country's first free and fair national voting in a very long time (some would say the first such ever). The winner with a comfortable majority was the Bangladesh National Party (or BNP, founded by Ziaur Rahman), which triumphed over the Awami League (the party of Sheikh Mujib) and the Jatiyo Party (created by General Ershad, who contested several seats from his prison cell). A fourth party is the Jama'at I-Islami — a largely fundamentalist religious party led by its charismatic and controversial leader Golam Azam and allegedly bankrolled by foreign funds from the Middle East. After the election, the BNP formed a government under the leadership of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (the widow of Ziaur Rahman). As in most Commonwealth parliamentary systems, elections must be held within five years but may be called at any time before that if the ruling party chooses or loses a parliamentary vote of confidence.

The manner of the Ershad government's downfall is worth remarking, in that it brought to a head the agitational politics of the 1980s in Bangladesh and in several ways also set a tone for politics in the ensuing decade. During the 1980s, the two major opposition parties — the BNP and the Awami League — had worked sometimes in alliance and sometimes at cross purposes in alternating between presenting lists of demands (e.g., that the Ershad government resign in favor of a caretaker government) and pursuing a "politics of the streets" to drive the Ershad government

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and to supervise their foreign funding more tightly. Such machinations evidently had a chastening effect on the NGO community.

[9] For a good account of political successions in Bangladesh, see Ziring (1992).

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from office either by forcing it to call an election or by provoking the army to remove it through a coup.[10]

The parties mounted processions, *gheraos* (pickets around office buildings) and *hartals* (strikes) with varying degrees of success, finally culminating in what might be called a "Philippines scenario" in late 1990, which had two major components. First, not only the students, trade union members and party-funded demonstrators who had participated in earlier agitations, but also the major professional communities (lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists, teachers, etc.), major segments of the business community and finally the country's leading NGOs joined in a rising crescendo of opposition to the regime. Second, when given an order by the president to impose martial law, the military refused and instead instructed the chief of state that it was time to leave office immediately. General Ershad did resign forthwith, and a neutral caretaker government took over with its major task being to carry out a fair election that would (and in the event did) legitimize an elected government.

The legacy of these events has had a profound impact on Bangladesh politics in the period since the end of the Ershad regime. In particular, there was no orderly *modus vivendi* developed between government and opposition, nor was there any lasting comity built between the major political parties themselves. The only ways to change governments the country had experienced up to 1996 were assassination, the military coup and the agitational "politics of the streets."[11] The year 1996, however, ushered in a new scenario that, after initially appearing disastrous, took on a much more promising turn. In the face of the ruling BNP's refusal to institute a caretaker regime before the upcoming national election held in February, all the prominent opposition parties completely boycotted the election, resulting in a minuscule turnout, a hollow victory for the ruling BNP, and a paralysis in the political system. A massive opposition to the regime ensued, in which the opposition parties were joined by all the civil society players who had declared themselves in the anti-Ershad movement of 1990. After some hesitation, the BNP relented and resigned in March in favor of a caretaker government, which then presided over an election in June that was pronounced "free and fair" by all the relevant international observer bodies. The new election returned the Awami League as the majority party, and for the first time in the history of Bangladesh political power shifted as the result of an election. A watershed had been crossed. How durable it would prove remained to be seen.

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[10] The seemingly endless rounds of demands and agitation were chronicled once a year in *Asian Survey's* annual review (see e.g., Rahman 1989, 1990).

[11] See Blair and Jutkowitz (1994) for an exploration of this theme.

II. Political economy and civil society

The provenance of the present political economy of Bangladesh can be traced back at least several hundred years if not longer, to such dispensations as the Permanent Land Settlement of 1793 (setting up the patterns of land ownership) and the Indian Civil Service of administrators who manned the "steel frame" of British India during the 19th and early 20th centuries. But for our purposes, we may begin with post-liberation Bangladesh as it emerged from Pakistan rule and track developments from there.

Political economy analysis: 1972-1990

The political economy as it existed during the 1972-1990 period is depicted in Figure 1. There were essentially three major urban-based strata involved, with an allied "silent partner" dominant in the countryside. The urban elements were the bureaucracy (principally the 30,000 or so officials that comprise its upper echelons; see Blair 1994), the military and the political leadership. During any particular period two of the three groups dominated politics at the macro level; sometimes these two consisted of the bureaucracy and the military (1975-79 and 1982-90), and sometimes they included the bureaucracy and the political leadership (1972-75 and 1979-81). It will be noted that the bureaucracy was the central player here, with the others alternating in alliance.[12] This was simply because the bureaucracy was critical to managing the state; generals or politicians could claim the top leadership positions, but it was civil servants that had to keep things running.

[Figure 1 about here]

Whichever alliance dominated at the center, it needed some way of dealing with the countryside, where even in the early 1990s more than 85 percent of the population still resided. Fortunately for them, those in command in Dhaka could count on a "silent partner" in the form of a rural elite stratum.[13] This group consisted largely of those agriculturalists enjoying a sufficient production surplus that they hired in agricultural laborers, lent out money, let out land on sharecropping or tenancy arrangements, and in general acted as patrons in the patron-client linkages that tend to characterize the rural sector in Bangladesh. Their relationship with the urban strata was largely one of mutual convenience: rural elites supported the central government (whatever it was at any given time) by keeping the countryside more or less quiet by means of their traditional patron-

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[12] It could be argued that for a time in the late 1970s, as Zia's regime was endeavoring to transform itself from an authoritarian military government to a popularly elected one, both the military *and* the politicians governed in alliance with the bureaucracy. In the later 1980s, the Ershad government attempted a similar shift, but much less successfully.

[13] As with the urban sector, the analysis that follows in the text is much oversimplified. The "rural elite vs. everybody else" account given here neglects a multitude of salient features of the rural socio-economic structure. But the treatment does accord in a broad sense with the more widely held interpretations of rural political economy in Bangladesh (see, e.g., Wood 1981; de Vylder 1982; Hartmann and Boyce 1983; Westergaard 1985; Rahman 1986).

client methods of dominance, so that the urban groups did not have to worry about rural unrest or insurrection; and for their part the ruling urban groups tacitly agreed to keep the extant rural social structure in place.[14]

Foreign assistance significantly aided the relationships depicted in Figure 1 by providing much of the lubricant for these linkages. The bureaucracy, which was tasked with transforming the greater part of foreign aid into development activity, found itself with immense chances for rent seeking and, not surprisingly, took advantage of such opportunities. Concomitantly, foreign funds illicitly flowed through the bureaucracy to the military or the political leaders (whichever were the partners of the moment). The flow of foreign assistance to the rural elite community took a somewhat different path, in that the allocations from the central ministries in Dhaka were generally all quite legitimate, in the form of various rural development project activities. What happened when the money got to the countryside, however, was rather otherwise, as rural elites siphoned off large shares to themselves from funds meant for infrastructure construction, rural credit, service provision, and the like.

It should be noted that none of the four groups thus far enumerated played a civil society role as we have defined it here. For elites from the bureaucracy, the military and the political parties did not want so much to influence the state as to manage the state directly. And while rural elites did want influence rather than a direct management role, their participation was essentially a tacit one, unorganized and largely inarticulate. There were no organizations or associations representing rural elites that could participate in political life.

In sum, the significant strata in Bangladesh's political economy for its first 18 years comprised only four major groups, which together amounted to a very small slice of the population. Civil society in the form of organized and autonomous groups trying to influence the state was hard to find.

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[14] In recent years, there is much evidence (admittedly largely anecdotal, but the cumulated mass of anecdotes must be pointing to a significant reality) that a new stratum of landowners has come into being, with businessmen, bureaucrats, military people and ex-patriate Bangladeshis buying up agricultural land. It would surely be too big a stretch to speak of a "gentleman farmer" class of the sort that can be encountered in parts of Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh in India, but there are clearly new elements emerging in the Bangladesh countryside. To this group must also be added the rural businessmen that have emerged in the last decade or so, centered largely on the construction trade (and battening on public sector contracts) to become a force of their own in the local political equation, relating to lower levels of government much as businessmen in Dhaka relate to bureaucrats and politicians at that level.

Political economy today

The arena of political economy in Bangladesh today is somewhat wider than in earlier years, for it now includes two additional players: the business community; and at a somewhat lower level the larger NGOs. Business was not a player in the early post-independence period. After the wave of nationalization that occurred during Sheikh Mujib's time (which turned the larger industries into parastatal concerns and transformed many business executives — among those, that is, who did not decamp to Pakistan in 1971 — into bureaucrats), business had consisted largely of traders and a sprinkling of manufacturers, most of whom had a strong vested interest in maintaining the protectionist, regulatory state that Bangladesh had become (with the concomitant opportunities for rent seeking that such a state inevitably provided).

By the early 1990s, however, this equation had changed quite a bit. Led by an explosive growth in finished garment exports[15] (but also including domestic economic expansion), the business community has by now emerged as a serious player in the political arena, concerned with the formulation of state policies on regulating exports and imports, as well as the administration of existing regulations through license granting, quota allocation, import duty collection and the like. Such organizations as the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters, have now become major actors. Their methods of entry have been principally by contributing to the major political parties and through directing money to individual rent-seekers within the various state and political sectors.[16] The result of this expansion of the body politic is the depiction shown in Figure 2, wherein the business community is now a major element — not on the level of the bureaucracy, military and political leadership, to be sure, but a serious participant nonetheless.[17] Now for the first time there is a regular, continuous civil society player on the political scene which functions as an organized group across time and (unlike the bureaucracy, military and political leadership) is not itself a part of the state.

[Figure 2 about here]

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[15] Exports in the ready-made garment area rose from virtually nothing in the mid-1980s to more than US$ 2 billion by the later 1990s to become the lead export industry, with some three-fifths of all exports by value in 1996-97 (*Economist* 1998). To be sure, much (around three-fourths) of this total represents the value of cloth imported for the finishers to make into garments, but even so the value added has been very large indeed for the entrepreneurs involved. Impressive export growth in the last decade has also occurred in such areas as leather goods, frozen shrimp and frog-legs.

[16] This system is explained in some detail by Kochanek (1993: 69-70, 195-96, 251 &ff, 259 &ff; also his 1996a and 1996b).

[17] It should be added that there is little reason to think that the business community is united on most issues; a degree of consensus appears to be emerging with respect to some major policy issues, but generally the larger businesses in the past have found it in their interest to seek particularistic solutions to their problems (see Kochanek 1993; 244 *et passim*; see also Kochanek 1996).

The second new player is the NGO community. NGOs, particularly the foreign-supported ones, had also expanded steadily during the period since independence, though not with the explosive force of the larger business community in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Still, the numbers are impressive. By the late 1990s, there were more than 1,300 foreign-assisted NGOs, which included some 24 million people and covering around 78% of the country's villages.[18]   The biggest NGOs, such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Proshika, had many hundreds of thousands of members.   The NGO community is organized into a number of apex or "umbrella" bodies, with the most prominent being the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB), which includes the larger rural development NGOS. Other important umbrella bodies are the Voluntary Health Services Society (VHSS) operating in the health sector, the Coordination Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) which has had a major role in pressing for human rights, and the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) which has concentrated inter alia on election monitoring. The umbrellas as collective bodies and the larger NGOs as individual players have on occasion exercised significant power on the Bangladesh political scene in the 1990s, as we shall see, but they have not become the steady participants that the business community has turned into. Accordingly, the NGOs are placed at a slightly lower level in Figure 2 than is the business community.

Other changes are also to be noted in Figure 2. Perhaps most importantly, the military's role is now somewhat reduced from one of central player to that of — at least temporarily — shadow actor. During the tumultuous events of spring 1996, there was apparently some real possibility of a military coup in the run-up to the second parliamentary election, but as things turned out no coup occurred (or was seriously attempted), and since then the military has remained effectively on the sidelines. Its potential to intervene remains, to be sure, but its role is now much less direct, as is indicated by the dotted line connecting it with the senior bureaucracy in Figure 2. Reflecting this change, the business and NGO communities as new players find themselves making connections with the senior bureaucracy and the political leadership, but not to any extent with the army, as also depicted in Figure 2.

Lastly, it will be noted that the designation "bigger farmers" has now become "rural elites." This reflects the changes that took place during the 1980s upazila phase of local governance in Bangladesh, when local governments found themselves with significant discretionary funds to spend and accordingly contractors came into being as serious actors on the rural political stage. Thus it is no longer just landowning and allied activities like moneylending and jute trading that form the power base in the countryside; construction has become a source of political potency as well.[19] The overall agenda of the rural elites remains much the same as before: to prevent any radical change in resource distribution (such as a land reform) and to steer development funds coming from Dhaka into their own pockets.

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[18]   Data from Karim (1999).

[19] There is of course much overlap between agriculture and construction, with many (probably most) contractors having emerged from landowner backgrounds. But politics and agriculture represent different sources of income and power, overlapping as they may be in rural Bangladesh.

<u>Can civil society expand</u>?

If the fundamental purposes of civil society in a democracy are to inform the state what citizens want and to hold the state accountable for what it does on a continual (as opposed to episodic) basis, then it is fair to say that in its first 18 years Bangladesh saw very little of that purpose realized. Aside from the three state/government sectors themselves (bureaucracy, military, political leadership), even by the late 1990s only the business community and more episodically the big NGOs and in their own self-protective way rural elites could be counted as having serious influence with the state. But if democracy is to endure in Bangladesh, the effective body politic must expand beyond the slice of population represented by the groups now involved. More groups must come to have a voice in how public affairs are managed on a day-to-day basis (rather than only times of crisis) as well as a say in holding the state responsible for what it is supposed to be doing. Put this way, the strategic task becomes a simple one, at least so far as its conceptualization is concerned: building pluralism.

Well, where are the other groups that might at least potentially have been civil society players? In the lower left-hand corner of Figure 2, a number of such groups are noted that customarily are included in political economy analyses of South Asian countries (see, e.g., Frankel 1989-90; Kohli 1990; Das 1992), whence their designation in the Figure as "traditional candidates." Of these, only the business community gets included in Bangladesh. What of the others? The answers to this question are critical to an understanding of civil society and the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

Three sets of candidates to be political players are the professional communities (lawyers, doctors, journalists, academics, engineers, etc.), labor unions and students. And organized associations do in fact exist in Bangladesh, but they tend for the most part to be so strongly identified with various political parties that they can be said in effect to be co-opted by the parties. Indeed, for the most part, these groups are divided into organizational factions (often called "panels") that owe allegiance to one or another of the major political parties in the country today. When they act on the public stage, they generally do so at the direction of political party leaders. In short, they have little if any <u>autonomy</u> from the parties.

To be sure, there are times when these three communities have played a serious role in determin- ing sea changes in the region's history. In particular university students were key participants in such watersheds as the 1969 agitation against Pakistan dictator Ayub Khan, the 1971 civil war, the 1990 democracy movement against General Ershad, and the events of March 1996. In the latter two efforts especially, labor unions and the professional classes also played a critical part. But for the most part, these three groups have been captive of political parties and so cannot be seen as autonomous actors playing important roles in civil society on a regular and sustained basis.

The two agricultural strata noted at the bottom of the list of "traditional candidates" in Figure 2 are not co-opted, but instead are missing altogether. Market-oriented farmers, who can be thought of as "middle peasants" utilizing mostly family labor and producing mainly foodgrains for the market do exist in Bangladesh. But they are not organized as a group, unlike the case in many parts of India, where "bullock capitalist" farmers have formed powerful political pressure

groups pushing the state for higher crop support prices, greater subsidies to agricultural inputs, etc. (see, e.g., the Rudolphs' landmark 1987 study on this topic). Perhaps inspired by such examples, as well as fired by their own grievances, lower caste and lower class rural citizens in India have also formed organized groups to press their demands on the political system (cf. Omvedt 1993: 47-75; also Alexander 1989).

As democratic politics in Bangladesh hopefully expands in the coming years, perhaps similar organizations and lobbies will emerge among middle farmers and the less favored agricultural sectors, but thus far this has not happened. Like the professional communities, labor unions and students (at least in the absence of great crises like the transition from the Ershad regime), agriculturalists from the middle and lower strata are essentially unrepresented in the political dynamic by independent groups. Furthermore, the evolution of such organizations is at best a slow and gradual process, if the Indian experience is any guide. There middle farmer organizations trace their beginnings to the 1950s if not earlier (Rudolphs 1987; also Attwood 1992), while groups from the bottom of the social spectrum go back to the British colonial period as self-conscious movements (Omvedt 1994).

But these groups are not the only building blocks for civil society. Bangladesh offers other possibilities as well for potential additional players, as indicated in the lower right-hand corner of Figure 2. The next section of this paper will focus on one particular kind of civil society organization — environmental advocacy groups.   The evidence presented stems largely from fieldwork undertaken by the author in 1994.

III. Civil society and sustainable environment: flood plan reactions

As recently as the later 1980s, there was relatively little concern for environmental issues in Bangladesh. Unlike neighboring India, where the Chipko movement had been in place for some years and such controversies as the Silent Valley or Narmada dam projects had generated much opposition from environmentally oriented CSOs (see e.g., CSE 1985; Herring 1991), environment did not seem a topic of much public interest in Bangladesh. It received scant attention from the press, the intelligentsia, the state or the donor community.

By the early 1990s, however, there was a vigorous environmental movement in place featuring several active (and even aggressive) CSOs, international network linkages to like-minded counterparts abroad, and considerable pressure on the state, at least some of which had a discernible policy impact.

The Flood Action Plan

What had inspired the movement to emerge over these few years was the government's Flood Action Plan (FAP), a bold and ambitious program to control and manage floods in the major river systems of the country. The FAP has its origins in the reactions of various foreign donors (especially the French) to the devastation caused by the extraordinary floods of 1987 and 1988 — "once in a century" floods that had in fact occurred back-to-back. Led by the World Bank (see World Bank 1990), the major donors put together the FAP, which consisted of some 26 component regional studies, sectoral analyses and pilot projects, most of which had commenced by 1991, under the supervision of the Flood Plan Co-ordinating Organization (FPCO), a government body staffed largely by engineers on deputation from the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), the parent agency in charge of water management.[20] Assuming that the studies and experiments went well, it was anticipated that the major flood control works would begin at some point later on in the 1990s.

The compartmentalization pilot project

An excellent illustration of environmental activism is afforded by the Tangail Compartmentalization Pilot Project FAP 20 (generally known simply as "FAP 20"), a Dutch- and German-sponsored project in Tangail District. FAP 20 had been intended to rehabilitate an earlier flood-works project, which (like many similar efforts in Bangladesh) had fallen into disrepair over the years.

At the outset, FAP 20 had at least two qualities that distinguished it from virtually all infrastructural surface water management efforts in Bangladesh (or most other places too, for that matter). First, in marked contrast to its traditional concern for design and construction combined with concomitant inattention to operations and maintenance, the water management agency involved would give concerted attention to operations matters. Second, whereas popular participation in water management projects typically has been either minimal or altogether absent, especially in the design phase, in FAP 20, the affected population was to be included right from the beginning.[21]

Several important things grew out of FAP 20's efforts to solicit popular inputs into the project. Before enumerating and analyzing them, however, it should first be noted that in a very real sense, they all emerged as a function of the project's intent to include community participation as an important component. If FAP 20 had been a more typical flood control effort, much of the controversy would never have arisen. In other words, the very innovative nature of the project evidently precipitated some of the wider circles of controversy that came to surround it.

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[20] See FPCO (1993b) for a brief description of the FAP components and a progress report on their activities. For a caustic analysis of the project, see Boyce (1990), also Custers (1992).

[21] The focus on design and construction to the exclusion of operations and maintenance has been an abiding problem in the water management sector for decades. To the extent that it existed at all, "participation" tended to consist of informing the affected population of what was going to happen to them. See Chambers and Wade (1980).

Reactions at home and abroad

An early source of discontent occurred in May 1992, when a group of women associated with the Unnayan Shahojogy Team (UST) CSO in Gala Union — one of those within the compartment area — launched a demonstration procession at the FAP 20 headquarters in Tangail town. UST is a donor-supported CSO working almost exclusively with rural women, focusing on development education, conscientization and income generation, with self-reliance as the objective.[22] The women's groups in Gala Union, energized by their involvement in an earlier controversy over local government land acquisition, became emboldened enough to organize a protest march when they felt their opinions, though solicited, were being ignored by the FAP 20 project. This at least is the story from the UST perspective. Noteworthy in the account are that the UST members' views were solicited by the FAP officials (even if not heeded) and that the members mounted a protest march in Tangail town, some distance away from their homes. It is difficult to imagine either the canvass or the procession occurring even a few years ago in rural Bangladesh.

In September 1993, a much bigger demonstration took place in Tangail, in which a number of CSOs participated, drawing in people from outside the area as well as local citizens. There were charges of stage-managing from outside, as well as accusations of *mastans* (small-time thugs for hire) intimidating the protesters.[23] There was also a videotape of the event, made by a Dhaka-based CSO, which subsequently achieved some circulation.

But well before the September 1993 demonstration, concern about the FAP in general and FAP 20 in particular had spread to European CSOs, especially environmental CSOs based in the Netherlands, which along with Germany was a co-sponsor of FAP 20. Netherlands-based CSOs especially put sufficient pressure on the Dutch parliament that a special investigation was launched into the FAP, with a special focus on FAP 20 (IOV 1993). Moreover, in May 1993 several European CSOs organized a conference on FAP in Strasbourg, France, which featured some heavy criticism of FAP 20 (see *Ecologist* 1993) and the following October, another European conference was held in Berlin, at which the Tangail demonstration videotape was screened.

In addition to the CSO demands both in Bangladesh and Europe, the donor community also put some pressure on the FPCO to build more participation into the FAP process. One result was a series of meetings from April through November 1992, involving FAP consultants, FPCO officials, donor representatives and others, intended to draw up a set of guidelines for popular participation in flood control efforts. These guidelines appeared in March 1993 (FPCO 1993a), and called for community participation in all phases of flood control project activity, from pre-feasibility studies through to operations and maintenance.[24]

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[22] UST provides an excellent example of an organization that for the most part has been an NGO, but in some of its activities — particularly those reported on here — becomes a CSO.

[23] As reported in an account appearing in *Bhorrer Kagoj*, a Bengali daily published in Dhaka, on 19 September 1993.

[24] For an insightful analysis of the creation of the guidelines, see Hanchett (1994).

A change of heart in flood control?

Was there been any discernible effect of all this upon FPCO? Some critics would deny it, but others found a different approach within the water management establishment. The director of one environmental CSO interviewed during the USAID field team study said that participation had come to be taken seriously, especially in FAP 20. In an overall sense, he said, "the FAP of two years ago and the FAP of today are totally different," including the chief engineer of FPCO, "who would be the first to say so," as he put it. Suzanne Hanchett also cites this same chief engineer as being supportive of community participation, quoting him as saying, "'Unless we know the problems, know what the people need, we're building up something on nothing'" (Hanchett 1994: 27).

It could be, of course, that all this ostensible change is only rhetorical — sops thrown to quiet CSO-based opposition, so that flood control construction could proceed on its traditional course, uncaring of what the local citizenry might think or want. This will remain to be seen. But the present writer can say from his own experience with other components of FAP that even the public changes mentioned in the preceding paragraph would have been inconceivable when FAP began in 1989.[25] Things have come a considerable way since then, and the CSO community can justifiably claim a good share of the credit for inspiring the shift.

Environmental activism on the legal front

Helping to ensure that official water management agencies continue to feel pressure to be accountable is the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), which has involved itself in both class action and public interest suits against the government. In its class action efforts, BELA has represented landowners whose holdings have been acquired by the government for FAP activities and the Jamuna Bridge project. On the public interest side, BELA has adopted a target-of-opportunity approach to hound the state on environmental issues.

With respect to FAP, the early months of 1994 saw two initiatives. In the first, BELA protested the apparent exclusion of several participation-focused paragraphs of the prime minister's speech at the March 1992 FAP conference from the official proceedings, demanding a recall and reprinting of all copies as well as an official apology. In its second public interest sortie, BELA threatened legal action against FAP 20 for carrying out infrastructural activities in violation of water sector statutes, "without jurisdiction and mala fide," in the words of the letter of complaint (Farooque 1994a and 1994b).

BELA has also proved adept at building relations with the press. It has sought out editors and reporters, trying to interest them in environmental matters. In the words of BELA's director, the main challenge was to make an initial splash. "Once you're a newsmaker," he said, "they come

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[25] The author worked with one of the USAID-supported FAP components during the period 1990-1992.

running to you asking for stories." Evidently, this strategy has had some success, for BELA's actions have made the newspapers.[26]

Environmental issues

In the environmental sector, several things have stemmed from CSO activity in the early 1990s. First and most importantly, CSOs have significantly widened the debate on environmental issues by placing the topic firmly on the public policy agenda. Second, CSO efforts appear to have had some effect (along with more direct donor pressure, as noted above) in changing the flood water management establishment's view of the role and importance of community participation. And third, however much the FPCO and BWDB may or may not have had a change of heart, institutions such as these now find themselves the subject of scrutiny by such CSOs as BELA, they know that a number of CSOs monitor their activities, and they feel a pressure to justify and be accountable for their actions that they did not feel even a few years ago.

Whether the FAP-20 officials (who asserted that increased participation has come strictly at their own initiative) or the environmental CSOs (who claimed credit for all changes) were more nearly correct on the details over which the two sides differ is hard to say (at least from what the USAID field study team was able to determine), but accuracy here is much less important from the civil society perspective than the fact that the controversy has widened the public debate and has put the environment on the public agenda as a sector deserving of serious discussion. The environment has now emerged as an area in which a number of disparate voices are heard, whereas only a few years ago it was a sector resounding only to a harmonious duet of bureaucrats and supportive donors, both interested primarily in pushing ahead with the development enterprise rather than in such matters as sound environmental management.

IV. Some major issues

There are several larger issues that emerge from this brief analysis of civil society in Bangladesh and which raise questions at the more general strategic level about supporting civil society as a means to strengthen democracy.

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[26] The FAP 20 legal notice letter mentioned above in the text, for example, was the subject of a story in the *Daily Star*, "Lawyers serve notice on FAP in Tangail" (17 April 1994). It is worth pointing out that the FAP itself has been able to get its side of the story into the press as well, e.g., a story in the *Bangladesh Observer*, "FAP project in Tangail stressed" (9 October 1993), which covered an FPCO-sponsored a pro-FAP meeting of political and professional leaders held in Tangail.

A defective polity

Political parties have not been effective in providing popular sovereignty, except in the crudest electoral sense of according a popular mandate to a particular party for leading the government, although that has by now been fairly tested on three occasions (the elections of 1970, 1991 and — after a bad first try — 1996). Given the turmoil surrounding the first of 1996's two polls, however, it still very much remains to be seen whether there can be two free and fair elections in a row.

The problem is a longstanding one in Bangladesh and relates to the fact that historically there has been no sense of comity between political parties, in large part no doubt because there has never been until the present a period when politics existed in a "normal" atmosphere, with a party in power and a "loyal opposition." Thus there has been almost no experience with parliament as a forum for debate. Rather the polity has been seen as a winner-take-all system, with the parliament perceived as a piece of machinery to be dominated by the ruling party with little or no role left for opposition or minority parties.[27] Nor, in the view of the governing party, is the public to be consulted, at least not in between elections. The ruling party sees itself as having a five-year mandate to govern however it wishes. The parties out of power, accordingly, have seen themselves with no recourse except to demonstrate, protest and agitate in hopes of forcing the system into a crisis that would hopefully produce a new political dispensation in which they might gain a place.

In accord with this scenario, by the mid-1990s interparty politics in the post-Ershad era had deteriorated, perhaps inevitably, to a "politics of the streets" similar to that of the 1980s, with an opposition mounting demonstrations and disruption, and the regime countering with shows of resolution and force. The opposition — now consisting of the Awami League, the Jatiyo Party and the Jama'at--Islami — hoped for an end game like that of the 1990 anti-Ershad movement (in which the regime abdicated on finding it no longer had military support), while the BNP ministry hoped for a scenario similar to earlier opposition efforts of the 1980s, in which the government prevailed through a combination of force, guile and fragmentation among the opposition parties.

Spurred by a parliamentary by-election in early 1994 that was widely seen as an exercise of fraud perpetrated by the BNP (see Hakim 1994), opposition parties launched a series of agitations, strikes and disruptions. Over the next two years, both the principal parties followed the script of the 1980s, with the opposition demanding a caretaker government and elections while those in power endeavored to show force and resolve in resisting. The political situation steadily deteriorated, moving successively through a boycott of the parliament, resignation of all opposition MPs, a year of even greater disruption and immobility, a parliamentary dissolution, a rump election in February 1996 ignored by all but the ruling party, further paralysis, and finally a resolution, in which the BNP resigned, and a caretaker government supervised a new round of elections in June 1996.[28]

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[27] For example, there is a committee system in the Parliament, with more than 40 committees appointed. But thus far they have not proven effective in providing for public debate on policy issues.

[28] Events of these years are ably summed up in Hossain (1995 and 1996) and Kochanek (1997).

Many of the same actors who helped precipitate the downfall of the Ershad regime returned to play a role in the spring 1996 crisis — students, professional groups, government workers, trade unions. But this time there was a significant shift, in two directions. First, the military apparently did not play a significant part. And second, two new groups did enter the scene. The business community, alarmed by the prospect of its newfound boom collapsing, put as much pressure as it could on the BNP to resign. And the major umbrella NGO group, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh, which had reluctantly joined the anti-Ershad movement in 1990 at the eleventh hour, this time moved more rapidly, taking our full-page advertisements in Dhaka dailies, for example, to urge a new election.[29]

The second round of 1996 elections, pronounced by outside observer teams to be free and fair, returned the Awami League to power, thus marking the first transition of power in Bangladesh between two elected governments without a military dictatorship in between. After the June 1996 poll, the opposition BNP alternated between protesting fraud in the second election, complaining about abuses visited by the state on its functionaries, and threatening its own agitations, "politics of the streets," and the like. Within a couple of years, the party had taken up essentially the full range of tactics employed against it earlier by the Awami League – boycotting parliament, organizing mass demonstrations, launching *hartals*, and in general hoping to create sufficient disruption that the ruling party would be forced to call new elections.

Taking the post-Ershad period as a whole, political parties still appear to be neither institutionally nor constitutionally prepared to deal with each other as government and opposition(s) in a system with rules that has accepted public roles for all. The only remedy, at least in the short term, seems to lie in other institutions like the judiciary, the bureaucracy and civil society playing a stronger role to provide political stability and accountability to the constitutional order.

Civil society as filling the gap

The problems with the political parties are not easily soluble. In the words of one observer, they amount to "a manufacturer's defect" that is debilitating the mechanism's function, but for which there is no chance for a manufacturer's recall, at least in the foreseeable future.[30]

In such a defective polity, with political parties not serving as instruments for popular sovereignty except perhaps at election time, can civil society carry the load? To attempt an answer, we must go back to the question posed in connection with Figures 1 and 2: "Where is civil society

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[29] The analysis of events surrounding the 1996 elections were taken from various sources, including S. Kamaluddin's analyses in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Kochanek (1996a, 1996b, 1997), and Karim (1999). Current events have been available to those outside of Bangladesh on a variety of Internet web sites that have emerged and faded. As of this writing (July 1999), the most enduring one appears to be "News from Bangladesh," at [http://www.bangla.org/news/amitech/], which transmits accounts from wire services and the major Dhaka English language dailies. See also the *Daily Star's* webpage at [http://www.dailystarnews.com] and the *Independent's* webpage at [http://www.independent-bangladesh.com].

[30] These ruminations were taken from Prof. M. Rashiduzzaman of Rowan College in June 1994; they still seem apposite more than five years later.

in Bangladesh?" It can be argued that, in recent years, the business community has entered the scene as a significant player and thus established a beachhead for civil society, with the added benefit for pluralist politics that there are in effect two business communities or at least factions at work - one eager to preserve protected markets and import license privileges while the other campaigns to open the economy to the global market. Competition between the two groups could well give the political leadership more maneuvering room.

What other candidates might be available? NGOs seem the only answer at present, insofar as they act as CSOs.   The environmental groups discussed above have begun to make a modest contribution, and at critical moments ADAB has had a more significant impact. Other observers like Karim point to a substantial role in influencing policy through serving on reform commissions in various areas (Karim 1999: 17). But would all this be enough to flesh out a pluralist polity? Environment could be an entering wedge — even a vanguard[31] — though it may prove in the end to be a "motherhood" issue that has exceptionally widespread appeal itself but constitute an impossibly hard act to follow by others. And ADAB's participation has thus far been too episodic to count it as a true CSO.   But if the environmental groups and ADAB do become active players, and other organizations (say, human rights and women's groups, both of which have had occasional roles) follow, will their efforts be enough to begin introducing serious pluralism to the political system?   In the longer run, can some of the coopted constituencies (professional groups, labor, students) become autonomous players? Can some of the "missing" elements (market-oriented farmers and agricultural underclasses) be induced to mobilize and enter the political arena as components of civil society?

CSO limits

If appropriately nurtured, civil society can surely make up some of the defects of the party system by directing a steady stream of policy demands to the state. It can also be effective in pressing the state to be accountable. But even the most vibrant civil society cannot substitute for political parties, for by their nature CSOs are particularistic, either answering the needs of self-concerned constituencies or projecting their own individual visions of a larger public interest (in environmental matters, human rights, etc.) rather than the public interest in any overall sense.[32] It is the political party that must aggregate the wide variety of demands into a program for

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[31] For example, BELA has expanded the scope for legal maneuver a great deal recently by winning a Supreme Court judgment allowing public interest lawsuits to be initiated. (See Kamal 1996). Now, as in many Western legal systems, individuals or associations can bring suit on behalf of the general public or a section thereof. Thus legal redress has become at least potentially a significant mechanism to ensure state accountability, along with elections, the media, and (one hopes in time) political parties and civil society.

[32] Richard Halloway (1996: 18) makes a similar division. For both types, even though they have their sights trained on their own substantive agendas rather than larger issues concerning the future of the polity, they can nonetheless benefit the system as a whole, simply by carrying on their present efforts. The players in democratic politics, in other words, do not have to self-consciously see themselves as working to better the overall public weal any more than do Adam Smith's participants in a market economy have to perceive themselves as serving the public good (provided, of course, that the assumptions (of competition, access, etc.) inherent to both democracy and markets are in fact being met.

managing state power (or offering an alternative program if it is in the opposition).[33] CSOs can help here, but they cannot carry the load of the political party unless they construct large and durable coalitions of a sort that would mean they have compromised and diluted the very focus and concentration that is required for them to become successful CSOs in the first place.[34]

Overexpectations for democracy?

Is the idea that a less developed country can push both economic growth and democratic politics asking for too much? Could it be that perhaps some countries a bit further along the path of economic development like Thailand — where per capita income is just over US\$ 2,400 and adult female literacy is reckoned to be around 90 percent — are better able to take on the challenges of democracy than nations like Bangladesh, for which per capita income is estimated to be only slightly more than US\$ 200 and adult female literacy is thought to be a bit more than 25 percent?[35] If such distinctions were to be made, Bangladesh would surely fall into some category of "too soon to attempt democracy."

Current thinking in USAID and most other donors, however, holds that economic and democratic rights should go in tandem, with each reinforcing the other.[36] More importantly, it can be argued that if the people and the political leadership of Bangladesh have chosen to embark on a democratic course, then donors whose own political systems are democratic should assist them in the effort.

Pluralist dangers

How do we know pluralism's darker side won't overpower its brighter aspects, that "demosclerosis" won't overcome competition, to the public detriment? Rausch (1994) finds this is happening in the American political system, while Mancur Olson (1993) would insist that it's been that way for a long time, in that particular interests will always be undermining the public interest. These dangers may well lie in the future for Bangladesh, as well as possible problems with corporatism, in which apex organizations purport to represent the interests of large constituencies (e.g., labor, small-scale industries, professionals, etc.) but in fact indulge in collusion to enrich their leadership echelons and defraud their memberships (see, e.g., Wiarda 1994).

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[33] These thoughts harken back to the formulations of Gabriel Almond (1960); in the context of modern Bangladesh, his interpretation is of enduring utility.

[34] Nor can CSOs themselves act directly like political parties in running candidates for office, at least not easily, though it has been tried, as when one prominent rural development NGO ran several dozen candidates in union parishad elections in 1992. It found that while local elites could tolerate the group as an NGO, they would react badly if it began to take on the mantle of a party (see Hashemi 1996; also author's notes from interview in April 1994).

[35] Data from World Bank (1996: 188-189 & 200-201. Using the arguably more relevant purchasing power parity (P.P.) measure, Bangladesh does much better at P.P.\$ 1,330, but then so does Thailand at P.P.\$ 6,970 (ibid.).

[36] See, e.g., the USAID strategy paper (USAID 1994) and the OECD summary of members' policies relating to democracy (DAC 1993); also Bhagwati (1995).

Certainly one can argue that a grave danger to democracy lies in the ability of well-financed players to count for an overlarge share in pluralist politics. News from the advanced countries is continually sobering in this regard. In the United States, for example, tobacco companies were reported to have spent some $67.4 million on lobbying the Congress in 1998, an effort that must have had some significant impact on the failure of bills that would have raised the taxes on cigarettes by $1.10 per pack. This lobbying outlay might appear like a serious burden on the American tobacco industry, already beset in 1998 by lawsuits and other legal problems, until one reflects that the after-tax profits of Philip Morris, the largest of the U.S.-based tobacco firms, came to some $5.37 billion in that same year.[37] This one corporation, in other words, could have underwritten the entire lobbying effort for the whole industry with less than 1.3% of its yearly profits. Heavy political influence, in short, comes cheap indeed for the bigger players in pluralist politics. It would be foolish not to expect the larger firms in Bangladesh also to carry an influence out of proportion to what might appropriately be their weight in the political arena.

But undue influence for some players need not mean commanding influence, and in most democratic systems, other less well-endowed organizations have voices, too. Indeed, if they do not, democracy itself cannot endure for very long. And besides, one has to start somewhere in trying to support democracy, and if not with civil society, then where? A country like Bangladesh would seem to have few other candidates for strengthening democratization.

International donors and civil society

As noted at the beginning of this essay, USAID and a good number of other international donors have declared a commitment to supporting democratization initiatives in their foreign aid assistance programs. Under that general rubric, they have declared civil society as a democratic component worthy of support. Certainly, this interest in civil society is reflected in their programs in Bangladesh. In addition to USAID, the environmental advocacy efforts discussed in this paper have at various times been assisted by the Ford Foundation, the Asia Foundation,[38] Sweden, Denmark and Canada, and probably other donors as well.

Is this donor effort justified, so far as democracy is concerned? Many Third World countries possess histories full of failed and even counterproductive foreign aid projects, and it could be argued that while failure in any sector is bad enough, in democracy it is surely worse, for a country's governance structure is what constitutes its very inner being. Moreover, it can be asked, who are the Western donors, with their unquestionably considerably less-than-perfect democracies, to be pressing these flawed systems on countries that cannot afford the social and economic costs that Western democracy evidently entails?

There exists in Western and particularly in American political science a long tradition of taking serious issue with the whole validity of pluralist politics. Such critics as G. William Domhoff

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[37] See Stout (1999); also Fortune (1999).
[38] The Asia Foundation is partly linked to USAID in Bangladesh in that it implements projects for the latter, but it is also independent of USAID in that it receives an annual appropriation from Congress in its own right.

and Thomas R. Dye,[39] for instance, have for decades argued that the general tendency within American politics has been for a small group of elites to manage the system in their own interest while laying down a smokescreen of misleading rhetoric emphasizing mass benefits. But one does not have to go any further than the recently concluded 1996 American elections (or the presently unfolding 2000 election campaign) to conclude that money carries an immense influence in politics, and that those able to spend more of it on politics are able to exert more influence on it in their own behalf. A pluralist politics, in short, scarcely benefits all equally. Are donors, then, essentially endeavoring to export a failed project to new venues — in the words of one longtime student of Bangladesh, "attempting to apply the myths of one society as reality in another"? (Wood 1994: 21)

Other possible dangers lurk as well. Given the tendency for political parties to take over civil society groups in the professional, trade union and student sectors, might they do so as well with other entrants into the field, in particular the business associations and the NGOs? And there are the donors to think of. Is there some chance that donor support for civil society could work to undermine democracy itself by channeling assistance only to CSOs attuned to donor agendas, perhaps even by fostering a CSO dependence? In the words of one critic, should we anticipate "donor attempts to colonize democracy?"[40]

Answers to these questions are difficult, as they are to all good questions in politics, but they are certainly possible. In the broadest terms, we can state that just as market economies in general perform better than command economies at producing the goods and services that people want, so too do democracies do better than authoritarian regimes at making the state accountable to its citizens. In particular cases, markets may fail and so can democracies, but in general both seem to do significantly better than their alternatives. Accordingly, it would seem appropriate for donors to support them.

As for elite control of civil society, business groups may present some danger of gaining excessive influence in Bangladesh, as they tend to do in democracies generally. Here as elsewhere money generally has a louder voice than other resources in the political arena, and the business community has more of it than do other players in the pluralist game. At the same time, there is also the danger that instead of business associations coming to dominate politics, political parties will come to dominate the business associations through co-opting them just has they have done with professional groups and other bodies. There are indications this has happened to some extent (Fremming et al. 1999), just as there are similar reports that the parties have established beachheads within the larger NGOs (Karim 1999, also author interview notes from November 1998). Here it would seem that donor support to civil society could help stem the dangers from both directions. Assistance to CSOs in areas outside the business sector would support the development of counterweights to overweening business influence in politics, while it would also help these organizations establish their own autonomy from the parties themselves.

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[39] Domhoff (1990, 1996) and Dye (1995) are among the more recent of their many analyses.

[40] Remarks by Rehman Sobhan at the Bangladesh at 25 Conference, Columbia University, 5-7 December 1996. See also Sobhan (1998).

When it comes to dangers of donors dominating democracy through CSOs, the kinds of organizations supported thus far — advocating human rights, women's issues, environmental protection, etc. — would appear to be the very types least amenable to outside control, for the simple reason that the sort of people attracted to work in these areas are those most unlikely to take direction from others. Moreover, the larger NGOs have gained such recognition and stature over the years that they can in effect go their own autonomous way and still find donors coming to them. As Sobhan has observed, the big NGOs "generate their own agendas and virtually every donor feels honoured to be invited to finance them" (Sobhan 1998: 26). The smaller fry among NGOs do not of course enjoy this kind of luxury, but the fact that the larger ones do have it sets a general tone that tends against donor dominance.

Surely donors have made mistakes in the past, with our tendency to favor stability over equity, social justice or democracy, but in recent years successive administrations in Washington, as well as donors more widely, claim to have turned over a new leaf with a willingness to support democratic pluralism through building civil society (USAID 1991 and 1994; DAC 1993). Bangladesh offers a good test case in this regard. Civil society in Bangladesh can fairly be said to have begun with the entry of major business groups into the political arena, but unless other groups become serious players, pluralism will not go very far. Donor support for groups such as the environmentalists discussed in this paper seems not a bad place to begin.

Figure 1

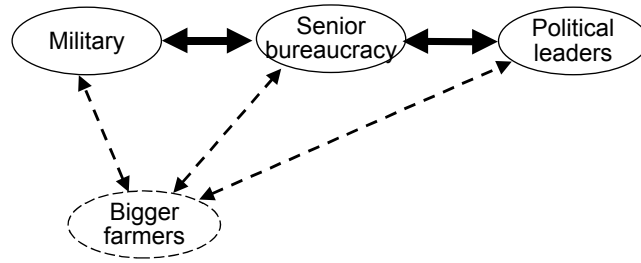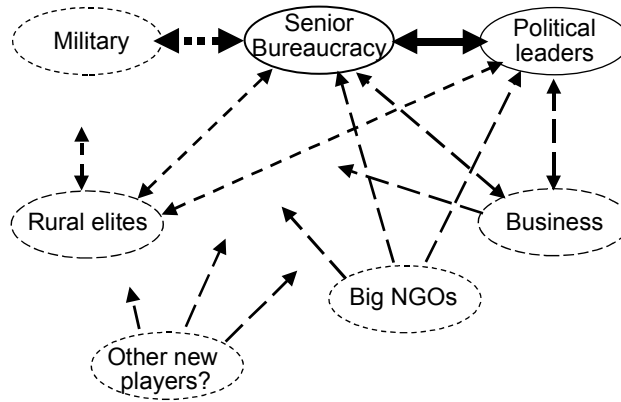POLITICAL ECONOMY IN BANGLADESH, 1972-1990

Figure 2

POLITICAL ECONOMY & CIVIL SOCIETY
IN BANGLADESH, 1999

POTENTIAL ADDITIONAL PLAYERS

*Traditional
candidates*

Co-opted actors:
 >Professionals
 >Labor unions
 >Students
Missing actors:
 >Market-orient-
  ed farmers
 >Sharecroppers
  & laborers

*Newer
candidates*

Business
Umbrella NGOs &
NGOs focusing on:
 >Human rights
 >Investigative
  journalism
 >Women
 >Environment
 >Rural poor
 >Urban poor

Acronyms

ADAB	Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BCAS	Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies
BELA	Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CDIE	Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID
CEN	Coalition for Environmental NGOs
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CSO	Civil society organization (the subset of NGOs engaged in civil society activities)
DAC	Development Advisory Committee (under OECD)
FAP	Flood Action Plan
FAP 20	Tangail Compartmentalization Pilot Project
FPCO	Flood Plan Co-ordination Organization
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
GSS	Gonoshahajjo Sangstha
NEMAP	National Environmental Management Action Plan
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SIDA	Swedish International Development Authority
TAF	The Asia Foundation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UST	Unnayan Shahojogy Team

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